

The Challenges & Opportunities Facing Holyoke Youth

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Holyoke a small town in western Massachusetts, less than two hours away - and yet a world apart - from the state capital of Boston. The City has the distinction of being the nation's first planned industrial community. Known as "The Paper City of The World," Holyoke was, for a moment in time, the largest producer of stationery, writing, and archival goods in the world. For the better part of the 19th and early 20th century, the City's economic base was the paper industry. Once a thriving city, Holyoke suffered decline like other mill towns. For several decades the City's downtown, and its uniquely old brick buildings has experienced significant neglect. Now Holyoke is undergoing a budding renaissance. Holyoke youth are eager to be part of the solution.

The Challenges

School Drop-Out Rate

- Holyoke public schools experiences a 54% dropout rate.
- 62.5% of Holyoke youth completed high school (2015). Only 23.2% complete a 4-year Bachelor's Degree.
- The graduation rate in Massachusetts high schools is up to 87.5%.

Teen Pregnancy Crisis

- While the teen pregnancy rate has dropped significantly by 32% (between 2010-2012), Holyoke is the 2nd highest in the State. (Teen births declined from 83.6 per 1,000 births, to 57.1 per 1,000 births.)

Heroin Epidemic

- Holyoke has been affected by a grappling addiction problem for the last couple of years.
 - Heroin and PCP are the most used drug in Holyoke: Officer Evans of the Holyoke Police Department
 - In 2016 the United States saw the largest annual jump of an exceeding 59,000 overdose deaths.
 - Deaths rose by 19 % from the 52,404 deaths recorded last year in 2015.
- **Economy:** Holyoke is one of the state's poorest cities: 28.8% of its families live below poverty level. Holyoke has a 5.4% unemployment rate - with youth unemployment significantly higher. The lack of jobs and job-training for current jobs is challenging for youth to be qualified for Holyoke's work force. Career Point runs a great youth summer jobs program. Due to limited grant funding, a fraction of youth who apply are able to obtain employment.
 - **Safe Places:** There are very few places in Holyoke for youth to spend their day doing something productive while having fun with peers and encountering new experiences for free.
 - **Holyoke's Population** of 40,280, 4.8% African American, 48.4 Latino, 46.8 Caucasian. As of 2013, 33% are under the age of 21. Youth from South Holyoke experience micro-aggressions or racism from some law enforcement and elected officials.
 - **Education:** Holyoke Public Schools are a Level 5 (according to the Accountability and Assistance System). The district's chronically under-performing young students of color are more likely to be suspended than non-white students: African-American 4x more and Latino 3x more. Students who are arrested at school are 3x more likely to drop out of school than other students. Holyoke youth have the highest suspension rate for Latino males in all of Massachusetts. In response, Holyoke Schools' Restorative Justice Program led to a decrease in school suspensions.
 - **Drugs & Crime:** Like other cities along Interstate Highway Rt. 91, Holyoke is dealing with a grappling heroin epidemic and is notorious for its drug use and attendant crime. Youth often see people affected by crime and drug problems around the City. Unfortunately, Holyoke has high crime rate. Thanks to the City's needle exchange program, there has been decrease of ODs.



The Opportunities

Holyoke is now proactively planning ahead for its future and seeking opportunities to capitalize on its unique aspects. There is a rebirth of organizations, programs and project on the rise never seen before in Holyoke.

• **Business:** Building on Holyoke's industrial heritage, efforts are underway to embrace green power generation. These new opportunities for job growth will significantly help in the economy. Creating business partnerships and workforce development programs will give youth the skills they need to contribute to a better future for the City.

Some of these efforts include:

- Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce's SPARK Entrepreneur Program & Holyoke Soup
- Massachusetts Green High Performance Computer Center
- The Transformational Development Initiative
- South Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative

• **The Holyoke Youth Task Force** is committed to creating positive opportunities and a healthier community for Holyoke youth. This coalition of youth-serving nonprofit agencies, city and state representatives, and community volunteers is concerned about challenges facing Holyoke youth.

The Task Force is creating a Vision Map & Plan for Holyoke to bring out solutions for the City's problems. This plan includes:

- A Youth Center that offers performing arts, social clubs, homework help, mentoring and internships.
- Local affordable drivers education course.
- Bus passes for students to provide reliable transportation to & from school from school to home or to their jobs.
- Festivals and parades organized by teens (with the help of the City) to help youth become responsible and gain experience to know how to plan and coordinate an activity.

Best Practices Model: Boston Center for Youth and Families

A great example of a community-changing program is one in Boston run by, Will Morales, Commissioner of the Boston Center for Youth and Families. They have 36 facilities with 30 community centers throughout the City of Boston serving over 90,000 people. Programs include the Mayor's Summer Jobs Program: Success Link; out-of-school youth programs, adult education, sports and fitness, arts, girls-only, senior, enrichment opportunities as well as the Street-worker Program, a nationally recognized youth violence prevention and intervention program. Will's programs really impact communities since they focuses on all aspects of people living in a low income community. He makes sure his staff tackle the problems the people are facing hands-on -- and without hesitation.

Best Practices: Youth Empowerment + Community Support = Major Funding for Youth Center

TD Garden to pay \$1.65m after teen sleuths claimed it owed \$13m

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/08/03/garden-pay-after-oversight-discovered-teenage-sleuths/IhAyDxnHclGFVUFrgwbyJO/story.html>

Resources

1. Mayor Proposed Holyoke Reinvestment Bond to Transform Holyoke
2. Secondary Redesign Report & Recommendations
3. Mayor 2016: \$21M Holyoke Reinvestment Bond

* Note: According to The Fordham Institute report "Rating the Ratings" - Massachusetts' plan for treating all schools fairly is "weak". This failure to meet educational needs increases disengagement and at-risk behavior.

