

RESEARCH REPORT

# Summer Programming for Young People in New York City

## Evaluating VIBE and Playstreets

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# Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice Response to the Urban Institute's Process Evaluation of the Police Athletic League's Playstreets and VIBE Programming

August 2019

On behalf of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), I am pleased to respond to Urban Institute's (Urban) process evaluation, which identified strategies to better understand and measure program performance. The Police Athletic League's (PAL) summer youth programs—Playstreets and VIBE—represent visible and popular parts of the City's play-based programming strategy to reduce crime and victimization for vulnerable communities and their young people. We are heartened that the process evaluation conducted identifies the positive achievements of each of these programs while identifying opportunities to more deliberately integrate them into our year-round, comprehensive interventions.

The Playstreets and VIBE programs are part of the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP), a citywide strategy initiated by the de Blasio administration to increase community safety and well-being and build strong neighborhoods. MAP is a multiyear, multiagency strategy focused on 15 public housing developments and their surrounding neighborhoods that, at inception, accounted for almost 20 percent of violent crime in the City's public housing. Unsurprisingly, the MAP developments are in neighborhoods that have historically led the city in other economic and social stressors—poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and chronic disease. MAP's driving principle is that public safety requires addressing disparities in opportunity, trust, and physical design in the places that need it most.

As the report lays out, Playstreets and VIBE offer two distinct approaches to play-based programming: Playstreets is a drop-in open play model run exclusively by PAL using sports as a draw for youth under age 14; VIBE subcontracts community-based cultural organizations to offer a structured arts and leadership program for youth ages 14–24 who are at risk of being victimized or engaging in negative activity. Both programs position a positive youth development framework to engage young people through their passions for sports or culture to develop social skills with peers and mentors, expand fitness and creative skills, and connect to local resources that can help youth better navigate wide-ranging and systemic social issues in their communities.

As discussed in Urban’s report, summer further exacerbates youth inequality. Young people in low-income communities often lack the resources and mobility to access high-quality enrichment opportunities while also lacking safe places to go during the day in their neighborhoods. Residents in neighborhoods with more violent crime often do not perceive their environment to be safe, which discourages adults and children from spending time outdoors.<sup>1</sup> With the rise in violence that typically accompanies the increase in temperatures, MOCJ and partners have invested in a network of opportunities to support young people during the summer. The PAL Playstreets and VIBE programs are part of this expanded investment in safe play and engagement over the summer.

Urban outlines in the report how positive youth development has shifted from a deficit approach that focused on “solving” negative or risky behavior; similarly, neighborhood safety is no longer defined merely by the absence of crime. Public safety is about the opportunity for residents to call a neighborhood home, public spaces that are vibrant, well cared for, and active, and shared trust between governments and residents. We are excited to continue to think about how play-based programming can be an essential part of this comprehensive picture of community safety.

Thank you to NYC Opportunity for their support of this evaluation and ongoing efforts to understand and improve programs that impact young New Yorkers.

Renita Francois

Executive Director, Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety

Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See Lori A. Weir, Debra Etelson, and Donald A. Brand, “[Parents’ Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety and Children’s Physical Activity](#),” *Preventive Medicine* 43, no. 3 (September 2006): 212–17; and Carrie D. Heitzler, Sarah Levin Martin, Jennifer Duke, and Marian Huhman, “[Correlates of Physical Activity in a National Sample of Children Aged 9–13 Years](#),” *Preventive Medicine* 42, no. 4 (April 2006): 254–60.

# Executive Summary

## Programs and Evaluation Overview

Policies designed to engage and support young people as they transition to adulthood have existed for decades, but only in recent years has there been a shift from a “deficit” approach focused on addressing problem behaviors. Research has found that retributive responses to youth behavior are often counterproductive. The turn to positive youth development programming (Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2016) has taken an assets-based approach that engages young people with community networks and prosocial activities, focuses on strengths rather than shortcomings, and features the development of positive relationships with supportive adults and peers. These efforts reflect a reorientation rather than specific program guidelines and have been taken up in various fields, including workforce development, arts and culture, and sports and fitness.

This report presents findings from an evaluation of two summer programs for young people in New York City: Playstreets and VIBE (Vibrant Interactions by Engagement). Both programs are funded through grants from the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) to the Police Athletic League (PAL), which runs Playstreets directly and contracts VIBE programming to local providers. Playstreets, which began in 1914, is a drop-in summer program where 5-to-14-year-olds can visit a safe neighborhood space at their convenience and participate in prosocial activities with other young people, guided by supportive adults. In 2017, Playstreets added more structure to its programming model to emphasize organized sports-based activities, basketball in particular. VIBE, which started in 2017, focuses on 14-to-24-year-olds at risk for justice system involvement. The program is based around production and presentation of art and community-based projects for participants. In 2018, Playstreets had 16 program sites and VIBE had 10.

Although they differ in their approach, target ages, and programming, both programs are designed to prevent youth crime and violence, build positive relations between youth and the community, and provide safe opportunities for youth programming, recreation, and enrichment.

This report presents the results of a process evaluation of Playstreets and VIBE. The evaluation identified strategies to better measure implementation and programmatic inputs and outputs and developed a New York City-specific play-based programming strategy to reduce crime and victimization for high-risk youth and their communities. We used a range of sources, including interviews with stakeholders, staff, and participants; site observations; and review of other materials.

We created a collaborative and iterative approach that brought stakeholders into the entire process, from logic model creation, to data collection protocol development, to review of initial findings.

## Topline Findings

### Playstreets

At the time of the analysis contained in this report, the current Playstreets model had existed for only two summers (2017 and 2018). Longer-standing sites, especially those with deeper ties to community partners, had higher participation levels, while some locations, particularly newer ones, were still finding their footing and had challenges attracting participants. Helping these sites build closer connections with local community organizations and schools will increase visibility and future attendance and help identify ways that Playstreets can be tailored to the features of a given neighborhood. Recommendations from program participants and staff focus on three main areas:

- Offer a wider variety of sports.
- Offer programming over a longer period (2018 programming ran from July 5 through August 9).
- Provide food for participants.

Based on Playstreets' goals and our observations, we recommend additional efforts:

- Facilitate more police engagement.
- Broker closer relationships with neighborhood schools.
- Build more opportunities for communication and peer learning.
- Enhance visibility and engagement.

Although PAL already monitors performance using attendance forms, participant surveys, program observations, and community surveys, we believe efforts to monitor program effects would be more robust if complemented by more pre-post questions to regular participants, consideration of other data collection approaches (e.g., focus groups and interviews), and a revamped approach to surveying community members.

### VIBE

VIBE sites engage in individualized programs, so their activities, goals, and challenges differ. But opportunities for joint learnings exist across program sites, since they share several broad program elements and goals:



- creative activities
- non-arts programming
- community-level outcomes
- youth engagement
- public safety and violence prevention

VIBE program staff indicated that some program goals—such as connecting young people to job opportunities or their communities and reducing neighborhood violence—were particularly challenging. VIBE providers also faced the usual institutional challenges that small organizations face, such as limited funding and internal capacity, and had trouble linking up to other local accessible creative outlets to sustain creative endeavors.

In surveys we conducted for this evaluation, participants generally agreed with statements that they understand the issues their neighborhoods faced, but they were less likely to agree that they contributed to their neighborhoods. Similarly, although participants strongly agreed with statements that they wanted the arts to be part of their life, they were less certain about whether the arts strengthened their communities. These responses indicate a continuing role for VIBE programs to link their arts-based programming to beneficial community outcomes.

Data collection and reporting requirements for VIBE program sites should continue to account for the diversity of and constraints VIBE program sites face. Process- and challenge-related questions in the reporting template help reviewers understand activities and outputs, but questions on data collection and success metrics focus on data processes (e.g., what kind of data does the program collect?) rather than data evaluation (e.g., what do the data indicate about the program's effects?). Some VIBE programs elaborate on their reporting, but the level of elaboration is not consistent. A few closed-ended questions on outcomes measures could be more easily aggregated across sites and be more useful to MOCJ while making it simpler for program staff to compile final reports. We recommend continuing the participant surveys Urban conducted for this project in a pre-post setting to identify changing perceptions of self, neighborhood, and arts-related programming. Long-term outreach with former participants, whether through interviews or short surveys, could also help program staff and MOCJ understand long-term effects and refine program models to respond to challenges and issues that may not be immediately apparent at the end of a given summer's programming.



# Summer Programming for Young People in New York City

Summer exacerbates youth inequality. For middle-class families, summers mean vacations, summer camps, and other forms of enrichment. But for some young people, especially those who live in communities that experience economic and social challenges such as unemployment or crime, summer instead might mean a lack of enrichment opportunities and a lack of safe places to go during the day. Youth living in disenfranchised communities often have less access or ability to pay for engaging summer activities. Resulting disparities show up in everything from the loss of academic learning over the summer break (the “summer slide”) to negative health outcomes such as weight gain (Alexander, Pitcock, and Boulay 2016; Bohnert et al. 2017; Smith 2012). The lack of access to summer activities also affects communities, especially because teenagers without jobs or places to go may strain neighborhood resources or because neighborhoods with the most need have the fewest resources.<sup>1</sup>

For decades, government agencies and community-based organizations have worked to address these challenges through strategies such as positive youth development programming,<sup>2</sup> which involves programs that help youth acquire skills and values to effectively respond to the risk factors they face in their relationships and in their neighborhoods. Research into these interventions focuses on access, quality, and outcomes and on how programs can be tailored to individual communities (NSLA 2018).

New York City has a long history of summer programs designed for young people.<sup>3</sup> Activities and programs have evolved to reflect social trends, best practices, and research evidence. Two such programs are the recently revamped Playstreets and the recently created VIBE (Vibrant Interactions by Engagement). Playstreets, which started in 1914, has served thousands of New York’s young people. It is a summer program that serves 5-to-14-year-olds using a drop-in model in which participants can visit a safe neighborhood space at their convenience and participate in prosocial activities with other young people, guided by supportive adults. In 2017, Playstreets added more structure to its programming model, emphasizing organized sports-based activities (basketball in particular). Playstreets also moved away from its traditional practice of closing down streets to instead focus on locations adjacent to New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments identified in the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety as having particular challenges around concentrated disadvantage and violent crime.<sup>4</sup>

VIBE, which started in 2017, is designed for 14-to-24-year-olds at risk for justice system involvement and, like Playstreets, has programming near high-priority NYCHA developments identified in the Mayor's Action Plan. Young people in VIBE collaborate with community-based organizations to produce and present art and community-based projects. In 2018, Playstreets had 16 sites and VIBE had 10. With grants from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), the Police Athletic League (PAL) runs Playstreets directly and subcontracts VIBE programming out to local providers.

Although different in their approaches, target ages, and programming, both programs are designed to prevent youth crime and violence, build positive relationships between youth and the community, and provide safe opportunities for youth programming, recreation, and enrichment.

Playstreets and VIBE represent two distinct program models. Playstreets is a drop-in model for younger participants, while VIBE provides a structured engagement approach designed around a cohort of older participants working on a community-building activity and culminating in a public event or exhibit. Although these programs have opportunities for shared learning and potential future collaboration or integration, they are separate in structure and practice. This evaluation report discusses both programs separately, first by elaborating their theories of change using logic models and then by analyzing program implementation and how well that implementation reflects intended program design. We focus on program-specific recommendations but note that there are opportunities for these two programs to collaborate to create a more systematic approach to summer youth programming.

## Evaluation Approach and Methodology

### Evaluation Approach

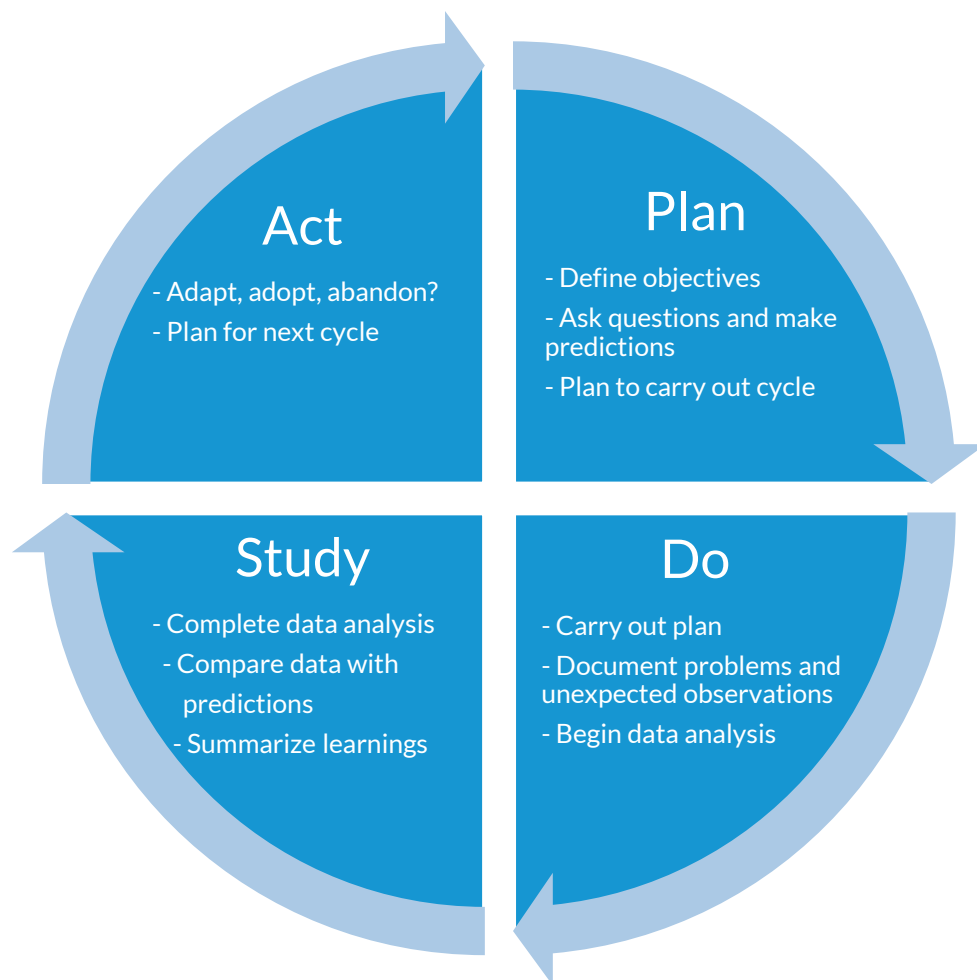
This study presents the results of a process evaluation of Playstreets and VIBE and was developed through a partnership between MOCJ and the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity). The evaluation identifies strategies to better measure implementation and programmatic inputs and outputs and develops a New York City-specific play-based programming strategy to reduce crime and victimization for high-risk youth and their communities.

#### ITERATION AND COLLABORATION: LEARNING FROM PROGRAMS AND PARTICIPANTS

Our data collection strategies and analyses were designed to include the voices of program staff and participants, using a participatory research framework. This approach involves not simply using program staff and participants as research subjects but involving them in the development of questions and findings. This approach makes research questions more relevant and, as initial analyses are

completed, explores reasons for given findings. The participatory research approach is also suited to future efforts to improve these programs and respond to new challenges. In the improvement science literature, this is known as the Plan/Do/Study/Act cycle (figure 1). The cycle builds a systematic approach to improving a system through regular and sustained learning. The first step (Plan) is to state the objectives for a given cycle, the questions to be answered, and the operational plan, including data collection. The second step (Do) is where the plan is implemented, data are collected, and challenges are noted. The third step (Study) compares the predicted patterns with the data, and in the fourth step (Act), modifications to the next cycle's plan are identified and made.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Plan/Do/Study/Act Cycle**



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**Sources:** Sebastian Lemire, Christina A. Christie, and Moira Inkelas, "The Methods and Tools of Improvement Science," *New Directions for Evaluation* 2017, no. 153 (Spring 2017): 23; and Ronald D. Moen, Thomas W. Nolan, and Lloyd P. Provost, *Quality Improvement through Planned Experimentation*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012).

The other key feature of our approach is that it integrates constituent voices and beneficiary feedback to clarify the research design and questions and to draw out useful and resonant strands from the analysis. The research team worked with stakeholders at MOCJ, NYC Opportunity, PAL, and the VIBE program sites. Here, the “Plan” component involved developing logic models for Playstreets and VIBE (discussed below). After drafting our initial logic models in consultation with MOCJ and NYC Opportunity staff and using program proposals and reports, we shared them with program staff for feedback. We also shared initial survey and data collection protocols with MOCJ, NYC Opportunity, and program staff. Subsequently, we relayed initial findings to VIBE and PAL program staff for feedback and discussion. We presented our overall survey results and provided site-specific survey results to VIBE programs.<sup>5</sup> Finally, we drafted data collection procedures and performance metrics for VIBE and PAL going forward. The literature review and the program-specific observations and analysis informed this work, which is intended to complement future data collection and internal evaluation work.

#### LOGIC MODELS, PERFORMANCE METRICS, AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

We drafted the initial logic models based on program materials and revised them based on input from program staff and on-site interviews. These logic models clarify program goals and intended activities and identify pathways where those activities lead to short-, intermediate-, or long-term outcomes. These logic models do not concentrate on the linear pathways by which particular activities are supposed to lead to given outputs and eventual outcomes. The models instead focus more broadly on how programming is designed to have particular effects.

Most sites can report on outputs and some short-term outcomes. Several sites where data are not collected wanted this information. Because staff capacity varies by program, a few site representatives suggested that obtaining such information via third-party interviews, possibly recording participants’ stories, could help with program monitoring and development.

These logic models give sites flexibility to define specific expected outcomes for youth and young adult participants. Because Playstreets is a drop-in program with inconsistent participant engagement and activities, it is difficult to expect major changes in youth outcomes. A further complication is that most of the Playstreets sites we visited had minimal or no law enforcement presence during typical programming. This is an area for PAL to consider, as the Playstreets website (as of May 2019) indicates that identifying local precinct police and, more generally, “fostering strong relationships and an increased sense of community” is a program goal.<sup>6</sup> If this goal is retained, we recommend that PAL reinforce its importance and perhaps directly help sites broker connections and relationships with law enforcement.

The initial logic models included several long-term outcomes that, on further investigation and interviews with program staff, we removed from our final models either because the data collection required to evaluate a given outcome was infeasible or because there was no clear pathway between program activities and outputs and that outcome. Certainly, Playstreets' drop-in structure would make tracking long-term outcomes difficult, except when youth participate for several years (which is common).

## Data Sources

Our research incorporated planning documents and program reports, interviews with program staff, site-visit interviews and observations, staff surveys and participant surveys for VIBE participants, and feedback from program staff on initial findings.

- **Document review.** The research team reviewed program proposal documents and 2017 and 2018 program reports for VIBE sites; reports, participant data, and survey results from Playstreets; and findings from a data collection and research scan of summer youth programs conducted for MOCJ by Urbane Development, an organization focused on building successful community development initiatives.<sup>7</sup> We also reviewed literature on findings and best practices associated with interventions in workforce development, arts and culture, and sports and fitness.
- **Staff interviews.** We interviewed MOCJ and NYC Opportunity staff over the phone to solidify evaluation goals and methodology and to inform subsequent work. We also interviewed PAL staff and VIBE program staff.
- **VIBE staff surveys.** We drafted and fielded an online survey to VIBE program staff, with questions on background; job duties; program goals, participation, and outreach; data collection; and challenges. The protocol is in the appendix. This was a snowball survey. We initially distributed it to staff in direct contact with MOCJ, but they could forward it to others working on VIBE programming. We fielded the survey between August 20 and September 20, 2018, and we received 17 responses. (We did not produce a PAL staff survey because PAL has a centralized structure and program design and we could reach key stakeholders through interviews.)
- **VIBE participant surveys.** We drafted and fielded an in-person VIBE participant survey, which asked about participants and their interest in the program, sense of self, understanding of neighborhood, and thoughts on arts and culture. This survey was designed to be a pre-post

survey fielded during the first and last weeks of summer programming. Although two program sites followed this approach, for most sites, participants filled out the survey only once. (We did not field a participant survey for PAL participants because dissemination and fielding would have been difficult, especially given the challenges of attaining consent from the parents of youth younger than 18.)

- **Site visits.** Urban conducted four visits. The first involved interviews and meetings with representatives from MOCJ and NYC Opportunity, as well as with staff from VIBE programs, to discuss the evaluation and initial findings related to the logic model, performance metrics, and literature review. We also attended an opening event for PAL's Playstreets and summer camps and a VIBE site kickoff and training meeting. We then visited two sites to observe VIBE and Playstreets summer programming. Each visit lasted four days. We visited four VIBE sites selected at random and visited five Playstreets sites that had the most active programs in consultation with PAL staff. We interviewed 20 program staff (10 from Playstreets and 10 from VIBE), conducted 10 focus groups with participants (5 from Playstreets and 5 from VIBE), and observed programming. Our final site visit, in October 2018, included group meetings with VIBE and PAL staff to present initial findings and collect feedback.

Our goal for this approach was to include the voices of program staff and participants throughout the project, both to inform our research design and approach and to more effectively understand our research findings.

## Supporting Youth in New York City

This section reviews the youth programming literature that informed this evaluation with an eye toward practices that are rooted in positive youth development. We discuss three areas of practice that were central focuses of Playstreets and VIBE: workforce and educational opportunities, arts, and sports and fitness. There is a robust literature on the effects of workforce interventions on youth engagement and violence prevention outcomes, but research on other interventions, such as arts and culture and sports and fitness, remains suggestive and exploratory. More research, as well as comprehensive theoretical frameworks, could provide better evidence-based guidance on these relationships.

Policymakers and practitioners alike have long worked to engage youth, ensure their safety and limit criminal justice involvement, and facilitate access to resources in their transition to adulthood. But these efforts have also taken place in the context of a justice system that has traditionally used



retributive approaches to address “problem behavior.” These approaches, which include the use of zero-tolerance discipline in schools and heavy police presence in communities of color, have been counter to a growing body of research that suggests excessive punishment presents challenges to young people as they transition from youth to adulthood. This dominant approach of the justice system operates on a deficit model that views development as a process in which negative or risky behaviors are reduced (Lerner and Lerner 2013). But recent studies have found that this model may neglect the developmental factors critical to understanding youth behavior. For example, compared with adults, youth are more highly influenced by their peers, are less able to judge risk, and have less future orientation, making their decisionmaking capacity underdeveloped (Dahl 2004). Retributive responses to youth behavior that rely heavily on punishment and sanctions therefore may not be developmentally appropriate and may make such behavior worse.

More recently, positive youth development programs have been used to engage youth with their community networks (e.g., schools, organizations, peer groups, and families) by emphasizing the potential of youth to thrive (Edberg 2008). Positive youth development programs involve engaging youth in prosocial activities (e.g., community service projects, group activities with other youth) and recognizing and capitalizing on their strengths, rather than focusing on deficits. Positive relationships with supportive adults and peers are critical components of positive youth development programs. These relationships provide protective influence and create opportunities for young people to gain a sense of validation, support, and legitimacy (Farineau and McWey 2011; Tajima et al. 2011). As an approach, rather than a program, positive youth development can be implemented in numerous settings relevant to youth development, such as workforce development programs, arts and culture activities, and sports and fitness activities.

## **Workforce and Educational Connections**

In New York City, as of 2017, the share of young people out of school and out of work was at its lowest point—both in absolute numbers and in population share—in decades.<sup>8</sup> Within this overall progress, however, racial disparities remain. Latinx youth ages 16 to 19 have the highest labor force participation rate but an unemployment rate 1.7 times that of white youth (table 1). Black youth ages 16 to 19 in the labor force have an even higher unemployment rate. As young people age, labor force participation increases and unemployment rates drop, but disparities remain. Among 20-to-24-year-olds, Latinx unemployment is 1.8 times that of white people, while black unemployment is 2.3 times that of white people.

TABLE 1

**Labor Force Participation and Unemployment among Young People in New York City**

	Ages 16–19		Ages 20–24		Ages 16–24	
	Share in labor force	Unemployment rate	Share in labor force	Unemployment rate	Share in labor force	Unemployment rate
White	18.1%	17.8%	69.5%	8.4%	50.2%	9.7%
Black	21.9%	33.8%	62.2%	19.2%	45.7%	22.1%
Latinx	25.7%	31.0%	66.5%	15.3%	49.9%	18.6%
Overall	21.7%	27.6%	64.8%	13.5%	48.0%	16.0%

Source: 2017 American Community Survey one-year estimates.

Nationally, youth of color—namely black and African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Hispanic and Latinx youth—are less likely than their white counterparts to have opportunities for workforce development through school, apprenticeships, or jobs (Sum et al. 2014). Programs that explicitly aim to connect youth to employment opportunities are limited, and many of those that do exist require participants to have a secondary educational credential to enroll (Treskon 2016). Youth who are disconnected from education and the workforce—often referred to as *opportunity youth* with unrealized potential—stand to gain from labor market participation (JFF and ED 2016). Increasing connections to the workforce can bridge opportunity gaps and have positive effects on economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Although there are myriad challenges with connecting youth to job opportunities, the number of programs seeking to address this challenge is growing.

Programs that employ multiple interventions yield the greatest success in connecting youth to employment and education opportunities. Interventions that focus on both employment and other salient issues in young people’s lives may better respond to young people’s needs while keeping them focused on attaining work. Learning styles, language barriers, and social and economic challenges may be motivating factors for youth disconnection (i.e., lack of adequate access to basic needs, frequent justice system contact) and need to be accounted for. Programs with multiple interventions can cultivate a sense of agency, integrated identity (a sense of internal consistency of who one is across time and multiple social identities), and competencies that enable people to effectively perform roles, complete complex tasks, or achieve specific objectives. At the same time, these programs may equip youth with the social and emotional skills to work toward employment while building meaningful relationships with peers and adults (Nagaoka et al. 2015).

Research also shows that youth who are involved with the justice system may benefit from employment programs that foster relationships with credible messengers, or mentors who share similar backgrounds and experiences with mentees (Austria and Peterson 2017). For example, probation-involved youth who participated in the New York City–based Arches Transformative Mentoring

program, which matches participants with credible messenger mentors, experienced a 69 percent lower felony reconviction rate after 12 months of probation and a 57 percent lower rate after 24 months of probation than the comparison group (Lynch et al. 2018). Similarly, Gelber, Isen, and Kessler (2014) found that by providing income support, enhancing practical skills, and “keeping participants out of trouble,” public employment programs such as NYC’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) decrease the likelihood of incarceration.

A study of Chicago’s One Summer Chicago Plus (OSC+) program, which engages youth from the city’s highest-violence areas in summer employment, found that OSC+ reduced violent crime arrests by 33 percent among participants 12 months after random assignment (Heller 2014). The study found that violence persists after two to three years of programming, suggesting that other contextual factors may impede the long-term impact of employment programming on youth violence. It also might indicate the need for ongoing programming to engage youth in the long term as they move through the developmental continuum. Likewise, the study of SYEP found increased academic gains among youth who had participated in the program for a second year and even larger effects for those participating a third time (Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2014).

## Arts and Culture Interventions

Programming that focuses on arts and culture may be the most difficult to measure among the three interventions reviewed in this report, in large part because no singular, uniform definition currently exists. For this evaluation, we draw on literature from the National Endowment for the Arts that employs a broad definition of arts and culture as any form of creative work that promotes positive personal growth and revitalizes communities. In this evaluation, arts and culture might include music, visual arts, dance, or theater (Markusen and Gadwa 2010; NEA 2012).

Until recently, arts and culture have often been overlooked as a way to divert youth from justice system involvement, and evidence generally remains mostly correlational. Hughes’s (2005) review of the literature on arts and violence or crime prevention found positive links between the two and showed that arts and culture can help transform the individual, institutional, and social circumstances that connect youth to the justice system. Some research has found that the arts promote academic engagement and enhanced school performance, as well as greater civic engagement. Catterall, Dumais, and Hampden-Thompson’s (2012) study on the arts and achievement among opportunity youth, for example, used four large-scale national datasets and found that students who engaged with arts programming had higher science and writing test scores, higher grade point averages, higher enrollment

in selective colleges and universities, and higher postsecondary educational attainment than students with less arts engagement.

Research also suggests that artistic creativity may be linked to cognitive, emotional, and neural development (Baas, Nijstad, and de Dreu 2015), which enhance young people's problem-solving abilities (Wright et al. 2006). Beyond strengthening young people's creative faculties, arts education is viewed as a promising outlet for opportunity youth because it often uses strengths-based principles, which encourage youth to develop their own voices and build their strengths through self-reflection and social responsibility. Strengths-based arts education enhances social and emotional intelligence (Montgomery, Roguin, and Persaud 2013). Studies have shown that arts-based programs have the greatest impact on development for opportunity youth when they are paired with cultural competency, mentoring, and conflict-resolution training (Brunson, Conte, and Masar 2002; DeCarlo and Hockman 2003). Moreover, the arts may promote positive individual identity (Ferrer-Wreder et al. 2002). This development may be highly effective for justice-involved youth, especially in the context of strengths-based arts education, because it allows youth to reimagine and rearticulate their identities using new personal narratives (Wolf and Wolf 2012).

Nonetheless, most research on arts and culture and youth engagement remains suggestive and exploratory. The paucity of research and evaluation remains a barrier in understanding the effects of arts education and arts-based programming on violence prevention. More research, as well as comprehensive theoretical frameworks, is needed to provide better, evidence-based guidance on this relationship.

## **Sports and Fitness Interventions**

There is no clear relationship between sports and fitness programming and violence prevention, and research findings are mixed and inconclusive. We know that sports help youth form prosocial relationships with peers (Rutten et al. 2007) and practice social skills (Vidoni and Ward 2009). Sports participation has been linked to improved academic performance and brain function, such as cognition, memory, concentration, and transfers from short- to long-term memory (Castelli et al. 2015). Further, research has found that increased activity among children may improve parents' perceptions of neighborhood safety (Nasar 2015). But no causal relationship between sports and fitness participation and justice involvement has been established. Spruit and coauthors' (2016) meta-analysis showed no relationship between sports participation and juvenile delinquency.

Nonetheless, best practices for implementing sports and fitness programming can be inferred from the literature. Play should be rooted in the community so it becomes an everyday part of life. Play-based programs should be flexible and open-ended (KaBOOM!, n.d.). In programs like Playstreets that encourage outdoor play, closing streets to traffic alleviates parents' concerns about safety and increases interpersonal interactions between neighbors (Page 2016). But culturally and linguistically diverse communities unfamiliar with Playstreets and similar programming may not fully understand or trust these programs (Gill 2017). Studies show, though, that programs that use a community youth development framework, involving communities from the beginning of implementation, better engage such families (Le Menestrel and Perkins 2007).

Programs such as Playstreets involve local law enforcement officers to strengthen relationships between youth and the police. This component of Playstreets intends to shape young people's attitudes toward law enforcement. Studies show that youth generally have negative attitudes toward police and that increased law enforcement may yield less favorable attitudes toward police (Brick, Taylor, and Esbensen 2009). Fine and coauthors (2003), for example, found that although a sample of more than 900 young people were cognizant about the violence prevention-related benefits of police presence, increased police presence made them feel unsafe and unwelcome. Young men of color are especially likely to hold such views, given public awareness about how much they are overpoliced (Brunson and Miller 2006).

Some programs have been designed to shift young people's perspectives to strengthen police-community relations. Prior evaluations of PAL programs in urban areas have found significant changes in police officers' attitudes toward youth over time, although participants' attitudes toward police remained the same (Rabois and Haaga 2002). The Police and Youth Interaction program, funded by the State of Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, has been used to promote positive youth development by engaging police and youth in community activities (i.e., ropes courses, bowling, team-building, leadership, and community service projects) separate from enforcement activities. Although program implementation varied across the seven communities in which it was implemented, all programs included team-building, leadership development, and community service. Using pre-post surveys, Goodrich, Anderson, and LaMotte (2014) found significant improvements in young people's views on police over their participation in the programs, which ranged from 2 to 11 months.

Even though such programs can transform police-community relations, particularly among youth, negative interactions can magnify mistrust and hostility. Skogan (2006) found that even 1 negative contact with law enforcement can outweigh 10 positive contacts, which suggests that the nature of the contact plays a large role in the relationship between youth and the police. Although programs such as

PAL may shift young people's views on police, the effects of such programming should be matched with increased investment in understanding and strengthening police officers' attitudes toward youth (Jackson 2002).

Studies show that a young person's demeanor is a key determinant of whether a youth-police interaction results in arrest (Liederbach 2007). Comparing arrest rates and level of authority used in police interactions with both youth and adults, Brown, Novak, and Frank (2009) found that disrespectful demeanor among youth increased the level of authority police used, particularly in distressed communities. Enhancing officers' knowledge about youth and adolescent brain development can strengthen relationships between youth and the police. Studies find that training programs that increase officers' knowledge of adolescent brain development are associated with improved views toward youth (LaMotte et al. 2010).

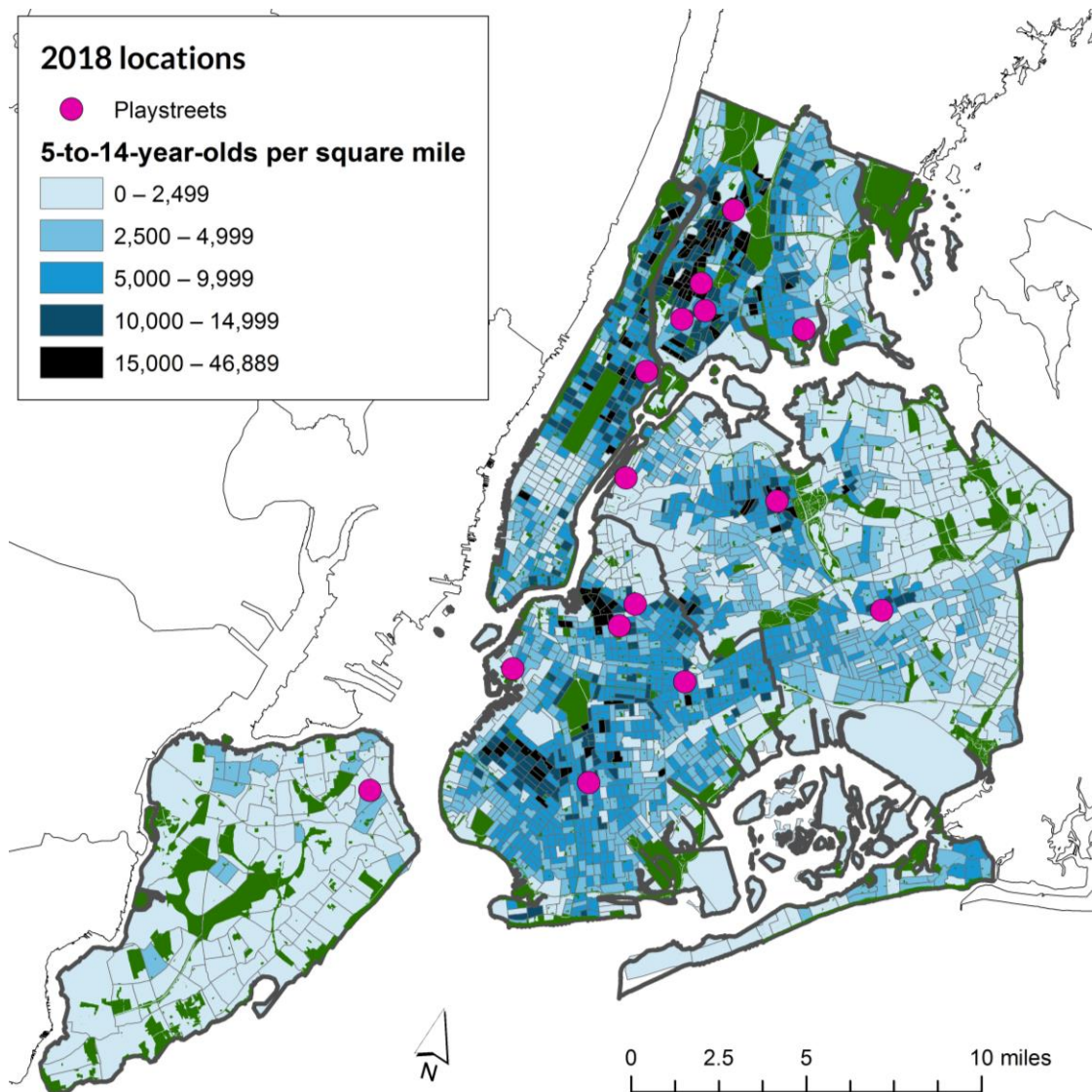
While research supports the importance of workforce development interventions for young people, there is a less robust evidence base showing how programs focused on arts and culture or sports and fitness support the transition to adulthood, whether through interacting with workforce development programming or promoting other outcomes such as, for example, increased civic engagement and collective efficacy or improving community-police relations. These gaps reinforce the need for evaluations such as the one presented in this report.

## Playstreets

Since 1914, Playstreets, operated by the Police Athletic League, has provided summer programming throughout New York City for 5-to-14-year-olds. Through activities such as organized, supervised sports training and recreation that focus on drills, teamwork, and conflict resolution, Playstreets aims to provide youth in high-poverty and violent neighborhoods a safe space to learn and play. Police officer participation is another program goal, designed to bridge the gap between youth and police. In 2018, there were 16 Playstreets sites across the five boroughs (figure 2), serving 1,243 young people weekdays from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. from July 5 to August 9.

FIGURE 2

Playstreets Locations and 5-to-14-Year-Olds per Square Mile



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Source: 2013–17 American Community Survey five-year estimates from the National Historical Geographic Information System.

As a program, Playstreets has undergone several recent changes because of declining resources and an effort to reinvigorate and refocus the programming. The number of sites and young people served has dropped, and the program model was revamped before the 2017 season. This change increased the funding per Playstreets site while diverting part of the funding to support the newly created VIBE programming for older youth. The combination of increasing the funding per site and reducing direct funding for Playstreets dropped the number of sites from 40 in 2016 to 16 in 2017.<sup>9</sup> The 2017



restructuring also moved away from a generalist approach with athletic activities and arts and crafts to one that emphasized a structured athletic approach focused on basketball. The restructuring also shifted locations to public housing and parks and away from a model that closed streets. The current model includes “site directors” and “activity specialists” who have skills related to playing basketball and running drills. Most Playstreets sites are in or near NYCHA properties, and PAL coordinates with NYCHA regarding logistics and outreach and with New York Police Department (NYPD) officials regarding officer participation.

## Program Goals and Logic Model

The Playstreets theory of change is based on a community and youth engagement model whereby residents, community partners, and law enforcement work together on behalf of youth to improve prosocial outcomes, enhance personal skills, address individual and community safety concerns, and improve relationships between youth and law enforcement.

The logic model below (figure 3) incorporates feedback from MOCJ and PAL. The flow of this diagram leads from left to right: the broad strategies and activity areas at left lead to the specific outputs and concrete activities that lead to initial and short-term and then long-term outcomes. Although the links between strategies and activities and outputs are clearly defined, their relationships to outcomes should be understood as a linked effect rather than as a one-to-one relationship.

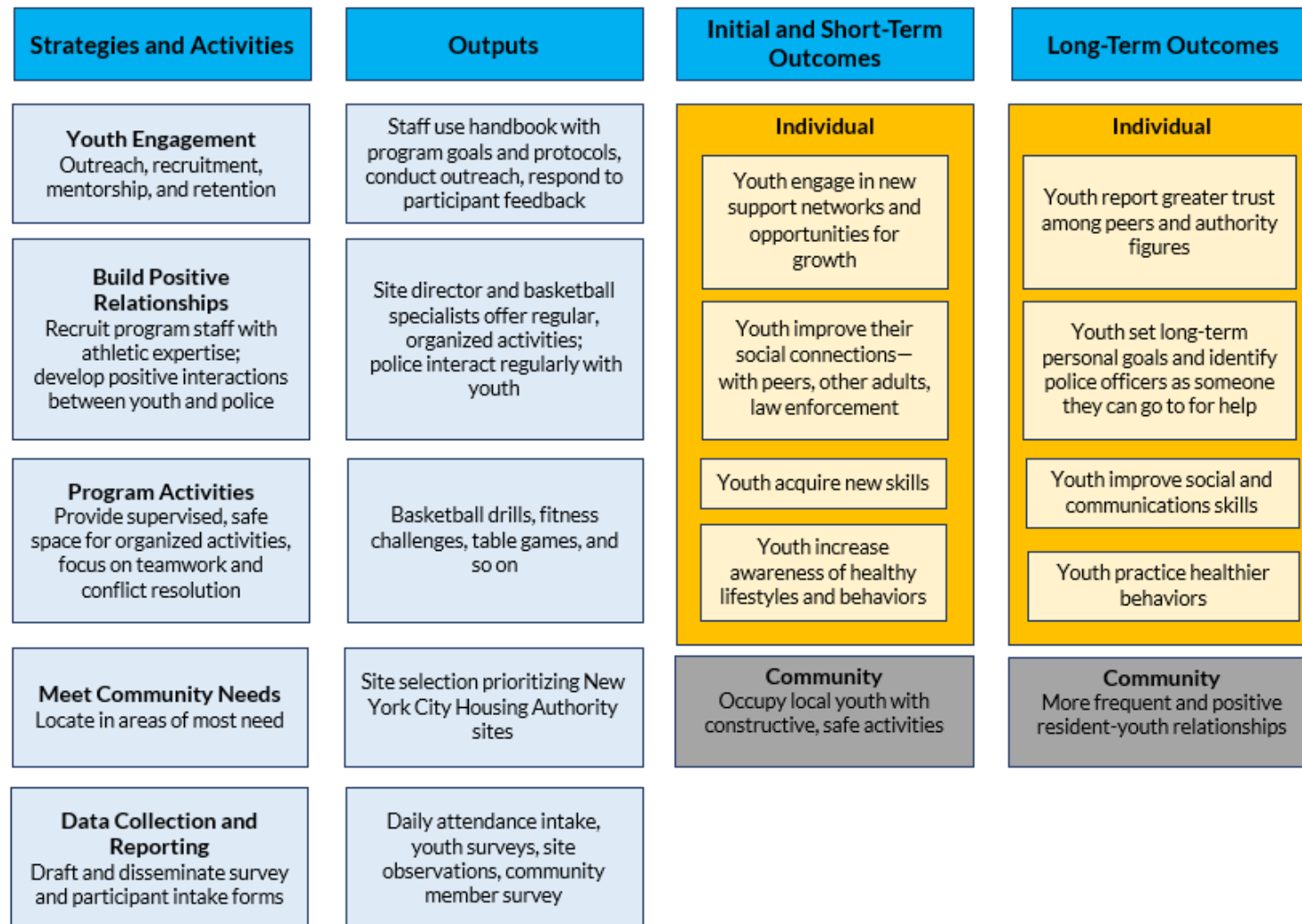
Pathways linking activities and outputs to outcomes are most clearly specified when they are initial, short-term, individual-level outcomes: organized activities lead directly to skill-building, and participants learn to work with one another, with site directors and specialists guiding and framing activities in terms of prosocial outcomes (e.g., healthy lifestyle promotion). With its focus on NYCHA locations that are a high priority in the Mayor’s Action Plan, Playstreets also provides opportunities in locations with notable challenges around violence and safety but with fewer resources and opportunities for residents.

The pathways by which these short-term outcomes are supposed to lead to long-term outcomes are clearer in some cases than in others: increasing trust among peers, improving social and communication skills, and practicing healthier behaviors build on the short-term goals. Improving trust in authority figures, if understood in the context of the mentoring roles Playstreets’ on-site staff play, follows the program structure. Setting long-term goals, creating positive interactions between youth and adult community members, and having more positive relationships with police are more aspirational, especially given the challenges in obtaining consistent police officer participation.



FIGURE 3

Playstreets Logic Model



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## Program Operations

PAL has instituted a hierarchical structure for Playstreets to organize activities and provide oversight. Central PAL staff include a chief of programs, assisted by three program managers and an office manager. One program manager is the Playstreets lead, who supervises four borough coordinators, who in turn supervise Playstreets sites across the city.

Playstreets sites have parallel staffing structures: one site director with two to three activity specialists (sometimes referred to as “basketball specialists”) who run drills and oversee games. The smallest site we observed had one site director and one specialist, and the largest we observed had a site director, two specialists, and around 10 other staff members made up of Summer Youth Employment Program participants. Most site directors and staff we spoke with felt they were capable of handling the average number of daily participants.

With at least two staff on-site at a time, staff were generally able to run structured group activities and supervise and engage with youth in less-structured activities, such as card games. Parents also support some sites as informal chaperones. But in interviews at some sites, staff noted challenges. One site with a large share of younger participants had safety concerns that necessitated staff taking participants to the bathroom, and staff were overwhelmed at times. One said: The “biggest challenge is if a lot of kids do come, what to do now? Three people with 20 different kids, I have two 5-year-old boys, three 9-year-old girls. You know, like, where is the balance?”

### TRANSLATING PROGRAM GOALS INTO PRACTICE

Playstreets uses a single model to offer parallel programming in multiple sites. To ensure consistency, PAL gives each site’s staff a small handbook (which PAL staff sometimes referred to in interviews as a “pamphlet”), providing information on signing up participants and containing different protocols. These handbooks also set weekly goals for each site, with topic headers designed to engender discussion. The handbook gives site directors guidance and flexibility to adapt programming to meet each site’s needs.

Each site had flexibility to recruit participants, advertise the program, and run activities, and program staff could add their own goals to the programming. One site director said, “When we have our meetings, we get a handbook that kind of gives us pointers and stuff of directions we can go in as far as the goals. Once we’re here and we’re really with the kids and we get to know the kids personally, that’s where it’s, like, we can [add] our own form of personal goals.”

Many site directors and recreation specialists indicated site-specific goals that focused on education in addition to improving participants' basketball skills. At one site, staff increased participants' vocabulary, while staff at another site produced large-scale group activities with arts and crafts. Some site directors gave participants advice about their futures, particularly around education. Site directors and recreation specialists discussed the importance of staying in school and getting good grades. Given their backgrounds and experiences, many Playstreets staff (site directors and specialists) were credible messengers (Lynch et al. 2018).

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*It's, like, we're definitely having a positive effect on them. You know, just talking to them, giving them advice, telling them—just little things, as far as just seeing their viewpoints on maybe things about school and being able to give them more of a positive look at it, you know, being college students and giving them something to look forward to.*

*—Playstreets site director*

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## RECRUITMENT

Playstreets sites are open to all youth in the neighborhood, although recruiting youth took various forms. Sites typically recruited from regular park or playground users. One site director noted, “The fact that they were already in the park kind of gives us an edge, because it’s, like, well, just come over to our side of the park and just see what we have to do, since you came here anyway.” Staff at some sites put up flyers before the summer session began in neighborhood bodegas, schools, and NYCHA development lobbies. Staff in some sites, particularly those in parks that were not attached to NYCHA properties, more actively sought to meet PAL’s target of 100 children over the course of the summer. Many participants heard about Playstreets by walking around the neighborhood.

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*I started because I used to just not do anything over the summer. I started coming downstairs, and I saw kids downstairs playing basketball and Nok Hockey [a tabletop hockey game for two players] and playing board games, so I was like, “Well, that looks like fun.”*

*—Playstreets participant*

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## ENROLLMENT

Staff in each site used a tablet to enroll youth who visited the program. Participants were required only to fill out their name and, on their initial visit, submit a permission slip from a parent or guardian.

Enrollment rates varied by site. Only four sites met the program's 100-participant goal. In 2018, Playstreets enrolled 1,243 young people across its 16 sites. Median enrollment per site was 55, while the average, driven up by 196th Street's 243 participants, was 78.

Participation also varied throughout each day and largely depended on the weather. One staff member in a site with low participation said, "[In] the morning time, we probably get four kids. Afternoon, most of the kids come out of summer school...from 1:30 to 4:00 p.m. We probably get another range of 10 to 15 kids.... In total, I would say a day, I would say 15 or 16 kids."

According to data collected by PAL, youth enrolled in Playstreets generally participated multiple times a week: 72.7 percent participated three or four times a week, 9.5 percent participated once a week, and 17.8 percent participated only sporadically (table 2). This level of engagement was consistent across sites.<sup>10</sup>

TABLE 2

### Participation in Playstreets

	Share of participants
Three or four times a week	72.7%
Once a week	9.5%
Sporadically	17.8%

Source: 2018 Police Athletic League attendance data.

Note: N = 919 respondents.

Of those who responded to the PAL survey, 77 percent stayed, on average, three or more hours a day, with most of the remainder staying for one to two hours (table 3).

TABLE 3

### Attendance Duration in Playstreets

	Share of participants
Three or more hours	77.2%
One to two hours	19.5%
Less than one hour	3.3%

Source: 2018 Police Athletic League Playstreets report.

Notes: N = 123. The survey question was "How long do you normally stay?"

In 2018, 85 percent of Playstreets participants were 15 or younger, while 44 percent were 10 or younger.<sup>11</sup> The share of participants ages 16 to 18 was 15 percent overall, but it was 20 percent or more at six sites. Sixty-two percent of participants were black or African American, while 31 percent were Hispanic or Latinx (table 4).

**TABLE 4**  
**Race or Ethnicity of Playstreets Participants**

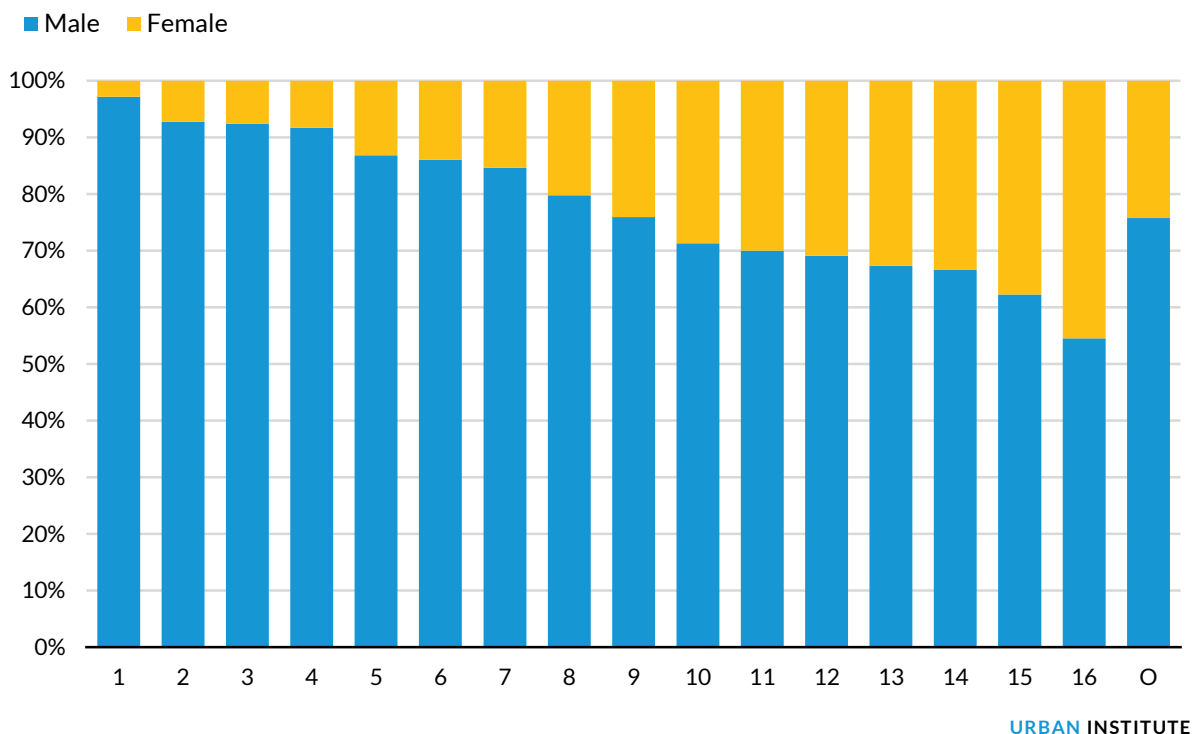
	Participants	Percent
Black/African American	806	61.9%
Asian/Asian American	19	1.4%
Hispanic/Latinx	401	30.8%
White	25	1.9%
Other	51	3.9%

**Source:** 2018 Police Athletic League Playstreets report.

**Note:** N = 1,302.

Seventy-six percent of participants (942) were male, and 24 percent (301) were female. This disparity was consistent across most sites (figure 4). In only three sites were girls one-third or more of the participants, and in four sites, fewer than 10 percent of the participants were female. Staff indicated that more girls would participate if the program offered structured activities beyond basketball. One site director said, “They [female-identified participants and youth] want art. Oh man, the girls. The one thing we could use is a little art program but with two art teachers.... If you have art for a portion of this—art portion where they could get that art, the girls would love it, making beads. We used to have that. We used to have art with this program years ago.”

**FIGURE 4**  
**Gender Breakdown by Site**



Source: 2018 Playstreets participant data.

Note: O = overall.

#### DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING ON OUTCOMES

PAL collects data on Playstreets activities in multiple ways. Participant and program information was collected at sign-in and entered into an electronic tablet. PAL also distributes a participant survey, collects program observations, and distributes a community member survey. The participant survey asked questions about demographics, participation, NYPD interaction, activities, and recommendations. Out of 1,243 participants in 2018, 123 people (minimum age 9) completed it. Program observation forms detailed staffing characteristics, participation, NYPD engagement, and site climate (e.g., safety).

PAL has also designed and fielded a community survey of neighborhood adults. Seventy-six people filled out the 2018 survey, which used a convenience sample. The survey asked how the adults found out about Playstreets, whether they would send their child there, and whether the program makes playing outdoors safer.

In our interviews, program staff said they could capture some information on outcomes (e.g., healthy behaviors or social skills) ad hoc during their engagements with youth, indicating a starting point for assessing Playstreets' effects. Also, several program directors said they were interested in obtaining this information more systematically. The program's drop-in nature means participant engagement varies between children attending regularly and those attending intermittently, complicating efforts to measure outcomes. But understanding engagement patterns and focusing on engaged youth may help the program better meet its goals. Below, we offer suggestions about how PAL and Playstreets could strengthen data collection to obtain outcome data in a structured way.

## Activities

Because basketball is central to the Playstreets program, most participants play. In a PAL-administered survey, 91 percent of respondents reported playing. One staff member explained, "The main things that we do, the basketball. After kids come, I like to try to just see what they're into, and we can incorporate different games." About one-quarter of those surveyed participated in other outdoor sports (27 percent) or board games (26 percent). Ten percent participated in arts and crafts, while 2 percent engaged in other activities.

Youth we interviewed generally enjoyed the program's focus on basketball but expressed interest in other activities. At sites with fewer staff, specialists focused on running the basketball operations, but they also engaged in and supervised other activities. Nok Hockey, a two-person tabletop hockey game, was also popular among participants. One said, "Usually when I come here, I play the board games, Nok Hockey. Sometimes, I go with one of the staff, and we'll shoot the balls, and they try to teach me how to dribble. My favorite one mostly is Nok Hockey because when you play it, there's this big thing, big, big, big, big competition." When we were at each site, we observed many activities, such as playing board games or playing with chalk, going on at once, even if basketball was the focus of organized programming.

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*It came out of my pocket, and I brought water balloons, since we have the sprinklers. One day, we had a water balloon fight. I got a Frisbee, I got a football, I got a baseball and a bat.*  
—Playstreets staff member

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Playstreets has also partnered with other organizations to provide complementary on-site programming. The Uni Project (now Street Lab) has operated temporary interactive building stations through its BUILD NYC effort on Playstreets sites. Offering building blocks (e.g., Lego and Magna-Tile) and with facilitators providing guidance on activities, Street Lab piloted a partnership with PAL for Playstreets in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

## Suggestions and Recommendations

We focus on programmatic suggestions and recommendations based on themes identified in our observations and interviews. We first present themes that participants brought up in multiple sites, and we then discuss suggestions to link extant programming to Playstreets' stated goals.

### PARTICIPANT SUGGESTIONS

Participants we interviewed offered suggestions that fell into three main categories, all related to additional resources and programming:

- Offer a wider variety of activities.
- Offer programming over a longer period.
- Offer food for participants.

***Offer a wider variety of activities.*** Some participants wanted more diverse activities, specifically arts and crafts. PAL staff noted that the focus on basketball gave Playstreets a structure and was an important draw, something the participants could improve on over the summer. Of course, other activities could provide other (or similar) skills that participants, especially those not interested in basketball, could learn and take with them through the school year. PAL is open to partnering with other programs, such as the Uni Project's BUILD NYC, that could provide resources and a greater range of activities, but these partnerships have been limited.

Logistics play a role, however. Expanding the range of sports is difficult in sites that do not have the space to accommodate full-court basketball or other sports such as soccer or baseball. One youth participant said, "What I think should be improved is the amount of space of the block, like what [other youth] said, it's too crowded a lot."

Several youth and staff were disappointed that an end-of-summer celebration that PAL had previously put on had been discontinued. Although staff discussed numerous logistical and legal hurdles with hosting the celebration, interviewees described the benefits of having a capstone activity, including opportunities for cross-site celebration and peer learning.



**Offer programming over a longer period.** Many participants and staff wanted the program to last longer, either starting earlier or ending closer to the beginning of the school year. The change in duration was in response to fewer program resources and to accommodate the higher wages provided to on-site staff for their greater expertise and skill set than had been preferred under the previous model.

**Offer food for participants.** Many participants we interviewed (and one parent we spoke with) wanted food during the day. Some staff also wanted to supply food. Two sites managed to use a citywide summer food program to provide breakfast and lunch.

## PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the program's logic model and our observations, we also discuss other areas for future work:

- Facilitate more police engagement.
- Broker closer relationships with neighborhood schools.
- Build more opportunities for communication and peer learning.
- Enhance visibility and engagement.

**Facilitate more police engagement.** Although one of Playstreets' primary goals is to help participants "learn how to identify members of their local NYPD precinct," site staff generally reported limited police involvement. One site director reported police officers coming to their site more than once and putting on a fair for the kids that included sweets. At another site, officers came once or twice to play basketball. But staff and participants in two sites reported little or no interaction with police officers. One site director interacted with police only during an incident with drug dealers: "That was really the only interaction we ever had with law enforcement, when we called them to help escort people out of the park, because they were giving us a hard time. Besides that, there's nobody that really consistently comes and checks on us in here."

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*I like playing with the police, and I feel comfortable. Other kids like it too. Before this program, I wouldn't feel comfortable playing with a police officer. Because of this program, I feel more comfortable around them.*

*—Playstreets participant*

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Responses from the PAL-administered survey of 123 participants showed that only 30 percent had any interactions with the NYPD while at a Playstreets site. Although young people did not mention the lack of police presence unless asked (potentially because they did not see it as a clear program objective), increased police involvement could clarify the mixed feelings some participants have regarding police officers. Sometimes, young people's negative feelings about the police stem from viewpoints expressed by parents and the media as much as personal experiences. "I'll be honest with you," one site director said. "They don't like the cops here. I feel like it's always a negative stigma on cops, so it's like, now when the kids see older people talking about cops in a bad way, they're obviously going to feel a type of way about cops, because they see other people doing it."

On the other hand, increased presence and interaction can improve these relations. Thirty-four respondents to PAL's participant survey interacted with NYPD. In response to a follow-up question, 29 indicated a positive interaction. In the site that had a more active and engaged police presence, one youth participant said, "I mean [police] actually contribute to making us have some fun. They don't work here, but they try to come to make us enjoy it more." That PAL participants' interactions with law enforcement are largely positive suggests that more of these should be helpful in improving youth-police relations.

While PAL staff do have some precinct-level relationships, their requests for engagement are generally made at the city level, particularly with the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit. Neighborhood community officers are generally the precinct-level point person for this sort of engagement, but PAL staff noted that these officers have competing requests and need to prioritize direct law enforcement duties.

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*Yeah. It's really mixed. I believe that there are good, pure officers who you can truthfully talk to, really talk to about things, and you can trust that they will do their hardest—they will work their hardest, and they will fight hard to make sure that you get the justice you deserve, but I also feel there are those police officers who are the opposite.*

*—Playstreets participant*

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Program staff also suggested other enhancements. These suggestions (e.g., off-site field trips) do not account for budgetary and logistical considerations or PAL's recent decision to move to a more

programmed sports-oriented approach, but they illustrate ongoing issues that could be addressed in the future.

***Broker closer relationships with neighborhood schools.*** The relationships that Playstreets sites had with local schools ranged from positive to nonexistent, with relationships usually more limited than program staff would have liked. Staff in some sites had problems accessing equipment or connecting participants to school-based summer lunch programs. Closer relationships could also provide an indoor solution during inclement weather. Currently, inclement weather requires Playstreets to cancel for the day, with hours to be made up within a week, but with its drop-in nature, communicating these changes is difficult. A set backup location could help.

***Build more opportunities for communication and peer learning.*** Program staff praised the responsiveness of central PAL staff but wanted more interactions with staff at other program sites. Some program directors communicated with one another informally to share ideas and concerns and recommended that PAL facilitate a forum two or three times each summer (or create a listserv exchange) for staff to discuss what is and is not working in their sites. Peer learning is effective for troubleshooting problems and reducing isolation. We also talked during our briefing session about whether there might be better ways to communicate about inclement weather (closure) conditions—specifically, getting the word out that the program might start earlier or run later on other days of the week to make up for lost hours.

***Enhance visibility and engagement.*** Although Playstreets has been around for more than 100 years, program visibility could be improved. Even though the small sample of community residents surveyed about Playstreets in 2018 was limited to residents in the immediate vicinity of Playstreets sites, only 44 percent were aware of Playstreets. As the program settles into new locations, neighborhood awareness may grow, but targeted community outreach, particularly in locations with few enrollees in 2018, could increase participation. At present, sites undertake their own recruitment strategies. More PAL support and outreach assistance could help.

Building ties with local stakeholders and organizations, whether local community groups, schools, or businesses, to help advertise and promote the program could improve outreach. The 196th Street site's high participation may stem from its long-standing stability and the buy-in of local community stakeholders, who donated funds and contributed resources to keep the site open when it was slated to close in 2017.<sup>13</sup>

## DATA COLLECTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Since youth involved in Playstreets are not necessarily invested in regular attendance and may be put off by requests for too much information, staff need to collect the most pertinent data quickly and easily. PAL's existing data collection approach does a good job of working within these constraints, although additional systematization could improve the value of this information.

The existing electronic-based system collects limited participant information and has been supplemented by a more in-depth participant survey (the 123 responses filled out in 2018 represent 10 percent of participants). This data collection was sufficient for determining participant characteristics, such as total enrollment, age, gender, level of engagement, and NYCHA residency. Ensuring the survey is filled out systematically across sites (especially for sites that may have less capacity) should be a goal going forward. In sites with greater survey participation, staff may have insights into techniques for improving response rates elsewhere. Other means of low-cost encouragement for higher response rates (e.g., lotteries for gift cards or pizza parties for sites with the highest survey response rates) should be considered.

PAL uses program observation protocols to provide data collection guidelines for on-site visits by central PAL staff. These protocols include sections on staff, participants, NYPD involvement, and other program activities and focus on topics pertinent to the program's goals. How well these protocols are systematically collected and compiled is unclear. If these protocols could be filled out multiple times per site during the summer, they would add context to raw participant numbers.

PAL also has produced a three-question community member survey. With 76 respondents in 2018 and wide variation in response rates (three sites had 10 or more responses, five had only one or two responses, and one had no responses), survey outreach needs to be improved to inform programming. Targeting parents, law enforcement, business owners, and other stakeholders may provide useful information about how Playstreets affects families and the broader community. If a community member survey is continued and is to be a research tool, questions should focus on intended community-level outcomes, such as whether Playstreets occupied youth during summer days or if it had any effect on youth-adult relations.

PAL already has an effective baseline data collection approach, but several program and data collection capacity issues limit the ability to report on all the items in the program's logic model. Most sites report on demographics and attendance data based on intake and other reporting forms provided by PAL. But metrics to measure outcomes for PAL participants are not systematically collected. We

recommend further consideration of measures that capture some of the indicators expressed by PAL's program model and logic model. The program's logic model has three main indicator categories:

- **Individual short-term measures.** Youth engage in new support networks and opportunities for growth; improve social connections with peers, law enforcement, and other adults; acquire new skills; and have an increased awareness of healthy lifestyles and behaviors.
- **Individual long-term measures.** Youth report greater trust among peers, set long-term personal goals, identify police officers as people they can go to for help, improve their social and communications skills, and practice healthy behaviors.
- **Community measures.** Youth engage with constructive, safe activities, and residents engage in more frequent and positive relationships with youth.

Many of these elements are already being addressed through ongoing survey questions and observations. We recommend that various data collection elements more effectively speak to one another. One way of doing so is implementing a pre-post component to the participant data collection. PAL asks whether participants were previously involved, so this would be a matter of asking young people a few additional questions at the end of summer or at the start of summer (for returning participants). To address community-level indicators, we recommend refocusing the community member survey to target parents, law enforcement, local businesses, and other stakeholders. These surveys can still be short, but they will help clarify the program's effects on families and the broader community.

Data collection needs to be kept as simple as possible. PAL should consider engaging in focus groups or interviews. Incentives could be small, but the research team noted that young people seemed to enjoy the discussions and may find them more amenable than another (or an extended) survey. One site even suggested using video to capture success stories and the site in action.

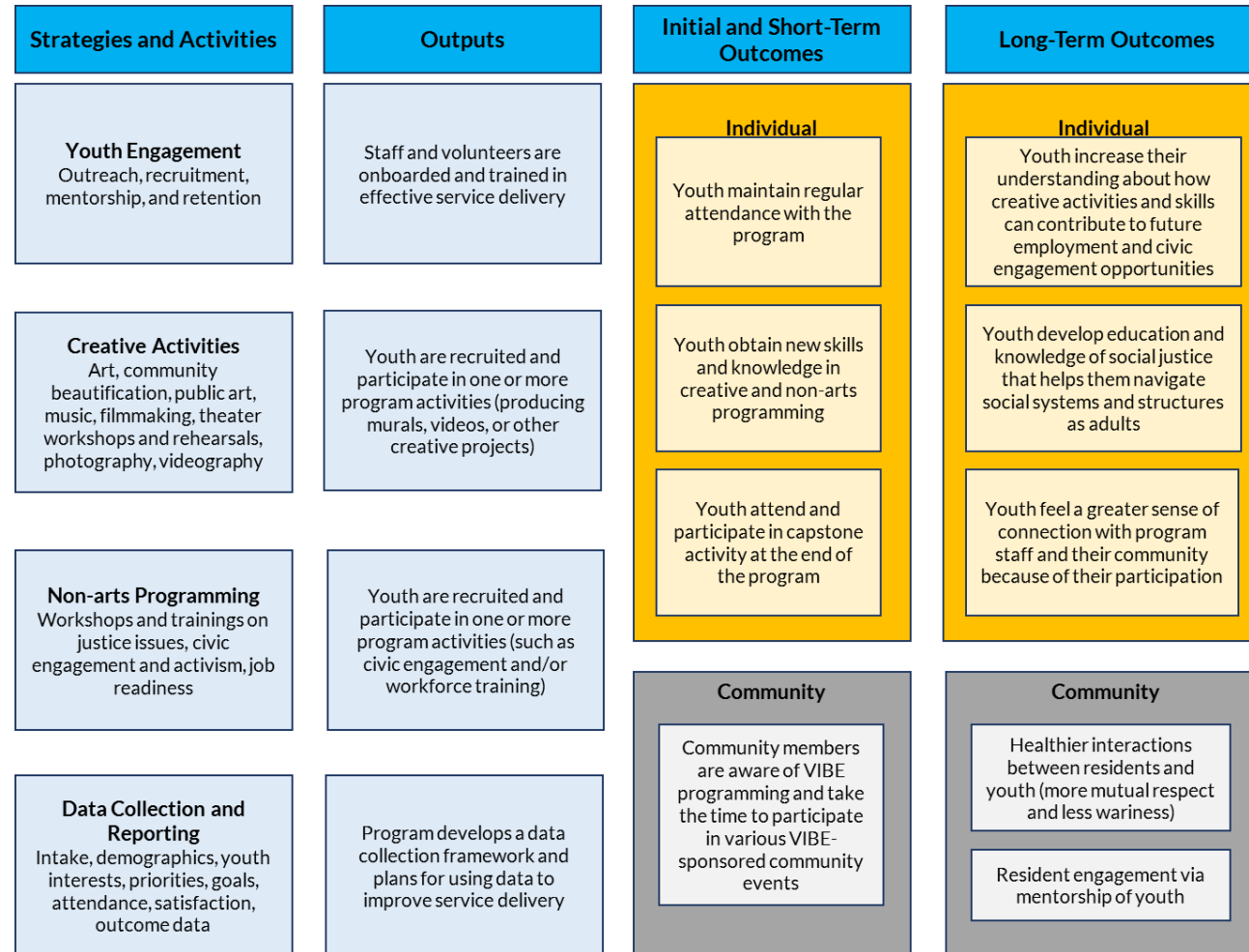
## VIBE

VIBE was developed in 2017 as a pilot program of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice as a part of the place-based strategy of the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety. The plan, introduced in 2014, provides a targeted and comprehensive approach to reduce violent crime in 15 public housing developments.<sup>14</sup> VIBE sought to engage 14-to-24-year-olds by offering opportunities for "play" that would cultivate safe and healthy neighborhoods. This intervention targets young people at risk for perpetrating or being victimized by violence. Most providers paid stipends to encourage consistent

participation. Programs worked with participants to develop, create, and perform arts programming, broadly defined, with summer activities culminating in a public exhibit, performance, or event. In its first year of programming, VIBE served 303 young adults at 10 sites.

Through arts and non-arts programming, community engagement, and periodic data collection and reporting, VIBE sites have both individual- and community-level outcomes. At the individual level, VIBE programming sought to enhance young people's creative abilities and help them develop skills that will prepare them for the workforce. VIBE programming also entailed social justice education and knowledge-building, often grounding these lessons within communities. At the community level, VIBE pursued relationship-building and youth mentorship as a core outcome, which involved community members as stakeholders in VIBE programs. Figure 5 outlines how sites realized these goals.

**FIGURE 5**  
**VIBE Logic Model**



## 2018 Program Operations

VIBE funding was delivered to 10 sites (box 1). All five boroughs had VIBE sites, though most were in Brooklyn (figure 6). Programs were selected in part based on location in neighborhoods with persistent violent crime and other social and economic stressors. Most focused on NYCHA developments identified in the Mayor's Action Plan. Research shows that neighborhoods experiencing violent crime tend to experience economic inequality, which often manifests as neighborhood-level disorder (Lieberman and Fontaine 2015). These phenomena are mutually reinforcing—disorder stemming from economic inequality cultivates ground for violence, which contributes to disorder and magnifies economic inequality (Friedson and Sharkey 2015).

VIBE programs engage youth through creative and cultural activities with broader community development goals to build safe, healthy, and prosperous communities. This section covers *how* programs were designed to reach these goals. We first provide an overview of the structural components of VIBE programming, and we then explain program milestones and how VIBE operated.

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### BOX 1

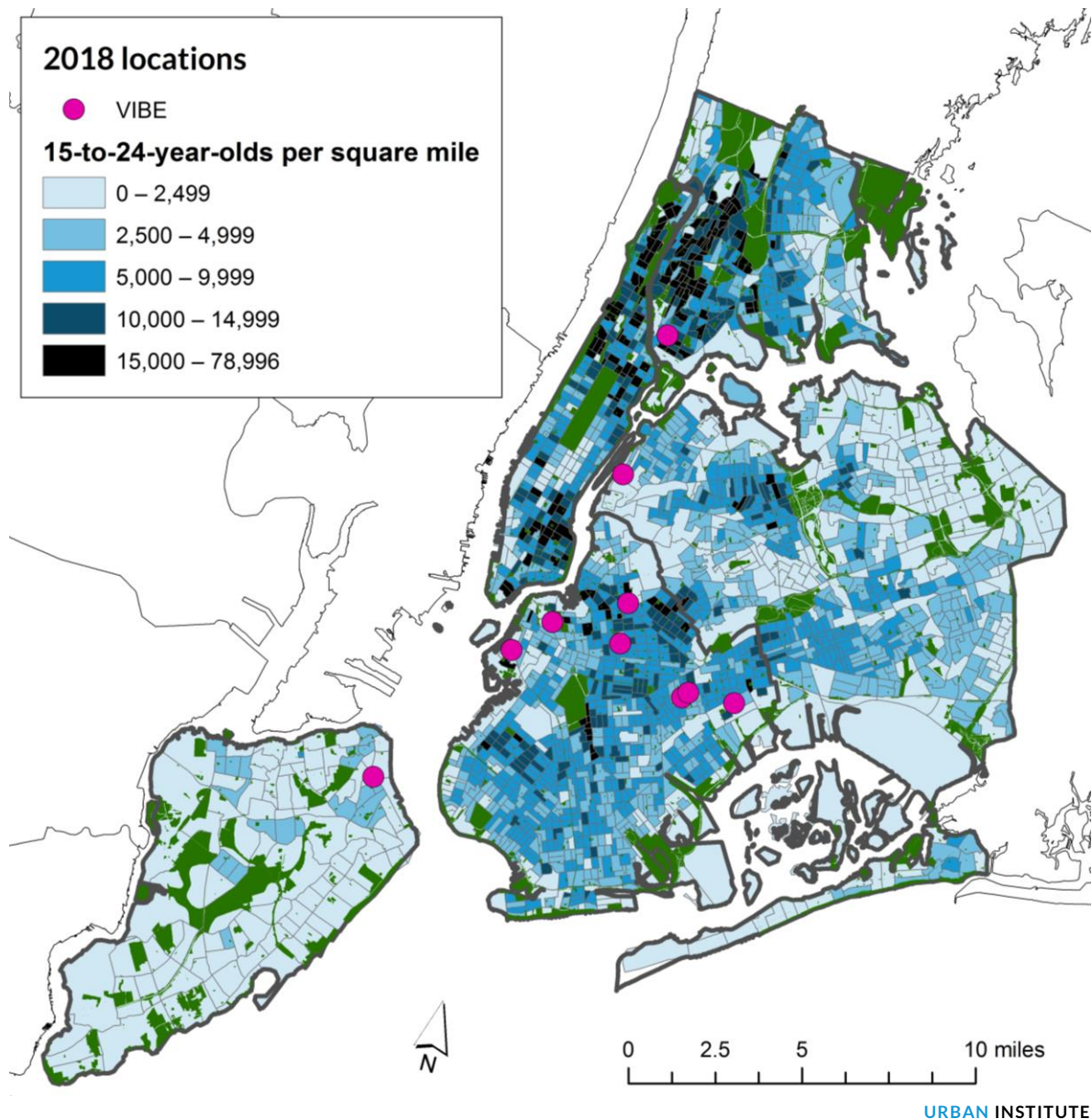
#### VIBE Sites in 2018

- Groundswell facilitated three mural projects in NYCHA sites with community organizations, young people, and artists to advance justice and equity. Groundswell managed three sites.
- Man Up! H2O used the credible messenger model to engage youth in civic activities.
- Brownsville Community Justice Center operated various activities, with summer 2018 work focusing on pop-up events that activated safe community spaces to bring different parts of the neighborhood together.
- Lead by Example provided workshops, interactive lessons, documentaries, and other activities focused on arts, music, sports, community engagement, and leadership.
- Theatre of the Oppressed formed a theater troupe that developed and performed plays engaging with economic inequality, racism, and other forms of social injustice, with the aim of building transformative political change.
- True 2 Life engaged youth through entrepreneurial arts activities (e.g., graphic design, acting, and film) and workshops focused on conflict mediation.
- The Chris S. Owens Foundation provided creative digital arts and information to help young people develop skills for the film and television industry.
- King of Kings Foundation served young people by facilitating workshops, activities, and discussions around peaceful conflict resolution.



FIGURE 6

VIBE Locations and 15-to-24-Year-Olds per Square Mile



Source: 2013–17 American Community Survey five-year estimates from the National Historical Geographic Information System.

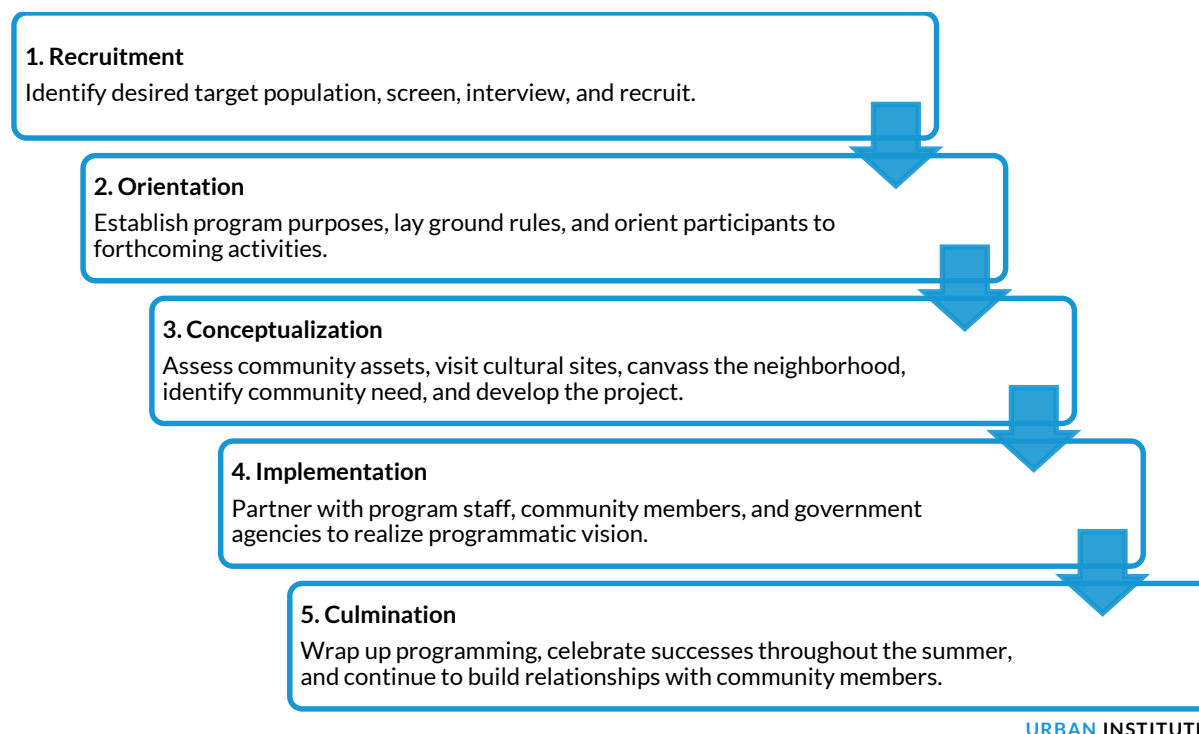
## PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Only one site included in the evaluation used VIBE funding to build a new program. In that site, funding went toward program conceptualization, curriculum development, infrastructure and capacity-building, recruitment, and daily operations. Stakeholders in all other evaluated sites described programming as “business as usual” as a result of VIBE funding, meaning that the funding reinforced their existing

activities and sites did not necessarily change programming. VIBE programming is broadly structured around five phases (figure 7).

FIGURE 7

### VIBE Program Structure



### OPERATIONS AND MILESTONES

VIBE programming lasts six to eight weeks. The initial phase is **recruitment**. Most sites adopted a similar approach to recruitment. Many used flyers and local advertisements, while others used personal and existing community connections. For Groundswell, nearly all those we interviewed were recruited through the Summer Youth Employment Program and then placed in Groundswell. Although such well-established approaches may help identify young people, programs like SYEP might not sufficiently engage the young people VIBE targets. Most young people who apply to SYEP are already engaged in their communities, and completing the SYEP application requires a defined sense of motivation that may prevent many young people from participating.

Program participants had other ideas for reaching the desired VIBE population. Some suggested using social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Others offered schools as potential recruitment sites, indicating that announcements or in-person visits would better capture young

people’s attention. Many young people stressed that the financial incentives of VIBE participation needed to be promoted more. In a context in which many young people living in disinvested communities experience poverty, participating in arts and culture programs may seem less desirable than other modes of income generation, whether through internships and employment—both on and off the books—or through illicit sources of income. One program staff member noted, “You have people who are maybe stealing because they don’t have anything. Now, they don’t have to steal because they have something positive to do, and they’re getting paid for it.” Being clear about the financial gains of program participation was crucial to recruitment and retention.

To better understand program goals, methods, and challenges, Urban fielded an online survey to staff at VIBE sites. Among respondents, word of mouth was the most commonly selected outreach method, although canvassing, flyers, and referrals were also commonly used (table 5).

**TABLE 5**  
**Outreach Methods: VIBE**

	Count	Mean rank
Word of mouth	11	2.27
Canvassing	9	3.33
Flyers	7	4.29
Referrals from our programs	9	3.22
Referrals from external organizations	9	3.89
Internal referral	1	2.00
Social media	1	4.00

**Source:** VIBE staff survey.

**Notes:** N = 17. Mean rank closer to 1 indicates that the outreach method is more frequently used, whereas a mean rank closer to 6 indicates that it is less frequently used.

The second program phase was **orientation**. The length of this phase varied. Some sites took one to two days to orient participants, and others took as long as a week. As with most summer youth programming, orientation was meant to show youth what they would be doing for the rest of the summer, to set expectations, and to go over ground rules. In some sites, orientation was a time during which program staff could “feel out” participants to better understand their needs and how they could be supported and to take stock of what they should pay attention to throughout the summer.

The third phase, **conceptualization**, did not occur in all sites. In sites that used the third phase, staff engaged participants in various activities, such as writing, drawing, watching films, visiting art galleries and theaters, going out into their communities, surveying residents, mapping community assets, and identifying needs. Participants then drew on these experiences to develop a project idea unified around a shared vision. This process required negotiation and strong facilitation, particularly when the practical

and logistical considerations of implementation did not fit program participants' needs and desires. Nevertheless, most participants lauded conceptualization and its participatory nature. Although conflicts arose because participants had different ideas about what their summer project would look like and how they would execute it, participants and staff valued working through these ideas and coming to mutually beneficial agreements. Guided by input from program staff and community members, participants built interpersonal skills and developed as a collective.

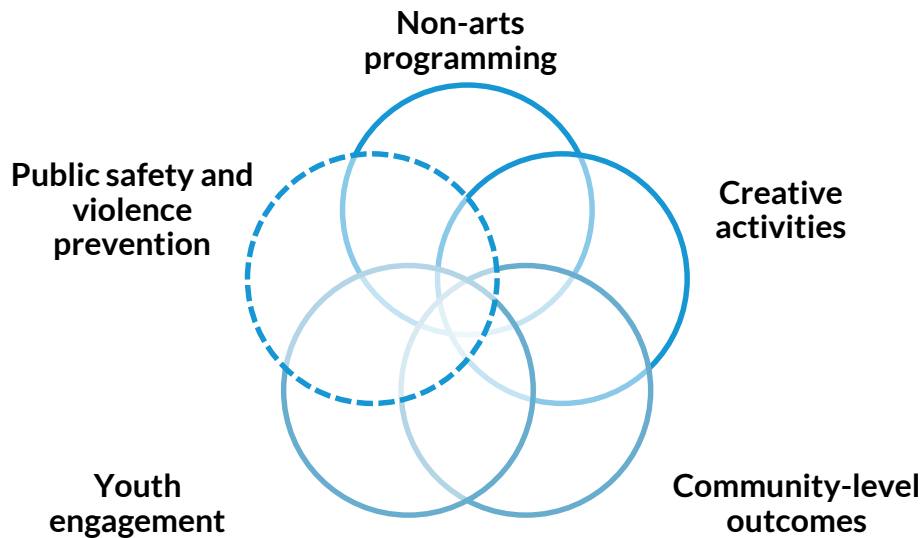
The fourth phase, **implementation**, was common across all sites. This phase—the most substantive—entailed realizing the broader vision of the VIBE site. The level of autonomy participants had during this phase varied. In some sites, participants were sent into the community to work on their project. In a few sites, staff were tangentially involved with the youth, allowing participants to lead implementation and lean on staff when they needed support. In other sites, program staff participated in the same activities as youth.

All VIBE sites had a celebratory program **culmination**, the fifth and final phase. In most cases, this culmination involved family and community members taking part in the contributions VIBE participants made to their communities. Dedicating a day for celebration allowed participants to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in the work they did throughout the summer and enabled them to take ownership of their work. Participants took pride in their own contributions to the project and acknowledged that the projects were a team effort.

## Underlying Program Elements

Nearly all administrative staff, program staff, and program participants thought their program goals aligned closely with the purposes of VIBE—that is, sites aimed to engage young people living in disinvested neighborhoods in New York City through cultural training and internships. Additionally, stakeholders' views on the primary purposes of programming mapped along five overlapping domains: non-arts programming, creative activities, youth engagement, community-level outcomes, and public safety and violence prevention (figure 8).

**FIGURE 8**  
**VIBE Program Elements**



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### CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

VIBE sites took various approaches to realizing the arts and culture goals. Some sites engaged in traditional artistic activities (e.g., painting murals and participating in theater), while others participated in more broadly defined creative activities (e.g., mobilizing community residents to take political action, pursuing entrepreneurial endeavors, and using space in new and creative ways to bring people together).

Creative expression was not necessarily an explicit goal of all program participants, and many had no intentions of participating in an arts program beyond being employed for the summer. Nonetheless, most participants praised the arts programming and saw the value of making art. This was made possible in part because teaching artists did not force participants to engage in the creative components of VIBE programming but instead provided participants the space and flexibility to “do their own thing.”

The process of making art was cited as a key source of participant satisfaction. Some indicated that it developed their interpersonal skills and helped them work better in teams. Related to other programmatic goals, participating in creative activities also connected youth to their communities and, in many cases, involved community input and participation.

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*Community murals are effective not only because of the artwork that gets left behind but because of the process that the community engages with, the research and design, creating the project, being a part of discussions of the content in a way that they engage young people as they're painting and ask questions about what the things are about, the way the community will continue that dialogue after you leave.*

*—VIBE program staff member*

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The creative activities of VIBE programming were also described as having an indirect and immeasurable effect on community violence. When asked about the links between arts and culture and VIBE's broader goals, some program staff drew connections between the two in a broad sense. Some explained that creating and participating in arts and culture activities in public spaces—with and for community members—deterred crime. Engaging youth in creative activities facilitated community-building and sent implicit signals about the value of public spaces, suggesting that crime and violence were not welcome.

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*It's the power of creation in direct opposition to the power of destruction.... And when you see visibly people creating in your neighborhood things that are beautiful, it changes the energy of a place.*

*—VIBE program staff member*

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Nonetheless, staff emphasized that the relationship between making art and preventing violence was not so clear-cut and that the community effects of arts-related programming take time to develop and take effect in ways that are difficult to measure.

## NON-ARTS PROGRAMMING

Social justice values were a core part of participating VIBE programs. Three of the four sites we visited intentionally reserved portions of program curricula to educate youth about social structures, systems, inequity, and inequality—some focused on criminal justice and mass incarceration, while others took a broader approach to the analysis of social (in)justice. Perhaps more importantly, the sites that embraced

this goal grounded these lessons in program participants' communities. Through a slew of activities, from viewing films, to telling stories, to reenacting salient experiences through theater, staff encouraged participants to contextualize inequalities in their communities.

Participants appreciated this component. Many participants were already aware of the injustices in their communities—and, in numerous cases that surfaced during interviews, injustices in their lives. One VIBE program participant remarked, “We walk around, we know it. But we don’t know that most people know.” Nonetheless, participants said that social justice lessons helped them develop a language to understand and articulate the injustices they witnessed before program participation.

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*It’s helping foster dialogue and critical thinking around social justice concepts and systems of oppression...just to get something that youth can respond to in these conversations and feel a part of a historical community that has been addressing these issues.*  
—VIBE program staff member

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Moreover, knowing that others were invested in eradicating these injustices provided a sense of support and reassurance against a backdrop in which participants expressed feeling like no one cared about them and that they were constantly overlooked. This feeling of solidarity and support facilitated civic engagement and community participation. Being made aware of injustices in their community and knowing that others were working to upend these injustices enabled participants to *want* to be a part of social change. It also inspired a sense of possibility and hope for stronger and healthier communities, one they may not otherwise have thought was possible.

## COMMUNITY-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Community engagement is built into various points of VIBE programming. At one of the program’s earlier phases, participants rely on community input as they conceive their project ideas. In most sites, participants rendered a project sketch they shared with community leaders—typically representatives of community organizations—who would push participants to think about their projects in novel ways: “They solicit input from community members that are like, ‘I’m unclear about that part’ or ‘What is that supposed to mean?’ or ‘This makes me think of this’ so that they have time to tweak their design, and [program staff] have time to do that as well because there’s quick turnaround here.” Because most

program activities involved doing work in public spaces, interviewees said passersby would often comment on the creative work, imparting encouraging expressions of gratitude and respect.

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*I feel like their complimenting stuff just motivates and pushes us to keep going because working on the mural, it does get tiring, and it's just, sometimes you really want to stop. But it's just hearing positive feedback that pushes you to go further and keep going.*

—VIBE program participant

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As programs ended, most sites put on a final event in which participants engaged with community members and shared the products of their collective work. These celebrations brought communities together in a way that participants and community members would not otherwise have the space to do. In these ways and others, VIBE programming was designed to better connect participants to their communities. VIBE responded to and incorporated community members' needs through every step of the process.

Participants, program staff, and administrators also shared a unified vision around the big-picture purpose of their activities. In some cases, such as those that involved performances for the community, this took shape by way of sending messages to community members and leaders about the struggles youth face. In others, it manifested as mobilizing neighborhood residents to be active and civically engaged. Where VIBE activities involved tangible artistic products, the process of shaping public spaces was meant to change perceptions of neighborhood spaces.

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*I think it's important to uplift the people who are doing that work in the community to provide safe spaces and to hold space for the elders and the children.... The violence has affected mostly the elders here and the young people in the community. That's why the main figures on that large wall are of an elder and young person being in peace together. It's telling the story of what's happening here but also trying to envision it in a healing light. I think it does make a difference.*

—VIBE program administrator

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## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

A core program goal was socioemotional development and the enhancement of participants' interpersonal skills. Nearly all projects involved group efforts. Projects in some sites were expressly guided by staff members, whereas others cultivated a dynamic in which participants executed their projects with minimal oversight. In either case, programming necessitated problem-solving or conflict mediation, and sites took these tasks in stride.

One site incorporated conflict mediation. That piece of the program required staff to become certified in conflict mediation and equipped participants to effectively communicate with others. Other sites less formally incorporated interpersonal skill development into program orientation and reinforced these skills throughout implementation. Often, this took the form of periodic check-ins between program staff and participants—either one on one or in group settings—and sometimes through less formal activities.

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*Regardless of what someone's going through, at the end of the day, we come together and focus on the mural. It was just the path of learning to work with each other and work with yourself.*

*—VIBE program participant*

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When asked to reflect on their personal development throughout the program, most participants described some degree of formative socioemotional development. Some participants developed empathy for their peers by listening to one another's stories. Sharing personal experiences and seeing the common threads among one another helped build mutual trust, which facilitated execution of the summer project. Other participants observed changes in their abilities to communicate comfortably among people they did not know, noting that working in teams with people they did not have prior relationships with, and sharing their work with community members, helped build their confidence.

## PUBLIC SAFETY AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Stakeholders in most sites spoke about addressing violence and crime more broadly, rather than as an issue specific to youth delinquency, and some stakeholders pushed back on this framing. Most VIBE stakeholders described the program's emphasis as one that reinforced the social justice values embedded into programming. One administrative stakeholder noted, "Ultimately, our goal is to

empower youth and residents and the young people who live here, and what that looks like for us is mitigating barriers, disseminating information, and increasing opportunities. What we're looking to get from this is empowering them in what strategy they can identify and effectuate in order to increase public safety and reduce recidivism."

Administrative and programmatic stakeholders in one site took issue with the idea that their program had anything to do with "crime reduction" or "violence prevention," as was stated in NYC Opportunity's "mini-bid" solicitation for this evaluation. This sentiment emerged during interviews with one site when interviewees saw the program's initial logic model. Specifically, interviewees took issue with one long-term outcome: "Youth have constructive and healthy interactions with law enforcement (and vice versa)." They emphasized that framing VIBE as a program meant to reduce crime by "keeping them busy" was one that overlooked that the youth targeted by VIBE face structural barriers impeding them from participating in their communities and having healthy relationships with authorities. In response, we removed this outcome from our final logic model.

One staff member argued that a violence reduction frame faults youth for failing in a system that was "built for them to fail" and raised as examples police profiling and the inappropriate use of school security staff to monitor students whom authority figures perceived as threatening. These staff contended that they approached social justice and youth engagement to empower youth to understand how institutional powers work so they could learn to navigate systems that criminalize them and avoid being involved in crime.

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*I have to challenge the model of respectability politics. That if you just act better around the cops, they'll treat you better.... We would be blaming the participants, and that's not our job and that's unethical. Participants sniff that out right away, and they resist that notion because it's not true. All that said, I think people walk away after doing this work with a fuller perspective on situations. They realize that being combative in a police encounter isn't going to get you what you need. Knowing your rights can, potentially, keep you safer.*

*—VIBE program staff member*

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But not all stakeholders embraced this perspective, and some program administrators in sites that were tangentially involved in violence prevention explained that behavior change was a core feature of

programming. They lamented that violence was common in the neighborhoods they served, and although participants in the target populations the programs served may not be involved in such violence, they were not immune to its enduring effects. Because violence was prevalent in the communities participants lived in, they were susceptible to crime victimization. When asked to describe their neighborhood, participants in one focus group unanimously agreed that it was “dangerous.” Some sites included formal programming directed at this goal, such as one-on-one or group case management and involving credible messengers to engage participants, steer behavior change, and reinforce other program goals.

## VIBE Participant Surveys

In this section, we present findings from the initial participant surveys at each VIBE site. We focus on questions about identity, neighborhood, and arts and culture. These surveys were designed to be useful in a pre-post setting, but because the timing of survey administration varied and only two program sites conducted surveys both before and after the program, we present results from only the *initial* responses for a given site.

### IDENTITY

Participants were asked to rate the importance of four indicators related to their sense of self on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important):

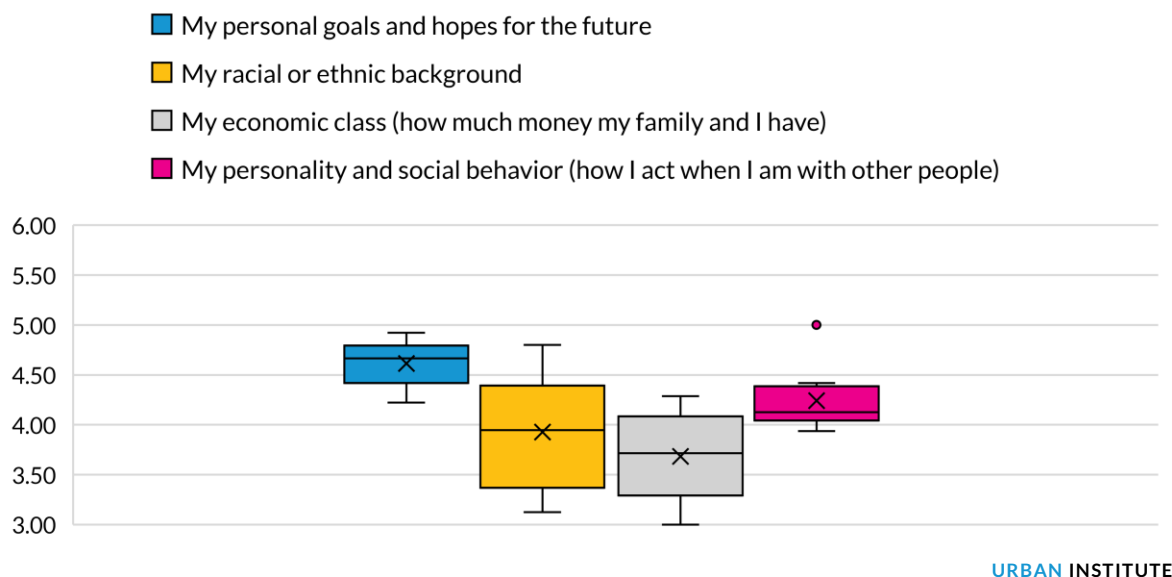
- personal goals and hopes for the future
- racial or ethnic background
- economic class (how much money my family and I have)
- personality and social behavior (how I act when I am with other people)

Of these four indicators, personal goals and hopes for the future had the highest mean response, followed by personality and social behavior (figure 9). Somewhat less important, on average, were race and ethnicity and economic class. The range of responses (the boxes in figure 9 indicate the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile of all responses) varied most for race or ethnicity.

FIGURE 9

### Distribution of Average Site Responses about Identity, Initial Surveys

Prompt: “Please circle how important the following things are to your sense of who you are”



Source: 2018 VIBE participant survey.

Notes: N = 101. Responses are based on a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = not important; 2 = slightly important; 3 = somewhat important; 4 = very important; 5 = extremely important. The box represents the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile of responses, the central line indicates the median, and the “x” marker indicates the mean. The lines (or “whiskers”) extending from the box include all values within 1.5 times the range of the closest quartile. Values outside this range are shown individually as dots.

## NEIGHBORHOOD

Regarding neighborhood, participants were asked how much they agreed with one of five statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree):

- I feel like I belong in my neighborhood.
- I understand the issues affecting my neighborhood.
- I am aware of neighborhood resources (people or groups) that can help me meet my goals.
- I contribute to my neighborhood (through, for example, volunteering, picking up trash, and helping my neighbors).
- I feel comfortable exploring different parts of my neighborhood.

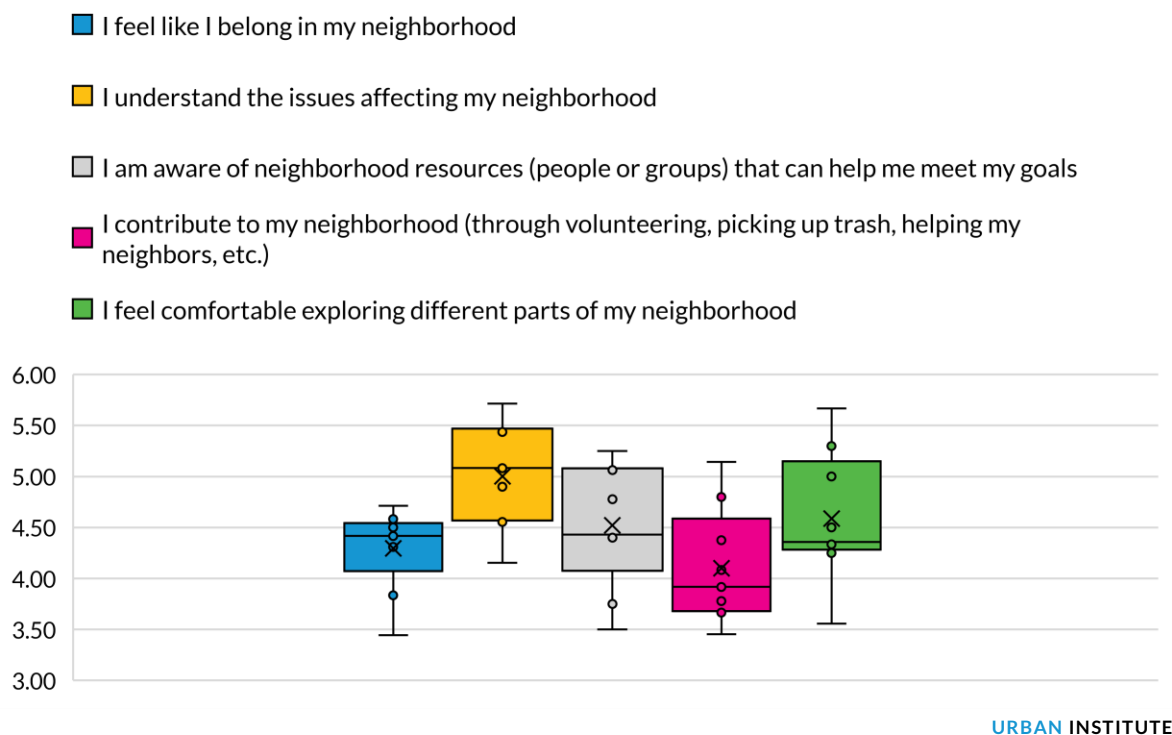
Participants were most likely to state that they understood the issues facing the neighborhood (figure 10). Questions about feeling comfortable exploring, being aware of resources, and feeling a sense of belonging had similar overall averages (around 4.5, between slightly agreeing and agreeing). The widest variation in responses (looking at the boxes, not the whiskers, in figure 10) involved whether

participants were aware of neighborhood resources, while the least variation involved whether participants felt they belonged in their neighborhood.

FIGURE 10

### Distribution of Average Site Responses about the Neighborhood, Initial Surveys

Prompt: "Please select whether you agree or disagree with the following statements"



Source: 2018 VIBE participant survey.

Notes: N = 101. Responses are based on a scale from 1 to 6: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = slightly disagree; 4 = slightly agree; 5 = agree; 6 = strongly agree. The box represents the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile of responses, the central line indicates the median, and the "x" marker indicates the mean. The lines (or "whiskers") extending from the box include all values within 1.5 times the range of the closest quartile. Values outside this range are shown individually as dots.

## ARTS AND CULTURE

Respondents were asked about their level of agreement with four statements about arts and culture. As with the neighborhood questions, responses were based on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree):

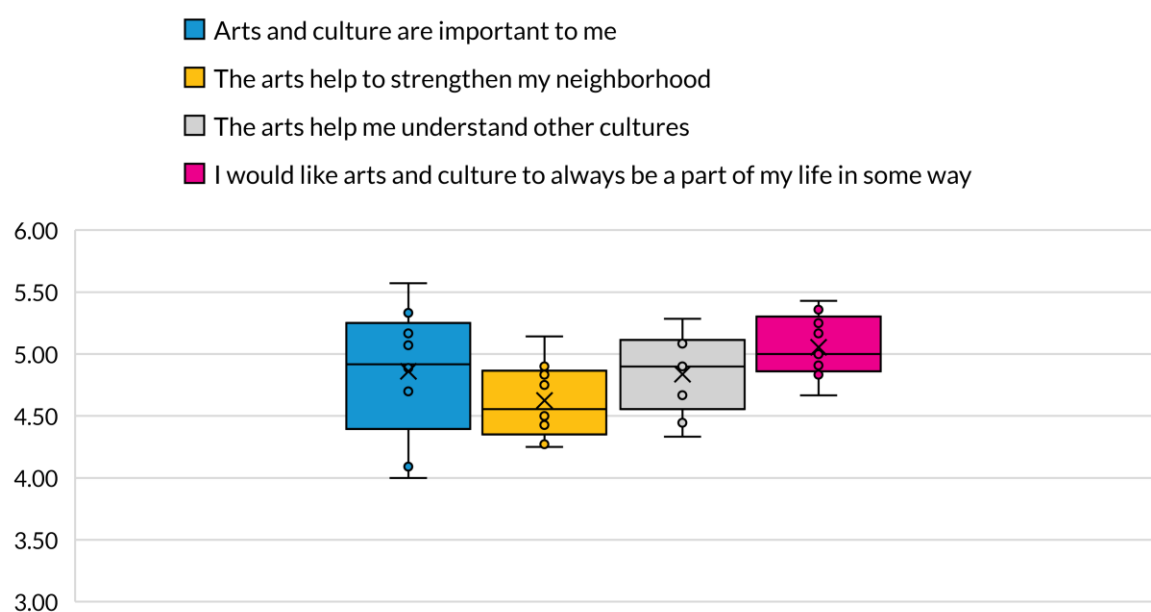
- Arts and culture are important to me.
- The arts help to strengthen my neighborhood.
- The arts help me understand other cultures.
- I would like arts and culture to always be a part of my life in some way.

The mean and median responses were similar across the four questions (figure 11). On average, agreement was strongest for statements indicating the personal value of arts and culture (whether measured as the desire for arts and culture to remain a part of one’s life or as the perceived importance to the respondent) and somewhat lower for questions on its broader social role (strengthening the neighborhood or understanding other cultures). However, because we are not measuring statistical significance, the importance of these differences should not be overstated.

**FIGURE 11**

### **Distribution of Average Site Responses about Arts and Culture, Initial Surveys**

*Prompt: “Please select whether you agree or disagree with the following statements”*



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**Source:** 2018 VIBE participant survey.

**Notes:**  $N = 101$ . Responses are based on scale from 1 to 6: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = slightly disagree; 4 = slightly agree; 5 = agree; 6 = strongly agree. The box represents the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile of responses, the central line represents the median, and the “x” marker indicates the mean. The lines (or “whiskers”) extending from the box include all values within 1.5 times the range of the closest quartile. Values outside this range are shown individually as dots.

## **Challenges and Recommendations**

VIBE program goals differed in their specifics, but sites shared several components. Sites implemented creative activities in the form of murals, community organizing, theater, and business entrepreneurship, but they allowed participants space for creative expression and engaged community members in the process. Sites also implemented non-arts programming—notably social justice programming—that gave

participants insight into broader program goals and provided perspective on how they could be part of a collective effort to change their communities. Sites sought to develop young people’s interpersonal and socioemotional skills—in some cases through group activities and in other cases through formal violence prevention activities.

Because VIBE’s goals were executed differently in each site, the challenges differed. Nonetheless, stakeholders and participants faced some common challenges. In this section, we look at program-level and institution-level challenges reported during interviews. We then ground these perceived challenges with quantitative insights from staff surveys. Finally, we outline recommendations from program staff that speak directly to these challenges.

## PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Common site-level challenges included staff turnover, staff training, participant recruitment, and insufficient and inappropriate materials. Administrative stakeholders noted difficulties with staff retention, indicating that staff struggled to make ends meet and had little incentive to stay. Some staff were employed only through the summer and would find other employment throughout the year, which reduced their chances of returning the following summer.

Administrators and staff wanted opportunities to train staff. Most suggested that they could benefit from developing youth-group management skills. Stakeholders mentioned that cross-site collaboration was limited and that meetings the evaluation team held were some of the few times site stakeholders spoke with one another. Increasing opportunities for cross-site learning and sharing ideas could foster innovation and provide stakeholders otherwise unattainable insights to address common challenges.

For the most part, sites indicated that recruiting participants was less challenging than meeting unmet demand. In sites where recruiting was more challenging, staff explanations focused on young people’s hesitation to embrace arts and culture. At one site that conducted its VIBE programming in a different neighborhood from where it usually operated, staff lacked the long-standing relationships with neighborhood residents that could have improved recruitment.

When asked to select descriptions that best fit their goals, staff most frequently selected reducing neighborhood violence, connecting youth to job opportunities, connecting youth to their community, connecting youth to arts and culture, and connecting youth to educational opportunities (table 6). When asked to rank the relative challenge of these goals, respondents indicated that connecting to job

opportunities, avoiding justice system involvement, connecting to communities, and reducing neighborhood violence were particularly challenging.

**TABLE 6**  
**Program Goals and Biggest Programmatic Challenges**

Program goal	Count	Challenge level (mean)	Respondents who identified goal as most challenging
Reduce neighborhood violence	13	4.1	3
Connect youth to job opportunities	12	3.6	3
Connect youth to their community	12	4.1	1
Connect youth to arts and culture	12	6.3	0
Connect youth to educational opportunities	12	4.6	0
Increase neighborhood livability	11	5.6	1
Connect youth to mentors	10	5.2	1
Build youth employment-related skills	10	6.2	0
Avoid justice system involvement	8	3.9	1
Build better relationships with law enforcement	5	4.4	2

**Source:** 2018 VIBE staff survey. Count refers to the number of staff member respondents who indicated the goal in the list as a program goal. Staff could select all goals that applied.

**Notes:** N = 13. Challenge level is on a scale from 1 (most challenging) to 10 (least challenging).

## INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

According to staff survey respondents, funding and resources were by far the most common institutional challenges (table 7). Twelve of the 13 respondents named it the biggest challenge. After that, training and staffing, employment and education, safety, and unmet demand also were commonly selected as significant challenges.

**TABLE 7**  
**Biggest Institutional Challenges**

Challenge	Challenge level (mean)	Respondents who identified challenge as most challenging
Funding and resources	1.1	12
Training and staffing	3.9	0
Employment and education	4.0	0
Safety	4.2	0
Unmet demand	4.9	1
Lack of demand	5.4	0
Measuring effects and outcomes	6.0	0
Competing programs	6.9	0
Other	8.8	0

**Source:** 2018 VIBE staff survey.

**Notes:** N = 13. Challenge level is on a scale from 1 (most challenging) to 10 (least challenging).



In general, program staff used VIBE funding to offer programming similar to what they already were offering rather than to create new models. Administrative and program staff in several sites simply saw VIBE as a funding source for their ongoing work. Notably, a few staff did not understand what “VIBE” meant. Relatedly, most stakeholders had limited direct engagement with the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, generally involving contracts and data requests.

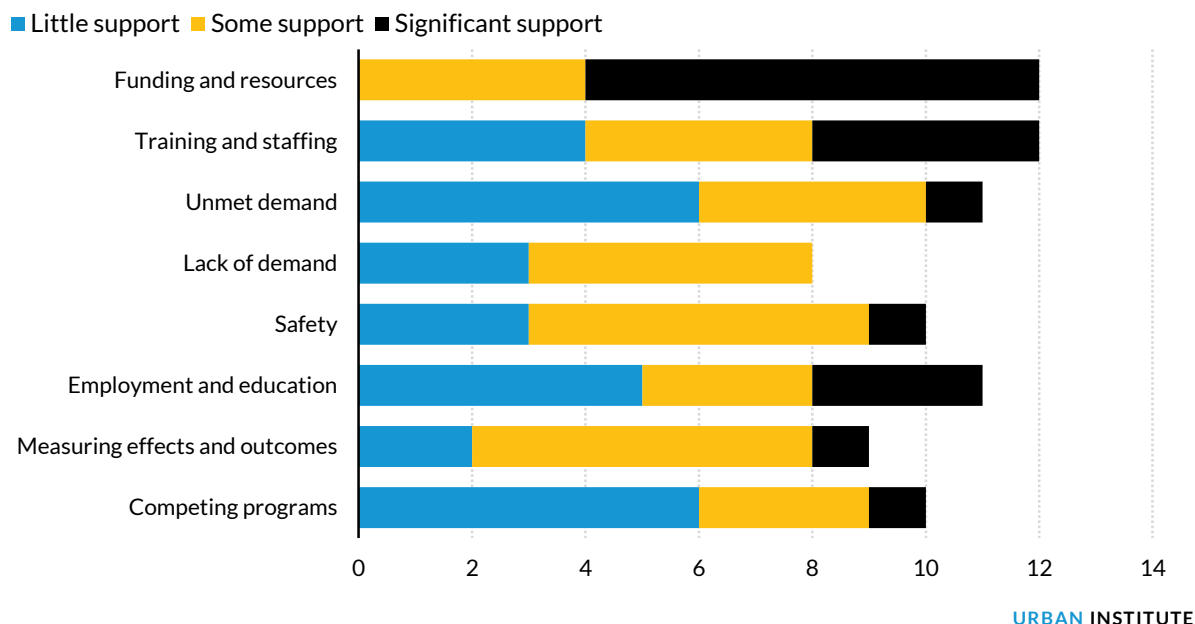
When asked about the type of relationship with MOCJ they desired, stakeholders expressed ambivalence. Some welcomed the opportunity to forge a strong partnership with MOCJ and invited its input and expertise on programming, but others expressed tepid support for greater involvement. These interviewees did not reject any such relationships but did not know what the relationships could provide. Some staff-level stakeholders were strongly opposed to more involvement, viewing MOCJ as too removed from the everyday realities of the communities they serve. One staff member said, “Just give us our money, and let us do our thing.”

Among challenges that program staff indicated they could see MOCJ supporting, funding and resources was the most common choice, followed by training and staffing, and employment and educational challenges. These were the only three that had more than one respondent (out of 14 overall) indicate MOCJ could play a “significant” role (figure 12).

FIGURE 12

### Challenges that the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice Could Help Support, According to VIBE Program Staff Survey

Number of staff members who said MOCJ could provide “little,” “some,” or “significant” support in each area



Source: 2018 VIBE staff survey.

Notes: N = 14. Response options also included “none,” which was omitted from this chart.

### DATA COLLECTION RECOMMENDATIONS

**Existing data collection.** VIBE’s data collection mechanism is limited to progress reports delivered to MOCJ that include information about such activities as programming inputs, outputs, short-term outcomes, and impact. Programs report challenges experienced throughout the program (e.g., issues with funding, retaining participants, space). Additionally, programs document such metrics as participant demographics, frequency of participation, and program completion rates.

This information provides a valuable snapshot of implementation successes and challenges. Yet, how much program stakeholders use this information to guide program refinement is unclear. Additionally, the existing metrics of success rely on only a few indicators. The open-ended components of the reporting system could shed light on implementation successes and challenges, but our review of the most recent year of reporting found that these sections contained limited information, painting an incomplete picture of program implementation. This reporting structure also poses difficulties for obtaining standardized information across all sites. These responses are also framed more in terms of outputs and methods (examples from 2018 reports include attendance as a common indicator; other success metrics include participant journals, audience feedback, and court involvement) than in

reporting on outcomes resulting from these strategies (examples could include measures of social cohesion and civic engagement or workforce readiness and participation).

**Recommendations.** Given the constraints that program and administrative staff face, it is important to include indicators in reporting systems that minimize the burden on staff members completing these reports. One compromise that would limit the time and effort required for completion would be to modify reports to include fewer open-ended questions and focus on a limited number of closed-ended questions that could be aggregated across sites.

VIBE programming might also consider participant surveys. As part of our evaluation, we developed and administered a pre-post survey that assessed how youth viewed themselves, their communities, and their relationship with arts and culture—a core component of VIBE programming.<sup>15</sup> This could be supplemented by additional questions for measuring long-term outcomes (e.g., school enrollment and employment status). One challenge of administering a longitudinal survey is maintaining long-term contact with program participants. VIBE sites do not have any such mechanism in place, so lowering barriers to response—such as offering multiple ways to fill out a survey (e.g., email or text) or offering a small incentive—would help collect more information on outcomes of interest that are not yet captured.

A final challenge is how best to make use of the data collected from the surveys when programs may not have the bandwidth or capacity to do so. This could be a role for MOCJ, but even at the program level, building Excel routines or macros that would compile survey responses and produce output tables or charts could assist in this work. This is also where shared learnings and group discussions across sites could help identify successes, challenges, and paths forward for improving the effectiveness of VIBE programming.

## Conclusions and Ways Forward

The communities served by Playstreets and VIBE share many of the same challenges, such as safety concerns, strained relationships with law enforcement, and limited enrichment and training opportunities. In many cases, the public housing developments have significant funding and maintenance strains. This evaluation reviewed recently designed interventions.

For Playstreets, the biggest challenge for most sites is attendance. Outreach efforts at low-attendance sites should be a key component. The site at 196th Street has shown that well-developed links with existing community resources can lead to well-attended programming. Local schools remain an obvious point of contact for potential participants. Basketball-focused programming has given

Playstreets more structure and provided a draw for many, but the trade-off has been a lack of variety that might draw other participants. Having external partnerships (potentially with VIBE sites) could take some of the onus off Playstreets summer staff to fulfill their basketball-related duties and more effectively respond to other interests, whether for other sports or for games or arts and crafts. The other main challenge going forward is how best to engage with law enforcement. If police engagement is to remain a key component of the Playstreets model, more must be done to ensure regular interactions across sites.

Challenges for VIBE programming were often site-specific but reflected broad societal challenges: connecting participants to jobs, avoiding justice system involvement, building community ties, and reducing neighborhood violence. Individual programs are working within broadly similar conceptual frameworks but address these issues differently. This makes understanding VIBE's effect difficult because—unlike Playstreets' more unified model—there are as many VIBE models as there are VIBE sites. Responses from VIBE participant surveys indicate that participants generally understood the issues that their neighborhoods face but were mixed on whether they contribute to their neighborhoods. Similarly, although participants strongly agreed that they wanted the arts to be part of their life, average responses on whether the arts strengthened their communities were lower. These responses (although it should be noted that sample sizes are small and we are not measuring statistical significance) indicate a continuing role for VIBE programs to clearly link their arts-based programming to efforts designed to benefit their communities.

Playstreets and VIBE focus on different age groups, offer distinct programming, and operate in different locations. Tight coordination between the two programs is unlikely. But some joint programming could be beneficial, particularly where Playstreets and VIBE sites are in close proximity. What might these opportunities look like? Having VIBE participants go to Playstreets sites for on-site presentations of their work (or having Playstreets participants take field trips to VIBE sites) could provide some arts-related programming for Playstreets and be a recruitment method for future VIBE participants aging out of Playstreets. It would also be another way for VIBE participants to engage with their communities.

More broadly, both Playstreets and VIBE are targeted interventions designed to confront wide-ranging and systemic social issues. The strength of these models is in how they help participants navigate these challenges. Playstreets helps youth develop social skills and learn how to engage with law enforcement, and VIBE uses creative practice to deepen young people's understanding of themselves and their community. Monitoring the success of these initiatives going forward should be undertaken with an understanding of what they are trying to accomplish on their own terms.

# Appendix. Protocols

## Summer Programs Survey

### INTRODUCTION

The Urban Institute, an independent, nonprofit research organization, is conducting this survey to learn more about your participation in this program. This evaluation is funded by New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), in consultation with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ).

This survey will ask you questions about your identity and your neighborhood. The purpose of the survey is to help the Urban Institute understand how this summer program is affecting how you view yourself and your neighborhood. This survey is completely voluntary, and you can skip any questions or stop answering questions at any time. No one besides the researchers at the Urban Institute will see your responses to the survey. The Urban Institute will keep your answers confidential and not share them with program staff, your parents, or anyone else. Instead, the researchers will combine all the survey responses to see how all participants (you!) think about themselves and their neighborhood. The combined responses will be used in research that will discuss the effects of arts programs like this. Thank you for participating!

### CONSENT

I understand that participation in the survey is completely voluntary, and if there are any questions I do not want to answer, I may skip them. I also understand that I can stop taking the survey at any time. I understand that the research team will only use this information for research purposes, and my individual responses will not be shared outside of the research team. I understand that the research team will maintain strict privacy standards at all times. I understand my rights and am willing to participate in this survey.

☐ Yes

☐ No

**Before beginning the survey, please select the program you participate in.**

*You must select one to go on to the survey.*

☐ Groundswell

☐ King of Kings

- ☐ Lead by Example
- ☐ True 2 Life
- ☐ Theatre of the Oppressed NYC
- ☐ CSO Foundation
- ☐ Man Up!
- ☐ Brownsville Community Justice Center

**Please select the statement that best describes why you chose to participate in this program.**

- ☐ I am interested in arts and culture
- ☐ I saw a poster, flyer, or brochure
- ☐ A friend
- ☐ A family member
- ☐ Another adult (teacher, guidance counselor, officer, coach)
- ☐ Other. *Please specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. YOURSELF

The following statements are designed to help the research team understand how you think about yourself. Please circle how important the following things are to your sense of who you are.

Select one option for each row.

	NOT IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
1. My personal goals and hopes for the future	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. My racial or ethnic background	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
3. My economic class (how much money my family and I have)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
4. My personality and social behavior (how I act when I am with other people)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

## 2. YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

The following statements are designed to help the research team understand how you think about your neighborhood. Please select whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Select one option for each row.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1. I feel like I belong in my neighborhood	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand the issues affecting my neighborhood	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
<i>Select <u>one</u> option for each row.</i>						
3. I am aware of neighborhood resources (people or groups) that can help me meet my goals	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
4. I contribute to my neighborhood (through volunteering, picking up trash, helping my neighbors, etc.)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
5. I feel comfortable exploring different parts of my neighborhood	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>

### 3. YOUR THOUGHTS ON ARTS AND CULTURE

*The following statements are designed to help the research team understand how you think about arts and culture. Please select whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.*

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY DISAGREE	SLIGHTLY AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
<i>Select <u>one</u> option for each row.</i>						
1. Arts and culture are important to me	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. The arts help to strengthen my neighborhood	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
3. The arts help me understand other cultures	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
4. I would like arts and culture to always be a part of my life in some way	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>



#### 4. ABOUT YOU

1. What month and year were you born? Month: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you describe your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Gender non-conforming

☐ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would you describe yourself? *Select all that apply.*

☐ White/Caucasian

☐ Black/African American

☐ Hispanic/Latinx

☐ Asian/Pacific Islander

☐ American Indian/Alaska Native ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is the highest grade of school you have completed? Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THE SURVEY!**

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Elsa Falkenburger, “Summer Programs for Low-Income Youth,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, July 23, 2012, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/summer-programs-low-income-youth>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Positive Youth Development,” Youth.gov, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>.
- <sup>3</sup> “About DYCD: History,” New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dycd/about/about-dycd/history.page>.
- <sup>4</sup> “The Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety,” New York City Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://criminaljustice.cityofnewyork.us/programs/map/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Our discussion of findings was arranged in a focus group or meeting framework, but for a larger group, a data walk involving more stakeholders would be beneficial. See Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena (2015).
- <sup>6</sup> “PAL Playstreets,” Police Athletic League of New York City, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.palnyc.org/playstreets>.
- <sup>7</sup> “About Us,” Urbane Development, accessed April 3, 2019, <http://urbane-dev.com/about/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Lazar Treschan and Irene Lew, “More Connections, but Looser Ties?” Community Service Society, February 1, 2019, <http://www.cssny.org/news/entry/more-connections-but-looser-ties>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Jim Dwyer, “Heard on the Stoops: A Nostalgia for Playstreets,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/nyregion/about12.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fnyregion>. According to 990 forms, Playstreets had 75 sites serving 11,000 young people in 2009, 40 sites serving 4,200 in 2016, and 16 sites serving 1,200 in 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Only one site had a regular participation share of less than 70 percent, although that site provided different participant tallies (38 or 47) depending on the question. Our estimate is based on 47 participants.
- <sup>11</sup> Breakdowns come from the 2018 summer report and site-specific participation data.
- <sup>12</sup> “Making a Place for Learning at NYC Summer Play Streets,” The Uni Project, August 28, 2018, <https://www.theuniproject.org/2018/08/28/making-a-place-for-learning-at-nyc-play-streets/>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Fordham Playstreet Reopens to Children for Summer,” Bronx News 12, July 10, 2017, <http://bronx.news12.com/story/35851980/fordham-playstreet-reopens-to-children-for-summer>; and Jim Dwyer, “In the Bronx, Fighting for the Right to Play,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/nyregion/in-the-bronx-fighting-for-the-right-to-play.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> See “The Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety,” New York City Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://criminaljustice.cityofnewyork.us/programs/map/>.
- <sup>15</sup> Although our survey was designed as a pre-post survey, most sites administered the survey only once. One primary challenge of administering the follow-up survey was maintaining contact with program participants and encouraging participation during the second wave. Because program staff reported strong, long-lasting relationships with participants, they could administer the surveys.

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## STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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