

East Boston Youth Dialogues

What Eastie youth tell us when we listen

September 2018

Summary of Findings

What Eastie youth say about their health, happiness, safety, and sense of well-being

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Executive Summary

Major Findings

Youth report feeling generally happy, healthy, and safe

Why?

- They have friends and family here
- It's a tight knit neighborhood

"I am very lucky to live in the neighborhood that I live in"

Assets in the neighborhood:

- East Boston Neighborhood Health Center
- The weekly farmer's market
- The transportation system

Places where youth feel safe:

- Paris Street Gym
- East Boston Social Centers
- Maverick Landing Community Center
- The Greenway

Youth also report some caveats to their sense of happiness, health, and safety

Many youth reported that they were "mostly" but "not totally" happy and healthy. Others reported feeling "unsure" about their safety because crime and violence they've heard about. Larger social and political forces, like the cancellation of Temporary Protected Status for Central Americans is also causing anxiety.

"No place is totally safe."

Conditions that detract from happiness, health, and safety

- General cleanliness and aesthetics of the neighborhood
- Prevalence of homeless people, especially those living with addiction
- Gentrification and displacement, including rudeness from residents in the new developments

"We need more trash cans, dog poop bags, and neighborhood cleanups."

"We came home to a homeless person sleeping on our stoop."

"We were trying to welcome them but were turned away."

Gangs

- None reported participation in or relationship with gangs
- Some have witnessed gang members discourage youth from joining gang

Recommendations from the youth

Infrastructure

- More community centers or community spaces for young people to hang out or play sports
- More or more frequent farmers markets
- Public gardens with opportunities for community gardening

More inclusive community meetings

- Include youth, don't patronize them
- Provide food and child care
- Translation for non-English speakers
- Apply attendance at neighborhood meetings to community service graduation requirement

Community education

For everyone, especially youth

- Cooking classes
- Financial management
- Career exploration
- Supplement to school learning
- English language learning

For adults

- Climate change
- Gentrification
- "How to live in the US"
- History of East Boston
- Parent education
- Cross-cultural language learning

Youth jobs

- Make getting the work permit easier for East Boston youth
- More jobs are needed to accommodate the desire to work
- Provide the M7 MBTA pass to youth with summer jobs
- More employment options, including:
 - Regular street or harbor cleanups
 - Tutoring or mentoring
 - Trades apprenticeship
 - Working with children
 - Retail jobs
 - Health care settings

Reduce negative impacts of gentrification

- Need to control the cost of rents
- Increase the local control over development

More and better security

- More foot or bike patrolling, less car patrolling
- Regular reports on community interactions not related to crime

What do higher quality police officers look like?

- Minimize use of force
- Who know the community and the people who live in the community
- Attend regular trainings on bias and de-escalation

Summary of process

The goal of the Eastie Youth Dialogues Project was to gather information from and by youth about their perceptions and experiences with health, happiness, and safety in East Boston. Each dialogue was by a youth facilitator, who was a junior at East Boston High School, and an adult facilitator trained in difficult dialogues. The college student helped with one dialogue and the member checking workshops where participants reviewed our preliminary findings.

There were four dialogues structured on the Public Conversations Model. This is a very structured form of dialogue involving questions aimed at ascertaining perceptions and experiences as well as concrete suggestions for strengthening or improving the conditions and structures in the neighborhood to support youth health, happiness, and safety. One of the goals of the project was to determine whether this model would be effective in collecting information from youth in an efficient manner while also providing the opportunity for dialogue among the participants. The dialogues were conducted between January and May of 2018. They took place at Zumix, Maverick Landing, and the East Boston Social Centers.

4 Dialogues | 1 Member checking workshop | 1 Member checking interview

Summary of participants

Youth were recruited through a variety of mechanisms. The majority were participants in existing youth serving programs (e.g., Zumix or NOAH) or were regular attendees at community centers in East Boston. A total of 24 youth participated in the four dialogues. The vast majority of the youth were over the age of 15 at the time of the dialogue. Seven participants were female. In an effort to keep the conversations as informal as possible, we did not survey participants to obtain other demographic information. The majority were young people of color based on appearance or how they referred to themselves in conversation.

In addition, we held a member checking workshop in which one-quarter of the youth who participated in one of the original dialogues reviewed our findings and made suggestions on revision. A one-on-one interview with one additional participant was conducted to review and provide feedback on the written report.

24 Youth | 17 males & 7 females | Majority youth of color

Major themes

Happy, healthy, safe

The majority of the young people who participated in our dialogues reported feeling happy, healthy, and safe in the neighborhood. The primary driver for this satisfaction was having friends and family here. Youth stated that knowing lots of people in the neighborhood, and being known by lots of people, makes them feel safe. They describe East Boston as a tight knit community, which is what makes it safer than other places some of the youth have lived. One participant stated, “I am lucky to live in the neighborhood I live in.”

Youth described several neighborhood assets as also contributing to their health, happiness, and sense of safety. The East Boston Neighborhood Health Center was repeatedly pointed to as contributing to their health. The existence of a Farmer’s Market also came up several times. Some of the youth stated that the transportation system made it easy to get around the neighborhood as well as to rest of the city. A number of youth also pointed to the police officers that patrol the Massport owned parks as contributing to their sense of safety.

There were a number of places in the community that the youth named as being safe spaces. These included the East Boston Social Centers, the Paris Street Gym, the Maverick Landing community spaces, and the Greenway. The Social Centers and Paris Street came up most frequently as both safe places with activities for youth. Prior to the expansion of programming at Paris Street and the Social Centers, youth reported that there were very few places for them to go. The basketball court at both locations was reported as popular among the youth, with the Social Centers being the less crowded of the two. The youth at Maverick specifically cited the programs offered by the Maverick Landing Community Services as supporting their happiness and safety. One person stated “They are always there for you.”

but

While most of the youth reported mostly feeling happy, healthy, and safe, there was always a qualification to that sentiment. Some of the youth would say that “no place is totally safe.” Others would say that they are mostly safe. Some would say they feel safe but they are “unsure” because there is crime and violence that they’ve heard about. One participant shared

that he had been asked if he wanted to purchase drugs in Central Square while walking home from school, which made him feel less safe.

There were three conditions or structures that came up across the dialogues that can detract from a sense of happiness, health, and safety. First, youth pointed to problems with littering, general cleanliness, and aesthetics of the neighborhood. The need for more trash cans, dog poop bags, and neighborhood cleanups was a common complaint.

Second, many young people complained about the prevalence of homeless people in the neighborhood. Several youth reported being made uncomfortable specifically by homeless men who were asking for money. One young person stated that he feels like a bad person when he is asked for money outside of the store and then tells the person that he has no money. Another person reported that an inebriated person was found passed out on the steps to her family's house. Several youth across different dialogues mentioned that homeless men loitering while inebriated was a problem.

Finally, the gentrification and associated displacement also came up several times across the dialogues and the member checking workshop as detracting from their sense of happiness and safety. Overall, there was a very negative perception of the development happening around the waterfront. Whenever gentrification came up, youth reported knowing people who were forced to move because of rising rents. Youth also described disrespectful and rude interactions with the people who work or live in these new developments. For example, one young person described taking flyers about CommUnity Day to The Eddy, a new development next to Maverick Landing. The concierge refused to allow them to leave flyers for the residents at The Eddy in the common area and demanded that the young people leave. "We were trying to welcome them but were turned away."

The perception of health and safety is also related to larger social or political forces. Some youth reported having experienced changes in their health insurance causing them to go further away from the neighborhood to receive health care. Other youth pointed to the recent cancellation of the Temporary Protected Status program by President Trump as causing anxiety and causing a diminished sense of safety. In one case, a young person stated that he is lucky that his parents and siblings have green cards or are citizens but that other close family members do not and this makes him feel unsafe. Some of the youth reported the media as influencing their perceptions of health, happiness, and safety. It is unclear whether or what specific forms of media constitute the primary source of information.

Specific unsafe places and times named by the participants included the Urban Wild/Chelsea Creek, the Orient Heights projects, and the neighborhood late at night.

Gangs

Gang violence was the primary motivation for pursuing this project. One participant explicitly stated that he had not personally seen or heard of the gangs. He had heard friends who have had encounters they believed were related to gangs but he personally had no experience with them. This was the norm across most of the dialogues. None of the young people who participated in these dialogues reported gang involvement or having any kind of relationship with a gang member

Gangs were only discussed at any length in one dialogue. When it was discussed, the youth acknowledged knowing about the gangs and their dangers. Some of the young people would like to see fewer people in gangs because of the violence and drugs associated with them. At the same time, others also reported seeing gang members discourage young people from joining gangs. Youth did not name specific gangs in the neighborhood during these conversations other than to distinguish gangs in Maverick from gangs in Orient Heights. MS-13 did not come up in any of these conversations.

Solutions offered:

The young people participating in these dialogues offered many suggestions on ways to strengthen the ability of youth to be happy, healthy, and safe. Some of these could be seen as creating a certain type of infrastructure, including more community centers or community spaces for young people to hang out, spaces where they can play sports, more or more frequent farmers markets, and public gardens with opportunities for community gardening. However, across the dialogues, there were five main categories of recommendations that sparked the most conversation.

Community education

In general, youth stated that there needs to be more activities for young people. While sports, video gaming, and other recreational activities were mentioned, the youth mainly suggested various types of education-type activities. Educational topics included cooking

classes, financial management, and English language learning. In addition, youth suggested that community educational opportunities that supplemented what they were learning in school were desired. Specifically, the youth were interested in health related topics in order to explore the possibility of pursuing a health related career.

Youth suggested community education for adults as well. Topics for adult related community education included climate change and gentrification. In addition, they suggested that community education on “how to live in the US” was needed for immigrant community members, especially in relation to littering. They also suggested that residents who move into the new waterfront developments be afforded the opportunity to learn about the history and people of East Boston. Finally, opportunities for parents to learn how to talk with their kids came up in the discussion about violence in the neighborhood (see below).

For both youth and adults, the youth also recommended cross cultural language learning opportunities are needed. These are opportunities for English speakers and non-English speakers to teach each other their languages. This would also contribute to members of the community getting to know each other.

More inclusive community meetings

Participants also felt that youth were underutilized resources across the neighborhood. Several participants complained about the lack of integration of youth in community and in civic association meetings. Youth stated that they did not feel welcome themselves at these meetings. One participant stated that when she did attend civic association meetings, she felt that the adults were condescending. Another participant pointed out that many young people are responsible for caring for younger siblings or family members in the evenings when their parents were working making attending community meetings impossible unless child care and dinner was made available. One participant stated that the meetings are not really worth their time. Youth might be more interested in attending if the meetings were held right after school or if attending neighborhood association or other community meetings could apply to the community service graduation requirements at East Boston High School.

In addition, the youth stated that community meetings were not accessible to their parents or other adults in their social or family network. They pointed out that the meetings were generally held during times when their parents or other adults are working. Moreover, the lack of

translation made it impossible for non-English speakers to attend and contributed to the perception that non-English speakers were not welcome.

In addition, the youth argued that gentrification needs to be a constant and high priority discussion at neighborhood association meetings. “This needs to be the main thing talked about” until the problem with displacement and overcrowding is addressed.

Youth jobs

Youth jobs was an important topic for the youth, especially during the member checking workshop. Many of the youth stated that finding and getting jobs aimed at youth should be made easier. There were two main barriers to youth employment discussed: the difficulty in getting a work permit and the lack of available jobs. The young people reported receiving conflicting or confusing information about where and how to obtain work permits. In addition, there are only a few locations, called Welcome Centers by the Boston Public Schools, where work permits can be obtained, and they all operate under limited hours. The East Boston Welcome Center was closed for most of the summer in 2018. The lack of Welcome Centers to support East Boston youth was widely criticized as unfair.

Youth also complained about the lack of available jobs. Youth reported that they and their friends were often unable to get jobs or that it takes as long as a year to be hired. Youth also need more employment options than are currently being afforded to them. There were two types of suggestions for youth jobs. The first were jobs that are aimed at improvement the community. These included paying young people to do regular street or harbor cleanups, tutoring, or mentoring.

The second are jobs aimed at exploring longer term work or career possibilities. One participant is a trainee in a computer network infrastructure training program at the East Boston Social Centers. Those who successfully complete the training will have the opportunity to sit for a computer networking certification test and assistance with job placement after passing this test. Other suggestions included placement in trades apprenticeship programs or in a health care setting where they can learn about health careers. In addition to these, youth would like more opportunities to work with children.

The lack of affordable transportation during the summer was a barrier brought up during the member checking workshop. Students are provided with an M7 MBTA pass during the school year. However, the pass is not available during July or August forcing young people to pay for

their transportation out of pocket. The youth recommend that M7 MBTA passes be available for youth who have summer jobs.

Reduce negative impacts of gentrification

Gentrification was widely seen as having a significantly negative impact on the health, happiness, safety, and general well-being of the youth in East Boston. There were repeated stories of people being displaced when their building was purchased and rents were raised. There were also stories of multiple families sharing apartments in order to afford the rent. Participants reported losing friends who had to move because of increases in rents.

The youth emphasized the need to control the cost of rents as well as increase the local control over development in the neighborhood. Youth also suggested that more effort be put into remodeling existing housing – and maintaining affordable rents – instead of new development that current residents cannot afford. This was mentioned as being especially needed in the Eagle Hill section of the neighborhood.

More and better security

One of the most surprising findings was the repeated suggestion that there needs to be more and better police patrolling the neighborhood. Youth frequently pointed to the police officers that patrol the Massport owned parks as making them feel safe. More police officers and higher quality officers patrolling on foot were recommended by several youth as potentially contributing to an increased perception of safety. While youth did describe police as often behaving in intimidating ways (e.g., having their hands on their guns when they talk with you), more police officers were still widely seen as being better. In addition to more police, youth also stated the need for a neighborhood watch, or possible greater youth integration into the neighborhood watch system.

During the member checking workshop and interview, we explored the desire for more police in greater depth. The youth provided concrete recommendations on what kind of police personnel they would like to see. They want officers who do not use force except as an absolute last resort. They want police officers who know the community and the people who live in the community. They suggested that police officers regularly undergo training related to bias. Finally, they stated that the police need to learn how to talk with people who are angry about what they see happening to young people of color and are anxious about interacting with police.

In short, police need to come to know the community, learn to manage their biases, and learn to deescalate tensions when interacting with community members, especially youth.

In addition, one participant suggested that the police regularly report to the community how they are engaging with the community outside of responding to 911 calls. Specifically, the police should report not simply how much or little crime has occurred but what specifically they have done to help people in need (including but not limited to intervening where there is abuse), where they have patrolled on foot, and who they have spoken with on their patrols.

Of Note

It is interesting to note that when we asked youth about their perceptions of their health, happiness, and safety, they frequently differentiated between their personal experience and their perception of the wider community. The majority of respondents reported personally feeling happy, healthy, and safe. However, they had heard about attacks, muggings, and violence. One young person explicitly acknowledged that “the news” will make him feel unsafe. This raises the question about whether media presentations or word of mouth reports of things happening the neighborhood have undue influence on their perceptions of the neighborhood.

We explored the sources of information about neighborhood crime and violence in greater depth during the member checking workshop. Youth reported that they first hear about violent incidents in the neighborhood from other youth via word of mouth or social media (specifically neighborhood groups on Facebook). Sometimes they hear about these incidents from their parents or other adults in their lives or from broadcast news sources before their peers, but mostly the information comes from peers first.

Of particular interest, the youth reported that their parents appear to be uncomfortable with talking with them about the violence in the neighborhood. From their perspective, their parents appear to be afraid to talk about crime and violence. They stated that they would like to be able to have honest conversations with their parents about neighborhood crime and violence but they feel like their parents might need to learn how to have these discussion even when they are uncomfortable.

Youth also noted that the places in the neighborhood that they perceive as “better” or “nicer” are places where the residents have “local control.” Some youth were adamant that residents should have more control over development and other decisions about the neighborhood than most currently do.

Lessons Learned

We found that the structure of the Public Conversations Model worked really well for the majority of the participants. Environmental factors, such as the room structure also influenced the level of dialogue between participants.

Our targeted age range was 15-20 years of age. We did have one dialogue that included four 14 year olds. We found that this model does not work for younger male participants. Male participants who were 14 years old were unable to focus on the conversation in the group setting, at least not in gender mixed company. It is possible that a male only dialogue with younger participants would be constructive. It is also possible that obtaining this information from younger males would be more efficient in a one-on-one interview rather than in a group setting. Younger females, however, were able to participate constructively.

This project was motivated by several incidents of gang violence in 2016. The original aim was to target youth who were not already connected to youth serving institutions or programs. It was our view that these are the youth who are most at risk for lower levels of happiness, poor health, and violence (especially gang related recruiting and violence). We were unfortunately unsuccessful in recruiting very many of these kinds of youth in these dialogues. The \$20 remuneration was not sufficient to incentivize youth who were not already part of an existing program or organization. It is not clear at this time what would be a sufficient incentive to successfully recruit the target population.

We have no reason to believe that the perceptions and experiences reported here are uncommon among youth in East Boston. However, it remains to be seen whether youth who are disconnected from youth serving programs have different perceptions or experiences pertaining to their health, happiness, and safety.

It also remains to be seen whether disconnected youth have either more experience with or more to say about gangs in the neighborhood. If they do have different experiences or perceptions, this would likely lead to different suggestions for ways to create the conditions for health, happiness, and safety. Because we were unable to recruit youth unconnected to youth serving programs, we believe that caution is warranted specifically around the perception that more police is better. We suspect that youth who are less connected to existing youth serving programs or agencies may have different experiences or perceptions of law enforcement.