

Delegation on Disconnected and Violent Youth

Understanding Challenges Facing our Youth

Dane County is changing rapidly, and the evidence is most obvious among our youth. There are 72,000 school-aged youth that live in Dane County, and we have found that many of these youth, following a national trend, feel disconnected from the strong educational, cultural, and economic infrastructure that this community has to offer.

As a group, the 72,000 school aged children that live throughout Dane County make up about 15% of the population. As individuals, each youth is vital and dynamic. Issues affecting our youth affect all of us.

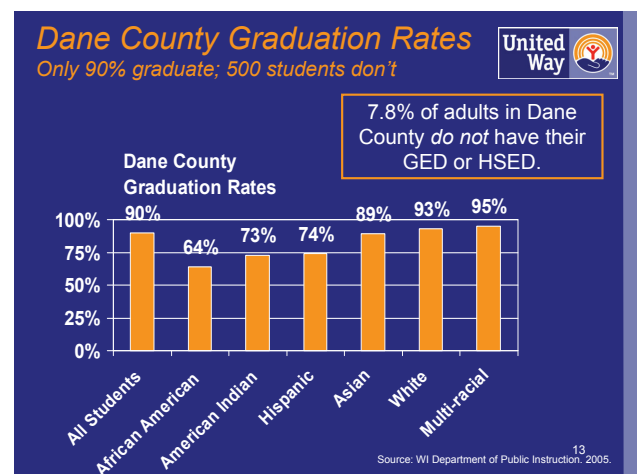
Acting out and increasingly destructive or violent behavior are often seen in youth who are not connecting with adults, achieving academically, or on track to graduate from high school. Their lack of skills, coupled with poor educational attainment and a myriad of other barriers are often predictors of a future inability to earn a sufficient wage that will sustain them above the poverty level. These barriers also often lead to incarceration.

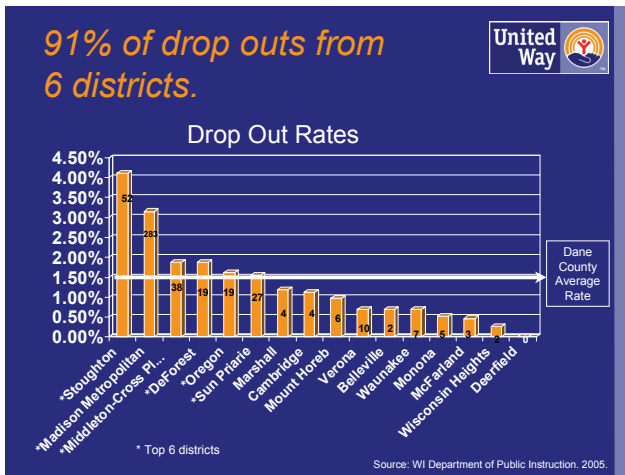
reducing violence, student achievement and access to health care. To help keep our youth connected to school and prepare them for self sufficiency, in March 2007, we convened a cross-Agenda delegation to tackle the root causes of youth disconnection.

Co-chaired by Corey Chambas, President and CEO of First Business Bank, and Darrell Bazzell, Vice Chair of Administration of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, this group of 40 community leaders brings expertise and experience relating to disconnected youth in four key areas:

- Youth Crime
- Employment
- Education
- Mental Health

The Delegation is midway in its process of gathering data, evaluating strategies and making recommendations community action. This report contains their initial findings, which define the problem.





increasing; more people are leaving the workforce than are entering into the workforce.

- 22.3% of the Dane County workforce over 25 years of age only has their high school diploma. Yet the demand for skilled workers continues to increase.
- Young people need basic skill training and stronger programs to help them succeed.

The remainder of this report will highlight learning from our four key areas of focus: Youth Crime, Education, Employment and Mental Health.

Scope and Dimension of Youth Connectedness

Research tells us that mental and emotional disconnection begins in middle school. An emotional disconnection often manifests outwardly in a physical disconnection. This typically begins with increased absences and leads to habitual truancy, acting out, rebelliousness demonstrated by violence, and finally dropping out of school all together. As we compare data from several sources, we estimate that there are around 3,000 school-aged youth in Dane County who are disconnected from school, fitting somewhere on the above spectrum.

Despite efforts to re-engage youth through alternative educational programming, there are still about 500 youth in Dane County that don't graduate every year. Without a high school degree, these young people find themselves in a revolving door of unskilled, low-paid and non-benefited jobs.

Why our youth matter:

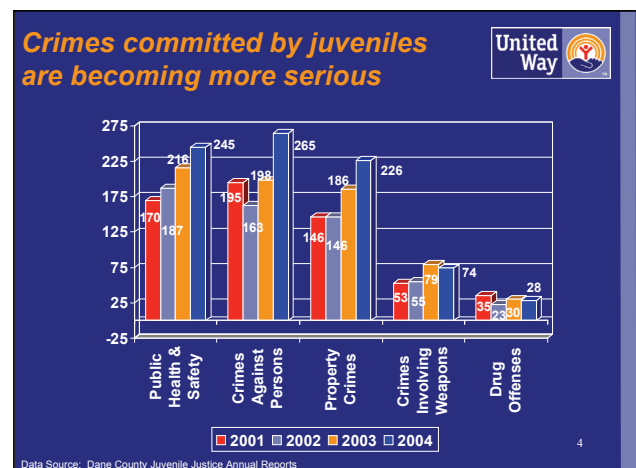
- When Dane County is safer for our youth, it is safer for all of us; unfortunately, juvenile arrests in Dane County increased dramatically from 2003 to 2004, with the types of crimes committed becoming more violent.
- Dane County has over 32% of its workforce between the ages of 10 and 29, with the number of people "aging out" of the workforce considerably

Crime and Juvenile Justice

Youth crime in Dane County is increasing at almost double the rate of adult crime. Most youth become involved with the justice system between the ages of 13 and 17.

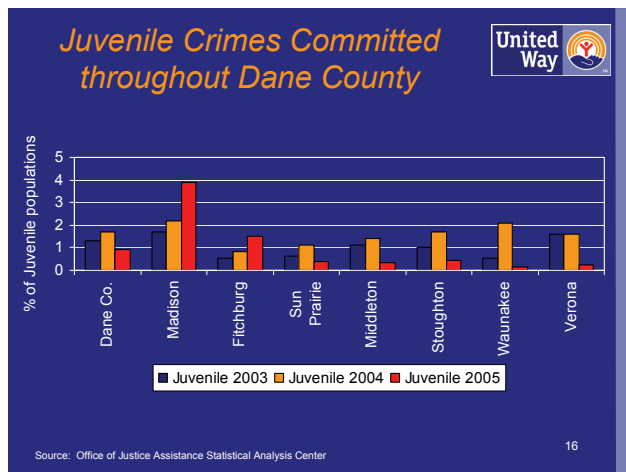
Among local youth, property crimes, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest offenses have increased in recent years while drug crimes have decreased. Also of note, there has been an increase in the number of violent crimes that are being committed by females with crimes of aggression up 53% over the past 10 years.

There over 500 youth in the Dane County justice system. African Americans are represented at a higher rate than their counterparts.



Youth heavily involved in juvenile justice miss critical opportunities to prepare for post-secondary education, skill development and employment opportunities. Juvenile offenders who do graduate from High School have lower levels of literacy and math skills, making it difficult to compete in an already tight employment market.

Youth who've become involved in the justice system have greater difficulty in finding meaningful – or any – work experience. An inability to find work creates more opportunity for crime or violence.



Youth violence is considered a national public health problem by such prominent authorities as the US Surgeon General, National Institutes of Health, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Family Physicians, USDHHS Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Rand Corporation.

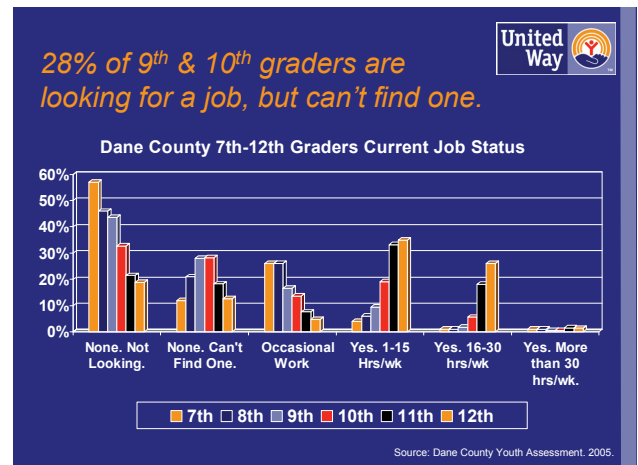
Employment

Dane County is fortunate to have an unemployment rate of only 3.8%. The Baby Boomer generation is beginning to retire, making employment opportunities available for a new generation. However, many youth are lacking the skills needed to find and sustain employment.

The Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) reports that as our workforce “ages-out” they cannot be replaced by the youth who are entering the workforce without a high school degree or the necessary job skills¹. These barriers to the future workforce are threatening to Dane County’s economic viability. The industries most likely to need skilled workforce are healthcare, biotechnology, construction trades and manufacturing.

Youth violence extends outside the parameters of the justice system. In our broad definition, youth violence can include:

- aggressive behaviors
 - verbal abuse
 - bullying
 - hitting
 - slapping
 - fist fighting
- serious acts
 - aggravated assault
 - robbery
 - rape
 - homicide
- more silent behaviors
 - drinking
 - drug use
 - becoming disengaged
 - dropping out of school



According to the Dane County Youth Survey, 28% of Dane County youth in grades 9 and 10 who would like to have a job were unable to find

¹ “The State of Working Wisconsin 2006,” The Center on Wisconsin Strategy.

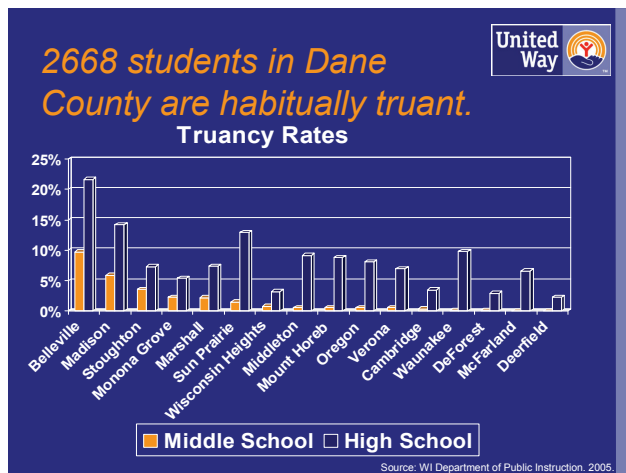
one. Delegation members have discussed the need for internships available to youth throughout the year that will give them exposure and skills needed to find and retain employment. Since Dane County is experiencing a growth in technical jobs, providing our youth with internships or other job exploration opportunities beginning in middle school will help them gain knowledge and skills in this area. The earlier career exploration and job readiness begins, the better.

Youth and adults have told the delegation that they would like the communities help in learning how to write a resume and practice doing interviews.

Education

Youth suffer isolation in different ways – some act out through violence, some give up on academic success, and some simply stop attending school.

The delegation has identified habitual truancy² as a strong predictor to dropping out of school. In 2005, 2,668 Dane County youth were habitually truant.

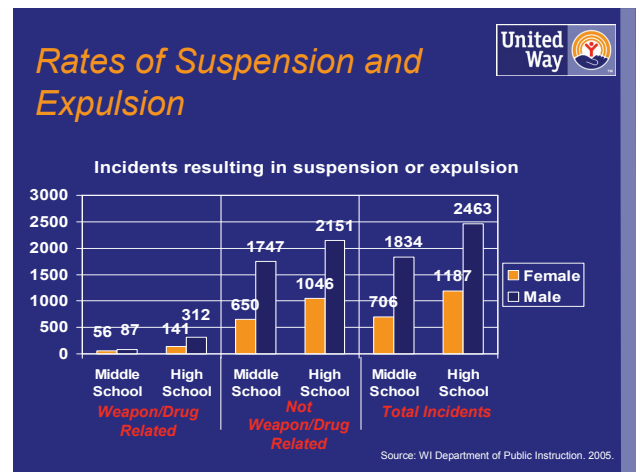


Beginning in 6th grade we begin to see youth mentally and emotionally disconnect. This

² An habitual truant is defined by Wisconsin Statute 118.16 as a pupil who is absent for part or all of five or more days during a semester.

emotional disconnection first manifests itself physically through skipping classes, and can quickly move to habitual truancy and then to completely dropping out in high school. High schools are increasingly seeing mental health and substance abuse issues in students who are habitually truant.

Parental involvement is a key component to a child's academic success. Students who lack a connection at home and school tend to slip through the cracks or become involved in risky behaviors. These youth are often associated with behavior such as experimenting with alcohol and drug usage, which may lead to suspension or expulsion.

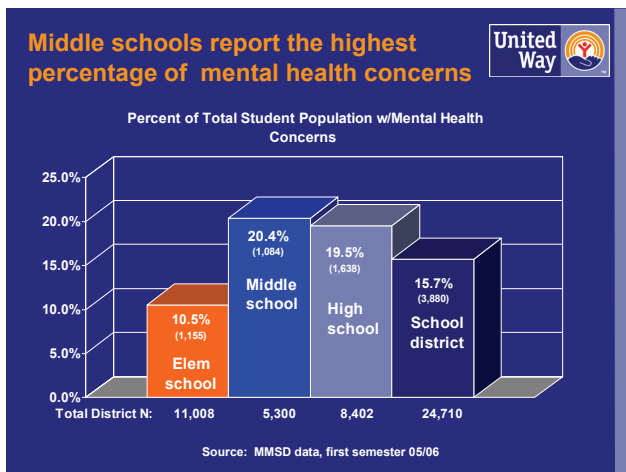
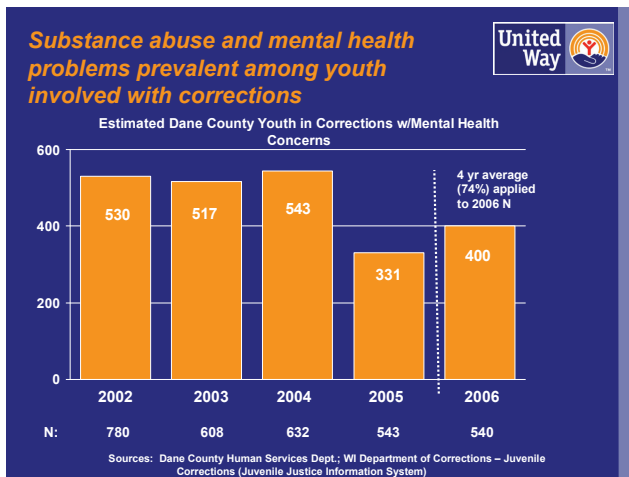


Alternative Schools

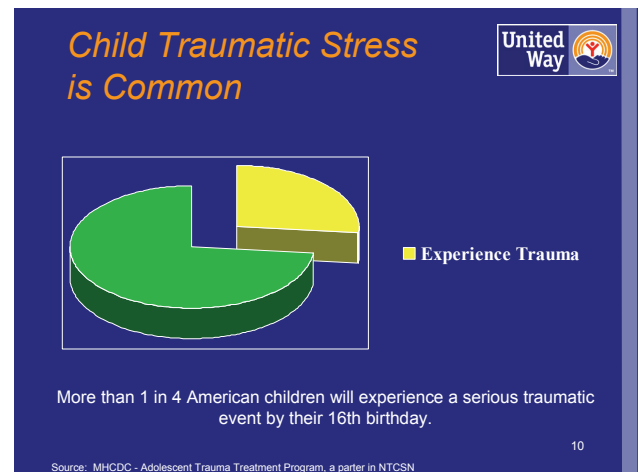
Efforts to keep youth engaged include placing youth in alternative school programming. Most alternative schools offer a combination of classroom time, field trips and service learning experiences. Many youth find the alternative school setting easier to "fit in." Alternative classrooms are much smaller than typical high school classrooms, and students have more one-on-one time with the teachers. The smaller student/teacher ratio can provide great benefits to students who are seeking an adult role model with whom to connect. Dane County offers five alternative programs in 10 districts and 43 school-linked employment opportunities.

Mental Health

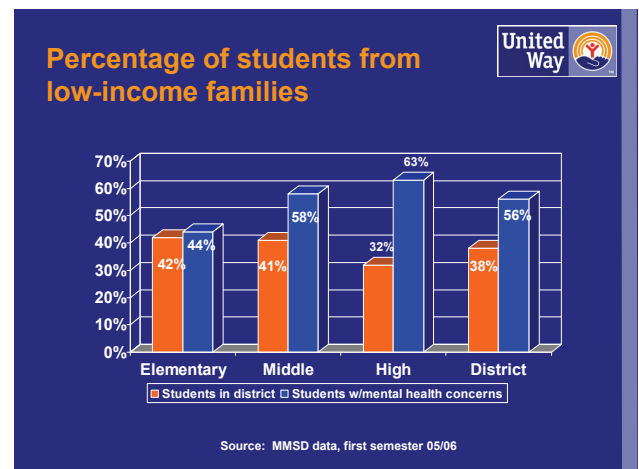
Local research in 2005 provided evidence that 13-15% of our children and youth are experiencing mental health issues that interfere with their learning. Mental health issues have a strong co-relationship to substance use and abuse, which often leads to violence. The most common concerns for students were depression, anger, anxiety, and impulsivity. Middle schools reported the highest number of students with these issues.



Depression, AODA and anxiety rank the highest for high school students screened for mental health concerns. In middle school, depression, impulsivity and anxiety rank the highest. Given this information, a new initiative called Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) provides screening and intervention for 6th graders who are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. In 2004 over 3,400 students in 5th and 6th grades were screened. 29% of the 3,400 screened had witnessed or been victims of violence in the preceding year. 12% of these youth showed signs of both PTSD and depression. Research shows that one in four youth nationwide will experience a traumatic event by their 16th birthday.



Madison Metropolitan School District data suggests that African American students and students from low-income families are more likely to have mental health concerns.

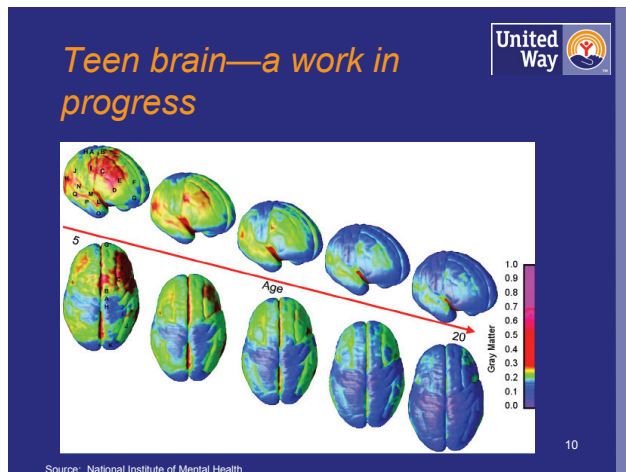


Maturing Minds

The Delegation has learned about new research on brain development

Adolescent brains continue to develop well into the 20's. At one time, it was thought that the foundation of the brain's architecture was laid down by the age of five or six – indeed, 95 percent of the structure of the brain has been formed by then. But researchers have discovered profound changes in the structure of the brain that appear relatively late in child development.

National Institute of Mental Health researchers have discovered a second wave of production of gray matter, the thinking part of the brain, just prior to puberty. This gray matter maturation begins at the back of the brain and flows toward the front – the areas of planning, impulse control and reasoning.



Teenagers are capable of learning a lot, but the parts of their brains related to emotions and decision-making are still developing. As their brains undergo rewiring, teenagers show limitations with motivation, emotional control, and judgment.

Their still-developing brains make teenagers particularly vulnerable to risky behavior, such as drinking and driving too fast. Alcohol and other drug involvement amplify these vulnerabilities. Additionally, youth are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors in the company of peers. In a classroom and around

the dinner table, they often will acknowledge the consequences of their behavior; however, in the company of their friends and in a more relaxed environment, they do not always think about the consequences to their behavior. Youth understand the difference between right and wrong, but in some circumstances and environments they make decisions without regard for the long-term impact.

What's Next

Now that the Delegation on Disconnected and Violent Youth has a clear understanding of the problems faced by youth in our community, they are ready to examine the strategies and best practices to connect youth with their families, schools and our community. They will look in particular for strategies that will do the following:

- increase graduation rate
- decrease habitual truancy
- increase academic success at 8th and 10th grade
- decrease referrals to the District Attorney's office

Using the Delegation's recommendations and strategies, United Way will develop a multi-year Mobilization Plan to implement these strategies by November of 2007 with a report launch to the community in January of 2008.