

## **Focus groups with youth**

What's it like to be a teen  
in Knox County?:

### ***Results of focus groups with youth***

#### **Knox County Community Assessment**

Focus group project, Part 2: Youth aged 14 to 18 years old  
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## **Summary**

### ***Purpose, methods, and participant characteristics***

This report summarizes the results of four focus groups with teens aged 14 to 18 that were held in December 2004-May 2005.

Focus group participants were recruited through their schools and all groups were held during class periods. A total of 32 students from four schools participated: 1) Mount Vernon High School (MVHS) senior boys, 2) MVHS senior girls, 3) Alternative Center 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 4) Knox County Career Center 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The average age was 16.8 years old and about half were female (47%). Twenty-two percent said they received free or reduced-price lunches, a proxy for living in a low-income household. The majority of participants lived in Mount Vernon (72%), with remaining students representing various parts of the county.

### ***Community strengths and assets***

Students in all four groups agreed that Knox County is a fairly good place to raise a family. A consistent theme was that Knox County is a great place for young children, but not such a good place for middle school and high school-age teens. Many of the community strengths students identified are linked to the rural nature of the county, such as safety and friendly people. Overall, the community strengths that were most commonly mentioned among the four groups were:

- Good community for young children
- Friendly people and people looking out for each other
- Safety and low crime rate
- Good schools
- Some high-quality programs available for teens and families

### ***High-priority issues***

There was a great deal of overlap and consensus across the four groups in selecting top-priority topics. Overall, the issues that youth were most eager to talk about were:

- Lack of things to do
- Jobs and the economy
- Schools
- Transportation

Teen pregnancy and drunk driving also emerged as important issues that were mentioned in most of the groups.

### ***Unmet needs and suggestions for improvement***

Youth identified many unmet needs and provided several specific suggestions for improving the community. Overall, their highest-priority needs and suggestions were:

More activities and places for teens to spend their free time:

- Construct a new community center in Mount Vernon, including fitness and sports facilities, as well as other recreational activities, classes, an ice rink, and space for teens to hang out
- Offer inexpensive or free activities
- Increase the number of businesses that cater to teen interests, such as a dance club or concert venue, a shopping mall, arcade-style venues that offer a range of recreational activities (such as putt-putt golf, video games, paint ball, laser tag, ping-pong, etc.), more sit-down restaurants, and a discount movie theater

More high-paying jobs and access to employment:

- Retain college-educated Knox County youth by providing higher-paying jobs in the county
- Offer more hands-on job shadowing activities for youth
- Help Alternative Center students enter the job market by overcoming stigma and presenting positive future opportunities
- Facilitate and support part-time employment for young Career Center students

Better transportation options:

- Provide free driver's education classes in the schools
- Educate teens about how to obtain and maintain low-cost vehicles
- Improve road conditions and lower gas prices

Improve and expand programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy and drunk driving:

- Educate students about safer sex (condom use and birth control) in addition to abstinence
- Teach students strategies to avoid drunk driving and expand taxi service later into the night

Specific improvements to Mount Vernon High School:

- Make sure school policies (e.g., tardiness, open lunch, re-admission to sporting events, etc.) are realistic and developmentally-appropriate, and are carried out in a fair and consistent manner; avoid favoritism
- Promote class cohesion and school spirit (team building, fun senior class activities, pep rallies, etc.)
- Offer more life skills education covering a broad range of topics (personal finance, ethics, diversity, car maintenance, applying to college, etc.)

Specific improvements to the Alternative Center:

- Improve the food served at school
- Reconsider the universal drug-testing policy and other discipline policies such as "Nighttime Podville"
- Create an environment that emphasizes and supports education and learning opportunities instead of the "prison-like" punishment and behavior-control aspects of the school

### ***Barriers to getting help***

Cost and lack of transportation are the most obvious barriers teens face when they are trying to find “something to do” or “somewhere to hang out.” Many of the youth referred to how busy their parents are and that most parents work outside the home. This could mean that parents have less time to help their teenage children to solve problems, or to seek or get to activities or social services. Low levels of satisfaction with the mental health and substance abuse treatment providers may also deter some teens from seeking help with those types of problems. Certain aspects of adolescent development, such as the desire to seek independence and freedom and concerns about identity, may also deter youth from seeking help or participating in structured teen activities.

### ***Awareness of and satisfaction with existing resources***

Youth seemed to be aware of resources within their own schools, citing help from guidance counselors and teachers, and the existence of support programs and school-based activities. Most seemed to be aware of youth-serving agencies (such as the YMCA, church-sponsored teen centers, and 4-H), and of the mental health and substance abuse agencies (Moundbuilders Guidance Center and the Freedom Center). They were less familiar with resources that may be important as they transition into young adulthood, such as the Consumer Credit Counseling Service. A brief survey conducted at the end of each group indicated that most youth have Internet access at home (84%) and 81% said they had used the Internet to find information about recreational activities, health care, or social services.

Overall, students seemed fairly satisfied with their own schools, although they did offer specific suggestions on how they could be improved. Results of the brief survey indicated that students were generally satisfied with services they had received from United Way-funded agencies. The focus group discussions of the mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, however, revealed strongly negative attitudes towards those agencies.

# Introduction

## **Purpose**

Four focus groups were conducted with youth as part of the United Way of Knox County's 2004-05 community assessment.

The goals of these focus groups were to:

- Identify community strengths, needs, and unmet needs
- Prioritize needs
- Assess awareness of, satisfaction with, and barriers to existing services
- Hear from groups who may not be well-represented in the household survey or other research

## **Methods**

**Recruitment.** Focus group participants were recruited through their schools and all groups were held during class periods. Two groups were held at Mount Vernon High School (MVHS) with seniors in the Learn and Serve Senior Social Studies class, which is required of all seniors. All Career Center focus group participants were 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the Career-Based Intervention program which is designed for students who need a new opportunity in school and are hands-on learners. Alternative Center participants were recruited if they were in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade and were caught up on their course work. The Alternative Center and Career Center were chosen as recruitment sites because they draw students from throughout the county. Furthermore, the Alternative Center provided an opportunity to include at-risk youth. Students did not receive any remuneration for participating in the focus groups.

**Process.** The length of each focus group ranged from one hour and 10 minutes to one hour and 50 minutes. All sessions were tape recorded and notes were taken. Parental consent was obtained for each participant. A research consultant facilitated the two groups at MVHS, while the United Way Executive Director facilitated the remaining two groups with assistance from a volunteer.

## **Participant characteristics**

**Demographic characteristics.** Tables 43-45 display the demographic characteristics of the youth focus group participants. A total of 32 youth participated in four separate groups. The average age was 16.8 years old and students represented grades nine, ten, and twelve. About half were female (47%). Twenty-two percent said they received free or reduced-price lunches, a proxy for living in a low-income household. Half of the students said they get mostly As and Bs in school. Almost all of the students were white (97%) and the majority lived in Mount Vernon (72%), with remaining students representing various parts of the county.

**Group differences.** Students in the two MVHS groups were older than in the other groups because they were selected from senior classes. The Alternative Center group was the youngest, on average (15.4 years). The Alternative Center group also had the highest proportion of students who received free or reduced-price lunches (67%) and reported that they get mostly Cs and Ds in school (33%).

**Table 43: Demographic characteristics of youth focus group participants (n=32)**

	Total	Group 1: MVHS boys	Group 2: MVHS girls	Group 3: Alternative Center	Group 4: Career Center
Number of participants	<b>32</b>	9	10	9	4
Age (in years)					
Age range	<b>14-18</b>	17-18	17-18	14-16	16-17
Average age	<b>16.8</b>	17.4	17.5	15.4	16.3
Grade in school	<b>9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup></b>	12 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>
Percent female	<b>47%</b>	0%	100%	33%	50%
Receive free or reduced-price school lunches	<b>22%</b>	0%	10%	67%	0%
"What kind of grades do you usually get in school?"					
Mostly As and Bs	<b>50%</b>	56%	60%	11%	100%
Mostly Bs and Cs	<b>41%</b>	44%	40%	56%	0%
Mostly Cs and Ds	<b>9%</b>	0%	0%	33%	0%
Mostly Ds, Es, and Fs	<b>0%</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Youth Focus Group Participant Information form, 2004-05

**Table 44: Town of residence (n=32)**

Zip code/ Town	Percent (number)
Mount Vernon	72% (23)
Howard	9% (3)
Fredericktown	6% (2)
Other	6% (2)
Centerburg	3% (1)
Danville	3% (1)

Source: Youth Focus Group Participant Information form, 2004-05

**Table 45: Race/ethnicity (n=32)**

Race	Percent (number)
White	97% (31)
Black or African American	0% (0)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0% (0)
Asian or Pacific Islander	0% (0)
Other	3% (1)
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	0% (0)

Source: Youth Focus Group Participant Information form, 2004-05

## Community strengths and weaknesses

### Strengths

Students in all four groups agreed that Knox County is a fairly good place to raise a family. A consistent theme was that Knox County is a great place for young children, but not such a good place for middle school and high school-age teens. They argued that the “small town” atmosphere of the community nurtures younger children, but leaves older youth with “nothing to do:”

*“It’s a great place to live, like, in your younger years. I have always talked about getting out of Mount Vernon, but I think it is a good place to raise kids. It’s safe.”*

Several youth commented that people in Knox County are friendly and that people know each other and look out for each other. Safety and the low crime rate relative to larger cities like Columbus were also mentioned as strengths.

Each group mentioned positive things about their school as something they like about the community. The MVHS seniors praised their guidance counselors and teachers, and mostly agreed that they have gotten a good education at MVHS. Alternative Center students said they appreciated being able to work at their own pace and get personalized attention. Career Center students said they appreciated their teachers’ caring attitude toward students and the opportunity to engage in hands-on, job-related learning.

*“At the Career Center the teachers actually care about you. They actually give you the time. They actually care about your grades.”*

*“If you need help [Alternative Center staff are] right there, they’re working at your pace, working with you.”*

Some students also mentioned specific resources or programs as community strengths, including: school sports programs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, 4-H, parks and the bike trail, Food for the Hungry, Kenyon College and Mount Vernon Nazarene University, the YMCA, and some specific stores and restaurants.

### Weaknesses

Having “nothing to do” was the primary complaint about being a teenager in Knox County. This was a consistent theme in all four groups. Students complained that there are very few affordable, fun, structured activities for kids their age:

*“It sucks. It’s not very fun at all.”*

*“...The kids are just rumbling around doing absolutely nothing. They are home or whatever. Parents are at work working 8 to 5 jobs. It’s not like there is any sort of supervision.”*

*“I want a little more fast-paced environment [to live in after I graduate], maybe somewhere around Columbus.”*

The students were also concerned about the small number of good-paying jobs they would have to choose from if they decided to stay in Knox County. Not having enough restaurants, especially sit-down restaurants (other than fast food), and not having a mall were also common complaints.

Reflecting on the down-side of living in a rural community, some students said they felt “too sheltered” and that they had not been exposed to enough diversity. There was a sense that they were not prepared for the “real world.” Some students also emphasized that the small town culture of “everyone knowing everybody’s business” was a mixed blessing and that you have to be a member of a certain families or cliques in order to really succeed.

Other problems mentioned by the teens included: teen pregnancy, drunk driving, police conduct, alcohol and drug use, verbal bullying, poor road conditions, high gas prices, and concerns about specific health and social service providers (Knox Community Hospital, Moundbuilders Guidance Center, YMCA, and the Drug and Alcohol Freedom Center).

## **High-priority issues**

Each group identified their top two or three issues for more detailed discussion. There was a great deal of overlap and consensus across the four groups in selecting these topics. All four groups, for example, identified things to do (“stuff to do,” “nothing to do,” “hanging out”) as a major youth issue for Knox County. Overall, the issues that youth felt were most important to themselves and others their age, and that they were most eager to talk about were:

- Lack of things to do
- Jobs and the economy
- Schools
- Transportation

Three of the groups talked in-depth about jobs and economic opportunities. Students from MVHS and the Alternative Center identified issues at their schools as important topics, while the Career Center students focused on transportation issues.

## **Things to do**

### ***How teens spend their free time***

Students in all four groups said teens spend lots of time hanging out at each others’ houses, often watching TV, or movies or playing video games. They said that most parents work outside the home and are often not present. Bowling, the movie theater, stores, and fast food and pizza restaurants were frequently mentioned as places where

teens hang out. Some also listed parties, church groups, the roller-skating rink, the bike trail, parks, the skate park, the Mount Vernon town square, and school activities, such as sports games, dances, and clubs. The MVHS seniors said they often drive to Columbus, Newark, or Mansfield to go shopping, eat at restaurants, go to movies, or go to arcades or amusement parks (Magic Mountain, GameWorks, Dave and Buster's). Students in the Alternative Center group said they cannot afford to go to movies or restaurants, so they spend their time hanging out at friends' or siblings' houses, often playing video games or guitar:

*"If you have money, this town could be fun."*

*"In the country I can get drunk, have a bon fire... and I don't get in trouble. But if I did that in the city I would get in trouble."*

### **Problems with existing resources**

The students expressed concerns about some of the existing activities for youth in Knox County. Students argued that the YMCA is too expensive and one group complained that the YMCA Sports Center no longer offers open gym (December 2004). Bowling alleys were criticized for having too much cigarette smoke. Students in one group described the skating rink as a "drug hangout" and a place where bullies hang out. Banana Joe's dance club was mentioned by one group, but was seen as being too expensive. The Escape Zone was mentioned by two groups, and the Alternative Center students were also familiar with the Harbor and Mulberry Street Church teen centers. None of the students seemed to spend very much time at these centers, however, because they said their rules are too strict. Students in one group also commented that these centers attract teens who use drugs.

*"The only places to hang out are the Christian places, but they have rules... you go there and sit there and you're like 'wow, this is dumb.'.... The best one is probably Mulberry Street, but they are starting to have more rules."*

*"No offense, but [the Escape Zone] is run by a bunch of Christians and they are all uptight about everything."*

### **Unmet needs and desired resources**

Each focus group was asked to generate a "wish list" of activities they would like to have in Knox County. Students were also asked to generate ideas for a new community center. Overall, the teens were very excited about the idea of possibly having a new community center in Knox County. Indeed, when asked to vote for their favorite activity ideas, "recreation center/new community center" was the most popular choice. Table 46 lists the top-priority activities and facilities the students identified on their wish lists that were not specifically related to a community center. (Ideas for a new community center are listed in the next section.)

Students were also enthusiastic about having a dance club or concert venue for live music. Some students specified that this club should be only for teens, and others requested that it not have Christian music. A shopping mall, an arcade or amusement center such Magic Mountain or GameWorks, and paint ball/laser tag were also popular ideas.

**Table 46: Youth activities wish list**

Desired resource	Votes
Recreation center/new community center	12
Dance club/concert venue that's only for teens/ open club for music and dancing (one group specified "not Christian music")	10
Shopping mall (with a few nicer stores and a food court to hang out in)	8
Arcade/Putt-putt golf/GameWorks/Go-carts/Magic Mountain/ Amusement park	5
Paint ball/laser tag	4
Ice rink/hockey	2
Music store with instruments	2
\$1 movie theater/cheaper movie theater that doesn't show new movies	1
More restaurants (such as Olive Garden)	1
Coffee shop for teens/good hangout for teens	1
Outside activities/hiking/canoeing	1

Source: Youth focus group, 2004-05

### ***Vision for a youth-friendly community center***

The focus group facilitators invited the students to envision their “dream community center.” In some groups, the students had time to draw pictures of their ideal community center. The teens came up with a multitude of ideas for the kinds of activities a community center should provide, the types of facilities and amenities it should have, and other ideas such as who the center should serve and where it should be located.

The teens suggested the following activities:

- Fitness classes (dance, yoga, kickboxing, pilates, taeko)
- Crafts and other classes (cooking, art, crafts, cake decorating, sewing, scrapbooking)
- Ice skating, hockey, roller blading, skate boarding, and snow boarding
- Weight lifting/fitness machines
- Football, soccer, baseball, dodge ball, basketball
- Pool, air hockey, darts, ping pong
- Wrestling, boxing
- Track and field, jogging
- Racquetball and tennis
- Equestrian activities
- Golf
- Bowling
- Bingo
- Counseling on parenting, relationships, alcohol and drug problems, etc.

- Physical therapy
- Church/ spiritual activities
- Group/ team activities
- Go-carts, dirt bikes, four-wheelers
- Paint ball

Focus group participants said they would like the community center to have the following facilities and amenities:

- Healthy food court
- Swimming pool/indoor and outdoor pools with slides
- Water park/lazy river/play fountain/sprinkler park
- Internet café/coffee shop/lounge/ book store
- Video arcade
- Day care center
- Spa, sauna, massage, facials, hot tub
- Exercise machines and a teen-specific workout room/weight lifting/fitness equipment
- Open gym
- Library/study area
- Drive-in movie theater/movie theater
- Playground
- Ice skating and hockey rink
- Dance/music club area
- Theater for plays and performances
- Rock climbing wall
- Basketball courts
- Billiards room/hang-out area (pool tables, air hockey, ping pong, darts)
- Golf course/driving range/putt-putt course
- Indoor track around the top
- Football field
- Field turf
- Tennis courts
- Archery/gun range
- Skate park/ramps for skateboarding
- Nice locker rooms
- ATM/bank
- Teen novelty shop (such as Spencer's)
- Car shows and special events/ festivals
- Pond for fishing, swimming, canoeing
- Large TVs mounted around

Other aspects suggested by the youth included:

- Smoke-free or separate smoking room
- Open all night sometimes
- Safe and new, not run down
- Teen job placements

- Intergenerational (one group of students said an intergenerational center would be OK, but another group said they preferred to have a teen-only center and did not want to be bothered by younger children or seniors)
- Free (no cost)
- Located in Mount Vernon
- Refereeing and coaching jobs
- Hold summer gym classes there
- Services offered for low-income people
- Internet access
- Summer camps

## **Jobs and the economy**

Three of the four focus groups identified jobs and the economy as one of their top-priority issues. Opinions and concerns about future employment varied widely across the three groups, reflecting the different ages and economic backgrounds of each of the groups. The Alternative Center students, in particular, stood out for having particularly pessimistic views of the economy and their ability to get a good job in the future. More than half of the students in this group (67%) said they received free or reduced-price lunches, indicating that many of the students in this group came from low-income families and difficult economic conditions. The MVHS seniors, by contrast, were older than the students in the other focus groups, and many of them had plans to attend college.

### ***Employment concerns and awareness of existing resources***

***MVHS boys.*** The MVHS boys group talked a lot about how difficult it was to find high-paying jobs in Knox County. Several of these students planned to go to college and said that many Knox County young people who go off to college do not come back because they find higher-paying jobs elsewhere. They also pointed out that many adults who live in Knox County have to drive long distances to get to high-paying jobs:

*“Most [kids who go off to college] don’t [come back here] because the high-paying jobs aren’t necessarily in Mount Vernon.... You have to drive at least an hour to get to those high-paying jobs.”*

Several of the students said they worked during the summer and/or during the school year, and they indicated that it is fairly easy for teens to find low-paying, part-time jobs.

The MVHS boys were aware of programs at the Career Center and of Opportunity Knox, and cited their guidance counselors, KAP classes (Kenyon Academic Program), and the Learning Center (tutoring program) as additional ways to get help related to job training and career placement. They argued that the Career Center is an excellent resource for some students, but that it would not help them to get higher-paying jobs or to go to college:

*“The Career Center is great for getting a job right away in town, but the people that come to Rolls Royce [for higher-paying jobs] come from out of town.”*

Some suggested that the Career Center needs more space, better technology, and additional programs to keep up with emerging career fields. As for their own guidance counselors at MVHS, most argued that they are very helpful but that they needed a lower ratio of students per guidance counselor.

**Alternative Center students.** Alternative Center students did not mention any specific job-related resources. They were very pessimistic about their future employment opportunities. Many talked about how difficult it was to find a job and that they are often discriminated against by employers because they go to the Alternative Center. For example,

*“[Prospective employers] just harass you because you’re in the Alternative Center. They think you’re a bad kid.”*

*“Most people here get good grades. But even if you get good grades, if you say you’re from the Alternative Center you won’t get a job. I’ve tried so many times.”*

Most of these students did not seem to envision themselves going to college and perceived that they could not get a job—even a job at McDonald’s—without a college education. They cited transportation problems as a barrier to getting a job and said that MOTA is too slow to count on. The students expressed concern about the health problems and other risks associated with factory work or other forms of physical labor. When asked what kinds of work they would like to do, a few students mentioned joining the military, becoming a social worker, or going to the Career Center. Several other students, however, expressed frustration and cynicism about the range of opportunities they feel they have:

*“This is how it goes: sit on your butt all day and do nothing, like the people who have real easy jobs they make \$100 an hour and the people who break their back make like \$20 an hour.”*

*“Sell drugs. You can make like \$500 or \$600 a week. But if you work at like McDonald’s you only make like \$100 a week.... And [if you sell drugs] you don’t have to pay taxes, get a pay check, or go through the bank.”*

*“Get high.”*

While discussing the process of applying for jobs, students brought up the topic of the Alternative Center’s drug testing policy. Students felt strongly that it was not fair that all students have to get tested for drugs, even those who were not sent to the Alternative Center because of drug use. Less drug testing was the highest priority on their “jobs wish list” (see Table 47), possibly reflecting their concerns about the negative impact the Alternative Center’s reputation has upon their ability to get a job.

**Career Center students.** The Career Center students were more optimistic about their future employment prospects. Their discussion focused more on specific barriers to

employment, such as work permits and transportation, and suggestions for improving the Career Center. They said they had encountered burdensome application processes for jobs, such as required permits and testing, and legal restrictions on health-related jobs. They also argued that the Career Center should provide more education on life skills such as debt management, check books, and taxes.

The Career Center students did not mention any job-related resources aside from the Career Center. Most seemed to feel that their participation at the Career Center would help them to get a job. None of the students were familiar with MOTA.

### ***Unmet needs and desired resources***

Each group was asked to generate a “wish list” of job-related resources they would like to have in Knox County. There was little overlap across the three groups, so each wish list is presented separately in Table 47. These lists reflect the different kinds of unmet needs students of different age groups and economic backgrounds experience. As high school seniors—many of whom were college-bound—participants in the MVHS Boys group were most concerned with opportunities for high-paying jobs in Knox County. Alternative Center students were frustrated by their school’s negative reputation and their poor job prospects. Career Center students were eager to join the workforce and optimistic about their future prospects, but were frustrated by barriers they had encountered, largely due to their young age (10<sup>th</sup> grade).

**Table 47: Jobs and the economy wish list**

Desired resource	Votes
MVHS Boys	NA*
More higher-paying jobs and large corporations (bring college graduates back to Knox County by offering high-paying jobs)	NA
Improvements to the Career Center (more space, better technology, more programs)	NA
More guidance counselors at MVHS	NA
Alternative Center	
No drug testing for students who were not sent to the Alternative Center for drug use	8
More teacher/principal recommendations to employers	6
Driving school (free option in school, rewards system would cover cost)	3
Summer job shadowing opportunities with a mechanic or carpenter	1
Career Center	
Easier application process for jobs (no permits)	3
More jobs available for all ages (larger employers, more hands-on experience, more jobs for younger ages)	2
More life skills education (checkbooks, taxes, debt management)	2
Access to low-cost vehicles	1

\*MVHS Boys group did not vote.  
Source: Youth focus group, 2004-05

## **Schools (Mount Vernon High School and the Alternative Center)**

MVHS and Alternative Center students chose “school” as one of their high-priority topics and had lots of suggestions for improving their own schools.

### ***Satisfaction with school***

***MVHS Boys and Girls.*** MVHS seniors generally had positive things to say about their teachers and guidance counselors. They were less satisfied with the school’s administration, rules, and policies. Overall, they perceived the administration and its policies as being too restrictive and sometimes unfair. For example, both groups argued that students with good discipline records should be allowed to leave school for lunch. They argued that the current PASS program which allows students with good grades to have open lunch was unfair and that the privilege should be earned based on good behavior. The Boys group complained that rules at sporting events are too strict; students are not allowed to “even get halfway rowdy” and re-admission is not permitted. Some in the Girls group argued the dress code is not applied fairly. They said it is distracting when students dress very inappropriately, but that some students are “allowed to get away with it” and others are not. The Girls group was also very concerned about what they described as declining school spirit, poor class cohesion, and favoritism by teachers towards popular or wealthy students. For example,

*“If you are popular, or what-not, you can get away with wearing stuff. The teachers treat you different and that gets people to hate each other..... In school, money talks. If you have money, you can do whatever you want.”*

*“You have to be a certain kind of person to do Key Club. It is not just open to anyone.”*

Bullying was not seen as a widespread problem, although some students reported verbal harassment from fellow students.

***Alternative Center.*** The Alternative Center students identified their school as one of the positive aspects of their community. They said they appreciated being able to work at their own pace and get personalized attention. Overall, they seemed thankful that they had the option to attend the Alternative Center, but they also voiced many specific complaints about the rules, staff, food, and facilities. The students argued that they are treated like prisoners; they complained that they are: “surrounded by probation officers,” subjected to unfair random searches and drug tests, and served “prison food.” In addition, they said that staff were inconsistent in how and when they reward students for positive behavior. Finally, several students told stories of how they perceived that they had been treated unfairly by the police or had been judged unfairly because of the way they dressed. For example,

*“...If you wear baggy clothes, cops will stop you. They will follow you around. They’ll harass you.... People in this town judge you by the way you dress.”*

*“If you talk to the cops they don’t believe you.... You could be the Pope and they won’t believe you.”*

### ***Unmet needs, desired resources, and suggestions for improvement***

***MVHS Boys and Girls.*** Across the two MVHS focus groups, three prominent themes emerged from the discussions of school improvements, namely the need for: 1) more flexible and fair school policies, 2) improved class cohesion and school spirit, and 3) more classes, particularly in life skills and college preparation. Students called for more lenient policies regarding sporting events and school dances, and for new open lunch, tardiness, and dress code policies. Fairness seemed to be an important theme in these discussions. The Girls group, in particular, saw the need for more fun activities that would help the senior class have a greater sense of togetherness. Finally, several students from both groups suggested ideas for new courses. Additional life skills courses generated a great deal of interest and the students described a broad range of “life skills,” from personal finance, car maintenance, and computer classes to ethics and diversity. For example,

*“I think there are issues outside of education, like life skills, that you don’t learn in school. There is another world out there that most [kids] don’t know about, like loans and mortgages. And drugs, and drinking and driving, and morals/ethics. Kids don’t see it at school and parents don’t teach it at home.”*

Students also expressed a need for more courses for college-bound students, more assistance applying to colleges, and greater visibility of existing post-secondary resources. For example,

*“They should have more advertisements for post-secondary [Post-Secondary Options college credit program] because I know I am in post-secondary this year and I had to try really hard because nobody, even the counselors, knew about it. I had to keep going back to them [when I was trying to get enrolled].”*

Table 48 displays the most popular school improvement suggestions put forth by the MVHS boys and girls.

**Table 48: School improvements wish list: MVHS**

Desired resource	Votes
More leniency/new tardy policy/more freedom/better policies at sporting events, including re-admission	9
More assemblies and pep rallies; senior trip; team building; fun senior activities for the entire senior class	7
Open lunch—an earned opportunity	5
Mandatory life skills course covering ethics, diversity, financial issues, and car maintenance; should be a class every year of high school teaching etiquette and more on current issues (make Senior Social Studies longer)	5
More sports teams (lacrosse, hockey, etc.)	4
More help with college applications/another guidance counselor/class for college preparation	1
A dress code that is more strict	1
Better classrooms—better desks, paint, carpet, windows	1

Source: Youth focus group, 2004-05

**Alternative Center.** The Alternative Center students’ suggestions for improving their school (see Table 49) seemed to stem from their feeling that they are treated harshly and unfairly. By far the highest-priority suggestion was for better food, comparing their school food to “prison food.” They also called for an end to “nighttime Podville” (after-school time outs) and for more help from teachers.

**Table 49: School improvements wish list: Alternative Center**

Desired resource	Votes
Better food	11
No nighttime “Podville”	3
Teachers working with you, fun but following the rules; better equipped to teach subjects	2
Rewards (walks, music headset, less blame for the entire class if someone acts up)	1
Computers (lab and classroom)	1

Source: Youth focus group, 2004-05

## Transportation

Career Center students were concerned about poor road conditions and the high cost of buying and maintaining a vehicle. They saw transportation problems as a barrier to getting and keeping a job. None of the Career Center students were aware of MOTA. The Alternative Center students were aware of MOTA, but said it was too slow. The Alternative Center students also argued that driving school is too expensive (\$200) and suggested that driver’s education should be a free part of the school curriculum so that low-income students could obtain driver’s licenses and employment sooner.

## Teen pregnancy

None of the focus groups identified teen pregnancy as one of their top-priority issues. Nonetheless, it came up in other discussions in three of the groups and students indicated they feel teen pregnancy is a fairly significant problem in Knox County.

***Causes of teen pregnancy.*** Students in all three groups said they thought the “nothing to do” problem was one cause of teen pregnancy; kids get bored, hang out without adult supervision, and have sex:

*“[Teen pregnancy is caused by] all of the freedom our parents are giving us.”*

*“[Sex] gives you something to do.”*

Beyond that, students put forth a variety of theories about why teens get pregnant. A few students said that some teens simply think “it won’t happen to me” or mistakenly believe that you cannot get pregnant the first time you have sex. Some argued that there is not enough education about teen pregnancy, while others argued that the schools provide plenty of information and that some students just do not pay attention. Others pointed out that higher-achieving students generally do not get pregnant and that teens are more likely to get pregnant if they lack options for future education and employment:

*“It could just be a mentality in some people’s minds that they don’t have the spark to want to get out and make something of themselves. They don’t look at their future and see how good it could be. They are satisfied with where they are right now, and that’s fine.”*

*“Many [kids] work, but the ones who don’t are the ones who are getting pregnant.”*

*“...you don’t see a Valedictorian [getting pregnant].”*

***Suggestions for preventing teen pregnancy.*** For the most part, the students were critical of existing teen pregnancy prevention efforts in their schools, which appeared to be health presentations that emphasize abstinence. Students called for more education about safer sex practices (condom use and birth control) and warned that abstinence-only messages are not very effective for some teens. For example,

*“I don’t think [the existing health class] addresses the issues that make people want to go out and have sex. I think we should talk more about safe sex because there’s a lot of people that, well, there is some people that by ninth grade abstinence isn’t going to mean anything to them. And, if they already had sex, then they aren’t really going to listen to an abstinence class.”*

*“[Existing sex education classes are] basically saying ‘don’t have sex your entire life.’... They act like sex is going to kill you.”*

*“They need to talk about safe sex.... Tell you how to tell if someone has herpes.”*

## **Drunk driving and other substance abuse problems**

**Drunk driving.** The MVHS Girls group identified drunk driving as a major problem, while the Alternative Center group argued that it was not a widespread problem, perhaps because most of them were too young to drive (average age 15.5 years). The MVHS girls said that many teens drink and then have no way to get home, noting that the taxi service ends at 10:00 pm. They criticized their school's anti drunk driving program, saying that it just tried to scare kids but did not teach them strategies for changing their behavior. For example:

*"I think what our school does is they tell you [drinking and driving] is wrong, but they don't tell you how to fix it.*

*"I think [drinking and driving] is a big issue that no one really knows about. I know people do it, but a lot of people aren't getting caught. Once you do it once, you are going to do it again."*

*"If you are drunk and you don't have a way home, what are you supposed to do? Kids don't know what to do."*

**Drug and alcohol use.** Opinions varied on whether or not drug and alcohol use was a big problem among teens in Knox County. The Alternative Center students had a lengthy discussion about drug use and drug testing. Some of these students seemed very familiar with drug use and said that marijuana, alcohol, and crystal meth were the most popular drugs:

*"[Drugs are] hard to avoid. They just kind of follow you around."*

*"Meth is really big. Almost everyone I know does meth."*

**Cigarette smoking.** Tobacco use was only mentioned in the Alternative Center group, where some students identified themselves as smokers. They said that "everybody smokes," that "most teenagers think it's cool" to smoke, and that smoking helps to relieve stress.

## **When things get tough**

**Crisis help and resources for birth control and emotional concerns.** Three of the focus groups were asked, "What happens when there is an emergency or a crisis or you have a problem? Do you know of resources to call here in the community if you need help?" Many students were aware of Moundbuilders and the Freedom Center. Most comments about these two agencies were negative, especially among the Alternative Center students. The MVHS Boys group mentioned the "free place for STD testing on Sychar Road," referring to the Kno-Ho-Co family planning clinic, which they could not name. Some students said they talked to their parents if they had a problem, but others argued that "nobody talks to their parents." MVHS and Alternative Center students were aware

of anonymous sources of help at their schools (the School HelpLine at MVHS and the Bully Box at the Alternative Center), but most seemed to think that no one ever uses those resources. The Career Center group also listed teachers, family members, friends, school and service provider counselors, Department of Job and Family Services Children's Services, and DARE officers as sources of support.

***Youth problems not mentioned.*** It is important to note that there are several topics that are often thought of as "youth problems" that were not mentioned in the focus group discussions. For example, the students did not talk about violence or crime; gang violence and weapons in school were not mentioned. Dating violence and sexual abuse were also not mentioned, although the group format may have deterred students from discussing these sensitive issues. Eating disorders and obesity were also not mentioned. Cigarette smoking, depression, and suicide were briefly discussed, but were not regarded by the students as major or significant problems. The absence of or minimal interest in these topics indicate that they may not be prevalent problems in Knox County, or that teens simply do not perceive them to be significant problems.

## **Awareness and use of United Way member agencies**

***Awareness.*** Students were asked to complete the *United Way Agency Awareness and Satisfaction Survey*. Participants were asked a series of questions about each of the organizations funded by United Way of Knox County. Awareness of the programs varied widely, from 100% saying they had heard of the YMCA of Mount Vernon to only 10% recognizing the South Vernon Youth League (see Table 50). Overall, the majority of students were aware of the organizations that serve youth and families in Knox County (with the notable exception of the South Vernon Youth League). For example, most had heard of the Freedom Center (94%), Big Brothers/Big Sisters (84%), 4-H (88%), and Moundbuilders (77%). Fewer had heard of Consumer Credit Counseling Service (17%) or New Directions (57%); these resources are not generally thought of as youth-related, but may be important for young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood.

***Use.*** Students were also asked which programs they had actually used. Almost all (90%) said they had been to the YMCA, 39% had gotten help from the Salvation Army in Mount Vernon, and 35% had participated in 4-H (see Table 8). Twenty-one percent had obtained service at the Freedom Center and 17% reported experience with Moundbuilders.

Table 50: Awareness and use of United Way member organizations

United Way member organization	Have you ever heard of this organization?: Percent "yes"	Have you ever gotten help from this agency or participated in any of its activities?: Percent "yes"
Adult Day Care Center	33%	0%
Alcohol & Drug FREEDOM CENTER	94%	21%
The American Red Cross of Knox County	93%	32%
Arthritis Foundation - Knox County Branch	53%	0%
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Knox and Morrow Counties	84%	21%
Boy Scouts of America - Muskingum Valley Council	72%	18%
Compassionate Friends	17%	4%
Consumer Credit Counseling Service	17%	0%
Heart of Ohio Girl Scout Council	58%	4%
Hospice of Knox County	73%	7%
Knox County 4-H Center	88%	35%
Knox County Head Start	87%	22%
Mental Health Association of Knox Co.	29%	0%
Moundbuilders Guidance Center	77%	17%
New Directions: Domestic Abuse Shelter	57%	12%
The Salvation Army of Mount Vernon	94%	39%
The Salvation Army - Centerburg Service Unit	32%	4%
South Vernon Youth League	10%	0%
The Station Break	31%	12%
YMCA of Mount Vernon	100%	90%

Source: United Way Agency *Awareness and Satisfaction Survey*, Youth Focus Groups, 2004-05

### **Computer and Internet access**

Two questions about computer and Internet access were also included on the *Awareness and Satisfaction* survey to get a sense of how useful it would be to provide information to youth about activities and programs via web sites and email. Most students said they had a computer at home with Internet access (84%) and 81% said they had used the Internet to find information about recreational activities, health care, or social services (see Table 51).

Table 51: Computer and Internet access (n=32)

	Percent "Yes"
Have you ever used the Internet to find information about recreational activities, health care, or social services?	81%
Do you have a computer with Internet access in your home?	84%

Source: United Way Agency *Awareness and Satisfaction Survey*, Youth Focus Groups, 2004-05

## Discussion and conclusions

Community leaders have identified several research questions that need to be addressed by the 2004-05 community assessment. This discussion is designed to answer these overarching research questions using the results of the four youth focus groups and the *United Way Agency Awareness and Satisfaction Survey*.

**Question 1: What do youth need? What needs are already being met, and what are the unmet needs?**

Youth identified many unmet needs and provided several specific suggestions for improving the community. Overall, their highest-priority needs and suggestions were:

- More activities and places for teens to spend their free time
  - Construct a new community center in Mount Vernon, including fitness and sports facilities, as well as other recreational activities, classes, an ice rink, and space for teens to hang out
  - Offer inexpensive or free activities
  - Attract more businesses that cater to teen interests, such as a dance club or concert venue, a shopping mall, arcade-style venues that offer a range of recreational activities (such as putt-putt golf, video games, paint ball, laser tag, ping-pong, etc.), more sit-down restaurants, and a discount movie theater
- More high-paying jobs and access to employment
  - Retain college-educated Knox County youth by providing higher-paying jobs in the county
  - Offer more hands-on job shadowing activities for youth
  - Help Alternative Center students enter the job market by overcoming stigma and presenting positive future opportunities
  - Facilitate and support part-time employment for young Career Center students
- Better transportation options
  - Provide free driver's education classes in the schools
  - Educate teens about how to obtain and maintain low-cost vehicles
  - Improve road conditions and lower gas prices
- Specific improvements to Mount Vernon High School
  - Make sure school policies (e.g., tardiness, open lunch, re-admission to sporting events, etc.) are realistic and developmentally-appropriate, and are carried out in a fair and consistent manner; avoid favoritism
  - Promote class cohesion and school spirit (team building, fun senior class activities, pep rallies, etc.)
  - Offer more life skills education covering a broad range of topics (personal finance, ethics, diversity, car maintenance, applying to college, etc.)
- Specific improvements to the Alternative Center
  - Improve the food served at school
  - Reconsider the universal drug-testing policy and other discipline policies such as "Nighttime Podville"
  - Create an environment that emphasizes and supports education and learning opportunities instead of the "prison-like" punishment and behavior-control aspects of the school
- Improve and expand programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy and drunk driving

**Question 2: What assets do we already have to meet these needs, and which are most effective?**

Students were able to list a number of teen activities and “hang out” places in Knox County (mostly in Mount Vernon), such as the bowling alley, the movie theater, stores, restaurants, church-sponsored teen centers, the YMCA, the town square, the roller rink, and the bike trail. They also had complaints about most of these resources, however, such as: cost (movie theater, stores, restaurants, YMCA); cigarette smoke and “druggies” hanging out (bowling alley, roller rink); and, rules being too strict (church-sponsored teen centers).

The teens clearly view local businesses, such as those on Coshocton Avenue in Mount Vernon, as community assets. Knox County’s proximity to Columbus, Mansfield, and Newark was also mentioned as an asset, as some teens drive to those cities to go shopping, eat in restaurants, and hang out at arcade/amusement venues. Younger teens and lower-income teens, however, face considerable cost and transportation barriers to accessing these kinds of assets.

**Question 3: Where are there overlaps in service or duplicated services?**

The focus group results did not reveal any obvious overlaps or duplicated services. Students in one group mentioned that there are several programs related to teen pregnancy, although the overall consensus seemed to be that more could be done to prevent teen pregnancy. Students in another group listed several different teen centers sponsored by churches or the Salvation Army. The teens in these focus groups voiced complaints about these centers, but it is not clear from this research if they are duplicative.

**Question 4: Are youth aware of existing resources and do they know how to access them?**

Youth seemed to be aware of resources within their own schools, citing help from guidance counselors and teachers, and the existence of support programs and school-based activities. Most seemed to be aware of youth-serving agencies such as the YMCA of Mount Vernon, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, church-sponsored teen centers, 4-H, and the mental health and substance abuse agencies (Moundbuilders Guidance Center and the Freedom Center). The focus group discussions and the *Awareness and Satisfaction Survey* results, however, indicate that many youth may not know about the South Vernon Youth League, MOTA, the Kno-Ho-Co family planning clinic, Consumer Credit Counseling Service, and New Directions. These latter resources may be important as the youth transition into young adulthood.

The survey results indicate that most youth have access to the Internet and could receive information about teen activities and resources online. Eighty-four percent said they had a computer with Internet access at home and 81% said they had used the Internet to find information about recreational activities, health care, or social services.

**Question 5: What kinds of barriers do youth face when trying to get help?**

Cost and lack of transportation are the most obvious barriers teens face when they are trying to find “something to do” or “somewhere to hang out.” Many of the youth referred

to how busy their parents are and that most parents work outside the home. This could mean that parents have less time to help their teenage children to solve problems, or to seek or get to activities or social services. Low levels of satisfaction with the mental health and substance abuse treatment providers may also deter some teens from seeking help with those types of problems.

Although not explicitly addressed by youth in the focus group discussions, there are certain aspects of adolescent development that may prevent youth from using existing resources. Adolescents typically seek independence and freedom. While they need some parental attention and adult supervision, they dislike at restrictive rules and environments they feel are too structured. Adolescents are also extremely concerned about forming their own identity. They may therefore avoid activities or hang-out places that do not fit with their sense of identity.

#### **Question 6: How satisfied are youth with existing services?**

Needs assessment focus groups of this type are not necessarily the best way to assess customer satisfaction with a wide range of agencies. Students did comment about interactions they had with different services, but the facilitators did not ask consistent questions about the same set of agencies in each group.

Overall, students seemed fairly satisfied with their own schools, although they did offer specific suggestions on how they could be improved. Guidance counselors and teachers generally garnered positive remarks, while administrators and school policies did not. While many students said they liked the YMCA, most also complained that it was too expensive. Results of the *United Way Agency Awareness and Satisfaction Survey* indicated that students were generally satisfied with services they had received from United Way-funded agencies. The focus group discussions of Moundbuilders and the Freedom Center, however, revealed strongly negative attitudes towards those agencies.