

GIRLS INC EVALUATION OF PROJECT PUERTA



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FINAL REPORT



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EVALUATION PRODUCTS

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ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



Meridian Consulting designs and delivers customized training and consultation to local, state, regional, and national non-profit agencies and health care providers. Meridian Consulting helps organizations increase private and public support, plan for the future, streamline systems, identify community need, evaluate programming and organizational capacity, build a motivated and energized staff, and respond strategically to community opportunities. The firm was founded on the principle that community improvement, initiative sustainability, and program success are closely tied to assessment of needs, evaluation of community goals and development of appropriate responses.

This document is a prime example of a comprehensive outcome evaluation that is formative and highly participatory in nature. In addition to documenting specific outcomes, this evaluation explores the skills, knowledge and perspectives acquired by the individuals who are involved with the project. Our vision for this evaluation is rooted in the conviction that project evaluation and project management are inextricably linked. Over time, this evaluation will inform a variety of findings, such as best practices, the impact of different conditions on service recipients, and factors that influence successful outcomes.

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OVERVIEW

I am so much more responsible. Honestly. I have to do my homework now – they make me do my homework! So, I'm doing well in school. I know my limits. I know a lot of things. I don't go smoking because I know what that does to you. I know what's bad for me because Project PUERTA showed me those things. I know about STD's and about AIDS. If I'm going to have sex, I'm going to use condoms, I'm going to get checked, I'm going to go on birth control. You know what I mean? If you're going to have sex, okay, but be safe and use protection and don't do it under drugs.

Project PUERTA Peer Leader Interview, Spring 2005

Since 1982, Girls Incorporated (Girls Inc.) has provided programs to motivate, encourage and empower over 5,000 young people in the Holyoke area. Established to enable girls to be strong, smart, and bold and to achieve their full potential, Girls Inc. builds participants' capacity to lead confident, healthy lives and to achieve economic independence and personal fulfillment. *Project PUERTA (Peers Utilizing Education and Resources Towards Action)* has been central to this mission because it addresses the issues that affect the mind, body, and spirit of at-risk youth, boys and girls, and gives them the tools they need to live healthy, safe lives and to realize their full potential. HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness and substance abuse prevention have been primary services at Girls Inc. since its inception. Girls Inc. combines these education and prevention services with programs that offer alternatives to high-risk behavior. These include a Drop-In Center, recreational programs, sports, culture and heritage, non-traditional career exploration, trips, and special events.

Holyoke, the community served by Girls Inc., is a city with alarming rates of poverty and undereducation. Its economy relies primarily on manufacturing, the insurance industry, the public sector, private education institutions, and a large service sector. Just over half (55.5%) of Holyoke's population is white; 41.4% is Hispanic; and 2.6% is African American/Black. Of the city's 39,800 residents, 41.4% are Latino, and this mostly Puerto Rican sector of the community faces a particularly grim situation with regard to its economic and educational well-being. In a state where the percentage of public school students with limited English proficiency in 2003 was 5.0%, Holyoke's was four times higher - the highest level of all school districts statewide - at 27.8%. Studies show that the low level of educational achievement among many Latino adults, based overwhelmingly in their lack of literacy and English language skills, is responsible in

We've had a little over 150 teens from our four organizations go through the Youth Leadership Institute. All of those teens received comprehensive education on a variety of topics. Only 1 out of 150 people in the Youth Leadership Institute dropped out of school. Only 2 out of 130 got pregnant. If you know Holyoke statistics than you know that is really good! The case management that we've been able to provide has been extremely helpful in some of the girls' individual lives.

Staff Interview

large part for the economic and social distress experienced by this population.

Census figures show that one-third of the adult population in the city has not completed high school and that the high school drop-out rate is triple the statewide rate, with 27% of all Holyoke high school students dropping out of school.¹ In 2004, Holyoke's MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) scores were among the lowest in the state, with the Holyoke school district ranking 369 out of 373 districts.

Compared to other cities in Massachusetts, Holyoke has the highest percentage of children living in poverty, the highest teen birth rate, and the second highest percentage of children living in single-parent families. Recent figures show almost two-thirds of Latinos in Holyoke living below the poverty level and another one-third unemployed. In the Holyoke Public Schools in 2002, 67.7% of students qualified for free lunches, compared to 26.2% statewide.

Poverty in Holyoke is especially prevalent among its growing population of teenaged Latina mothers and their young children; 62% of Holyoke's impoverished children are Latino.² According to March 2004 MA Department of Public Health data, births to teen mothers accounted for 20.5% of the city's total births, a rate that is nearly quadruple the state average of 5.9%.³

A staggering proportion (41.9%) of Holyoke children under 18 live below 100% of poverty, compared to 12% statewide. Although per capita income in the state has climbed over the past three years, in Holyoke a higher proportion of families and children are living in poverty. Nearly half (46.3%) of Holyoke families live below 200% of poverty. Holyoke's per capita income of \$15,913 is nearly 40% less than the statewide per capita income of \$25,952. Over one-quarter (27.2%) of Holyoke residents are AFDC Medicaid recipients, compared to 7.1% statewide.

Holyoke continues to lag far behind other cities in the effort to slow the spread of HIV and AIDS. Holyoke's rate of newly diagnosed AIDS cases is nearly six times the state average. Homicide rates in Holyoke are also high, at three times the state average, and hospitalizations for alcohol and drug abuse are particularly high in Holyoke, where the rate of substance use hospitalizations is nearly four times the statewide rate.

A lot of people who get this job get peer pressure. But when it happens they know what stuff can do to you so they're like, "Oh, I'm not going to smoke." Peers pressure you more and more, and so many people give in. But when you're here, you learn how to say no. I love it here. It's great. Honestly there is nothing better. If I didn't have Project PUERTA in my life I'd go crazy. It helps a lot. I can't even picture it if they weren't in my life.

Peer Leader Interview

I love it here! I love all the people here – they're so great!!

Peer Leader Interview

¹ Massachusetts Department of Education: *Dropout Rates in Massachusetts Public Schools*, November 2001.

² Massachusetts Citizens for Children: *Massachusetts Kids Count*, 2003.

³ Massachusetts Department of Public Health: *Adolescent Births, A Statistical Profile, Massachusetts*, revised March 2004.

Holyoke's population continues to become more ethnically and racially diverse, and the percentage of residents in Holyoke who are children remains far higher than the statewide average. The need for quality programs for children and youth remains a critical community need.

The following Table of Community Status Indicators⁴ has been compiled for Holyoke. It reveals a stark picture with regard to the well-being of families, youth and children in this city.

Table of Community Status Indicators - Holyoke

Community Indicators	Holyoke	MASSACHUSETTS
Per Capita Income	\$15,913	\$25,952
Population below 100% of poverty level	26.4%	9.3%
Population below 200% of poverty level	46.3%	21.7%
Children under 18 living below 100% of poverty	41.9%	12%
Persons unemployed	6.9%	5.3%
AFDC Medicaid Recipients	27.2%	7.1%
Population White	55%	83.9%
Population Black	2.6%	5.3%
Population Hispanic	41.4%	6.8%
Percentage of female heads of household (no spouse/partner present)	22.1%	11.9%
Percentage low birthweight babies	10.3%	7.5%
Teen birth rate	20.5%	5.9%
Mothers not receiving pre-natal care in 1 st Trimester	29.5%	15.8%
Percentage of 2004 high school class that did not complete high school ⁵	29%	13%
Drop-out rate (2002-2003)	10.2%	3.3%
Newly diagnosed AIDS cases per 100,000	62.8	11.1

Project PUERTA has been like a home base for a couple hundred teens at least. The Drop-In Center for over 500 teens has really created a head-quarters, a safe space to gather and to rally around different things affecting them. I feel that well over 1,500 unduplicated teens have been impacted by this program through the peer education, Youth Leadership Institute, van and other outreach activities.

Staff Interview

Thank all you guys for being there for my son.

Parent Survey

⁴ The following information, obtained from *Massachusetts Community Health Information Profile* (MassCHIP) reports, updated in 7/23/2004, was derived from numerous federal and state publications. Vital statistics were obtained from 2002-2004 Dept. of Public Health data, and census information was derived from the 2000 US Census, with updated estimates for 2004. Unless otherwise noted, information applies to the 2004 calendar year.

⁵ This rate demonstrates the cumulative effect of student drop out rates from 9th-12th grade.

Persons alive with AIDS per 100,000	384.1	117.2
Homicide per 100,000	7.5	2.4
Lung Cancer Deaths per 100,000*	69.3	54.9
Hospitalizations, Alcohol Substance Abuse- related per 100,000	1,450.9	364.6
Alcohol and other drug use deaths per 100,000 persons*	47.2	20.4
Hospitalizations, asthma per 100,000 persons*	193.6	130.8

Holyoke's youth are bombarded by an array of issues that have tremendous potential to impede development and minimize opportunities for academic and personal success. Too often, young people engage in risky behaviors with devastating long term consequences –STD's and HIV/AIDS, drug/alcohol addiction, pregnancy – due to low self esteem, peer pressure, a need to feel loved or liked and/or because they lack information and support. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future is probably the most powerful asset propelling youth to healthy outcomes despite adversity (Benard, 1996). For young people growing up in high-risk environments or troubled families, neighborhood-based organizations can play a pivotal role in providing support, caring relationships, and opportunities for meaningful involvement and responsibility (McLaughlin, 1995). The most successful programmatic approaches built on this concept provide youth with opportunities to "give one's gift back to the community" through cooperative learning, peer support groups, and cross-age/peer helping or community service. Research also shows that youth respond best to peer-led programs rather than authority-led programs.

Because young people tend to feel invulnerable and misunderstood, they mistrust adult warnings and simplistic slogans designed to alter their behavior. Until recently, traditional service models have viewed young people as dangerous, deficits to society. Empowering young people to make decisions in their own lives can be fostered by giving them the power to make decisions in their schools, community organizations, and after-school programs. This requires adults to let go of their control orientation, to see youth as a valuable resource, to willingly share power with youth, and to create a system based on reciprocity and collaboration rather than on control and competition.

This is the philosophy behind Project PUERTA. Through this program, Girls Inc. poses questions that encourage critical, reflective thinking; makes learning more experiential and hands-on; involves youth in program design; uses participatory

I've made a lot of friends here and I spend time with them at school, too. I think that a lot of those friendships will last even after I go away to college.

Peer Leader Interview

After we do the games or acting or something, we have group discussions. A lot of people talk. I talk too! Sometimes I feel a little nervous, but I'm much more comfortable than I was before, when I started hereAt first I was like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I'm saying something!", but it's good. I used to never speak out, but now I do.

Peer Leader Interview

evaluation strategies; and encourages youth to create program/group norms and agreements. Creating ongoing opportunities for reflection and dialogue around issues meaningful to youth – especially those related to risky behaviors, drug use, sexuality, and family communication – is continually identified by youth as what they want in youth programming (Brown et al, 1995).

Through Project PUERTA, Girls Inc. seeks to expand opportunities for young people to voice their realities (especially in a small group context); to discuss their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings; to question societal messages; and to become empowered critical thinkers and decision makers around the important issues in their lives. Project PUERTA provides a wide range of prevention interventions – Peer Leadership training, prevention-focused peer education, curriculum-based prevention programming, Drop-In Center, and outreach van - to build resiliency, increase protective factors, and empower youth to choose healthy and productive alternatives to high-risk behaviors.

This report describes the evaluation and provides cumulative findings for the entire grant period, from 10/2002-9/2005. This evaluation provided ongoing process and outcome information throughout the duration of the evaluation to enable program planners to assess the extent of the change in Peer Leaders and to strengthen the program throughout its life. Ultimately, although this evaluation provides specific outcomes, it has been equally focused on the skills, knowledge and perspectives acquired by the Peer Leaders, youth participants, Project PUERTA staff, and community partners who have been involved with Project PUERTA. We believe that self-reflection and dialogue on the part of every person involved with the evaluation has been key to reaching sophisticated understandings of how, why, and when Project PUERTA has been most successful.

What difference did Project PUERTA make in the lives of the participants? Why was it working and in what circumstances? What did the Project PUERTA experience mean to Peer Leaders and collaborators? How did these meanings relate to intended outcomes? In exploring questions like these, we strived to understand the richness and complexity of Project PUERTA, the program's impact, and its most influential components.

Evaluation Staffing

The Girls Inc. evaluation was designed and coordinated by a third party, external evaluator, Meridian Consulting, in collaboration with Girls Inc. staff and Project PUERTA's partners. An Amherst, Massachusetts-based firm specializing in the design and implementation of customized research projects including program and outcome evaluation, community assessment and asset

I want to be a Peer Leader for as long as I can – four years! I know I'll learn more about other stuff as long as I'm here. I think it's a good program for teenagers. It's helping me make better choices, too. I know what to do now in different situations. It's not like I'm a different person, but I feel more strongly about things now.

Peer Leader Interview

Now that I'm here I have a place to go and positive things to do. I'm not just outside all the time hanging out with my friends and doing nothing. I used to go to my friends' houses and we'd just chill and walk around outside, and walk around more. Now I don't have to just walk around all the time being bored and looking at the same people.

Peer Leader Interview

mapping, and policy studies, Meridian Consulting worked closely with Girls Inc. to develop the Project PUERTA evaluation plan described in this report. Founded in 1995, Meridian Consulting provides third-party evaluation services for a wide variety of non-profit agencies, youth service providers, hospitals, and educational institutions. In addition to facilitating the Project PUERTA evaluation, Meridian Consulting currently serves as external evaluator for a number of major, multi-year initiatives, including *Proyecto CALOR*, a three-year program of the Holyoke Health Center, the *Reach Out Initiative*, a three-year regional nonprofit capacity building program focused on health care access, and *Project PUERTA*, a model Adolescent Family Life demonstration program of The Care Center in Holyoke. Meridian has worked with a variety of agencies in the Holyoke community for over ten years, and has a local reputation for fostering inclusive, highly effective, and results-oriented programming. In fact, during Girls Inc.'s 2004 SAMHSA site visit, site visitors credited Meridian's evaluation with "serving as an example of why external evaluation is so valuable to agencies and to the Holyoke community." Meridian Consulting has designed and implemented evaluation plans for programs covering a wide array of areas, including youth services, health care, substance use, HIV/AIDS, public health, K-12 and higher education, nonprofit capacity building, community organizing, international relations, and other organizational development initiatives.

The Project PUERTA evaluation was coordinated by Marian Wolfsun, Meridian's senior evaluation consultant. Ms. Wolfsun specializes in designing innovative evaluation plans for a wide variety of non-profit agencies, with a specific focus on agencies providing youth programming and health care services. The work was conducted by a three-person team consisting of two senior evaluation design consultants, one of whom compiled and wrote the reports, and a data analyst. Interviews, focus groups, and observations were conducted by Meridian Consulting. Surveys were designed by Meridian Consulting and administered by Girls Inc. staff; information from these surveys was collected and analyzed by Meridian Consulting. At the end of each contract year, Meridian Consulting integrated findings from all the evaluation instruments into a formal, written report.

Data Collection Plan & Procedures

Meridian Consulting collected data at 1-3 points during the year, depending on the type of data collection tool. Process data was collected from program records, staff interviews, youth interviews, youth surveys, parent surveys, stakeholder interviews, program observation, and focus groups. GPRA data, and particularly analysis of pre/post GPRA results, promises to provide the most

I learned a lot more stuff than I expected, and I like it a lot. More about AIDS and HIV especially. I was surprised at all the stuff you can get it from.

Peer Leader Interview

Our youth have a real community feeling and the sense that they are not alone.

Collaborator's Focus Group

concrete data to measure outcomes, but in addition to the GPRA data (which has yet to be fully analyzed by CSAP) the Girls Inc. evaluation also included a pre/post youth survey designed to track general changes in behaviors, attitudes and knowledge of participants. Written process and outcome reports were prepared at the conclusion of every data collection period, and a formal report, summarizing all findings for the year, was completed at the end of each program year. Reports were issued at least monthly, and sometimes more frequently, depending on the data collection calendar. Specific data collection tools are described in further detail, in the following sections. The data collection calendar for 2004-2005 is included in the Appendix.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan consisted of the analysis of two fundamental types of performance indicators. The first type was process or "service unit indicators" - including counts of Peer Leaders, service hours, numbers of trainings provided, types of training and activities delivered, frequency/length of activities, and quality measures such as program satisfaction ratings. These measures gave a clear indication as to whether Project PUERTA was meeting program objectives in terms of delivering training, activities, and interventions on specific topics to Peer Leaders and the wider youth community. The second type of performance indicator measured impact or "outcome" (including impact on Peer Leaders; measures related to Peer Leader knowledge acquisition; reduction in high risk behavior; and increase in collaborative efforts between Girls Inc. and Project PUERTA partners). The distinction between process or service unit indicators on the one hand and outcome or impact indicators on the other hand follows the United Way of America's distinction in Evaluating Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach (United Way of America, 1996).

This year the collaboration has been improving. We're communicating better. When we meet, we work well together, adding our ideas and really participating in a way that shows we care about the work. Even if it is difficult to get people to meetings, when we are together it feels comfortable and everyone works cooperatively.

Collaborator's Focus Group

PROCESS EVALUATION

The Project PUERTA evaluation was designed to provide outcome information (outcome evaluation), as well as to provide an understanding of how the program functions (process evaluation). This included assessing implementation of interventions, including contextual variables to explain findings, participation levels, and success of outreach activities. The process evaluation examined the program components (resources, activities, and so on) of the systems model and how these components were linked together. The main feature of the Project PUERTA process evaluation, therefore, was a focus on the way resources, activities, immediate effects, objectives and vision were interconnected, and how the elements contributed to the overall outcomes. The evaluation design stemmed directly from the program logic model – a visual description of the connections between program goals, outcomes, objectives, activities and resources. Process evaluation enabled staff to adjust programming throughout the duration of a project in order to increase effectiveness and improve outcomes. This approach encouraged and enabled improvement almost from the outset. As planners increased their understanding of the work and its impact, they changed different points along the logic model (resources, activities, or the way in which activities were delivered) to increase their effectiveness. Although often qualitative in nature, process evaluation also linked findings to outcome information in order to be truly meaningful. For example, immediate feedback from participants might support a particular approach to an activity, but the long-range value of this approach could only be validated if it was linked to improved outcomes.

Informed Consent Forms & Procedures

To ensure the confidentiality of all youth participating in the evaluation, all program participants were identified through identification numbers, randomly assigned by staff. These ID numbers were used on all evaluation materials, instead of names, to protect the confidentiality of the program participants. Staff reviewed all evaluation material to ensure that any identifying characteristics were excluded from all formal and informal findings. In addition, Meridian Consulting was bound by the same confidentiality guidelines as all other Project PUERTA staff and collaborators. Prior to the beginning of their participation, all Peer Leaders and their parents/guardians signed customized consent forms which notified both Peer Leaders and parents/guardians of the risks involved in being in the program, how the evaluation process works, and that participation is strictly voluntary.

Number of Participants

A total of 24 youth Peer Leaders participated in Project PUERTA

Evaluation is to help projects become even better than they planned to be.... First and foremost, evaluation should support the project.

**W.K. Kellogg
Foundation
Evaluation Approach
1997**

As collaborators, we need to take the time to get to know each other better, appreciate where each other are coming from and build connections to each other.

**Collaborator's Focus
Group**

from October 1, 2004-September 30, 2005, and an estimated 320 additional youth participated in Drop-In Center programming. Compared to FY 2004, this represents a 15% increase over the number of youth Peer Leaders and a 24% increase in the number of Drop-In Center participants. During the entire three-year project period, a total of 139 youth Peer Leaders participated in Project PUERTA, and an estimated 920 additional participated in Drop-In Center programming

Participant-Specific Attendance

Attendance estimates for Project PUERTA-sponsored activities are included in the *Project PUERTA Activities Chart, FY 2003-2005*, on the following page.

Dosage Data

Project PUERTA maintained statistics on the number of overall Peer Leader participants and the number of Peer Leaders and other youth participating in specific activities. Project PUERTA also maintained estimates of the number of hours of programming provided and the number of hours that individual Peer Leaders participated, on average, in the program. In FY 2005, Project PUERTA sponsored an estimated 1,440 hours of programming. This includes 960 hours of Drop-In Center programming in addition to the activities listed on the activities chart. It is also estimated that individual Peer Leaders participated in the program for an average of 390 hours/individual during the year. Altogether, the Peer Leader group participated in this program for an estimated 54,000 person hours.

Participant, Community & Staff Satisfaction

A wide variety of qualitative tools were used in this evaluation to measure participant, community, and staff satisfaction as well as to provide critical feedback from stakeholders on how the program might be improved. Results from these data collection efforts, described in detail in the following section, were made immediately available to staff. This formative process was critical in enabling program planners to respond effectively and quickly to any concerns that were raised and to maximize perceived strengths. Focus groups, interviews, and surveys were the primary methods for gathering qualitative information; these data collection efforts were scheduled throughout the year to provide an ongoing process for assessing and responding to stakeholder needs and concerns.

I always like to collaborate; if we want to build our community it's up to all of us.

Collaborator's Focus Group

Just having a consistent empowerment model in place at Girls Inc. is a major part of the teen culture here. Observing how the closing down process is affecting the teens has made an impression – they see a real void when Project PUERTA leaves.

Staff Interview

Chart of Participant-Specific Attendance

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Advanced Peer Leaders Present at Amherst College		1						
Advanced Youth Leadership Institute	Multiple sessions	Multiple Sessions	35					
Agree/Disagree presentation on Activism Strategies		1						
AIDS/HIV Movie		1						
All Stars Meetings/Training	7		15					
And the Band Played On discussion and action		1						
Basketball Practice, Dodge ball, baseball, football events		5						
Being a Good Teacher /Leader workshop		2						
Bicycle Repair Workshop/bicycle safety		2					28	
Billboard Project	6		20				60	
BLAST Youth Conference (preparation and attending)	1	2	12				40	
Book Binding Workshop/ Presentations		1						
Book Club	1	12						
Bowling Sessions (& youth league play)		11						
Boys Peer Leader Group Community Event & Dance	1		26		82			
Boys Peer Leader Group Planning Meetings	3		6					
Braid Day Fundraiser		1						
Breakdancing	15+		4		7			
Breast Exam Workshop	1		8		4			
Butterfly Museum Dinner Event		1						
Career Planning Workshop/Career Panel		2						

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Christmas Dinners		2						
City-Farm Working Group Meetings/Events	5	2	4		15			
Clean Up (Peer Leaders Clean & Organize the Drop-In Center)		1						
College Life & College Prep Workshop Series		2						
Community Courtyard Brainstorm; setting up games; improving the neighborhood		2						
Community Environment Workshop	1	1	6		31			
Community Event: Clothesline Project Display/Discussions	1		35		26		80	
Community Event: Heritage Park Rally Against Domestic Violence	1		35		32			
Community Event: Outreach	ongoing/weekly	ongoing/weekly	20					
Community Event: Public Forum on Racism in Public Schools	1		35		60			
Community Impact Project Planning & Field Trip for Peer Leaders		2						
Community Options Forum (youth prepare and facilitate)	1	1						
Conflict Resolution Workshop	2		14					
Conflict Resolution Workshop Presented To The PLI By The Advanced Peer Leaders	1		42					
Cooking Club		1						
Dance Improv Workshop & Dance Class Series by Enchanted Circle Theater		8						
Developing a Drop-In Center Newsletter Peer Leadership Class/Newsletter development		2						
Diversity, Circles of Influence &		1					45+	

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Global Diversity Issues (workshop preparation)								
Domestic Violence Drop-In Center Activities	6				16			
Dynamics of Healthy Communication Workshop		1						
Educational Trip: Springfield Armory Museum		1						
End Of Summer Meeting	1	1	20					
Environmental Conference (in Boston)	1		8		6			
Environmental Problems Workshop		1						
Environmental Project & Meetings (make community signs, study pollution, meet with Appleton newspaper)		3						
Evaluation/Tutoring Discussion	1	1	9				100	
Facilitation Workshop Project (Resulting in Peer Leader Led Workshops Presented on Homophobia, Self-Esteem, Sexology and Music)	Multiple sessions throughout year	Multiple sessions throughout year	42		38			
Family Discussion	1		9		14			
Female Anatomy and Reproduction Workshop	2		10		8			
Field Trip: All Out Adventures	1				13			
Field Trip: Fenway Park	1				18			
Field Trip: Walking tour of the Amherst Survivor Art exhibit		1						
Field Trips: Other	2						75+	
Friday Nights at the Drop-In Center Special Program for Girls on Nutrition, Body Image and Conditioning.	ongoing sessions, Friday night		30+		150+			
Friendly PEERsuasion Movers	8		15		30			

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
and Shakers Workshop Presentation								
Garden Project at Drop-In Center		10						
Gardening Workshop Presented By Peer Leaders To School Groups	1	2	4		20+			
Gender Training for the PLI	4		24					
Girls Day: Hair Styling		1						
Girls Inc. Annual Dinner	1	1	4					
Girls Make the Message Media Training		1						
Girls Speak Out at Congregational Church		1						
Gladiator Night – Leadership Initiatives & Community Action Projects		1						
Gladiator Night Teambuilding Event		1	42				45+	
Healthy Activity Session with YMCA youth		2						
Healthy Relationships Workshop	1	1	15		6			
HIV Testing (on-site)	4		15		10			
HIV Testing (On-Site, rapid testing provided by CEPA)		1						
Holyoke Health Fair Planning & Event	1 (multiple sessions)	1 (multiple sessions)	18					
Holyoke Youth Summit	1				100			
Homework Sessions With Amherst College Tutors	32	32 ⁶	15					
Ideal Futures Workshop		1						
Improving Our Own Environments Workshop	1		6		12			
Improving Our Own Environments Workshop at	1		6		12			

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Holyoke Youth Summit								
Journal Making Workshop		1						
Karate Night	Every Monday evening		5		10+			
Land Clean Up Project (cutting trees and landscaping)		2						
Language of Sex, Gender and Myths Discussion	1		24				25+	
Leadership Meetings, Training & Retreat	1 (multiple sessions)	5	20					
Leadership Training	Ongoing	Ongoing	20					
Living for Tomorrow Curriculum Development	Multiple sessions		6					
Living with HIV/AIDS – Personal stories by people who are HIV+		1						
Mask Making Workshop		1						
Media Literacy Project	13		11					
Media Messages & Teens Workshop		1						
Media Pre-Production Meetings/PSA Premiere	4		11					
Movers and Shakers Group Meeting	Multiple sessions		10					
Movie Night		4						
Mural Arts Group Meeting	10	4	8		4			
Mural Project includes pieces on gangs/violence; war & patriotism; teen pregnancy; diversity & discrimination; education; and HIV/AIDS	Multiple Sessions	Multiple Sessions						
Nursing Club		Meets monthly starting summer 2005						
Nutrition & Cooking Project/Workshops	2				20+			

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Nutrition Workshop	4	1	12					
Orientation/Team-Building		1						
Outreach Activities	8		20					
Outreach in the Winter Workshop		1						
Outreach Planning		1						
Outreach Van	ongoing weekly sessions	5 sessions/ week	55		600+			
Outreach van participates in Puerto Rican parade		1						
Parent Appreciation Event	1		4		14			
Parent Event Planning	1		4		14			
Parent Feast Preparation	1		4		14			
Parks and Recreation Department Presentation	1		5		4			
Parks Brainstorming Session (how to improve them)		1						
Peer Leader Celebration & Awards Ceremony	1		42					
Peer Leaders participate in Mother's Day Road Race Fundraiser		1						
Peer Self-Evaluation Development Meetings	1	1	35					
Photo Novella Workshop	10	1	8		5			
Planned Parenthood Nurse at Drop-In Center		Regular weekly schedule						
PLI Attend "Youth Got the Power: Break Down the Walls" Conference	1		9					
PLI: Art Project	3	1	6					
PLI: Environmental Research Project	3		6					
PLI: Farm Project	3		4					
Program Planning/Feedback	2	4	12		6			

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Sessions								
Project Adventura (family fun day and preparation)		8						
Project Adventure/Summer Adventure Programming	Weekly events through summer		4		8			
PSA on Better Family Communication Developed	Multiple sessions		12		4			
Public Speaking 101 Workshop	2		20					
Puerto Rican Culture Workshop	1		35					
Racism Workshop	2	1	35					
Radio Interview of Peer Leaders on HIV/AIDs in the Pioneer Valley		1						
Repair trails at Hitchcock Nature Center		1						
Science Project (Amherst College-led)		1					60+	
Self-Expectations Discussion	1		35					
Sleepover (one at Smith College with the Girl Scouts; one at the Drop-In Center)		2						
Slide Show Presentation for Community Forum	2		12		32		200+	
STD Prevention Workshop for Boys		1					100+	
STD Testing (On-Site provided by Planned Parenthood)		1					40+	
STD's/Birth Control/Teen Pregnancy Training/Workshops	1	4	28		130			
Street Outreach	Ongoing/weekly	Ongoing/weekly	55		600+			
Summer Games	Weekly through summer	Weekly through summer						
Summer Planning Meeting		1						
Summer YLI Kickoff: Barbecue,	1		40					

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Team Building and Discussions								
Talk Show Workshop (planning and implementation)		1						
Team Building Sessions	7	11	35					
Team-Building Games	9	10	35					
Drop-In Center Forum	2	1	5		15			
Drop-In Center Special Events, Games	6	1			30+			
Drop-In Center vandalism discussion		1						
Teen Committee Speak Out (organizing & event)		1						
Teen Dating Violence Workshop/Discussion	3	1	8		18			
Thanksgiving Dinner at Drop-In Center (for teens and family)	1	1	35		20+			
Theater Skills Presentation To Amherst College Freshmen		1	6		12			
Theater: Circle of Life presentation		4						
Theater: Develop and Perform New Play on Diversity/Multiculturalism	1 (multiple sessions)		6					
Theater: Holyoke Community College HIV/AIDS Dramatic Performance	1 (multiple rehearsals)		6					
Theater: Party Of Life Performance	1 (multiple rehearsals)		6					
Theater: Skills Development	20, including multiple sessions and 2 performances	12	6					
Theater: What is Hip-Hop Project		8						
Treehouse Planning		1						

Project PUERTA Activities FY 2004 – FY 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2004 & 2005	# Of times activity was conducted during FY 2005	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Peer Leader Participants FY 2005	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2004	Estimated # of Other Youth Participants FY 2005	Estimated Audience FY 2004	Estimated Audience FY 2005
Valley Women's Martial Arts self-defense		6 week course						
Volleyball Teams and Summer Competition	1	2	4		16		16	
Ways of Being Discussion	1	1	35		25		25	
Women's Health Workshop & Series	6		15		12		12	
Workshop on Men's Health	1		4		8		8	
Workshop on Safer Sex/Sex Education	1	2	8		20		20	
Workshop on Teen Relationships	1		8		15		15	
Workshop Planning and Design	15	17	35					
Writing from the Soul Workshop		1						
Youth Leadership Institute	30	22	35					
Youth Leadership Institute Showcase		6						
Youth Peer Leader Training Sessions	ongoing/weekly	ongoing/weekly	20					
Youth Power Committee Planning Sessions & Workshop		7						

OUTCOME EVALUATION

The goal of an outcome evaluation is to measure the effectiveness and impact of a specific program or service. However, outcome evaluation is not an “event” that occurs at the end of a project, but is an ongoing process that helps decision-makers better understand the project and how it is impacting participants, staff, and the community. To be truly useful, evaluation design should take an emergent approach, adapting and adjusting to the needs of an evolving and complex project. This is particularly true with a program such as Project PUERTA, which evolved daily as Peer Leaders and staff increased their understanding of how and why different strategies worked in different circumstances.

The Project PUERTA evaluation design was concerned not only with specific outcomes, but also with the skills, knowledge and perspectives acquired by the individuals involved with the project. Our vision for this evaluation was rooted in the conviction that project evaluation and project management are inextricably linked.

The objectives of the Project PUERTA Evaluation were to:

- 1) Assess short-term outcome data to inform program modifications;
- 2) Assess implementation and describe how and why the program works; and
- 3) Identify promising intervention strategies (best practices) within the Project PUERTA model.

From 4/2003-9/2005, this evaluation sought to identify the extent to which Project PUERTA decreased high-risk behaviors, increased protective factors, and built resiliency in its youth participants, with a particular focus on substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention. Because long-term outcomes were beyond the scope and timeline of this study, data collection focused on the relationship between Project PUERTA and the short-term development of key traits associated with youth resiliency and substance abuse/HIV prevention: social competence, autonomy, problem-solving and leadership skills, knowledge related to high-risk behaviors (substance abuse and HIV prevention), resourcefulness, and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future.

This evaluation investigated the effects of the Project PUERTA model of prevention, education, and Peer Leadership development primarily on youth Peer Leaders, and secondarily on the young people who participated in Peer Leader-led programs and other activities provided through the Project PUERTA Drop-In Center.

Throughout the 3-year evaluation period, the evaluation team documented particular features of interventions that influence enactment, positive risk-taking, and resiliency. In addition, the

Knowing this stuff changes my decisions and it changes other people's decisions, too. There are a lot of people who come to talk to me. I used to smoke weed and then I stopped completely. I never knew about the side effects and the stuff that it does to your brain, but now I do. I don't drink at all.

Peer Leader Interview

evaluator examined organizational and professional factors, as well as environmental factors, including everything from staff attitudes to local community characteristics, which are also likely to influence enactment.

Evaluation Design

The data collection tools for the evaluation were designed to elicit information in response to the following four primary focus questions:

1. *How effective is Project PUERTA at promoting an increase in positive risk-taking and a decrease in high-risk behavior?*
2. *How effective is Project PUERTA at increasing participants' self-esteem, leadership abilities, and positive relationships with program staff, family, and friends?*
3. *How effective is Project PUERTA at promoting measurable, positive changes in substance abuse and HIV-related knowledge?*
4. *To what extent does Project PUERTA result in stronger community networks for young people; increased community involvement in Peer Leadership and health-focused programming for young people; and increased public and private investment in the Project PUERTA model?*

Girls Inc.'s criteria for success were measured in relation to the agency's ability to meet the program objectives, including outcome projections for Peer Leaders. To the extent that the agency effectively met, exceeded, and/or made real progress towards meeting its goals, objectives, and outcome projections, the program was considered successful.

Outcome Instruments

The findings detailed in this report are based on a compilation of qualitative and quantitative data, including demographic information, surveys, focus groups, interviews, and classroom observation. The evaluation was designed to support a continuous improvement approach, in which appropriate information was collected and processed on a regular basis to provide critical feedback and inform ongoing program modification and enhancement. The evaluation applied simultaneous, multiple methods to obtain data and information. The convergence of this information resulted in a particularly rich, dynamic process. In addition, the validity of these instruments was strengthened through: 1) the periodic application of instruments and comparison of findings over time; and 2) the number and variety of instruments. For every question explored, information was collected from numerous sources, including youth, staff, and stakeholders. The ability to corroborate findings through different data collection techniques ensured that the findings are highly

As far as drugs and alcohol education goes – in strengthening their self-esteem, knowledge of the future and resiliency, one of the outcomes has been increasing their ability to make positive choices about substances. I've always been impressed with the Peer Leaders' determination to avoid substance abuse. I hear comments all the time about them taking stands and educating their friends and influencing their friends in a positive way as well.

Staff Interview

reliable and valid. GPRA data for all three years, combined with these findings, may provide further evidence to corroborate outcomes.

Data collection from FY 2003-2005 included the following tools (included in Appendix):⁷

Core Participant Survey Tools

1. Peer Leader Survey
2. Staff Assessment of Peer Leader Survey
3. Parent/Guardian Survey in English (FY 2003, 2004)
4. Parent/Guardian Survey in Spanish (FY 2003, 2004)

Administrative Survey Tools

5. Peer Leader Intake and Demographics Form
6. Monthly Activity Report
7. Peer Leader Exit Survey completed by participant (FY 2003, 2004)
8. Peer Leader Exit Survey completed by staff (FY 2003, 2004)
9. Staff Survey

Formal Observation Tools

10. Project PUERTA Observation Tool
11. Drop-In Center Observation Form
12. Outreach Van Observation Form (FY 2005)

Participant Feedback on Program

13. Project PUERTA Training Evaluation and Feedback
14. Drop-In Center User Survey (FY 2003, 2004)
15. Outreach Van User Survey (FY 2005)

Qualitative Interviewing - Sample Question Sets

16. Individual Peer Leader Interviews
17. Annual Program Director Interview
18. Collaborator Interviews
19. Staff Interviews (FY 2005)

Focus Groups – Sample Agendas from FY 2005

20. Collaborator Focus Group Agenda
21. Peer Leader Focus Group Agenda
22. Drop-In Center Focus Group Agenda

In addition to these data collection instruments, which were developed and administered by Meridian Consulting in partnership with Girls Inc., Project PUERTA also collected CSAP GPRA pre- and post-test Participant Outcome Measures in accordance with SAMHSA guidelines.

Data Collection Points

Throughout the evaluation period, data collection was conducted at pre-determined intervals, which were strategically timed to build information based on results from previous evaluation activities. For example, focus groups were timed to follow written

Yes, everyone of us is a teen. Everyone is going to try everything. Peer Pressure. But then I think I'm a girl; I'm standing for my own self. If someone's gonna run through me, I stand up and be a brick wall so they can't. And so I changed my mind about doing that stuff. I always was a positive girl. I think, "No, don't do this, because this is going to mess you up, and think about your future and save money for your future."

Peer Leader Interview

The Youth Leadership Institute is an incredible program, too. Normally most of our organizations work in such isolation and together we've had the experience of representing all of the neighborhoods in Holyoke. Getting together and working together can make that much more of a difference and impact. You expand your social experiences and experience in general.

Staff Interview

surveys; this enabled the evaluation team to explore specific findings that had emerged from the surveys in more depth through a focus group. The FY 2005 evaluation calendar, showing data collection points over the year, is included in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

The evaluation plan outlined in this report consisted of the analysis of two fundamental types of performance indicators. The first type is service unit or “output” indicators (including enrollment counts such as counts of numbers of Peer Leaders, enrollment counts for different Peer Leader-led activities, and quality measures such as satisfaction ratings). The second type of performance indicator measured impact or “outcome” (including impacts on youth such as acquisition of knowledge related to substance abuse and HIV prevention, increase in positive risk-taking, development of leadership skills, motivation to reach out to peers in the community, etc.). The distinction between output or service unit indicators on the one hand and outcome or impact indicators on the other hand follows the United Way of America’s distinction in *Evaluating Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (United Way of America, 1996). Data was analyzed according to a pre-post comparison group design (Campbell and Stanley) wherever possible. To ensure confidentiality, all program participants were identified through randomly assigned identification numbers.

The findings detailed in this report are based on a compilation of qualitative and quantitative data, including demographic information, surveys, focus groups, interviews, and program observation.

We have many programs that we do that are so much fun. We’re with other organizations doing the same things we are doing – something positive in our community. We come together, talk about and go out together to try to do good. We’re trying to let people know what we’re doing, that we want to help the community, that we want to pick up the litter, that we want to make it look neater; we want to have teen pregnancy stop. We want to stop the drug abuse, help people find jobs, stop the guys hitting women or the women hitting guys. It’s hard to believe, but it’s true, and there are a lot of issues that we need to address.

Peer Leader Interview

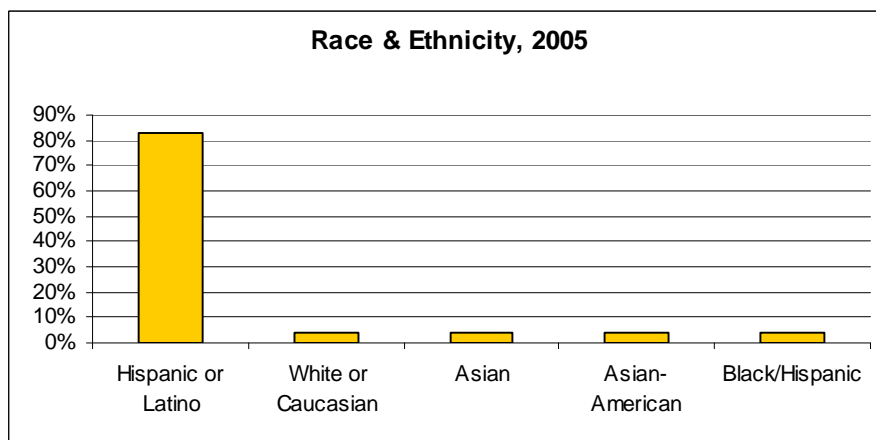
THE RESULTS

In each year, between 14 and 18 distinct data collection efforts (14 in FY 2003; 18 in FY 2004; and 18 in FY 2005) were conducted to support this assessment. A variety of noteworthy process and outcome findings have been documented in this report and organized below in relation to each specific program area (Youth Leadership Institute; Drop-In Center; Outreach Van; Community Collaboration). Whenever possible, findings are shown for FY 2005 as well as the combined three-year program period.

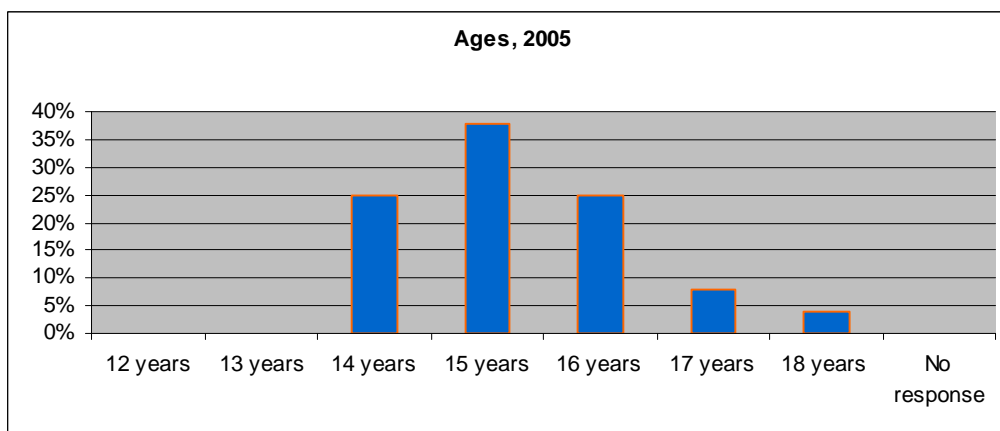
Youth Leadership Institute

Demographics: FY 2005

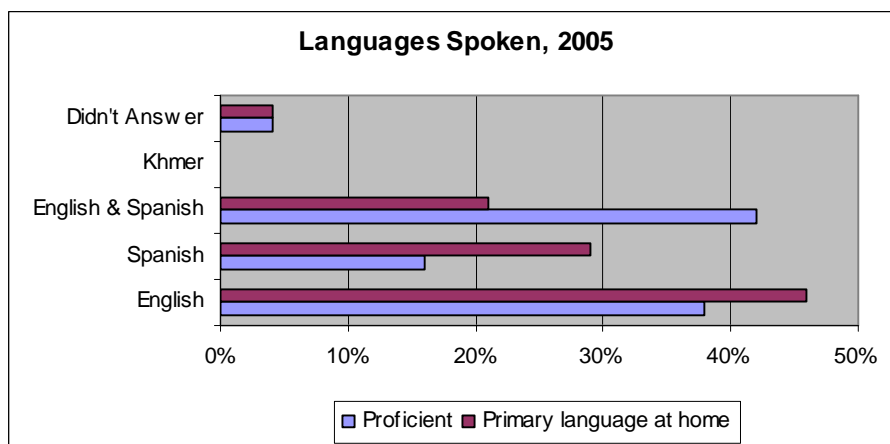
Records were kept for 24 Peer Leaders during FY 2005. The vast majority of participants live in Holyoke, Massachusetts. As the following chart shows, the vast majority of Peer Leaders identify as Latino(a):



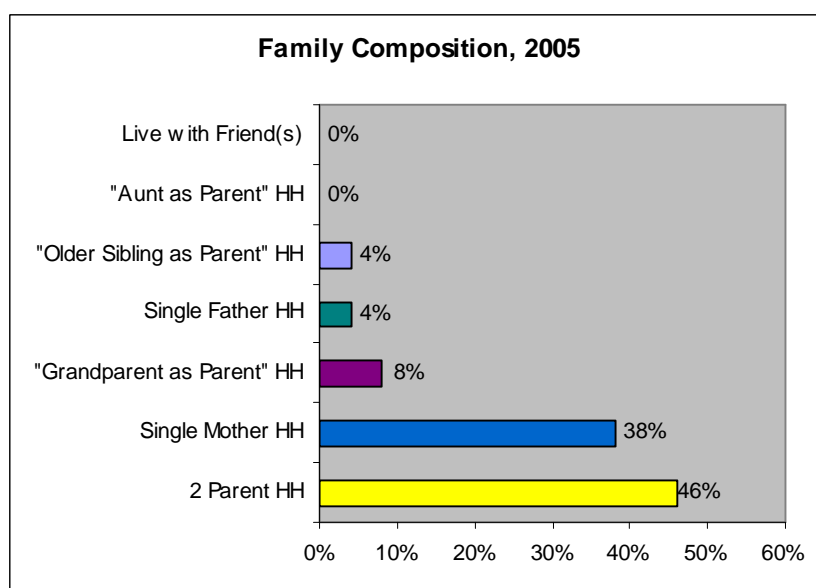
Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the Peer Leaders are female, and most of the Peer Leaders are between the ages of 14-16. Age of Project PUERTA Peer Leaders:



Spanish is the primary language at home for 29% of Peer Leaders responding; 21% speak a mixture of Spanish and English at home; and for 46%, English is the primary language spoken at home. Ninety-six percent (96%) of Peer Leaders identify as heterosexual/straight and four percent (4%) identify as bisexual. Languages spoken by Peer Leaders:

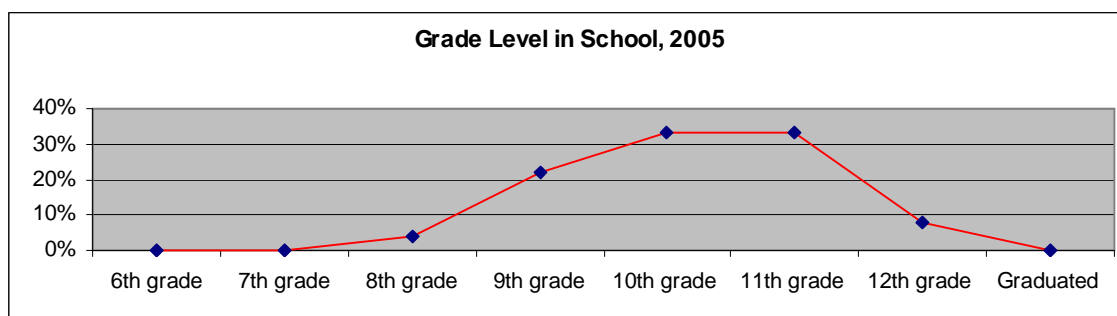


In FY 2005, 100% of Peer Leaders lived in their family's home or apartment. As shown in the following chart, a significant number of Peer Leaders live in female-headed households:



At the time of the survey, none of the Peer Leaders had graduated from high school. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the Peer Leaders were in 9th and 10th grade.

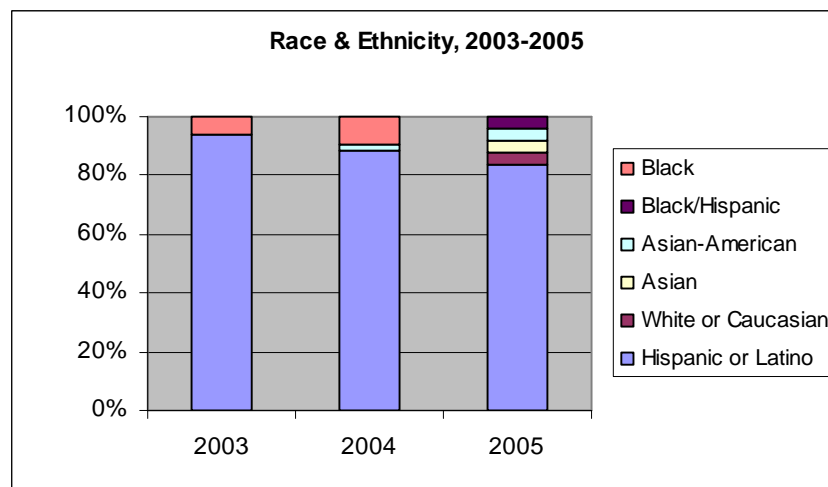
Peer Leaders' year in school at the time of the survey:



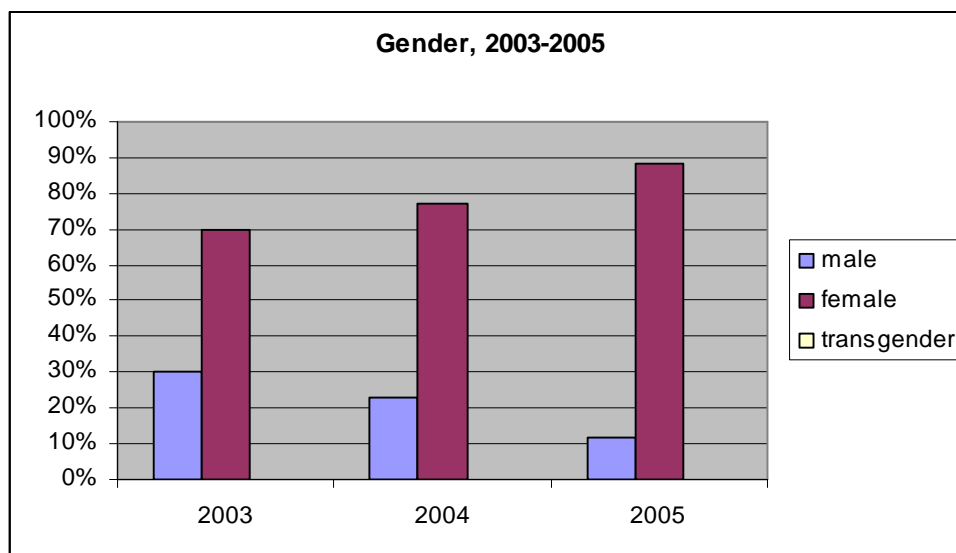
When asked to describe hobbies or things they like to do outside of school, the Peer Leaders gave a variety of responses. In order of frequency, Peer Leaders favored the following activities: playing music/singing/dancing; participating in sports (basketball, soccer, volleyball, running); reading or writing; spending time with friends (including spending time at the Drop-In Center); shopping; and sleeping. Movies, TV, and the computer each got a few votes; and one Peer Leader likes to garden.

Demographics: FY 2003-2005

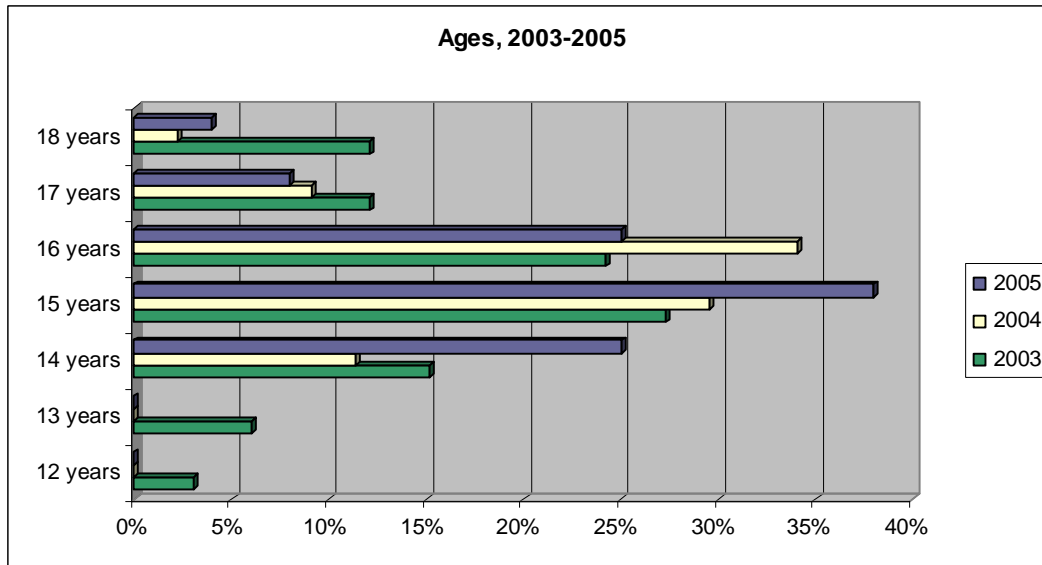
Records were kept for 24 Peer Leaders during FY 2005; 44 Peer Leaders during FY 2004; and 33 Peer Leaders during FY 2003. The vast majority of participants live in Holyoke, Massachusetts. While most identify as Latino(a), the Peer Leader program became a more ethnically diverse program over the three-year period, with small increases in the number of White or Caucasian, Asian, Asian-American, and Black/Hispanic participants.



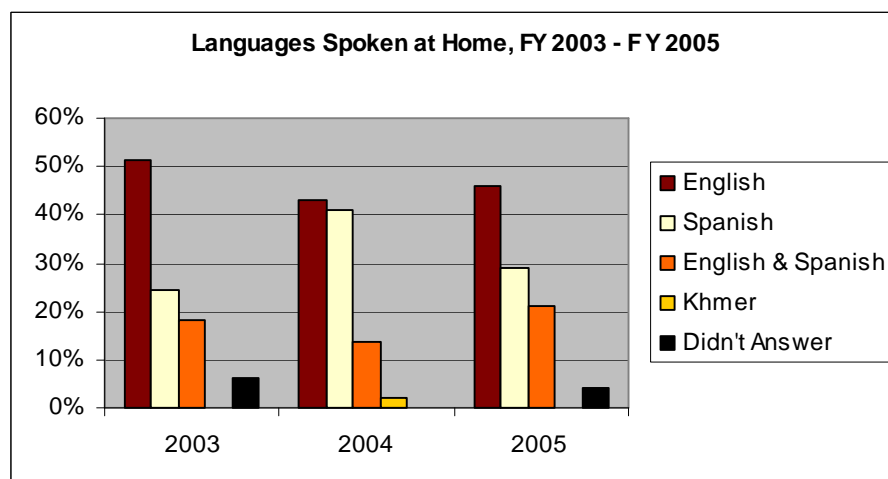
In FY 2003, 70% of Peer Leaders were female; in FY 2005, 88% were female, as shown on the following chart:



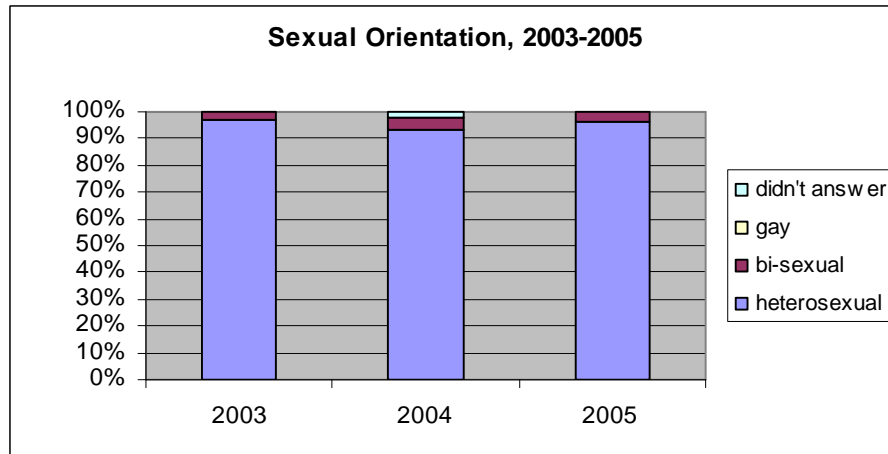
In FY 2003, the age of Peer Leaders ranged from 12-18 years. In FY 2005, the ages ranged from 14-18 years of age, with the highest concentration between the ages of 14-16 (88% in FY 2005 compared with 66% in FY 2003). Age of Peer Leaders:



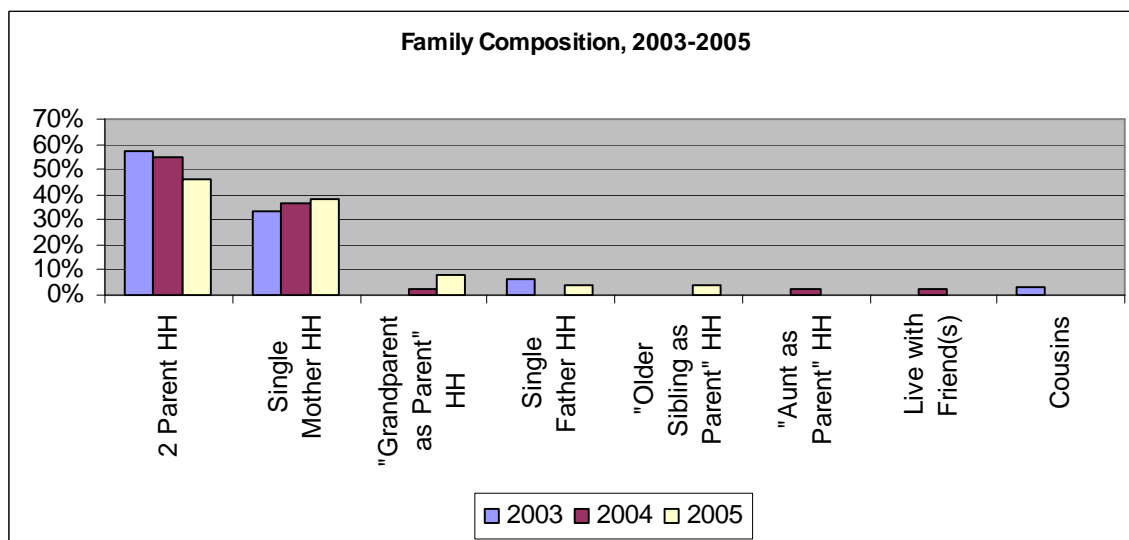
In FY 2005, Spanish was the primary language at home for 29% of Peer Leaders responding, compared with 41% in FY 2004 and 24% in FY 2003. About one-fifth (21%) spoke a mixture of Spanish and English at home in FY 2005, compared with 14% in FY 2004 and 18% in FY 2003. For 46% of Peer Leaders in 2005, English was the primary language spoken at home; compared with 43% in FY 2004 and 52% in FY 2003.



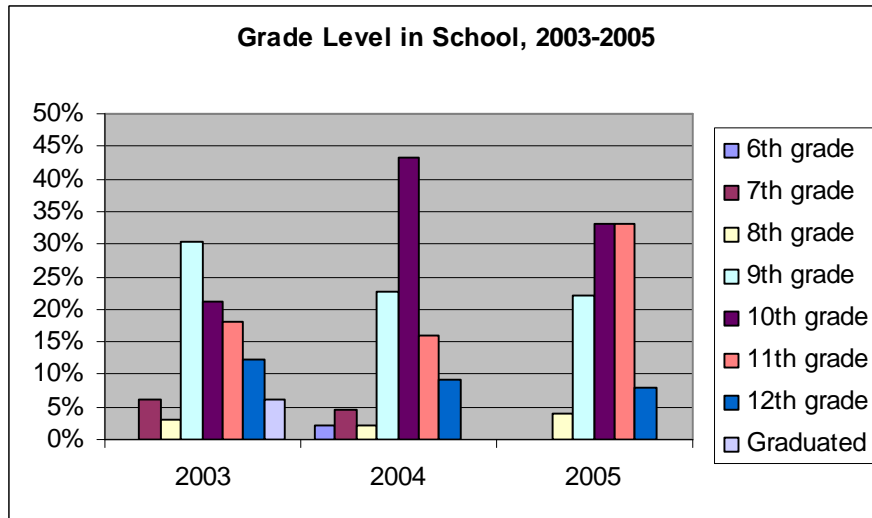
Over the last three years, the percentage of Peer Leaders who identify their sexual orientation as heterosexual showed little change. In FY 2003, 97% of leaders identified as heterosexual/straight; 96% did in FY 2005. Three percent (3%) identified as bisexual in FY 2003; 4% did so in FY 2005.



The percentage of Peer Leaders living in a two-parent household has decreased over the last three years. In FY 2005, 46% lived with two parents, compared to 58% in FY 2003. As shown in the following chart, the percentage of Peer Leaders living in single-mother households or in "grandparents as parents" households increased during that same time period:



In fiscal years 2003, 2004, and 2005, none of the Peer Leaders had graduated from high school at the time of the survey. In the last three years, the percentage of 9th graders in the program has decreased, while the percentage of 10th and 11th graders in the program has increased. Peer Leaders' grade level in school at the time of the survey:



When asked to describe hobbies or things they like to do outside of school, the Peer Leaders gave a variety of responses. In all three years, spending time with friends has ranked as the number one or number two response. Participating in sports has soared from the bottom of the list in FY 2003 to the number two spot in FY 2005. In all three years, Peer Leaders also wrote that they liked going to movies; listening to music; shopping; going to parties; and eating. Several Peer Leaders indicated that they also like to read; talk on the phone; draw/paint; write music and sing; watch TV and play video and computer games.

Peer Leader Survey: FY 2005

In FY 2005, twenty-four Peer Leaders responded to the Peer Leader Survey, which explores a variety of topics, including respondents' personal attitudes; goals; knowledge about high-risk behaviors; high-risk behaviors; relationships with family and friends; and feelings about school. The surveys are administered twice annually; in FY 2005, they were administered in November 2004 and again in August 2005, a time span of nine months.

It is important to note, however, that Peer Leaders taking the survey in November and August included some who started with the program in FY 2004. To capture a more accurate picture of the impact of Project PUERTA on Peer Leaders over time, results were isolated for the 18 Peer Leaders who had taken the survey twice between August 2004 and August 2005. Pre/post analysis for these 18 Peer Leaders examined only the first and last surveys completed by each individual regardless of which year they started.

Of the 18 Peer Leaders that completed two surveys, the majority indicated that "most of the time" they:

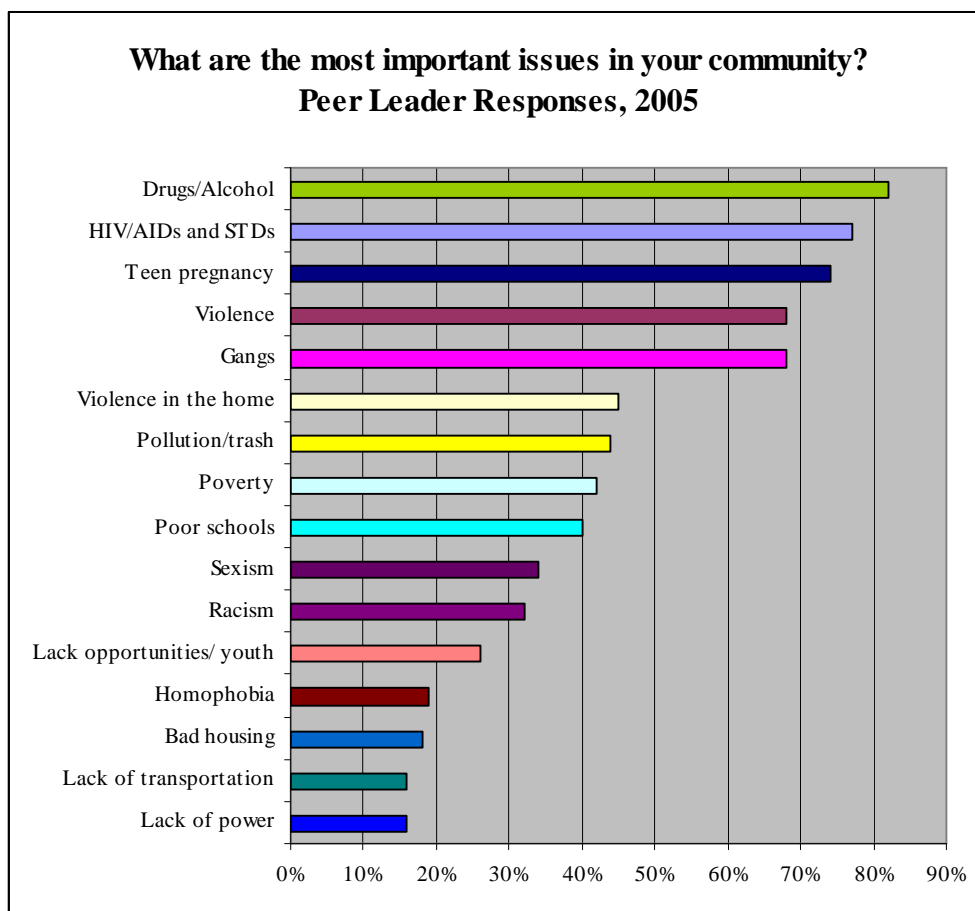
- Believe they will graduate from school;
- Have dreams, goals, or plans for the future;
- Plan to attend college or vocational school; and
- Want to work after they finish school.

The percentage of Peer Leaders who believe they will graduate from school increased by 15% during the nine month period, from 63% to 78%.

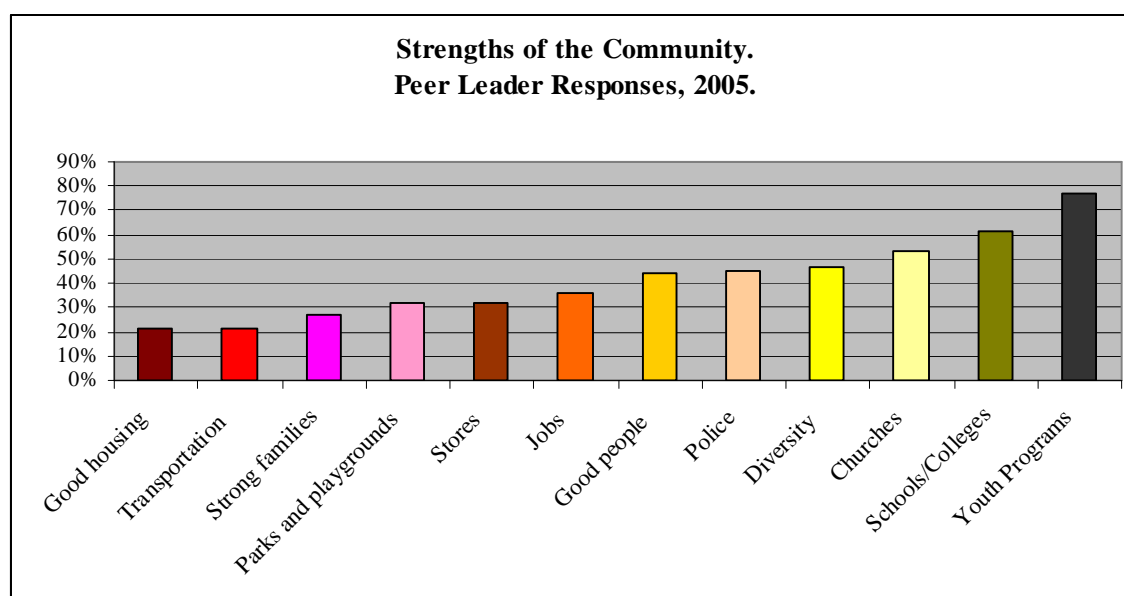
Areas that showed the most significant changes include improvements in attitude; stronger sense of leadership abilities and comfort in leading groups; and improved attitudes toward school and teachers. The following chart details these changes:

Survey Question	1st Survey	Last Survey
1. Can you accept feedback/ criticism from others?	Most of the time (38%); Not Really (19%)	Most of the time (72%); Not Really (0%)
2. Are you able to resolve conflict when it comes up?	Most of the time (31%)	Most of the time (50%)
3. Do you practice what you preach?	Most of the time (44%); Not Really (13%)	Most of the time (56%); Not Really (0%)
4. Do you feel angry?	Not Really (56%); Most of the time (6%)	Not Really (83%); Most of the time (0%)
5. Do you like your teachers?	Most of the time (6%); Not Really (25%)	Most of the time (39%); Not Really (11%)
6. Do your teachers like you?	Most of the time (25%); Not Really (31%)	Most of the time (44%); Not Really (0%)
7. Do you feel good at school?	Most of the time (31%)	Most of the time (50%)
8. Do you do your homework?	Most of the time (13%); Not Really (19%)	Most of the time (67%); Not Really (6%)
9. Do you think you will graduate from school?	Most of the time (63%); Not Really (19%)	Most of the time (78%); Not Really (0%)
10. Do you see yourself as a leader in school?	Most of the time (25%)	Most of the time (44%)
11. Do you see yourself as a leader among your friends?	Most of the time (31%)	Most of the time (50%)
12. Do you think you can create change in your community?	Most of the time (31%); Not Really (13%)	Most of the time (44%); Not Really (0%)
13. Do you think you can other teens with their problems/lives?	Most of the time (50%); Not Really (13%)	Most of the time (61%); Not Really (6%)

When asked to select the most critical issues facing their community from a list of possible choices, the entire group of Peer Leaders placed drugs/alcohol, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy as the three most critical. The following chart lists topics in order of importance, as selected by Peer Leaders:



When asked to select the strengths of their community, the entire group of Peer Leaders chose churches (53%), schools/colleges (61%), and youth programs (77%). The following chart shows these responses:



Based on survey responses, it is clear that most of the Peer Leaders were strongly influenced by their exposure to information about HIV/AIDS. The surveys, which were administered *after* the Peer Leaders had completed their initial training (including HIV/AIDS education), nevertheless show a general increase in Peer Leader knowledge related to HIV/AIDS and STD's, even after the introductory training period. The survey also revealed a few areas, mostly related to transmission of HIV and the effectiveness of testing, which were still being answered incorrectly by a number of Peer Leaders in their last survey.

TRUE/FALSE Questions about HIV/AIDS and STD's	Percentage of Peer Leaders with correct answers	
	First	Last
1. I know about at least three different types of birth control. (TRUE)	33%	78%
2. The breast milk of a mother who has HIV is safe for her baby. (FALSE)	80%	78%
3. A person can "pass" an HIV test (test negative) but still be infected with HIV. (TRUE)	73%	67%
4. Someone with AIDS can spread HIV by coughing and spitting. (FALSE)	67%	100%
5. You can be cured of HIV if you are careful to take the medicine the doctor gives you. (FALSE)	80%	94%
6. You can get infected with HIV by having oral sex. (TRUE)	80%	72%
7. You can tell by looking if someone is HIV positive. (FALSE)	93%	94%
8. You can get HIV from drinking from the same glass or water fountain that a person with AIDS/HIV drank from. (FALSE)	87%	94%
9. You can get HIV by sitting on the seat of a toilet that a person with AIDS has used. (FALSE)	87%	100%
10. I know where I can get birth control if I need it. (TRUE)	87%	83%
11. You can get HIV from a mosquito bite. (FALSE)	100%	83%
12. You can get infected with HIV by having sex with someone who shares drug needles. (TRUE)	93%	89%
13. I know how to put on a condom. (TRUE)	93%	89%
14. If you hug someone with AIDS you can get HIV. (FALSE)	100%	94%

In addition to analyzing changes in attitudes and knowledge, the evaluation team also examined the degree to which Peer Leaders reported engaging in high-risk behaviors. All categories show a decrease in high-risk behavior for the 18 Peer Leaders who completed two surveys between August 2004 and August 2005. In addition, in all cases, statistics of high-risk behavior for Project PUERTA Peer Leaders are significantly lower than have been reported through health risk assessments for the general Holyoke and Massachusetts youth populations. For example, sporadic to heavy alcohol consumption by 9th grade high school students in

Massachusetts was estimated in 2003 at 46%; for Project PUERTA, the percentage of Peer Leaders (including Peer Leaders in higher grade levels) consuming alcohol never exceeded 11%, a significantly lower percentage than the 9th grade general Massachusetts population. Also, it is worth noting that although high-risk behaviors tend to *increase dramatically as teens age*, this pattern is not being replicated among the Peer Leader group, which saw only slight changes in the few categories that showed an increase in high-risk behavior. The following chart compares high-risk behaviors among Peer Leaders to the incidence of these behaviors in the general population of Massachusetts 9th graders:

High-Risk Behavior In the past 30 days, have you . . .	Massachusetts Youth Risk Assessment Data 2003 ⁸ (general 9 th grade statewide population)	Project PUERTA Peer Leaders	
		First	Last
Smoked cigarettes	21%	20%	6%
Had alcohol	46%	27%	12%
Had more than 3 drinks of alcohol in one day?	27%	0%	0%
Smoked marijuana (pot)	28%	20%	6%
Smoked rock or crack cocaine	2.7%	0%	0%
Used hallucinogen	3.1%	0%	0%
Sniffed glue or inhaled gases or sprays	2.9%	0%	0%
Used prescription drugs to get high?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Injected any drugs?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Had sex after getting drunk or high?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Been forced to have sex?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex (sex without condoms) with someone in exchange for money, drugs or shelter?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex with a partner you knew had, or suspected of having HIV/AIDS?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex with someone whom you knew was or suspected of being an injection drug user?	Data unavailable	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex with anyone?	30%	13%	6%

Other findings that emerged from the analysis of the Peer Leader Surveys include:

- In an analysis of Peer Leader attitudes towards gender, in general Peer Leaders engaged in less gender stereotyping over time. Characteristics commonly seen as typically “male” or “female” at the beginning of the year, were more likely, by the end of the year, to be seen as characteristics of either men or women.
- Over three-quarters of Peer Leaders believe that youth programming is one of the strengths of the Holyoke community. Eighty-three percent (83%) believe that Project PUERTA can create change in their community.
- The vast majority of Peer Leaders are likely to have goals, dreams or plans for the future and to think that those goals are possible.

Peer Leader Survey: FY 2003-2005

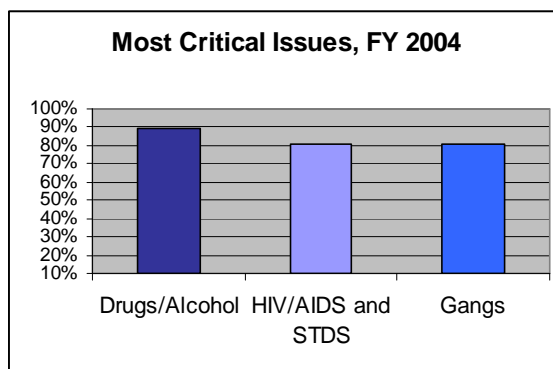
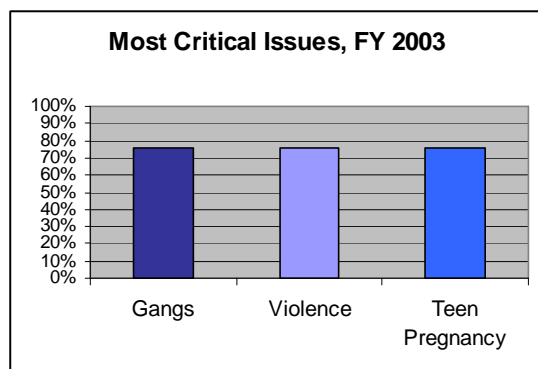
In FY 2003, FY 2004, and FY 2005, Peer Leaders (25, 28, and 62, respectively) responded to the Peer Leader Survey, which explores a variety of topics, including respondents’ personal attitudes; goals; knowledge about high-risk behaviors; high-risk behaviors; relationships with family and friends; and feelings about school. The surveys were administered twice each year, in November and August.

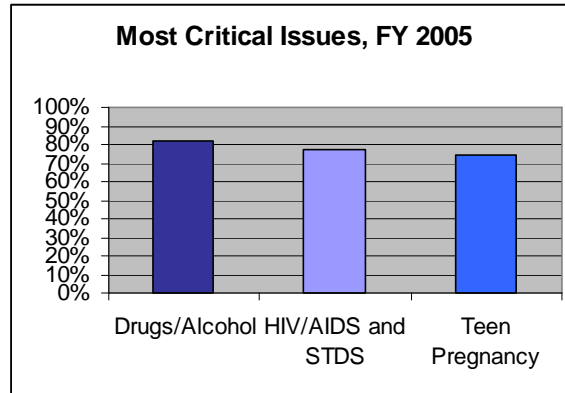
In order to compare survey responses for FY 2003, FY 2004, and FY 2005, the entire group of surveys respondents for each year is included.

In all three years, the majority of participants indicated that “most of the time” they:

- Believe they will graduate from high school (100% in both the pre- and post- surveys indicated that they believe this);
- Have dreams, goals, or plans for the future;
- Plan to attend college or vocational school;
- Want to work after they finish school;
- Have skills and talents they want to develop;
- Feel pride in their accomplishments;
- Do their homework; and
- Believe that Project PUERTA can create change in their community.

Each year, Peer Leaders were asked to select the three issues most critical to their community.





In all three years, the evaluation team also examined the degree to which Peer Leaders reported engaging in high-risk behaviors. In FY 2003 through FY 2005, all categories show a decrease in Peer Leaders' high-risk behavior. In addition, in all cases statistics of high-risk behavior for Project PUERTA Peer Leaders are significantly lower than have been reported through health risk assessments for the general Holyoke and Massachusetts youth populations. FY 2005 showed decreases from FY 2004 in all areas (that had higher than 0%).

High Risk Behavior In the past <u>30 days</u> , have you . . .	Massachusetts Risk Assessment Data 2003 (general 9 th grade statewide population)	Percentage of Peer Leaders responding "yes"		
		FY03	FY04	FY05
Smoked any cigarettes?	21%	8%	11%	5%
Had any alcohol?	46%	20%	25%	10%
Had more than three drinks of alcohol in one day?	27%	12%	0%	3%
Smoked marijuana (pot) or hash?	28%	8%	11%	6%
Smoked rock or crack cocaine?	2.7%	0%	0%	0%
Used hallucinogen (such as ecstasy, LSD)?	3.1%	0%	0%	0%
Sniffed glue or inhaled gases or sprays to get high?	2.9%	0%	0%	0%
Used prescription drugs to get high?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Snorted cocaine?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Injected any drugs?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Had sex after getting drunk or high?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Been forced to have sex?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex (sex without condoms) in exchange for money, drugs or shelter?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex with a partner you knew had, or	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%

High Risk Behavior In the past <u>30 days</u> , have you . . .	Massachusetts Risk Assessment Data 2003 (general 9 th grade statewide population)	Percentage of Peer Leaders responding "yes"		
		FY03	FY04	FY05
suspected of having HIV/AIDS?				
Had unprotected sex with someone whom you knew was or suspected of being an injection drug user?	Data unavailable	0%	0%	0%
Had unprotected sex with anyone?	30%	4%	14%	10%

Other findings that emerged from the analysis of the Peer Leader Surveys include:

- In an analysis of Peer Leader attitudes towards gender, in general Peer Leaders engaged in less gender stereotyping over time. Characteristics commonly seen as typically "male" or "female" at the beginning of the year, were more likely, by the end of the year, to be seen as characteristics of either men or women.
- The vast majority of Peer Leaders are likely to have goals, dreams or plans for the future and to think that those goals are possible.
- When asked who they confide in, friends, parents, and family members were the most selected responses in FY 2003, FY 2004, and FY 2005.

Staff Assessment of Peer Leaders: 2005

Staff were asked to assess each Peer Leader individually using questions that mirrored those asked of Peer Leaders. In general, staff corroborated findings from the Peer Leader Surveys, although there also were some notable differences in how staff perceived Peer Leaders relative to how Peer Leaders perceived themselves. In general, with respect to these differences, staff tended to have somewhat more negative view than the Peer Leaders. However, it is important to note that there was a complete turn-over in Project PUERTA staff during FY 2005, which is likely to have influenced many of the results; certainly, this turn-over lessened the reliability of comparative findings during this period. Notably, there was a high incidence of "don't know" responses by staff when responding to questions about the Peer Leaders' attitudes and strengths.

One of the most notable points of agreement related to Peer Leaders' feelings of accomplishment "most of the time." During FY 2005, staff perceived that 76% of Peer Leaders feel proud of their accomplishments "most of the time" – by comparison, 82% of youth reported feeling proud "most of the time" during that time period.

On several other issues, however, youth tended to see a more positive picture than staff:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Are you able to resolve conflict when it comes up? / Is the Peer Leader able to resolve conflict when it comes up?	Most of the time (53%); Not Really (2%)	Most of the time (32%); Not Really (15%)

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
2. Do you feel lonely or isolated? / Does the Peer Leader feel lonely or isolate?	Not Really (73%)	Not Really (50%)
3. Do you speak up for people if they're being picked on? / Does the Peer Leader speak up for people if they're being picked on?	Not Really (6%); Most of the time (52%)	Not Really (24%); Most of the time (32%)

On the following issues, while Peer Leaders' views took a more negative turn between the two surveys, staff generally were more positive:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you feel comfortable leading a workshop or activity? / Does the Peer Leader feel comfortable leading a workshop or activity?	Not Really (18%)	Not Really (6%)

With respect to finishing school, a significantly higher percentage of Peer Leaders want to work when they finish school than staff estimated:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you want to work after you finish school?	Most of the time (87%)	Most of the time (50%)
2. Do you plan to attend college or vocational training in the future?	Most of the time (79%)	Most of the time (47%)

Staff Assessment of Peer Leaders: FY 2003-2005

In FY 2003, FY 2004, and FY 2005, staff were asked to assess each Peer Leader individually using questions that mirrored those asked of Peer Leaders. In general, staff corroborated findings from the Peer Leader Surveys, although in all three years there also were some notable differences in how staff perceived Peer Leaders relative to how Peer Leaders perceived themselves.

FY 2003

In general, youth tended to see a more positive picture of themselves than did staff:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you communicate well with others? / Do you feel that she communicates well with others?	Most of the time (52%); Not really (0%)	Most of the time (45%); Not really (19%)
2. Do you speak up for people if they're picked on? / Does she speak up for people if they're picked on?	Most of the time (52%); Not really (8%)	Most of the time (26%); Not really (19%)
3. Do you feel comfortable leading a workshop/activity? / Does she feel comfortable leading a workshop/activity?	Most of the time (48%); Not really (8%)	Most of the time (32%); Not really (26%)
4. Do you practice what you preach? / Does she practice what she preaches?	Not really (4%)	Not really (13%)

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
5. Do you do your homework? / Does she do her homework?	Most of the time (60%); Not really (4%)	Most of the time (32%); Not really (23%)
6. Do you think you will graduate? / Does she think she will graduate?	Most of the time (88%)	Most of the time (55%)
7. Do you see yourself as a leader among your friends? / Does she see herself as a leader among her friends?	Not really (7%)	Not really (16%)

On other issues, however, staff tended to see a more positive picture than youth:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you like your teachers? / Does she like her teachers?	Not Really (20%)	Not Really (3%)
2. Do you think about quitting school? / Does she think about quitting school?	Most of the time (16%)	Most of the time (6%)

With respect to finishing school, a significantly higher percentage of Peer Leaders want to work or attend college when they finish school than staff estimated:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you want to work after you finish school?	Most of the time (84%)	Most of the time (55%)
2. Do you plan to attend college or vocational training in the future?	Most of the time (68%); Not really (4%)	Most of the time (45%); Not really (13%)

FY 2004

In FY 2004, staff tended to have somewhat more optimistic view than the Peer Leaders.

One of the most notable points of agreement related to Peer Leaders' feelings of accomplishment "most of the time." Staff perceived that from November to August, 21% more Peer Leaders feel proud of their accomplishments "most of the time" - by comparison, over 25% more youth reported feeling proud "most of the time" during that time period. This significant increase was noted by both staff and Peer Leaders.

On other several other issues, however, staff tended to see a more positive picture than youth:

Survey Question	November	August
Peer Leader: Do you feel angry?	Most of the time (12%)	Most of the time (6%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader feel angry?	Most of the time (0%)	Most of the time (0%)
Peer Leader: Do you ask questions when you are confused?	Most of the time (64%)	Most of the time (44%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader ask questions when he/she is confused?	Most of the time (56%)	Most of the time (82%)

On the following issues, while Peer Leaders views took a more negative turn between the two surveys, staff did not share this view and/or did not rate the downturn as significantly as did youth:

Survey Question	November	August
Peer Leader: Do you like your teachers?	Most of the time (40%)	Most of the time (8%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader like her/his teachers?	Most of the time (42%)	Most of the time (36%)
Peer Leader: Do your teachers like you?	Most of the time (44%)	Most of the time (33%)
Staff: Do teachers like the Peer Leader?	Most of the time (48%)	Most of the time (55%)
Peer Leader: Do you feel good at school?	Most of the time (40%)	Most of the time (28%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader feel good at school?	Most of the time (45%)	Most of the time (55%)
Peer Leader: Do you do your homework?	Most of the time (60%)	Most of the time (36%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader do his/her homework?	Most of the time (32%)	Most of the time (55%)
Peer Leader: Do you talk to your parents about your dreams, goals or plans for the future?	Not really (20%)	Not really (17%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader talk to his/her parents about his/her dreams, goals or plans for the future?	Not really (0%)	Not really (9%)
Peer Leader: Do you see yourself as a leader in school?	Most of the time (36%)	Most of the time (28%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader see him/herself as a leader in school?	Most of the time (23%)	Most of the time (59%)

As in FY 2003, a significantly higher percentage of Peer Leaders wanted to work when they finished school than staff estimated:

Survey Question	November	August
Peer Leader: Do you want to work after you finish school?	Most of the time (84%)	Most of the time (83%)
Staff: Does the Peer Leader want to work after he/she finishes school?	Most of the time (55%)	Most of the time (64%)

FY 2005

It is important to note that there was a complete turn-over in Project PUERTA staff during FY 2005, which is likely to have impacted many of the results. In particular, there was a high incidence of "don't know" responses by staff when responding to questions about the Peer Leaders' attitudes and strengths.

As in FY 2004, one of the most notable points of agreement related to Peer Leaders' feelings of accomplishment "most of the time." During FY 2005, staff perceived that 76% of Peer Leaders

feel proud of their accomplishments “most of the time” – by comparison, 82% of youth reported feeling proud “most of the time” during that time period.

In other areas, though, youth tended to see a more positive picture than staff:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Are you able to resolve conflict when it comes up? / Is the Peer Leader able to resolve conflict when it comes up?	Most of the time (53%); Not Really (2%)	Most of the time (32%); Not Really (15%)
2. Do you feel lonely or isolated? / Does the Peer Leader feel lonely or isolate?	Not Really (73%)	Not Really (50%)
3. Do you speak up for people if they’re being picked on? / Does the Peer Leader speak up for people if they’re being picked on?	Not Really (6%); Most of the time (52%)	Not Really (24%); Most of the time (32%)

On the following issues, while Peer Leaders views took a more negative turn between the two surveys, staff were more positive:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you feel comfortable leading a workshop or activity? / Does the Peer Leader feel comfortable leading a workshop or activity?	Not Really (18%)	Not Really (6%)

As in FY 2003 and FY 2004, a significantly higher percentage of Peer Leaders want to work when they finish school than staff estimated:

Survey Question	Peer Leader	Staff
1. Do you want to work after you finish school?	Most of the time (87%)	Most of the time (50%)
2. Do you plan to attend college or vocational training in the future?	Most of the time (79%)	Most of the time (47%)

CSAP Results

Project PUERTA is a grantee of the National Minority Substance Abuse and HIV Prevention Initiative program of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. As part of this program, 36 Project PUERTA youth completed a CSAP on-line survey in 2003. The survey, the Youth Baseline Questionnaire, asked questions that are part of a study of how to prevent substance abuse and HIV infection. Below are selected questions and responses from the 2003 results, which add to our description of Peer Leaders. It is important to note, however, that this is a one-time “snapshot” of one group of Peer Leaders, and it does not necessarily represent the whole population of Project PUERTA Peer Leaders.

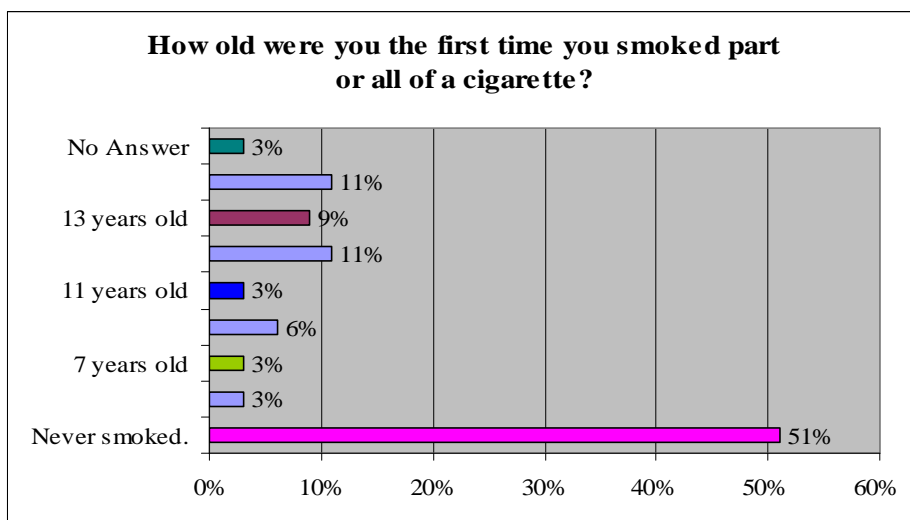
Selected Questions & Responses

First, some demographics:

- Seventy-one percent (71%, or 25) reported that English was their primary language.
- Twenty-six percent (26%, or 9) reported that Spanish was their primary language.
- 79% have lived in the United States for 13-18 years.
- 54% call Puerto Rico their "home" country.⁹
- 26% call the United States their "home" country.
- 26% received mostly A's for their most recent grades in school; 40% received mostly B's.

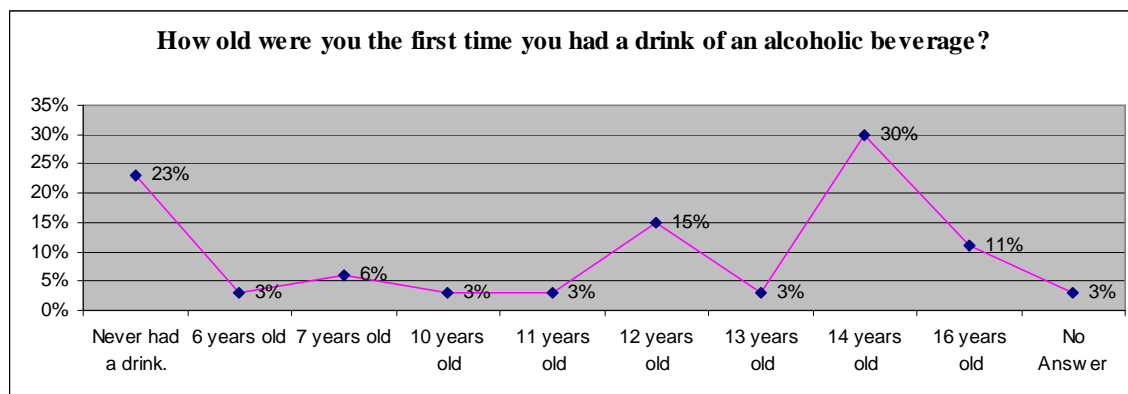
Smoking Cigarettes

Of the Peer Leaders who completed the survey, 51% reported never having smoked. Six percent (6%) started when they were six or seven, and another 31% smoked their first cigarette between the ages of 12-14 years.



Drinking Alcohol

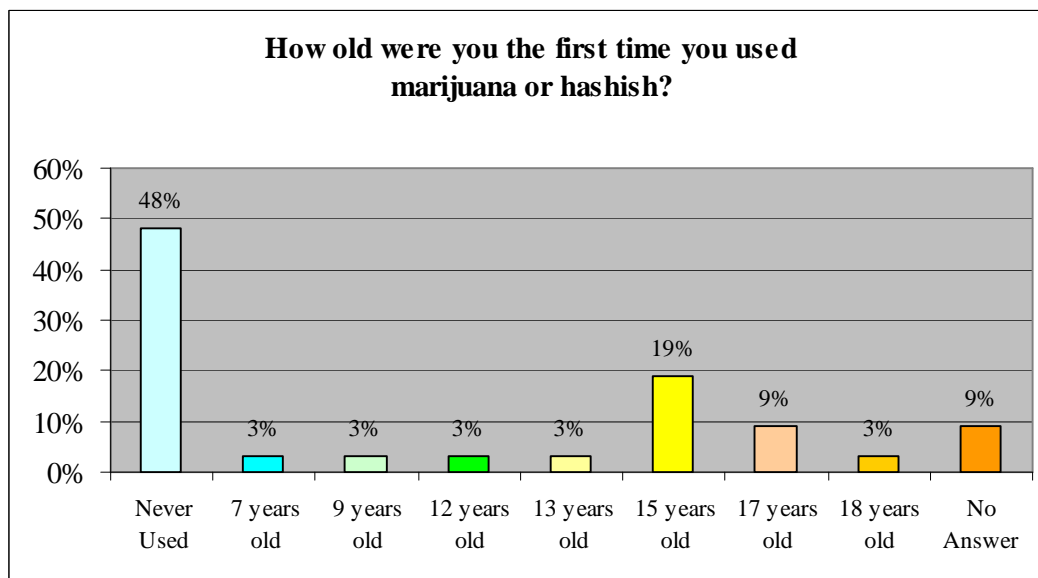
Thirty percent (30%) report never having had an alcoholic drink in their life. Forty-eight percent (48%) had their first alcoholic drink between the ages of 12-14 years.



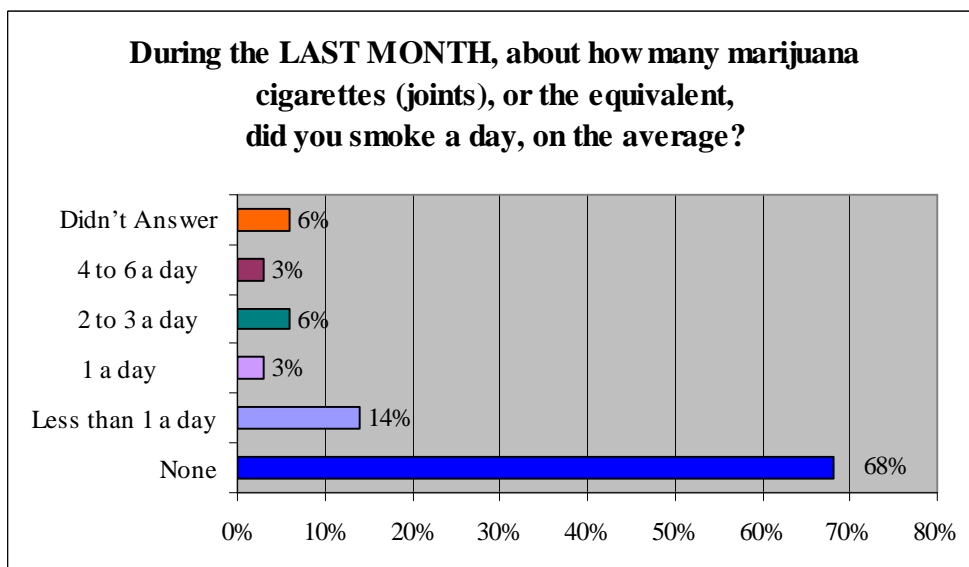
Forty-four percent (44%) have had 5 or fewer alcoholic drinks in their lifetime while 17% have had 20 or more drinks in their lifetime.

Smoking Marijuana

Nine percent (9%) had smoked marijuana for the first time between the ages of 7 years and 12 years old and 21% tried it between the ages of 13-15. Forty-eight percent (48%) reported never having tried marijuana.

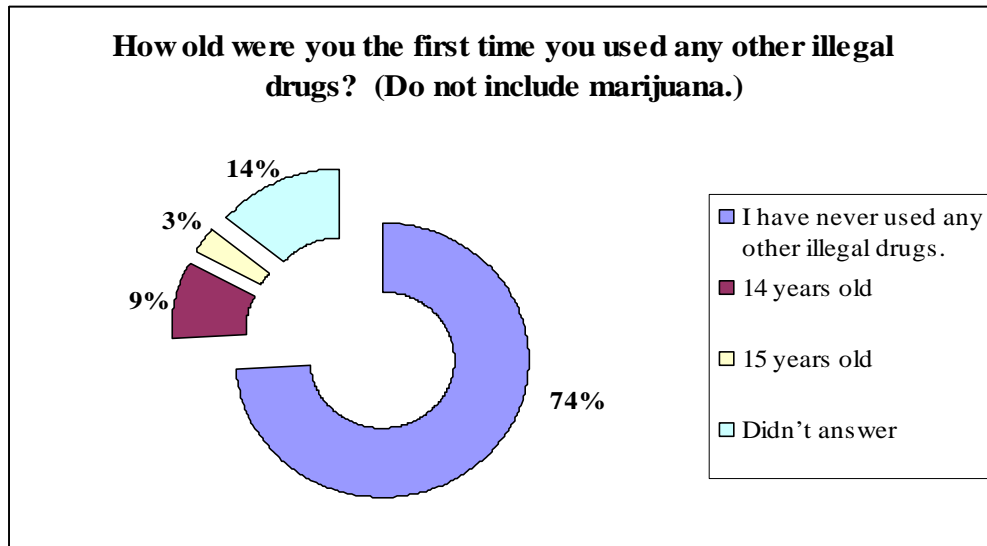


Recent behavior: When asked about their habits over the last 3 months, 17% reported smoking 1 joint or less a day; 9% 2-6 a day; and 6% did not answer.



Other drug habits

Seventy-four percent (74%) have never used other illegal drugs (not including marijuana). Nine percent (9%) first tried illegal drugs (other than marijuana) when they were 14 years old; 3% when they were 15; and 14% did not answer.



Three percent (3%) of Peer Leaders used LSD on 3-5 occasions; 97% reported never using it. When asked, no one (0%) reported sniffing glue, breathing the contents of aerosol spray cans, and not inhaling (huffing) any other gases or sprays in order to get high in the last 30 days.

Recent behavior: When asked about their habits in the last 30 days, no one (0%) reported using: Crack, Cocaine, Crystal Meth, Heroin, Ecstasy, Rohypnol, GHB, Ketamine, or Oxycontin.

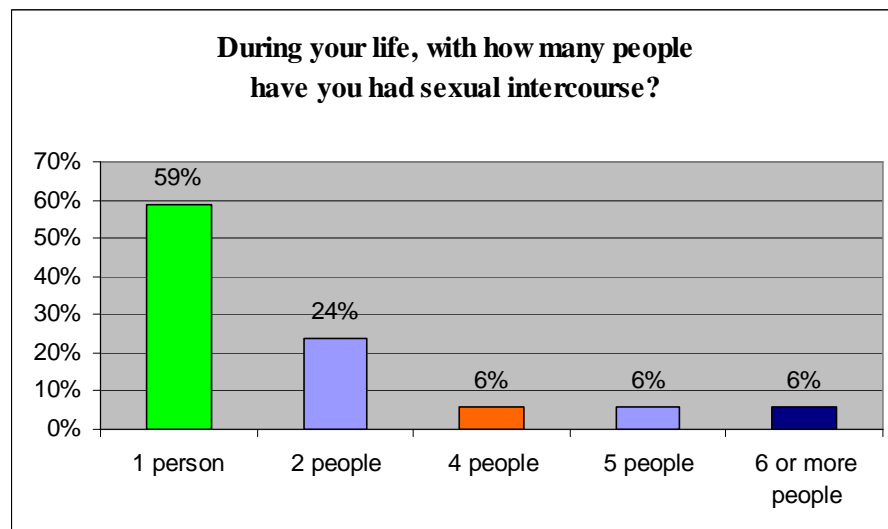
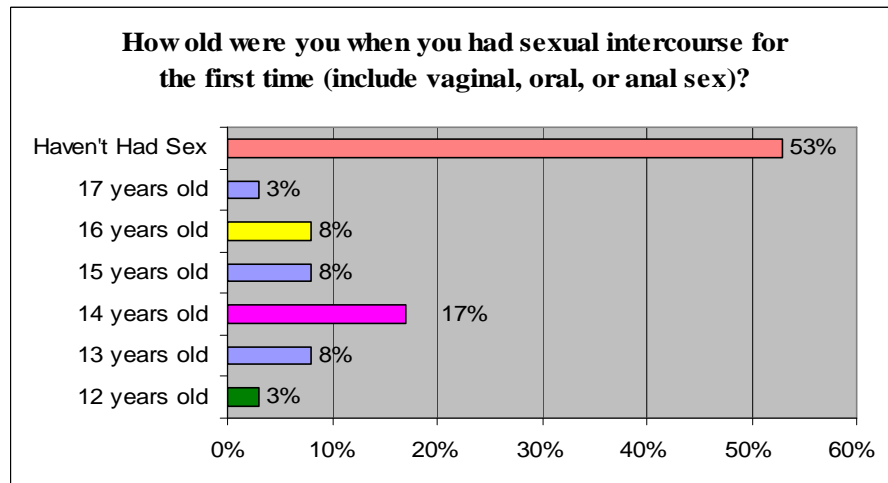
Prescription drugs

Ninety-one percent (91%) report never abusing prescription drugs, while 3% reported abusing them on 1-2 occasions; 3% reported abusing them on 20-39 occasions; and 3% did not answer.

Ninety-four percent (94%) report never abusing amphetamines, while 3% abused them on 1-2 occasions, and 3% did not answer. Ninety-seven percent (97%) report never abusing tranquilizers or barbiturates, and 3% did not answer.

Sexual Experience

Almost half (48%) of Peer Leaders have had sexual intercourse (either vaginal, oral, or anal sex).



In the last 30 days (from when surveyed):

- 34% have had sex
- 25% of those who had sex used a condom
- 53% talked with their boyfriend or girlfriend about using condoms

In the last 3 months (from when surveyed):

- 0% had sex for money, drugs, or other things
- 0% drank alcohol or used drugs before having sexual intercourse the last time.
- 29% had sex (at least once) after getting drunk or high.

Observation of Peer Leader Activities

Several different evaluation team members observed Peer Leader gatherings on different occasions in FY 2003, 2004 and 2005. These gatherings included both small group meetings and large group sessions, and a variety of activities, including introductions, icebreaker exercises, workshops and special events.

In FY 2003, the evaluators observed all thirty Peer Leaders, both boys and girls, in a variety of activities; in FY 2004 the evaluators observed a Peer Leader meeting, a Peer Leader training, and a de-briefing on a racism event. For the first time in FY 2005, evaluators observed two activities where Peer Leaders gave presentations to other youth and community groups. This included Peer Leaders from the Drop-In Center (ages 15 and up) training the Peer Leaders at Jarvis Heights (ages 11-15), and a peer-leader facilitated community event for youth and parents.

It is clear from what was observed in all three years that Project PUERTA takes empowerment seriously. Youth are expected to have their own ideas and perspectives, and to make decisions related to program planning and development. Youth are strongly encouraged to voice their thoughts, make decisions and concretize their own visions in every aspect of the program from space design to decorating, workshop selection, trainings, and activities.

All the settings provided abundant opportunities for Peer Leaders to enhance their interpersonal skills and behaviors and translate these skills to their peers. Particularly for teens who come into the program with a degree of verbal skill, self-confidence and ability to take "risks" in group settings, there are wonderful opportunities to stretch, try out new leadership roles and responsibilities, and enhance interpersonal and group skills. Because of the large- and small-group structure, as well as variety of activities, there are ongoing opportunities to build relationships.

As presenters, Peer Leaders were well prepared with agendas, handouts, and activities. They led discussions, encouraged participation, and encouraged youth participants to share their thoughts and opinions. Project PUERTA Peer Leaders often showed great skill in introducing and discussing difficult topics, and creating a friendly and respectful atmosphere. In the FY 2005 observations, the Peer Leaders showed great confidence, pride and self-assurance, directing the audience to be quiet, commanding the respect of both parents and teens, and running smooth meetings and trainings. For example, at the presentation at the Jarvis Heights Drop-In Center, Peer Leaders were professional and treated each other with respect. They had worked out an agenda and assigned tasks before the session, and they followed the agenda throughout the session, each leader introducing their part as it arrived, with the other leaders listening quietly and respectfully, adding to the general air of respect in the room.

The Peer Leaders also treated the Jarvis Heights youth with respect. They explained the agenda for the session and set ground rules, inviting the younger participants to contribute some of their own rules for the session, which they did. During the session, each component included an opportunity for the Jarvis Heights youth to contribute their opinions, and when they did, their thoughts were listened to, echoed back, and confirmed (e.g., "I agree with what you're saying," or "That's a good point").

In all three years, the activities observed provided stimulation to youth with varying skills and abilities. A variety of different roles and tasks could be assumed depending on each Peer Leader's personality, likes and dislikes, areas of interest and skill level. Moreover, the presenters and facilitators consistently encouraged youth to take risks and share their thoughts

and ideas. Although some of the facilitators were more successful in their approach, all made an effort to encourage participation and self-expression.

In general, the activities were well planned, and leaders were clear and took charge appropriately. As presenters, Peer Leaders took on the role of educating audiences in positive decision-making and the importance of using condoms (discussing the risks involved in not using condoms), and they also encouraged the audience to get involved in their community, to help make it safer, cleaner, more attractive, a "place we'd like to raise children and bring people."

In a variety of settings, staff and Peer Leaders generally did an excellent job of setting a respectful tone, and there were many occasions when specific steps were taken to affirm perspectives and appreciate opinions or thoughts that were offered. Often, Peer Leaders were given space, guidance and opportunity to express themselves and be heard.

Observers reported being impressed by the ability of Peer Leaders to think "for themselves," and not be swayed by the opinions of the other youth in the group. Especially in the second and third years, the group included several individuals that stood out as having very strong leadership, organizational, and creative thinking skills.

The focus of many of the activities was substance abuse, HIV-related issues, and high-risk behavior, and Peer Leaders consistently demonstrated strong positive attitudinal perspectives related to these issues. During the activities, there were clear messages in favor of safer sex, condom use, preventing sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, and against using illegal drugs.

One of the goals and guiding principles of the entire program is to provide opportunities for independent thinking and leadership. As often as possible and as much as possible, staff encouraged teens to take responsibility for facilitation, program design, and planning while also being present to guide the Peer Leaders as much as needed.

Peer Leader Focus Group

As part of the data collection effort, a focus group was conducted each year to collect feedback and ideas from Peer Leaders. A member of the evaluation team met with a group of Peer Leaders that included 11 Peer Leaders in FY 2003; 5 Peer Leaders in FY 2004; and 8 Peer Leaders in FY 2005. The focus groups provided a critical opportunity to solicit feedback from project participants about how to more actively engage Peer Leaders in their work and accomplishing their job responsibilities.

FY 2003 Focus Group

In FY 2003, in addition to providing the agency with an opportunity to solicit feedback from project participants, the focus group was also designed as a leadership development opportunity, providing leadership training for those teen staff who organized and conducted the session.

The teen staff focus group facilitators were responsible for recruiting participants, facilitating the discussion within the focus group, and putting together a written summary of the information obtained from that discussion. Subsequent to the session, an evaluation and follow up meeting, facilitated by the evaluation team, was held to discuss the results obtained from the focus group and to enable the teen staff to assess their overall experience.

The youth facilitators began the focus group by explaining the purpose of the discussion and explaining that participants could use this forum to express their ideas and feelings about Project PUERTA. The facilitators took notes and compiled a summary of the discussion. After reviewing ground rules related to confidentiality and participation, the facilitators conducted an ice breaker designed to encourage discussion and break down barriers to participation. Focus group discussion centered on how being a Peer Leader is valuable and the kinds of changes that Peer Leaders are making in their lives because of their experience at Project PUERTA. Focus group participants said they have been changed in the following ways:

- *It's helping me meet new friends and be more kind and outgoing.*
- *It's helping a lot; it helped me be more open and more outgoing and that helps because in the future you need those qualities for some jobs.*
- *It's helped me be more open to people.*
- *It's helped me by teaching me things about life so that I don't make the wrong decisions.*
- *It's helping me because my stress level has lowered, and I've made more friends.*
- *It's helping me control my temper and attitude. I want to help out more.*
- *It's helping me meet more people and learn lots of things. It's helping because I have a daughter, and when I'm outside of the Drop-In Center it's hard because I have to dedicate all my time to her. But when I'm at the Drop-In Center, I chill and have fun. Also, outside the Drop-In Center there's mostly negative things going on, and I've learned not to pay attention to those things and to try to help people who are going the wrong way in life.*
- *I am more positive now. I was negative and liked problems, and being a Peer Leader made me realize all problems are ignorant and a waste of time.*
- *I'm no longer outside on the streets, and I'm keeping up a good job at work.*
- *It's changing my life by keeping me out of trouble.*
- *I don't sit in the house all day anymore. I go out and find things to do because I'm more motivated.*
- *The changes that I've made are helping me reach my goals and learn more communication skills.*
- *I'm a different person. The streets to me have no meaning, and I learned that by becoming a Peer Leader.*
- *It has changed me because I know that when I have problems at home or somewhere else I can always come here to talk about them or just to chill.*

FY 2004 Focus Group

In FY 2004, Project PUERTA staff and Peer Leaders determined that a focus group facilitated by the evaluation team might prove more effective than a Peer Leader-led group in identifying and resolving ongoing challenges. The 2004 focus group was designed to explore expectations of Peer Leaders and how well they are meeting them. Prior to the meeting, a list of Peer Leader responsibilities was compiled in order to provide a focus for discussion of expectations. The responsibilities included:

- Coming up with new ideas for projects
- Coming up with new ideas for improvements in the way things run
- Working independently and follow-through
- Expectations of participation in group meetings
- Showing improvements in school and academics
- Handling conflict between Peer Leaders
- Helping increase the level of trust within the group of Peer Leaders

- Helping shy or quiet Peer Leaders
- Reaching out to co-workers/other Peer Leaders you don't know from Girls Inc. or the other organizations, and Drop-In Center members
- Dealing with Peer Leaders who are sarcastic or judgmental or put down other people

This was a general theme throughout the focus group: each time a responsibility was discussed the participants noted the need for clarity in communicating the expectation to each of the Peer Leaders, offering assistance as needed to help them achieve what was expected, and then taking more stringent, disciplinary steps (or firing) if all efforts failed. However, there was a strong feeling that many peers might need a lot of help, assistance and coaching in order to meet expectations. Several also spoke about the need to give people time in order to feel comfortable with the group and their role.

Consistently, the distinction was made between the members of the group who were trying and those who weren't; the ones who cared about doing a good job and those who didn't; the ones who had a variety of skill levels but were doing their best versus those who were just doing the minimal in order to get their pay check. There was agreement that if the lazy, non-contributing members of the group were replaced by ones who tried and cared and did their best, the overall atmosphere would become more positive. They also agreed that the "problem" Peer Leaders were pretty obvious to everyone.

The group all felt that they were responsible for making improvements in the Drop-In Center. When asked what kinds of specific responsibilities, they said to "keep the peace," to "start new activities," and to "make newcomers feel welcome." There was consensus that the cliques that form in the Drop-In Center present a barrier to newcomers in particular and the group agreed that it was up to them to help people break through that barrier.

There was a definite split in terms of the way Peer Leaders feel they are expected to behave and the way they feel comfortable and willing to behave. All agreed that Peer Leaders who witness conflict are expected to step in, get involved and try to help the situation. However most expressed reluctance to get involved when situations actually arise. One said that it just isn't her business or problem. Most said that the expectation is reasonable to a point and sometimes okay, but if you aren't comfortable, you shouldn't be expected to get involved or say something. One said that she would only get involved if it was a situation where a shy person was being picked on. If the conflict didn't involve a shy person who "needed" help, then they were on his or her own. Although most of them acknowledged that this was an expectation, they didn't agree that it was a reasonable one, and they felt there should not be any repercussion if it wasn't done.

The participants clearly felt pleased to be included in this discussion and were active and engaged during the process. Although most were unclear about the purpose in the beginning, they all shared personal thoughts and contributed their ideas. Most were vocal and extremely enthusiastic about Girls Inc., being Peer Leaders, and working with Heidi.

The impetus behind the selection of the focus group topic was concern about why some Peer Leaders aren't more independent, why they don't follow through on their work in a more self-directed manner, why they don't exhibit leadership skills in the way they relate to one another, and why they don't take better advantage of the tutoring options they have. Concern had been expressed about their lack of contribution of ideas for improvements or new projects. This focus group was meant to explore what they thought was expected of them and how they were meeting those expectations.

As a result of this focus group and other feedback received through surveys, Project PUERTA staff began to make a concerted effort to clarify expectations, hold Peer Leaders accountable, and take specific steps to terminate Peer Leaders if their performance is unacceptable. Peer Leaders increasingly became aware that they would be held accountable according to clear and fair standards and that the repercussion of failing to meet those standards would mean losing their Peer Leader positions.

FY 2005 Focus Group

As the last focus group in the three-year project, the 2005 group discussion, which was held in Summer 2005, focused on the “long view” of Project PUERTA: how participants first felt when they arrived; their favorite and least favorite aspects of the program; the ways in which they feel Project PUERTA has impacted Holyoke; and their hopes for the program in the future.

When asked to describe their first impressions of Project PUERTA, Peer Leaders expressed a variety of feelings, from shyness, to feeling it was fun. Typical responses included:

- *To me it was good because I was shy when I first started. It's a good experience here. It was hard when I started.*
- *It was easier for me. I was in Girls Inc. before Project PUERTA so I knew some of the people already.*
- *I thought everybody was so outgoing. I was shy and it seemed like everybody knew each other.*
- *At first there were a lot of people that I knew from school. There was this one girl that I never got along with, but now I work with her and I got to know her and we're mad close now! We're like a big family.*
- *We had a lot of people in the beginning and it's always been a fun group. People would quit and come back or other people would come instead. It was always changing.*

Likewise, Peer Leaders described a variety of “best experiences” with Project PUERTA. Most talked about experiences that enabled them to work with other youth to advance a particular project – educational, community outreach, or public presentations. One girl emphasized the cooperative work, saying, “I like best the Youth Leadership Institute retreat, where we go every summer to a camp. There are a whole bunch of people and you get to play games and stuff. The games are team building games and we have to work together. Some of them are hard, but if everyone cooperates it works out and it's cool!” Another described presenting workshops on racism and stereotyping at the middle and high schools, which prompted another girl to recall a conference where some of them presented:

I went to a conference and it was the best conference ever, ever, ever. We were the only teenagers there. It was all adults and important people. Everybody else's workshops and presentations were boring with overhead projectors. But we spoke and had games to play. Our boss let us do everything. It was so cool and we felt so important. A lot of people shook our hands, and by our afternoon session people were changing their workshops so they could be at ours!

Other “best experiences” included presenting an STD workshop with boys; being part of a talk show on diversity; and the media project.

Most Peer Leaders had trouble coming up with a “least favorite” part of Project PUERTA, with only one saying that beginning a new experience can be frustrating.

All the Peer Leaders were able to find many ways in which Project PUERTA has impacted them and their choices, saying they have learned “a lot of things” and that they “take a different look at things, too.” Focus group participants talked about feeling like “experts so teens can come to us,” and they feel they have important information to share on issues like contraception and HIV/AIDS. One Peer Leader reported, “My teacher told me that I’m a leader. My math teacher told me I should be good at something because of my leadership skills.” Another Peer Leader said, “I know how to stand up for myself now.” Several Peer Leaders complained about the lack of knowledge among youth in the community, particular on the topic of contraception. As one girl reported,

A lot of my friends are from the Drop-In Center. I don't really talk to people outside of the Drop-In Center. Not that I don't know or like other people, it's just that I'm more comfortable with these people. I talk to some people who are really ignorant. They don't notice it but they say some really stupid things. They talk about how they'll get abortions if they get pregnant. I'm like – how about if you use birth control so you DON'T get pregnant! Some people are just not ready to have sex.

Peer Leaders made many other comments about how the program has impacted them:

- *If an emergency happens, some girls don't know what to do about emergency contraceptives. I don't even have to ask somebody now, because I know what needs to happen.*
- *There are a lot of girls here who go out and have sex and don't use condoms. One girl said, “Oh, it feels too good to use a condom.” And I thought, “You’re an idiot, get out of my face.” If your boyfriend doesn't want to use a condom, there are other things you can use. And some people don't know where to get condoms. Some people don't know that birth control is not 100% and that it won't stop you from getting HIV/AIDS and STD's.*
- *Some people think that you won't get pregnant, and it'll keep you from getting AIDS and STD's. But that's not true!*
- *We talk about drugs and alcohol all the time. We know our limits. I don't go to parties to drink, I go to have fun. If I am going to drink, I have someone with me that I know isn't drinking.*
- *I've never smoked or anything because I know all about it and what would happen.*
- *I'm very strong. If I say no, I mean no. Don't keep asking me, or I'll burn you with it!*
- *My friends know that if I say no, I mean it, and I know they'll be okay with it.*
- *My friends don't ask me to do drugs because they know how I feel.*
- *Even being new here has changed how I talk to my friends. I always tell people to come here.*
- *In tutoring here they give you a different view of how to do things. Every teacher has their own way of teaching. Sometimes it really helps to be coming here and working with them.*
- *There are six girls from Mt. Holyoke who come here to tutor us.*
- *Even without the tutors, the things we do here help us at school.*
- *Sometimes people from colleges come in and talk to us about careers. I'm not sure what I'm going to do when I'm older, but when people come in and talk about their careers it gets me interested.*
- *They brought us on a tour of the college, too, and answered our questions about what we'd need to do if we chose different careers.*

- *Some people might not like doing the tutoring because it's mandatory. But I think it helps. You can just do your work yourself, but sometimes there's just one little problem that you could use help with. Some people might just not like some of the tutors. It's not necessarily the tutoring, it could be the people. One time I had this tutor, and it was like she didn't know what she was talking about. But the next week I had math homework, and she knew everything. Different people are good at different subjects.*

Peer Leaders were less vocal on the question of Project PUERTA's impact on the community, but they agreed that the Drop-In Center provides a safe place for young people to "chill," and that the resources "keep teens out of trouble." They also cited the positive effect of their volunteer work (e.g. picking up trash) on the community.

Peer Leaders were anxious about the future of the program and what they would do if the program closed. As one youth expressed, "What if something happens, and we can't have our programs anymore? What are the teens gonna do then? I don't know what I'd be doing if it wasn't for this program. This is my second home." Others chimed in, noting that they have many friends at the Center, that they meet youth from other programs, and that they've "been through so much together."

Training Evaluations

In FY 2005, the evaluators collected information about three different Peer Leader trainings that were offered through Project PUERTA. The three trainings included:

- 1) Women's Sexual Health. Thirteen teens completed evaluations of this training, which was conducted in November 2004. Planned Parenthood provided the training.
- 2) Peace Teen Ensemble. This series of workshops was designed to inspire deep thinking and open dialogue about the issues concerning peace in today's world as seen through the eyes of a representative group of Holyoke's teen youth. Enchanted Circle Theater artist, educator, and conflict resolution specialist Tracy Vernon created the training and offered resources to bring the fears, hopes and ideas of the participants to life through a variety of artistic mediums. Participants chose from drumming, dancing, acting, performance poetry, visual art, and singing. The group created a one-hour performance, which was presented to a live audience in downtown Holyoke on August 4 as part of the Caribbean Nights Festival. Six teens completed evaluations of this training, which was held on July 18, 19, 25, 26, August 1, 2, 2005.
- 3) Reality Workshop. This workshop, conducted by Trudy Monsen and Barbara Lyon, exposed teens to adult responsibilities. The teens that participated in this workshop were randomly assigned different jobs, marital status, spousal employment status, number of children and number of pets. Each job was accompanied by a monthly income, and teens rotated from station to station paying bills and keeping a check book register. Depending upon their income, teens had to budget and choose which cars, houses, clothes, furniture, insurance, cable package, etc. would best accommodate their lifestyle. Eleven teens completed evaluations of this workshop, which took place on August 10, 2005.

Feedback on all three workshops was provided by participants through anonymous written training evaluations. Feedback for each workshop is summarized below.

The workshop on Women's Sexual Health was well received by Peer Leaders, who felt that it taught them "many new things" about their bodies and "how to use things." "I learned a lot I

didn't know," summarized one participant. They felt that the trainer was effective and well informed, even though "we sometimes had difficulty" paying attention. They also felt the trainer was respectful, although one mentioned that she sometimes "had to cut people off." Participants liked the idea of writing down questions and having the presenter pick questions from the box (ensuring the questioner's anonymity), but, even then, a few youth said they felt that they "couldn't ask some questions" they were wondering about. When asked whether the workshop changed their opinion or attitude about anything, eleven of the thirteen participants said yes. They said they learned about the importance of safe sex, about "what's going on with my body," and about how they could take initiative for protecting themselves. When asked what more they would like on this topic, most participants simply said they would like to learn more. Specific suggestions included have a discussion group on sex education, learning more "about our bodies," and relationship pro's and con's. Every respondent said they would recommend the training to a friend.

The Peace Teen Ensemble participants were enthusiastic and positive about this training. Several said they "loved" the training, and all felt that the trainer was prepared, interesting and able to keep everyone's attention. At the same time, half of the respondents felt that there was less opportunity to participate and ask questions, and one felt that the trainer went "fast." Four of the six respondents felt that the trainer respected other people's opinions; one felt that she did not, and one felt that she didn't "listen to our ideas." All of the respondents felt comfortable talking and asking questions, and five of the six felt that the training changed their opinion or attitude. In particular, several respondents felt that the workshop helped them learn to express themselves through dance. All of the respondents would like more training on this subject, including dancing skills; hip hop; bomba, and salsa lessons.

All eleven respondents enjoyed the Reality Workshop, saying it was great experience and eye-opening. As one youth explained, "It was great, I loved it, and it was a great experience. I realized how much bills and stuff you have to pay and how you have to decide on which to pick. It's really hard." Youth felt that the trainers were well prepared, interesting, and able to keep everyone's attention. Youth also felt that their opinions were respected and that the trainers encouraged them to participate and ask questions. Many of the training participants felt that their opinions or attitudes had changed as a result of the workshop, primarily with respect to expenses and not being able to make ends meet. "I thought I could spend as much as I want on stuff but I couldn't," explained one participant. Another wrote, "I thought I would have a lot of money left over and being 28 would be free." Eight of the eleven participants said they would like more training on the topic, with even more realistic parameters ("Do more reality stuff because furniture does not really cost just \$25"). One respondent said that she had changed her mind about trying to move out of her mom's house. All of them said they would recommend the workshop to a friend.

Parent/Guardian Survey

In both FY 2003 and FY 2004, the Parent/Guardian survey was completed by eighteen parents of Project PUERTA Peer Leaders. Given the similarities between the responses in both these years, this survey was not administered again in FY 2005. By an overwhelming majority, parents in both years described feeling good about their child's participation in Project PUERTA. In both years, parents noted a number of positive changes in their children, but the change in FY 2004 was seen as more pronounced.¹⁰

The following chart compares parent responses in FY 2003 and FY 2004:

Survey Question	% of parents giving this response in FY 2003	% of parents giving this response in FY 2004
Is she/he able to resolve conflict when it comes up?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 72%	Yes, this seems to have improved 94%
Does she/he seem to have good relationships with other people around his/her own age?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 78%	Yes, this seems to have improved: 89%
Does she/he participate more in community groups, church or clubs?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 78% No change, but there is no need for improvement: 5% No change and we hope it will improve in the future: 17%	Yes, this seems to have improved: 67% No change, but there is no need for improvement: 28% No change and we hope it will improve in the future: 5%
Does she/he seem to think about how his/her actions will affect others?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 66%	Yes, this seems to have improved: 83%
Does your child do his/her homework?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 66%	Yes, this seems to have improved: 83%
Does she/he help out at home?	Yes, this seems to have improved: 72%	Yes, this seems to have improved: 83%

On every question but one, parents noted marked improvements and positive changes in Peer Leaders. On that one question - "Does your child talk to you about his/her dreams, goals or plans for the future?" – 16% fewer parents felt that their child was doing this more, from 72% of parents in FY 2003 to 56% of parents in FY 2004. In addition, 16% of FY 2004 parents, compared to 5% in FY 2003, hoped for improvements in this area in the future.

In general, parents noted many beneficial changes. One parent wrote, "my child communicates more with me and is more open about different topics." Another noted that her son "has taken more responsibility for himself and others," and another parent wrote, "It has made him more independent." Nearly three-quarters (72%) of parents felt that their child was more able to accept criticism or feedback from other people; 78% of parents felt that their child accepted compliments and praise; and the vast majority (94%) felt that their child was able to resolve conflict when it came up. In fact, more parents saw an improvement in conflict resolution skills than in any other area.

All the parents felt that their child's dreams, hopes and plans for the future were possible. As one parent explained, "I have always encouraged my daughter to follow her dreams and her goals, and her dreams will come true."

All but two parents felt "very happy about" the program, and those parents felt respectively that "it's probably good for my child" and "It's up to my child, I don't have any feelings one way

or another.” All the parents indicated that they would recommend the program to another parent in Holyoke.

When asked for suggestions about other kinds of programs or learning experiences they would like to see offered, several parents made suggestions for further education, including one parent who encouraged the program to delve more deeply into domestic violence. Another parent suggested having the Peer Leaders do volunteer work in hospitals, “where there are children who need someone to take care of them, talk, read books, and have people who can help them with their fears about life. That will be a great experience for teens to learn also.” Another parent suggested additional sports programs.

When asked if they are worried or concerned in some way about the program, most parents expressed no concerns. One parent felt that sex should be more strongly discouraged, and another parent of a 15 year old wrote, “It concerns me sometimes that she is only 15, and she has too much knowledge of sexual topics.”

In general, however, praise for the Project PUERTA was unequivocal. One parent said that she “relies on and trusts her daughter’s opinions about the program,” and another parent expressed the feeling that Project PUERTA “teaches my son how to prepare to be a boss, leader, person of authority.” “It’s a very good program for young girls,” said another parent, and still another wrote, “It’s an outstanding program, and I would be happy to recommend it to another parent.”

Qualitative Interviews

In years two and three, individual evaluators conducted qualitative interviews with Peer Leaders. In FY 2004, interviews were conducted with three experienced Peer Leaders and four incoming Peer Leaders the day before their first day of work with Project PUERTA. The goal of the FY 2004 interviews was to obtain a more detailed picture of the feelings of particular Peer Leaders, their strengths, and their particular challenges. Results from the FY 2004 interviews are included in the Appendix.

In FY 2005, one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted with two groups of Peer Leaders:

1. OCTOBER 2004 FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS: Follow up interviews were conducted with three of the four Peer Leaders who had been previously interviewed on the day before they started with Project PUERTA. These interviews, which were conducted four months after the Peer Leaders' start dates, were designed to see how the reality of the program compared to their expectations and to capture their overall experience as new program participants.
2. SPRING 2005 GENERAL INTERVIEWS: Interviews were conducted in Spring 2005 with four Peer Leaders of varying experiences with the program. These interviews were designed to capture program impact, Peer Leaders' impressions of the program, and suggestions for the future.

Findings from the FY 2005 interviews have been merged and grouped in two distinct sections, below.

OCTOBER 2004 FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

When asked how they feel about being a Peer Leader and coming to work, all the interviewees were enthusiastic and positive. "I love it here! I love all the people here – they're so great!" said one Peer Leader. Another compared her work experience to others: "Everybody I know says, "Oh, I have to go to work," and they complain about it, but here work is fun. I come here almost every day even when I'm not working here, just because I like to be here." One felt that the work was easier and "more fun" than she expected, and another said that the work was not like other jobs. As one teen commented, "I like every part of this place – the workshops, the retreat was just mad fun, the Thursday nights getting together with everybody and the other groups, everything."

All the interviewees felt that being part of a group, interacting with other young people, and making friends was the best part of the experience. One girl enthused about the Thursday night activities, and another commented on the retreat. Pilates classes,

I've learned so much about STD's, about teen pregnancy and about every drug. About a month and a half ago I was with a group of people who smoke, get high. There were two young Peer Leaders nearby, and I knew they saw me with the group. I knew I didn't want to get high, but I would have stayed with the group except for the two little girls. I told my friends I'd see them later and walked over to the two girls, and they were surprised. They told me they thought I was going to get high, but I told them that there are other ways to have fun. We talked about how two hours after you get high you just get depressed and it brings you down. When I used to smoke I noticed that.

Peer Leader Interview

games, acting, and group discussions were also highly rated.

After we do the games or acting or something we have group discussions. A lot of people talk. I talk too! Sometimes I feel a little nervous, but I'm much more comfortable than I was before, when I started here. I feel comfortable because I know the people here. At first I was like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I'm saying something!" - but it's good. I used to never speak out, but now I do.

Several interviewees talked about anticipating future activities, and one talked about looking forward to being a Peer Leader for many years:

I want to be a Peer Leader for as long as I can – four years! I know I'll learn more about other stuff as long as I'm here. I think it's a good program for teenagers. It's helping me make better choices too. I know what to do now in different situations. Well, it's not like I'm a different person, but I feel more strongly about things now.

All the Peer Leaders felt that the program has had an impact on their lives, with some explaining that they now know much more about issues like AIDS/HIV, and others talking about how it has helped them feel confident in "sticking up for their beliefs." As one teen explained, "Being here hasn't changed my mind or changed my decisions or behavior. But it has confirmed what I already believed and felt and made me feel stronger that those are the right decisions and choices for me." Interviewees talked about feeling more confident, less shy, and more secure talking in public. "I've opened up a lot more here than I ever expected," added one Peer Leader. Another commented:

I talk more than I used to, and I speak up more for myself since I've been here. Like with the workshop I've been planning. My group wanted to drop off a piece of the workshop that I thought was important, so I said "no." Speaking up like that is new for me, but if I hadn't [spoken up] the workshop wouldn't have been nearly as good and it's important what we're doing. I really wanted that section to be included.

Interviewees described how Project PUERTA provides them with positive things to do instead of "hanging out all the time being bored and looking at the same people." Another said that she's changed her behavior because of what she's learned: "Especially when it is about infections and safer sex. I think the best thing about this program is the way all these teens are learning about

Doing things with my friends and meeting people has really helped me not be so shy. Now in school I talk to everybody from the first day of school. Last year I wouldn't ever talk to anybody I didn't know. Now I talk to everybody and it's because of being here. I tell people I work at Girls Inc. in Holyoke, and I tell them all the things we do around prevention and workshops and how we give out condoms and protection. I tell everyone what we do here. Being here has helped me learn how to be more of a leader and be more comfortable in lots of situations.

Peer Leader Interview

HIV and unprotected sex.”

Interviewees were divided about the extent to which tutoring has helped them improve their grades at school, perhaps to some extent because the school year had just started at the time the interviews were conducted (October). In general, the interviewees felt that tutoring would be helpful. And one interviewee, who was using Project PUERTA tutoring for the first time, elaborated:

Last year I kind of slipped back in school, so this year I'm a freshman. I have freshman home room and sophomore classes – because I didn't get all of my credits. But I'm catching up this year and next year I'm going to be a regular junior. I'm getting better grades this year. I'm doing all of my work because I know I have to do good. The tutoring here is helping me too. I have to do good because I have to be somebody in life. I want to do more studying here.

None of the three interviewees said that they spend much time at the Drop-In Center, describing it as more often attended by the “younger kids” from middle school.

When asked for suggestions to improve the program, several Peer Leaders focused on the need to deal with one participant who “seems to have problem following the guidelines, the ways of being.” Although they recognize that staff are making attempts to “deal” with the girl, they were skeptical about whether she would change. Other suggestions included finding “bigger space” on Thursday nights. “I like the big group,” explained one interviewee. “I wouldn't want to split it up, I just wish we had more space because there are so many of us and it can get kind of crazy and overwhelming.” Putting together the new pool table and organizing use of the pool table was also suggested: “We should have a pool sign-up or something because the boys are always using the pool table. The guys come and even though someone might say ‘I have it next,’ they leave for a minute and then some other guys are playing. All the guys love it.”

Interviewees also complimented specific staff people (Heidi, Jenny, Jessie), and they added comments about how they personally contribute to the positive atmosphere of the program (I think I can make people laugh, I'm friendly and not rude, etc.).

SPRING 2005 GENERAL INTERVIEWS

The Spring 2005 interviews began with the evaluator asking each Peer Leader to describe what Project PUERTA has meant to them. All four interviewees credited the program with encouraging them to become more responsible, work to make change in the

The Peer Leaders have been able to be educated and learn how to educate others about issues which are difficult to talk about – adults have been so impressed with how candid our Peer Leaders are about issues of sexuality, STD'S, HIV, AIDS. Seeing these girls and how different they are from average teens and how comfortable they are with these subjects is so impressive.

Staff Interview

Before Project PUERTA there was no teen center where people could hang out. Before our outreach van there was no mobile van reaching out to people who might have been intimidated by other efforts.

Staff Interview

community, and make positive choices. One Peer Leader described her work on the Outreach Van and how she feels good about “going out and finding new people all the time.” Several described how they have become more confident and less shy speaking in public. One summed up her experience as follows:

The program is good because you learn about HIV and STD's, you have a collaboration of all four groups, and you get to know people. We put a showcase on and studied for it for months. I'm an advanced Peer Leader, and we did a whole bunch of things on diversity. We cut and pasted diversity pictures, and I was the leader of that. It was a challenge but it was fun. All of the girls were all nervous and all that. I'm used to facilitating because I've been in the program for a long time, but I'm not shy or anything, I'm comfortable doing it.

The interviewees also described how accepted they felt and that other teens were always available to answer questions. One Peer Leader, who described herself as once having “a really short temper,” said that the program has totally changed her – she now accepts and even welcomes critical feedback. Several Peer Leaders made observations about other people who had become less shy or were much more informed as a result of the program. As one interviewee commented, “I see the younger teens when they first come here. After a while they are a little more calm, more respectful of each other. Their manners have really changed. . . They were just wild when they first came. . . But no, we've got rules. If you want to come here you need to follow the rules.”

Being able to say no to peer pressure and make good choices (not smoking, using protection against STD's and pregnancy, etc.) were seen by the interviewees as direct results of their participation in Project PUERTA. One Peer Leader, expressing what many other Peer Leaders also shared, said, “I love it here. It's great. Honestly there is nothing better. If I didn't have this program in my life I'd go crazy. It helps a lot. I can't even picture it if they weren't in my life.” Another Peer Leader commented, “Even if I didn't get paid for this I would still come here.”

When asked to describe their “favorite things about the program,” interviewees most often spoke about doing workshops, the summer retreat, community projects with other Project PUERTA partners, and getting to make new friends and meet new people. Explained one interviewee,

We have many programs that we do that are so much fun. We're with other organizations doing the same

I like it when the staff come into our groups, give us ideas, get involved and work with us. Most of them – like the teen staff – are always helping and doing that.

Peer Leader Interview

It's still a little hard for me to talk in front of people, but I definitely talk more than I used to. I think that will keep changing for me though. I'm getting more talkative now. At school, too. I'll talk in front of the class now, even when I don't know everyone. I never used to do that. I think being here is helping me talk up more at school, too.

Peer Leader Interview

things we are doing – something positive in our community. We come together, talk about and go out together to try to do good. We're trying to let people know what we're doing, that we want to help the community, that we want to pick up the litter, that we want to make it look neater, we want to have teen pregnancy stop. We want to stop the drug abuse, help people find jobs; stop the guys hitting women or the women hitting guys. It's hard to believe but it's true, and there are a lot of issues that we need to address.

Feeling like their work makes a real difference for people is important to the interviewees, as is feeling that people respect them and what they have to say. In describing a conference that was attended by some of the Peer Leaders, one of the interviewees focused on the contribution made by Project PUERTA members and the feedback they received from other conference participants: "All the other workshops had those big white things – overhead projectors. It was so boring. And then we got out there and did it differently. We got people to get up, and we let them know what we do here. Everybody was shocked and amazed. They kept saying that they were proud of us and how they heard great things about our workshop. We were so excited." Likewise, another participant described feeling best about being able to teach other teens:

The workshops are my favorite part because you learn what you don't know and you teach other teens. That's the best part because there are teens out there who think they know everything, but we do these workshops and they say things like, "Oh, I didn't know about THAT!" There are girls out there who don't even know how to put a condom on; I just talked to a girl who didn't even know female condoms existed!

One Peer Leader described how exciting it was to have her mother come to a showcase, and another, who went to Washington, DC, and met Hillary Clinton, talked about how special it felt to get "dressed up" for a conference, behave professionally, and get excused from school for the event.

All the Peer Leaders interviewed felt that Project PUERTA has improved their relationships with friends and family. "Friends see a change in me," said one Peer Leader. She added:

I feel like I have more patience with people and more respect for people. Everybody is different, their sexuality, who they like and who they're attracted to – I learned about this. I accept everyone for who they are, gay people and everybody. Sometimes I don't get

I've learned a lot here about things so I think I'll do things differently because of that. Especially when it is about infections and safer sex. I think the best thing about this program is the way all these teens are learning about HIV and unprotected sex.

Peer Leader Interview

This program has helped me a lot and meant a lot to me. We've done a lot of community work and I feel good about that. I love the outreach van, it's so much fun. We go out and find new people all the time.

Peer Leader Interview

along with a particular person but that's alright. You're always going to have difficulties, always going to have challenges in your life. Nobody is perfect. Everybody makes mistakes.

Being able to talk to people, listen and give advice were common themes described by all the interviewees. As one Peer Leader explained, "Everybody talks to me and I listen and sometimes I give advice." She went on to describe how her knowledge helped one friend:

I have a friend who thinks she might be pregnant, but she had a lot of bleeding for a few days. Before the bleeding, she had taken a test and knew she was pregnant, but doesn't know if she lost the baby. So I told her that I would talk to the nurse at my job and ask her some questions and get information for her about what she needs to do now. She's afraid to tell her parents anything so she asked me to get the information for her. And I was able to get her information so she could get help. That's one example of the kinds of things I do. People come to me when they have a problem.

One Peer Leader talked about becoming closer to her mother, becoming more organized, "stressing" less, and improving her attitude in general.

All the Peer Leaders felt that the mandatory tutoring had been helpful. Even those that "don't like it," acknowledged that they "need it" and have benefited from it. One teen explained, "I look forward to the tutoring. I can't let myself down. I'm stressing about MCAS coming up, but the tutors here help me and get me on track." Another credited tutoring with helping her graduate at the end of the year.

When asked the extent to which Project PUERTA has influenced their behavior with respect to high-risk activities, all the interviewees described major changes in their knowledge and choices. All feel they are making better choices as a result of Project PUERTA. One interviewee commented, "I'm making good choices. If I ever decided to lose my virginity I would be so careful about using a condom. Before this program, I used to say I'm going to use five condoms if I have sex, but now I know that the friction would break it and I could get pregnant." This particular Peer Leader explained that she talks through everything with her boyfriend and that, although he's older, he "doesn't even know about" the information she tells him. She continued, "I know I need to tell my mom about it when I do finally decide to lose my virginity."

Several girls acknowledged that they initially "didn't know

The girls are so deflated at the end of this project – they keep saying, "What are we going to do, what are we going to do?" They're at that age when they need structured guidance and feel a little lost at sea – even those who have just started this year and changed so much.

Staff Interview

anything” about HIV/AIDS, smoking, or “anything.” Several also felt it was likely – given the behavior of their friends – that they would be smoking marijuana or having unprotected sex if they hadn’t been involved in Project PUERTA. Another said that changing her behavior also changed the behavior of some of her friends:

Knowing this stuff changes my decisions and it changes other people’s decisions too . . . I used to smoke weed and then I stopped completely. I never knew about the side effects and the stuff that it does to your brain, but now I do. I don’t drink at all.

Another Peer Leader felt similarly, describing a recent experience in positive decision-making and how being a role model can influence one’s own behavior:

I’ve learned so much about STD’s, about teen pregnancy and about every drug. About a month and a half ago I was with a group of people who smoke, get high. There were two young Peer Leaders nearby, and I knew they saw me with the group. I knew I didn’t want to get high, but I would have stayed with the group except for the two little girls. I told my friends I’d see them later and walked over to the two girls, and they were surprised. They told me they thought I was going to get high, but I told them that there are other ways to have fun. We talked about how two hours after you get high you just get depressed and it brings you down. When I used to smoke I noticed that.

One of the Peer Leaders, who became a mother when she was 13, described feeling isolated initially from the other participants. “In a way, I’m still a child,” she explained, “but having a child has changed my life.” At first, she didn’t join the program because she didn’t want to be used as a cautionary tale – or to be seen as encouraging other girls to get pregnant. In a community where teen pregnancy is epidemic, participation of the two teen parents in the program seems to serve as a reality check for would-be parents. As another Peer Leader explained:

I love babies but I’m not having kids until I’m 25. In my school half of the girls already have kids, are pregnant or are on their second kid. I try to tell my friends how much a baby costs. I’m trying to get myself a car and that’s expensive enough. I have a friend who thinks a baby costs about the same as a car, but I tell her it’s so much more expensive. Diapers, clothes and so much stuff you have to have. I beg her to try not to get pregnant.

We all get along with each other here. We’re all practically friends around here, the staff and everyone. Some of us have been Peer Leaders for a while, but others are really new. We all get along though. When new Peer Leaders join, they easily become part of the group. The thing is, they’re just basically being themselves. We like people who are being themselves, not being fake or just trying to impress us. That’s one thing I can spot – when someone is just trying to impress us, and I don’t really like that. I like you to be your own person, your own leader – not be a follower - because I went down that road of being a follower. But ever since I’ve been with Girls Inc., I have been a leader and I’ve been doing my own thing.

Peer Leader Interview

All of the Peer Leaders interviewed are intent on graduating from high school and pursuing some kind of profession. Their career interests include working in a nursing home; radiology; becoming a registered nurse; joining the Marines; becoming a firefighter; and becoming a police officer. One Peer Leader, about to graduate from high school, shared her feelings at this accomplishment:

Me - I'm the person that'll tell you that you can't let them step on you. I'll be a role model and tell you to do this, go there, that you've gotta do it. Sometimes I feel I'm trapped with four brick walls around me, and I can't get nowhere, and I have so much stress all around me. Before I know it, I'm breaking through that wall, and I accomplish so much stuff. When I graduate, it's going to be a big thing for me. I'm going to make it my night. I'm going to sit there and cry with happiness and celebrate . . . I will have been through my 12 years of education and I'll have accomplished it!

This is what the Drop-In Center does: it changes people for the good. That's what we need. Instead of having gangs, let's bring all the kids to the Center and help them to become Peer Leaders.

Peer Leader Interview

Teen Drop-In Center

Drop-In Center Observation

The Drop-In Center was observed by different members of the evaluation team on numerous occasions over the three-year period. Two formal observations were conducted each year. By FY 2004, all observers agreed that the facility was well-marked and easy to find. The main room of the Drop-In Center is large and colorful, with activities located all around it. It is right by the main door. The side of the building reads, "Teen Drop-In Center," which is visible to people pulling into the parking lot, but not very obvious to people driving past on the main street. A more visible sign directing visitors from Main Street might make it even easier to locate. It is accessible by car and public transportation. Although it is not in the center of town, it is close to Holyoke center.

The atmosphere in the Drop-In Center is friendly, welcoming and safe. Although the foyer is dimly lit, the main space is friendly and welcoming, bright, cheerful, and hip. Photos and signs for Girls Inc. encourage youth to come inside. The space is warm and bright and feels very safe. In general, the room is filled with smiling faces, listening to music and playing games. There is lots of laughter, which makes it a "nice feeling to walk into." Observers and teen visitors are all greeted warmly as they arrive. A Peer Leader in a designated chair checks in newcomers, which helps teens enter and feel okay about being there. On Peer Leader meeting nights it is very hectic and busy; this may be somewhat intimidating to teens just dropping by for the first time. There are lots of brightly colored informational flyers, various youth projects, photos, and other youth-friendly posters on the walls. Although many of the posters advertise a service or event, there is a good mix of types of visuals. During some observations, new arrivals were often greeted with cheers and hugs. The rules are clearly conveyed and obeyed, and staff were a visible presence; they maintain order while not being officious.

There is a side entrance to the Center that is handicapped accessible. It was locked when tried, and the window in the door is fairly high, so a person in a wheelchair would need to announce their presence or have someone with them who could get the attention of someone to open the door or go inside to open the door for them. The bathroom is handicapped accessible, which like the rest of the Center is colorful, clean, designed with bright posters and well-equipped with pamphlets and helpful information.

The Drop-In Center is very neat and clean, everything having its own place. The bathroom also is clean and stocked, including a basket of condoms that can be taken discretely as youth desire. The kitchen looks great, as does the health room. Floors were swept/vacuumed, spaces for brochures were well-stocked, there were signs up to tell a newcomer how each space was to be used (e.g., computer lab, tutoring space, kitchen, health room, bathroom). Calendars were posted with scheduled events noted. Posters conveyed the Center rules (e.g., be respectful). Lots of photos of participants, Peer Leaders, and staff were up throughout the Center, adding to the friendliness of the place. The Center has large garbage cans in obvious spots, large lockers for the teens, and a water tank for drinking and cups. Overall, observers felt that the Center was well thought out and organized, though not oppressively so. This is clearly a real strength of the Center. The setup allows different individuals/groups to engage in different activities at the same time. Music is playing most of the time, and the pool table is very popular.

Resources throughout the Drop-In Center are clearly identified, and the space is very well lit. The Peer Leaders are also helpful in identifying anything and assisting with resources. In general, the space is sufficient to allow for multiple activities without having them interfere with

each other. Space is effectively used for many activities, including pool table, TV area, reading area, sitting and game area, etc. Nothing is too crowded or uncomfortable. Despite having a lot in a small building, the Center is set up very well.

In addition, the sofas, open space, tables, etc. create opportunities for small groups that don't interfere with one another. Card games are common and multiple conversations go on in different sections of the space. There are also other rooms for meetings, computer work, a kitchen and other quiet spaces.

For the most part, staff are available and responsive when teens arrive at the Center. Whenever evaluators arrived at the Center, they were immediately noticed (by either a Peer Leader, other staff or the Coordinator), addressed, and brought where they needed to go. Staff were professional but friendly and low-key, and interactions between staff/Peer Leaders and staff/youth and Peer Leaders/youth were the same - respectful and professional while also friendly and laid back. Staff don't seem authoritative or controlling, nor do they get in the way of the feel of the Center being for and about teens and their own space.

The youth are treated with great respect in a very positive environment. The leaders treat them with mutual respect and do not 'talk down' to them. They keep it real with the teens and try to attain a comfortable environment where the teens can open up and be themselves. Staff were observed greeting youth, making them feel welcome in the Center, and periodically walking around the room while engaging individuals and groups in conversation. The staff, especially Loca, clearly enjoyed the youth, and they respected and liked her.

Staff encouraged peers to solve any conflict with each other appropriately and independently. They were always there to support the teens when needed and seemed available at any time for any peer. The setting provides teens with ample opportunities to build relationships, meet new people, and enhance their interpersonal skills. Since the site is basically a social setting, teens are able to meet their friends and connect with one another in a positive place. There is a great amount of interaction between youth at the Center. In the main room, the youth negotiated use of the pool table, were playing music, and talking. The ability to form new connections and relationships is one of the primary reasons why teens say they go to the Center. New friendships are formed and others are strengthened. Teens also report that they get to know people who they recognize from school. Given the high degree of "shyness" reported by youth, this seems a wonderful aspect to the entire program.

The Center provides up-to-date resources, referrals and equipment for youth of varying abilities and interests. The equipment and games seemed to be in good shape, and all of the activities seemed to interest at least some of the youth. The magazines, which are mostly fashion and media based, could be more up to date and interesting, including publications on a variety of topics such as nature, traveling, education, etc. Better literature and reading activities might capture the interest of some teens and be beneficial in many ways. Referrals are everywhere and easily obtained, and the pool table and computer equipment are heavily used.

In general, staff facilitating special activities appeared to be skilled and able to effectively engage the participants. Leaders spoke loudly and clearly and were able to engage the attention of the teens at any time. Most importantly, the youth were enjoying themselves and their shared time with others. It seemed to be a safe-haven and nice place to retreat to. Although on occasion and behind closed doors staff seemed stressed with scheduling conflicts and leader conflicts, this did not reflect on youth in the Center. The staff were professional and devoted and adept at dealing appropriately with stressful events.

Overall, observers agreed that the Drop-In Center is very impressive, filling a critical need in Holyoke. The special events like Thanksgiving dinners and Halloween parties give the Center a true community feel.

Drop-In Center Focus Group

In February 2005, a group of Drop-In Center participants was convened for a focus group. Facilitated by an evaluator, the focus group explored participants' feelings about the Drop-In Center, likes/dislikes, and suggestions for improving the program. Unlike prior years, when feedback was extremely positive, participants in FY 2005 had many more complaints – in particular, they complained about the ineffectiveness of staffing, the bad behavior of some participants, and the fact that many youth now coming to the Drop-In Center don't come back because equipment and games are broken and "there's nothing happening." High staff turnover in FY 2005 and the anticipation of program funds ending may be factors influencing these Drop-In Center findings. The discussion is summarized below, according to each focus question. (Direct quotes are in italics.)

Why Teens Say They Come to the Drop-In Center

- There were two themes in response to questions about what teens enjoy about the Drop-In Center. As reported in surveys in all three years, most like relaxing; meeting friends; listening to music and hanging out. (*I like to chill here; I like to listen to music; I go if I want to hang out; I have fun here; If I'm in a bad mood, I come here and all my friends are here and I cheer up and feel better about everything; We're like one big family here; I love it here.*)
- A few comments also were made about the drop-in space being a refuge or positive alternative in their lives. (*I like coming here to get off the streets; I have a lot of problems at home, so I like to come here.*)
- Several comments were made about meeting and reaching out to new people. (*I like to see all of the people who come; we meet new people just about every time we come; I just go up to new people and hang out with them; we just play games and it's easy; I like to meet new people; If you see someone sitting there who looks bored or shy, we go up to them and see if they want to play a game or something – or go up to them and ask what's wrong – a lot of us do that.*)
- There was a great deal of enthusiasm for Friday nights expressed by all of the participants, in particular about how it is so much fun because there are activities. There was a definite focus on wanting more activities, and the focus group participants were energetic and excited about even discussing the possibility of doing more planned activities.

Things Teens Don't Like at the Drop-In Center:

Without exception, the focus group participants complained about inappropriate and disrespectful behavior on the part of some Drop-In Center youth. Breaking things, cursing, and stealing items were just some examples of behaviors that participants do not like.

- *Sometimes teens listen to the staff, sometimes they don't.*
- *I don't like when people disrespect stuff, when they break stuff, when they play too rough.*
- *They broke the foosball, the railing for the wheelchair entrance, there are holes in the walls.*
- *They stole the 900 condoms; that was so immature. Why are you going to steal it if it's free?*

- *We tell them not to come if they're going to break stuff or whatever, but they don't listen.*
- *We can't control the teens.*
- *There is cursing all over the place all the time.*
- *There are too many immature people coming here, it's not about their "real" age – it's mental age or just how mature they are.*
- *They don't give the respect that they should.*
- *People wrestle with each other, they throw stuff around. Like the ping pong table, they slammed into it and it broke.*
- *People wrestle so hard it's like they want to kill each other sometimes.*

Staffing

Unlike prior years, when Drop-In Center staff were commended as being highly engaged (while still respecting teens' space), available and helpful, this year's feedback was more critical. Focus group participants repeatedly complained about staff "not doing their jobs," sitting on the side and ignoring problems, and even being "lazy." Some youth felt there should be more staff, while others felt that the number of staff would be sufficient if they were more actively "doing their jobs." To some extent, this feedback may reflect the high degree of paid staff turnover in the program in FY 2005.

- *We need more Teen Staff watching each spot*
- *There should at least be one or two staff in the drop-in space IN the space.*
- *Staff need to watch out and make sure that people follow the rules.*
- *Have staff pay more attention to the drop in space.*
- *I'll be honest, sometimes no one is even looking at the drop-in space.*
- *Staff need to stop being lazy.*
- *Instead of sitting in the office they should get up and go chill with the teens.*
- *Sometimes they are just sitting in their office not paying attention, and people are getting away with murder.*
- *Not all the staff – some certain staff need to stop sitting around.*
- *Sometimes a staff person is just having a bad day – everyone has bad days, but there are certain staff who just sit around and don't do anything.*
- *Loca is with us all the time, she'll just hang out or play a game or just be with the teens, like she'll help us.*
- *The other staff need to interact with the teens more.*
- *We should be protective but not overprotective – we don't want staff everywhere just staring at us, but we do need people to pay better attention to what is going on.*
- *Staff need to interact with the teens more and get to know them more instead of sitting in the office.*
- *There should be a staff in the computer room and there's not anyone there – that is why things are getting ruined and there are viruses.*
- *It's not really that the amount of staff needs to be bigger, as long as they are doing their job and looking at what is going on there shouldn't be a problem; you just need staff who are doing their jobs.*

How Well Are Staff Handling Problems When They Come Up?

On the question of whether staff (paid staff and Peer Leaders) are effectively dealing with problems, again, the feedback from youth was significantly more critical in FY 2005 than in FY 2003 and FY 2004. Focus group participants complained about staff's inability or unwillingness to address problems directly or to talk to teens who are misbehaving.

- *When there are problems SOMETIMES the staff deal with them.*
- *Sometimes people just don't get told things, even when staff see that they are breaking the rules.*
- *If staff or teens are noticing someone is being too rough with the equipment, then they should tell them to stop.*
- *I've seen people in the hallway where they aren't supposed to be, and I've seen staff just pass by there and NOT say anything to them. For example, you're not supposed to walk around the building – you're supposed to stay in the drop-in space, but staff don't tell them that they're not supposed to be there.*
- *Teens know that they aren't supposed to be there, but staff see them and just keep on walking.*
- *They should talk to people that are doing the things that are wrong or disrespectful.*
- *We should talk to people when they are breaking the rules.*
- *I don't think the rules and policies are being enforced.*
- *Rules are being broken, sometimes nothing happens.*
- *Maybe staff don't say anything because they think the teens won't listen to them – and they don't.*
- *In a way, it's not the teen staff's responsibility to be babysitting the kids – kids should be mature enough to not be trying to "get away with things" because someone isn't watching them every moment.*
- *Some Peer Leaders don't know how to be nice – some people say that if you are all up in someone's face they won't listen to you, so you have to know how to be nice.*
- *When kids come to the Drop-In Center, the Drop-In Center staff don't want to be like "oh, get out of here" or be rude to people because then they'll talk about how whack we are, and we'll get a reputation.*

Things That Could Be Done To Help:

- *There should be more strict rules and more people supervising the Drop-In Center so no one can steal stuff.*
- *The kitchen door should be locked because the kids are always stealing food.*
- *If you need a condom you should ask for one; don't have them at easy reach.*
- *We should suspend (close) down the Drop-In Center for a while or do a meeting with everybody in the Drop-In Center.*
- *Hang things up, for example, like rules - and when somebody new comes in, make sure that they read the rules.*
- *Warn them, like say, "This is your first warning and there are only three warnings. Three strikes and you are out."*
- *You should warn them if they do something – that if they do it again there will be consequences.*
- *Like at the Boys and Girls Club - they'll suspend you.*
- *I don't think we should suspend people because then they won't come back because it would be too embarrassing.*
- *I don't care if we have a bad reputation; we can't have our things wrecked this way.*
- *When kids act up, they should be kicked out of the Drop-In Center almost similar to what the punishments are in school.*
- *We need to tell teens if there are more broken or stolen items, there are consequences and there would be no more things to play with.*

The Reputation of the Drop-In Center

- *At school we have a reputation – they say that all we do is gossip. I hear that all the time, that all those girls do over there is gossip.*
- *I've heard that too – that all they do over there is talk and gossip.*
- *Some people talk crap about it here – they say it's whack and they dis it. But other people like it.*
- *Some people think it's whack here because they come here and there is nothing going on.*
- *They should remember that no one is here because everyone comes here and sees that nothing is going on and then they leave.*
- *Now that everything is broken, there really isn't anything going on.*
- *Yeah, a lot of people come and see that there isn't anything to do, or no one is here so they leave and don't come back.*

Appropriate Age of Drop-In Center Teens

Most participants agreed that the majority of the teens that come to the drop-in space are between 13-15, although some are older. Often the older ones are the Peer Leaders. They agreed that youth between the ages of 13-19 should be allowed to come, but they also acknowledged that "age" doesn't always match maturity. According to participants, there are 12 year olds who are effectively working in the program while there are 17-year-olds who are too immature. Generally speaking, however, participants agreed that twelve is too young/immature.

The group felt that Fridays should be reserved for older teens. There was some hope that if there were special nights for older teens it might attract more of them and that could result in a different, more mature environment. There was agreement that the way to attract older teens is to do the workshops, special events and activities that were discussed during the brainstorm.

Brainstorming Workshops, Activities and Special Events:

To explore the types of activities that teens would prefer, the group brainstormed possibilities and added them to a partial list of other choices. The facilitator asked them to select their top 12 favorite choices. There was collective groaning and complaining because they thought it was hard to limit their choices to 12 – and there was a great deal of enthusiasm about most of the activities and a general desire to do more. The following are the prioritized items (with the first being highest priority) followed by a brief list of options that were suggested, but not ranked as highest priority.

Top choices:

- 6 Videos: Making our own music videos
- 6 Cooking demonstrations and classes
- 6 Hip hop dance/break dancing
- 6 Belly dancing
- 5 Movie nights
- 4 Art classes
- 4 Self-defense classes
- 4 Fashion design
- 4 Parties
- 4 Sports competitions of any kind with the teens versus the staff
- 4 A summer water event with water balloons and other kind of games

Additional Activities which received 1-3 "votes":

- 3 Hair design
- 3 Salsa dancing
- 3 Karaoke nights
- 3 Creating a rhythm and stomp band – "beating the funk out of junk"
- 2 Fundraisers (i.e.: bake sales, car washes, sell things we make, guess how many condoms are in the bowl contest, etc.)
- 2 Ice cream eating contest (during the summer)
- 2 Sports tournaments with just the teens
- 2 Guitar jam – bring your guitar and play favorite songs, create new songs, play with others, or just enjoy the music
- 2 Learning about photography
- 2 Craft projects focused on holidays (like Valentine's Day or Christmas)
- 2 Sewing and/or quilting
- 1 Make-up lessons
- 1 Learning how to design web pages
- 1 Feasts and/or cook outs
- 1 Health workshops
- 1 Discussions about our relationships with boyfriends/girlfriends
- 1 Learning Sign Language
- 1 Creating journals and scrapbooks
- 1 Flower arranging
- 1 Crocheting and knitting
- 1 Job interviewing skills and practice
- 1 Stress management: meditation and self-hypnosis

Below are other activities that were suggested, but which did not receive priority ranking by the focus group participants.

- *Singing (note that Karaoke got three votes)*
- *Holyoke Idol singing competition (lots of initial enthusiasm for this concept, although it did not receive any votes)*
- *Other types of contests with prizes*
- *Free styling (with no swears)*
- *Wrestling and boxing (mentioned only by the one male participant with the girls at the table expressing concerns that people would be hurt and not agreeing with this option even being kept on the list)*

Considering Support Groups

The idea of support groups was not well-received at first. Almost everyone shook their heads no and said that no one would want to go to something like that. After discussion, there were comments like "people would think it was whack," "it's not interesting," "I just don't like the idea," "people would be embarrassed or shy and think that other people would think there was something wrong with them," "they might like it after they go but they wouldn't like the idea at first, you'd have to force them or bribe them with pizza or something." There was a brief conversation about how the Drop-In Center is about coming to chill, get advice and get help. Participants maintained that if someone is in trouble or needs advice, they can talk with someone on staff.

Focus group participants acknowledged that in a group a person might get more feedback than with a one-on-one situation, and they also felt it might be surprising to see that there are other people going through the same kinds of things they might be going through. But the bottom line was still that it would probably have to be something that people were bribed (at least) to attend in order to get it going.

Nurse Practitioner

Discussion focused on how she just sits in her office and never comes out. According to focus group participants, people aren't familiar with her and most people haven't even met her. There were a few comments about how people would probably go to her if they needed help with birth control. Although they agreed it might help to have a meeting to introduce her to everyone, the participants felt she should come out of her office and try to meet teens in the drop-in space – that she should introduce herself, hang out, try to get to know people and give them a chance to get to know her and feel comfortable with her.

Outreach Van

Outreach Van Observation

The Project PUERTA Outreach Van began operating on a regular basis, after considerable planning, in FY 2005. The evaluator observed this activity on two different days in the summer and the winter, in December 2004 and again in August 2005. Evaluation information for the van includes only data for FY 2005 because the van was not operating regularly prior to this time and corresponding data was not collected.

On both days, the evaluator felt that the van was easy to identify: it is painted to imitate a downtown street, is attractive and fun, and stands out from other buses and vans. While it does not blast its purpose (sex education or HIV/AIDS information), it is nevertheless easily distinguishable from other vehicles and can be spotted from a distance.

On both days observed, the van served as an effective outreach tool in terms of location and visitors. On the December date, the van spent several hours in the afternoon in the parking lot of the Holyoke High School. The van parked next to the sidewalk, within sight of the school's side entrance/exit (about 35 yards away). Slightly before school was released for the day, the van was stationed with its doors open and music on. The Project PUERTA staff person stayed outside the door to greet students coming out of school, and three Peer Leaders arrived shortly thereafter. The van's position was very effective:

1. It caught students as they were leaving school and later, as they were leaving sports and after-school activities.
2. Staff were able to see when students were leaving the school and position themselves outside of the van and/or approach students.
3. Students were able to check out the van as they walked by and enter if comfortable and/or interested. Students didn't have to go out of their way to visit.
4. It was a cold day and the van offered a warm spot for kids who were hanging out.

The visitors who entered the van made many positive comments about the music, the X-Box, and the candy, including "this is like a crib," "this is phat," "oh, snaps," and "I like this." Students recognized the van from seeing it in the neighborhoods. A lot of the people walking

by checked the van out; many peered in the window even after not giving the staff any recognition.

During the August observation, one staff person and six Peer Leaders staffed the van, which parked in a neighborhood in the flats of Holyoke, near a public housing development. The Peer Leaders set up a few small tables with board games alongside the van, turned up the music, and turned on the X-Box for video games. A bowl of condoms was in plain view, brochures were stocked, and signs with information for fall Drop-In Center hours & activities were displayed. It was a warm day, and the neighborhood was crowded with kids from 5-20 years of age, and the van caught their attention. In particular, a lot of younger kids (ages 5-10) stopped by and played video games on the X-Box. In addition, many 12-17 year olds wandered by, some stuck their head in, many exchanged at least a few words with the Peer Leaders sitting outside, and some recognized the van from its school-year visits to the high school parking lot. About every twenty minutes, groups of 2-3 Peer Leaders would take Drop-In Center flyers listing new fall hours and wander around the neighborhood, reaching out to the teens they saw, encouraging them to come in the fall, and making sure to mention the pool table.

Van staff were very effective at providing up-to-date resources, referrals and information. The van had stacks of abstinence brochures, how-to brochures on using condoms (male and female) and the pill, brochures on HIV and AIDS prevention and testing, and brochures for local resources, including Tapestry Health Services, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Western Massachusetts Center for Healthy Communities Resource Library. Brochures on local services (health care, literacy, teen activities, etc.) were available in both English and Spanish. A big bowl of candy contained colorful 2" x 3.5" cards with HIV/AIDS prevention information. The van also had a large bowl of assorted condoms. On both days, the evaluator witnessed both the Van Coordinator and the Peer Leaders giving out brochures, answering question about birth control and female condoms, and handing out/encouraging students to take condoms. They also encouraged all teens who came on the bus or were talking outside with the Peer Leaders to sign the log-in sheet and to take candy.

By its very public nature, the van was limited in its ability to assure sufficient privacy and confidentiality, although the vast majority of visitors to the van did not see this as a problem. Primarily, the outreach van is great at advertising the Drop-In Center and giving kids a fun place to stop by and become familiar with the program and community resources. Because the van is small and loud, due to the music, users who wanted information would talk with the Peer Leaders outside. Particularly in nicer weather, there is plenty of space outside the van, where staff and the Peer Leaders tend to spend their time, spacing themselves out and striking up conversations. In the van's casual atmosphere, some sex education did take place. For example, a Peer Leader explained that there is a female condom available, and, no, you don't need to see a doctor to get it, and yes, you can leave it in for 48 hours, go out dancing and still use it. These conversations were in reaction to a casual remark (in this case, "yeah, there's a female condom but you have to go to your doctor to get it"), rather than a direct question asked in hushed tones. Even in the winter, people who wanted confidentiality stood out in the cold (where the Peer Leaders spent a lot of their time), and came in to hang out. Most importantly, the positive tone of the interactions set the stage for continued – and more private – conversations and meetings in the future at the Drop-In Center.

On both days observed, the Van Coordinator and the Peer Leaders were friendly, welcoming and respectful. They all spent a lot of time outside the van talking to people they knew

(greeting with hugs, kisses, handshakes) as well as people they didn't know (explaining a little bit about the van, that they'll be sitting here every other Friday, that visitors can come in and play X-box or just hang out). On the December date, at the high school, the Van Coordinator, a man, spoke with young men walking by; he didn't greet any women he seemed to already know - those that he attempted to greet either smiled and kept walking, just shook their head no, or never made any eye contact, keeping their head turned as they walked by. At the high school, the Peer Leaders were much more successful in connecting with the girls walking by and encouraging many to take information about the van. They were also successful in getting some to come aboard, take condoms, take candy, and sign in. The Van Coordinator was not threatening or uncomfortable in any way; he was comfortable, relaxed, and respectful. In the case of three couples that were observed, the couple stopped, the young man talked with the Van Coordinator and took a brochure – the girl did not engage at all, and then they kept walking. At the summer observation, by the housing project, the Van Coordinator as well as the Peer Leaders chatted with little kids, youth, and moms, and they were all friendly, casual, and respectful.

On both days observed, the staff responded effectively to the specific needs of the van visitors. Any questions (e.g. about the vagina ring) or misstatements (e.g., the female condom conversation) were addressed openly and comfortably. Condoms were discussed (flavors, etc), games were played, music was on, and, in general, visitors were made to feel comfortable and welcome. A couple of visitors asked about other events, e.g. dances at the Drop-In Center, and the staff talked about what would be going on over the next couple of weeks. The van does a great job responding to the needs of youth in terms of having a comfortable, safe spot to visit and providing respectful interaction with youth and adults and an innovative outreach strategy.

During the August 2005 visit, the Van Coordinator mentioned that the van will not be conducting the same level of outreach in the future, due to staffing changes and the end of the Project PUERTA contract/funding. Among other changes to the Drop-In Center, the van will be used for transporting youth from their neighborhoods to Girls Inc. during the school year to increase the number of youth coming into the program on a regular basis.

Outreach Van Survey

The Outreach Van survey was administered to users during a one-week period in January 2005 and again in August 2005. Thirty-three users completed the survey in January, and twelve users completed the survey in August. Results from these two data collection periods have been combined.

Three-quarters of respondents (75%) had visited the van previously, and 11% were visiting the van for the first time. All but two respondents felt that the van was easy to find. Respondents gave various reasons for visiting the van, ranging from curiosity to wanting specific health information.

Why did you visit the van today?	
Reasons for Visiting Van	% of Respondents
I was curious	64%
I had heard about it	60%
I knew someone who worked on the Van	31%

I wanted information about HIV/AIDs	22%
I wanted info about drugs or alcohol	22%
I wanted condoms	16%
I wanted information or help for a friend	16%
I wanted info about birth control	13%
Other responses (games, people, music, curious)	13%
I needed help getting a doctor's appointment	0%

All but two of the respondents indicated that they received the help they were seeking, and 100% of respondents felt that staff were respectful and helpful. The vast majority (91%) also felt that they were able to get privacy and confidentiality; 100% of respondents indicated they would return to the van; and all but one said s/he would recommend it to a friend. In general, van users were extremely positive about this community resource.

Staff

Staff Survey

In July 2005, in anticipation of the end of the project year, staff were asked to complete a survey designed to capture their impressions about Project PUERTA's strengths and weaknesses, availability of resources, vision for the future, and impact of Project PUERTA on the Holyoke community. Eight staff completed the survey; a number of these staff members had joined Project PUERTA in the previous six months. In this section, some direct quotes are indicated in italics.

All eight staff members feel "good" or "extremely positive" about their work with Project PUERTA. In particular, staff said they feel best about:

- *Our leadership groups*
- *The outcome of most projects of Project PUERTA. Knowing that our youth are getting something out of the program.*
- *Working with the teens and getting to know them has been a terrific part of this job, the most rewarding part. I love how they respond to projects, and getting to know each one makes the hard work worth it.*
- *I liked when the different youth groups came together and worked well together.*
- *Getting to know the youth and their point of view in many aspects.*
- *I can honestly say we have made a difference in the 2½ years we've been at this Drop-In Center.*
- *The staff is great...working with them.*

When asked what bothers them the most, staff focused on issues related to the project coming to an end, including feeling that "there is no job for me to work with them," and that "the drop-in space is not a priority anymore." Several of the staff said they felt unclear about their role with the youth, and one talked about the collaborators being "burnt out with collaborating." As one staff person explained, "I'm still new and energized and usually shocked about the . . . collaborators." After glowing reports from staff and youth in the first two years of the program, this shift in attitude – apparently driven in large part by the project's uncertain future – was apparent.

Most staff feel that they have the appropriate tools and support to meet the needs of the teens that come to Project PUERTA, and five of the eight staff feel that their relationships with the other staff are supportive and collaborative. One indicated that "the relationships are somewhat negative," and two selected "the relationships are fair." In general, staff felt that relationships within Girls Inc. were very positive, but that the relationships with the Project PUERTA collaborators were more challenging.

All eight staff surveyed feel either good or extremely positive about the Youth Leadership Institute/Peer Leader program:

- *I feel like the Peer Leader program is positive. It helps the girls realize their strengths and weaknesses. I feel like the collaborators could take more ownership of the Youth Leadership Institute.*
- *Love the Peer Leadership program – it does wonders. But the Youth Leadership Institute...perhaps it's an idea that's run its course. There seems to be a lack of energy from teens and staff.*
- *Again – it would be nice to have better communication with collaborators.*

- *From what I understand, it is a positive place for Peer Leaders to get together to share their experiences and also learn.*

Staff felt somewhat more ambivalent about the Drop-In Center. In contrast to past years, where youth, staff, and Peer Leaders expressed a high level of enthusiasm for the Drop-In Center, FY 2005 saw a decrease in participation and interest. This reality was reflected in the staff survey comments:

- *We need to revive the Drop-In Center. We don't have participants. (Rarely, we have one or two).*
- *It's great space! I hope we're able to really get it running this summer like it has been in the past.*
- *It is a very loud place. The music is very sexual. The language is very bad. Example the cursing.*
- *It is a great place for youth to come together and get involved in the programming that is going on.*
- *I feel like it is a place where teens can hang out and be themselves. I also feel like we should always have food. It is a place where (clearly) teens feel very comfortable.*

Staff's feelings about the Outreach Van ranged from fair to extremely positive, with most feeling good or extremely positive:

- *I feel it is a nice positive vehicle that teens learned to recognize out in the community. It's known and that's what we wanted!*
- *I love the van; I think it's a wonderful and accessible tool for reaching more youth.*

When asked to share anything that has surprised them in the past year, several staff members noted the many changes that were made within the program, the drop in attendance at the Drop-In Center, and the poor behavior of the collaborators. One of the new staff members said, "I thought the Peer Leader program would be a little more chaotic but it's been running pretty smoothly."

When asked how Project PUERTA has made a difference in the lives of Holyoke's teens, all but one of the surveyed staff felt that the outcomes were positive. Staff explained that youth are more informed about high risk behavior, are making better/healthier choices, and have been given opportunities to meet other youth and envision a more meaningful future. As one staff person explained,

Project PUERTA does a lot of valuable education. I know these teens personally and they now think twice before having sex, doing drugs etc. We have a good message that we're giving/teaching these teens.

And another staff person wrote,

It has provided a place for youth to gather so that they are not on the street. In some cases, it has added a little more household income, with the Peer Leader position. Sum it up in one word - Responsibility.

When asked to comment on what they see the program looking like in one or two years, most of the staff surveyed felt that the program would be scaled back due to lack of funding. Several said that the work would continue with new funding: "With the experience that we have acquired from the past grant years, I see the programming stronger than ever. We know what works and what doesn't. All we need is to be picked up by someone, which I am confident we will." Most staff acknowledged that the program would change in some way:

I see the programs still running but in a different way. I think each of the collaborators will have strong Peer Leader programs separately, but we won't work together as much. It won't be necessarily better or worse, just different. For example, working with these collaborators is something we've always done, so maybe working with different collaborators is something we can look into doing.

Staff Interviews

Four key Project PUERTA staff members – Heidi Thomson (Associate Executive Director and Project PUERTA's first coordinator), Leah Ubersader (Peer Education Coordinator), Sarah Dunton (Director of Youth Development), and Anne Gonzales (Drop-In Center Coordinator) – were interviewed in the spring and summer of 2005. The purpose of the interviews, like the written staff survey, was to capture impressions about Project PUERTA's strengths and weaknesses over the past three years, availability of resources, vision for the future, and impact of Project PUERTA on youth and the Holyoke community. Some direct quotes are shown in italics.

Interviewed staff agreed that the impact of Project PUERTA on Holyoke teens has been significant. Staff talked about how teens are not only more knowledgeable about issues of sexuality, STD'S, HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse, but they also are able to educate others. As one staff person explained, "Seeing these girls and how different they are from average teens and how comfortable they are with these subjects is so impressive." Another staff person pointed to the impact of the outreach van, and how "people can come anonymously and get critical information." "Bringing groups together to represent all the neighborhoods of Holyoke" was cited as an invaluable aspect of the Youth Leadership Institute.

Several staff members talked about the importance of the project's youth development model and the void that will be left when Project PUERTA leaves. As one staff person acknowledged, "Project PUERTA has been like a home base for a couple hundred teens, at least. The Drop-In Center for over 500 teens has really created a headquarters, a safe space for teens to gather and to rally around different things affecting them. I feel that well over 1,500 unduplicated teens have been impacted by this program through the peer education, Youth Leadership Institute, van and other outreach activities."

Where before teens had no place to "hang out," the Drop-In Center became a regular gathering place for teens. Added one staff person, "Before our outreach van there was no mobile van reaching out to people who might have been intimidated by other efforts." According to staff, the statistics speak for themselves:

We've had a little over 150 teens from our four organizations go through the Youth Leadership Institute. All of those teens received comprehensive education on a variety of topics. Only 1 out of 150 people in the Youth Leadership Institute dropped out of school. Only 2 out of 130 got pregnant. If you know Holyoke statistics than you know that is really good! The case management that we've been able to provide has been extremely helpful in some of the girls' individual lives.

Another staff person remarked, "As far as drugs and alcohol education goes – in strengthening their self-esteem, knowledge of the future and resiliency - one of the outcomes has been increasing their ability to make positive choices about substances. I've always been impressed with the Peer Leader's determination to avoid substance abuse. I hear comments all the time about them taking stands and educating their friends and influencing their friends in a positive way as well." And another staff person concluded, "Participating in Project PUERTA changed

the lives of the girls and boys who participated in it. They've had a really rich experience and were able to source a sense of self that I don't think would have been defined otherwise."

Most of the interviewed staff felt that high staff turnover and transitions in FY 2005 presented a unique challenge for Peer Leaders and collaborators alike. As the current coordinator explained, "It was a little rocky leaving the program completely under the support staff and teen staff for several months before I came in. It led to a lack of clarity when I was hired." At the same time, the Peer Leaders were seen by staff as rising to the challenge of running the program in the absence of a paid coordinator.

With respect to the group of collaborators, staff continued to struggle in FY 2005 to find ways to encourage regular participation and equal commitment from all groups. One staff person described attempts to address some of these issues: "There was a meeting last year with the collaborating organizations where the group identified the need for all participants to commit to regular attendance at regular meetings and more short and long-range planning. Instead of getting stronger, it seems these areas got weaker during this third year." Different expectations on the part of different collaborators and the lack of basic supervisory values and priorities were seen as contributing factors. As one staff person explained,

The staffing of the collaborator's group has been a challenge to the very end of this process. We've learned a lot in this agency about what is reasonable in terms of expectations of collaborators, and the Youth Leadership Institute demands exceeded that. It would have been easier if we were following a curriculum, but they needed to put so much more time into it because we were creating it as we went forward.

Staff agreed that although the program may continue in some way in the future, it will undoubtedly change. Reduced staffing for the van and the high cost of liability insurance has changed that function from primarily outreach and education to transportation. And in other areas, Project PUERTA also has plans to modify programming. One staff person described the impact of the project coming to an end: "The girls are so deflated at the end of this project. They keep saying, 'What are we going to do, what are we going to do?' They're at that age when they need structured guidance and feel a little lost at sea – even those who have just started this year and changed so much."

The award of a small state grant is enabling Girls Inc. to maintain some staffing at the Drop-In Center, and the agency has plans to undertake renovations to revitalize and re-open the space. One staff person explained that "the Peer Leaders are not going to continue to be paid. Fortunately, some of our Peer Leader's self selected and agreed to participate without a stipend." Girls Inc. has submitted several grants to continue various aspects of the program, and, if awarded, some of the programs will be reinstated.

Although the collaborating group has presented challenges, staff agreed that some of the collaborating agencies were significantly, and positively, impacted by Project PUERTA. "I hear the collaborators talk about the collaboration being a wonderful change and experience," said one staff person. "Some of the organizations were really affected by this program – especially El Arco." Many of the agencies embraced the youth development model, and have been "inspired to structure their Peer Leader programs differently so they can do more peer education . . . we've been a role model for cross agency collaboration, and I see more of that happening in the community."

Several staff members acknowledged that the Drop-In Center needs to attract older teens, which some feel would have a direct impact on increasing Drop-In Center attendance generally: "Older teens are often either looking for a job, staying after school, might be more into sports or hanging out with a particular friend. Middle school is different so it plays out that the middle school teens come here frequently. When older teens come they see the younger teens and don't want to hang out." Staff observed that the Drop-In Center tends to attract more boys than girls, and several also feel that setting aside time for all-girls activities is important:

I was talking to another staff member about how I wish it had been started in reverse with everything for girls except for ONE co-ed day per week. That way the teens would have enjoyed co-ed days more and been more open to it being just girls the other days of the week. I think it would have been a better experience for the girls. When it is all girls, they learn more about themselves and don't just focus on the boys as much.

In responding to the inappropriate behavior, thefts, and vandalism, which proved to be a problem in FY 2005, staff tried a variety of tactics, and in the summer began holding "town meetings" for Drop-In Center youth and Peer Leaders. As one staff person explained, "We're continuing to have some trouble. I think the teens are so used to breaking things if they are mad or frustrated that they go ahead and break stuff here . . . The ones who were responsible for the vandalism didn't show up for the town meetings."

In FY 2005, in response to a FY 2004 evaluation recommendation to continue to work with Peer Leaders to more clearly communicate expectations in concrete and specific terms, Project PUERTA developed a Peer Leadership Handbook to encourage self-monitoring, convey rules and standards, explore leadership issues, and clarify Peer Leader responsibilities. The program also instituted "mandatory" volunteer hours. Together, these steps shifted the expectations of Peer Leaders and helped them better understand the purpose of Project PUERTA. As one staff person commented, "The Peer Leaders are doing fundraisers, they're doing a whole backpacking project for Katrina, and they've really been instilled with a sense of service." In the summer, the screening for Peer Leaders became more rigorous, and youth showed a stronger sense of commitment to the program. Said one staff person, "Everyone went through another review and application and some people we didn't hire back." As of May 2005, staff stopped using terminology which alluded to employment – such as paycheck and hourly wage, instead opting to refer to stipends and volunteering. According to one staff person, "I think that's made a big change in terms of Peer Leaders' expectations. They can't just show up for a few hours and then leave; they were enlisting in a bigger, more comprehensive program."

And staff fears that changing the paycheck to a monthly stipend would drive away some youth proved unfounded. As one staff person explained, "In fact the ones we lost were the ones who weren't that invested in the program itself - in the end it was only one or two girls that we lost."

In FY 2005, Peer Leaders' attitudes towards tutoring improved significantly. Although staff were unable to pinpoint any one reason for the shift in attitude, most agreed that a variety of factors contributed, including tracking and maintaining records on who was being tutored; transporting the teens offsite to the Holyoke campus; and infusing the program with monthly panels and motivating speeches from successful Latina women who sought higher education and became successful.

Community Collaboration

The evaluation team conducted a focus group with Project PUERTA collaborating partners, as well as individual interviews. The following highlights from the interviews and focus group are summarized in distinct sections.

Collaborators Focus Group

A focus group of Project PUERTA collaborators was convened towards the end of the project, in August 2005, to reflect on project impact, challenges, and benefits of the collaboration over the three-year project period. Focus group attendees included three Girls Inc. staff members, two El Arco staff members, and one representative from the Teen Resource Project (TRP). There was no representative from Nuestras Raices.

All the focus group participants agreed that the collaboration had been invaluable in giving youth a sense of community ("that they are not alone"), lessening competition between the agencies, creating unity within the community, and inspiring youth to get involved. As one collaborator explained, "The structure and cooperation we demonstrate serves as a role model for youth to learn to work together."

Collaborators all felt that Project PUERTA had been extremely successful in increasing youth involvement in the community; providing education and training to young people; and increasing Peer Leaders' knowledge about "difficult subjects like relationships, sexuality, drugs, alcohol, HIV and STD's, etc." Peer Leaders were seen as being less shy, more involved, and more committed.

When asked about challenges in bringing collaborators together on a regular basis, participants agreed that attendance and commitment "has gotten worse." One participant explained, "It's our main frustration." Collaborators felt that they had improved in setting agendas and doing long-term planning, but in terms of building relationships, the group conceded that this had happened only minimally:

It never happened. In order to work together you need to know each other. When you have personal connections and make that commitment to know each other, it makes you take your commitment to one another more seriously. But it has been frustrating and hard enough to just get the group together to focus on work.

**** When asked to assign a grade to their success in collaborating, all participants chimed in with "C." Some felt that communication among members has improved, although attendance continues to be a problem. Explained one collaborator, "When we meet, we work well together, adding our ideas and really participating in a way that shows we care about the work . . . when we are together it feels comfortable and everyone works cooperatively. Another member said, "This experience will definitely help future collaborations. This has been a great experience for my Peer Leaders." And despite the challenges, another member concluded, "Given all of the benefits we've seen, I'd love to collaborate again. I might do it somewhat differently to clarify what is expected of everyone, but that just means I'd go into it with more preparation."

Collaborators Interviews

The Project PUERTA evaluator conducted individual interviews with three project collaborators in July 2005. The interviews were designed to collect information about the collaborators' feelings about the project over the past three years.

One of the interviewees explained that s/he had not been at any of the collaborating meetings, but that s/he had received reports about Project PUERTA from the “larger youth task force.” Another described how the project had helped her not only work with teens in her program, but also interact more effectively with her own teenage daughter, who was involved in the program. According to this collaborator:

The responsibilities that come along with being a teen and the pressures [my daughter] endures are helped by being able to go to the Drop-In Center, be with other teens and be able to give back. The whole experience has made her more responsible. She’s matured so much over the past three years I have to catch myself and remind myself that she’s only 16. She’s just grown mentally. We communicate a lot, we don’t always see eye to eye, but we communicate well. The program has really helped her do that.

Interviewees agreed that Project PUERTA has increased participants’ knowledge about substance abuse and HIV-related high-risk behavior. “It’s in their face constantly and it’s made a huge difference,” explained one interviewee. “If it wasn’t there, a lot of girls would be in serious trouble.” In describing the impact on her daughter, one collaborator said, “The impact of learning so much about it has changed her completely. She doesn’t even consider using drugs. She tries to be a role model for her friends, she advises them in a positive way.” One collaborator described the impact on the broader community: “The four organizations that have been coordinating have been incredibly successful working with the kids in teaching them and having them teach others in the community. So they are key in passing along critical messages to other teens – teens listen to each other.” Keeping kids “busy” and giving them something to do was also cited as a concrete benefit of Project PUERTA, although according to the interviewees, the impact of the program was felt throughout the community: I do think that Project PUERTA has raised community awareness about substance abuse and HIV, now more than ever. Because of their outreach, because of the high profile of these four agencies in our community.”

One interviewee expressed the feeling that the collaborators are “very good at developing leadership among teens and walking the walk (not just talking the talk).” Tutoring, outreach, and education were all cited as benefits provided to the community. Interviewees described a number of critical, ongoing problems facing Holyoke’s teens, including lack of caring adults, HIV, teen pregnancy, drug addiction, heroin, crack cocaine, and gangs. As one interviewee explained, “Gangs are another huge issues – another way for kids to feel accepted and protected, but of course in a way that’s not effective or appropriate.”

When asked what other areas should be a focus for Girls Inc. and the collaborators, the interviewees cited several needs, including programming focused on employment (“helping teens find jobs and perhaps providing more jobs themselves like internships”), gang intervention, transportation, and continued tutoring programs (“It is critical for our teens to pass the MCAS in order to get their diploma. Transportation can also be a problem”).

The collaborators recognized that Girls Inc. is facing several challenges in terms of keeping the Drop-In Center open and running due to lost funding; reaching out to parents and engaging them in actively engaging with their children; and finding ways to expand programming for boys in the community.

When asked to compare Girls Inc. and Project PUERTA to other similar programs, collaborators gave high praise:

- *I think they have a lot of integrity. They're not just like a puppy mill and counting heads. They are really focused on quality, have amazing staff and they really have an impact on the girls they serve. They work to have the girls define what is important to them and within the guidelines of the grant, they involve them in programming.*
- *I have a lot of experience with community organizations and Girls Inc. can't really be compared to other agencies – they are very unique in what they do.*
- *I think that it's admirable that they've really been trying to put Latinas and other minorities into management positions, and they should continue to make that a priority.*
- *I am very, very thankful that my daughter has other people who will talk to her, listen to her and guide her in the right direction. I trust the people at Girls Inc.*
- *Keep the program going – it's so great!*

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In its three years of operation (with much of year one being devoted to start-up and planning), Project PUERTA has grown to be an integral and essential part of Holyoke's youth community. The evaluation found numerous ways that the program has influenced Peer Leaders, increasing their knowledge about high-risk behavior and building youth leadership in the community. Although CSAP's GPRA pre/post outcome information is not yet synthesized to supplement these evaluation findings, the evaluation's rich variety of qualitative and quantitative findings confirm that the program is meeting or exceeding most of its outcome objectives. Key findings are summarized below.

• *Increased Knowledge About High-Risk Behavior*

Project PUERTA has made measurable progress with respect to increasing participants' knowledge and attitudes towards high-risk behavior. In the surveys, interviews, group meetings, and other observed activities, the youth participants demonstrated strong positive attitudinal perspectives related to substance abuse, HIV-related issues and high-risk behavior. In addition, Peer Leader Surveys show a general increase in Peer Leader knowledge related to HIV/AIDS and STD's. At the same time, in all three years, some Peer Leaders didn't have all their facts straight: for example, in FY 2005, 19% think breast milk of an HIV-infected mom is safe (it's not); 34% don't realize that you can be HIV-positive and yet pass an HIV-test; and 15% think you can be cured of AIDS if you take your medicine.

During the training and meetings, youth received and conveyed clear messages in favor of safer sex, condom use, preventing sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, and against using illegal drugs. Participants seemed to consistently demonstrate these positive perspectives.

• *Perception of HIV/AIDS and Substance Abuse*

Most of the Peer Leaders were strongly influenced by their exposure to information about HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. Experienced Peer Leaders are more likely than new Peer Leaders to believe that the three most critical issues facing their community include drugs/alcohol, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy.

• *Prevention of High Risk Behaviors*

Overall, Peer Leaders engaged in high-risk behaviors at a level *significantly* lower than reported through health risk assessments for the general Holyoke and Massachusetts youth populations. For example, sporadic to heavy alcohol consumption by 9th grade high school students in Massachusetts was estimated in 2003 at 46%; for Project PUERTA, the percentage of Peer Leaders (including Peer Leaders in higher grade levels) consuming alcohol never exceeded 11% in any year, a significantly lower percentage than the 9th grade general Massachusetts population. Also, it is worth noting that although high-risk behaviors tend *to increase dramatically as teens age*, this pattern was not replicated among the Peer Leader group, which saw only slight changes in the few categories that showed an increase in high-risk behavior.

It is particularly impressive that during the three year project period, *only 1 out of 150 Peer Leaders dropped out of school, and only 2 out of 130 became pregnant*. This is an astonishing and encouraging figure, even more so when compared to the general population of Holyoke teens. According to Massachusetts Department of Education data

for Holyoke, 27% of Holyoke youth (40 out of every 150 students) dropped out of high school in the same three-year period. In addition, according to Massachusetts Department of Health data, 20.5% of Holyoke teen girls (27 of every 130 teen girls) became pregnant. Project PUERTA's outcomes are not only significantly better when compared to Holyoke's drop-out and teen pregnancy rates, but also when compared to comparable statewide data.

- ***Peer Leader Perception of Project PUERTA***

Peer Leaders believe in the program: 93% believe Project PUERTA can make a difference most of the time, and the other 7% believe it sometimes.

- ***Improvements in Attitude and Leadership Ability***

The most significant changes in the Peer Leaders during their time with Project PUERTA included improvements in attitude; stronger sense of leadership abilities and comfort in leading groups; and stronger sense of responsibility for others. Teens repeatedly credited the program with helping them make positive choices, develop leadership skills, and make a difference in the community. In addition, Peer Leaders self-report happy attitudes and stable mental health: they're proud of their accomplishments, are able to resolve conflict when it comes up, and are not often angry or lonely.

- ***Increased Opportunities for Positive Interaction with Peers & Healthy Lifestyle***

When asked to describe hobbies or things they like to do outside of school, the Peer Leaders gave a variety of responses. Participating in sports soared from the bottom of the list in FY 2003 to the number two spot in FY 2005. When asked to select the strengths of their community, the Peer Leaders were most likely to choose churches, schools/colleges, and youth programs.

- ***Peer Leaders' Perception of Self as Community Leaders & Perception of Girls***

The vast majority of Peer Leaders see themselves as leaders in their community and believe they can make a difference in their community. This percentage is higher among Peer Leaders who have been with the program for nine months or more. Over time, Peer Leaders showed improvements in attitude; stronger sense of leadership abilities and comfort in leading groups; and improved attitudes toward school and teachers.

In general, Peer Leaders engaged in less gender stereotyping over time. Characteristics commonly seen as typically "male" or "female" at the beginning of their time in the program, were more likely, after even a few months, to be seen as characteristics of either men or women.

- ***Goals, Dreams, Plans***

The vast majority of Peer Leaders are likely to have goals, dreams or plans for the future and to think that those goals are possible. In addition, most Peer Leaders believe they will graduate from school, plan to attend college or vocational school, and want to work after they finish

school. Involvement in the Peer Leader Institute tends to increase Peer Leaders' belief that they will graduate from school.

- ***Opportunities for Interpersonal Skill-Building***

Project PUERTA provides abundant opportunities for Peer Leaders to enhance their interpersonal skills and behaviors. Particularly for teens who come into the program with a degree of verbal skill, self-confidence and ability to take "risks" in group settings, there are wonderful opportunities to stretch, try out new leadership roles and responsibilities, and enhance interpersonal and group skills. Even many Peer Leaders who initially considered themselves shy or quiet eventually gained confidence in speaking up and contributing in group settings.

- ***Importance of Friendships/Relationships***

Connecting with friends, meeting friends, and participating in activities with friends were ongoing themes throughout the evaluation. Not surprisingly, many teens become acquainted with the Drop-In Center through a friend, and they value it as an opportunity to "hang out" with friends.

- ***Perception of Parents***

On every question but one, parents noted marked improvements and positive changes in Peer Leaders as a result of Project PUERTA. On that one question - "Does your child talk to you about his/her dreams, goals or plans for the future?" - 16% fewer parents felt that their child was doing this more, from 72% of parents in FY 2003 to 56% of parents in FY 2004. In addition, 16% of FY 2004 parents, compared to 5% in FY 2003, hoped for improvements in this area in the future.

In general, parents noted many beneficial changes. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of parents felt that their child was more able to accept criticism or feedback from other people; 78% of parents felt that their child accepted compliments and praise; and the vast majority (94%) felt that their child was able to resolve conflict when it came up. In fact, more parents saw an improvement in conflict resolution skills than in any other area. All the parents indicated that they would recommend the program to another parent in Holyoke.

- ***Project Collaboration***

Project PUERTA's collaborators agreed that the collaboration had been invaluable in giving youth a sense of community, lessening competition between the agencies, creating unity within the community, and inspiring youth to get involved. As one collaborator explained, "The structure and cooperation we demonstrate serves as a role model for youth to learn to work together." Collaborators all felt that Project PUERTA had been extremely successful in increasing youth involvement in the community; providing education and training to young people; and increasing the Peer Leaders' knowledge about "difficult subjects like relationships, sexuality, drugs, alcohol, HIV and STD's, etc." Peer Leaders were seen as being less shy, more involved, and more committed.

- ***Evaluation Design and Changes***

The evaluation provided a wealth of valuable quantitative and qualitative information about the Project PUERTA program, Peer Leaders, Drop-In Center participants, visitors to the van, and key stakeholders. The qualitative findings were thorough and rich with information and suggestions. Multiple data collection efforts, from interviews, to focus groups, to written surveys, corroborated findings in each area. The final evaluation year included a focus on examining relative outcomes for Peer Leaders who have been with the program for different lengths of time, and evaluation of the Outreach Van was also incorporated. Although pre/post GPRA results have yet to be synthesized for all three years, this additional input will eventually prove invaluable in providing additional quantitative pre/post data to assess impact.

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