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*Bridging the Divide: Community Centers as a Catalyst of Socioeconomic Opportunity Cultivation
for At-Risk Youth*

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A Capstone Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>Literature Review Economic Development</i>	6
<i>Literature Review: Community Development</i>	10
<i>Literature Review: Youth Development</i>	15
<i>Positive Youth Development</i>	22
<i>Afterschool Programs as Mechanism of Community Development</i>	26
<i>The Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model (IPEI)</i>	28
<i>Case Study: The East Bluff Community Center (EBCC)</i>	32
<i>Neighborhoods: Why Do They Matter?</i>	33
<i>The IPEI at the EBCC</i>	34
<i>Neighborhood Needs Assessment</i>	35
<i>Creation of the Neighborhood Needs Assessment</i>	38
<i>Implementation of the Neighborhood Needs Assessment</i>	40
<i>Methodology of Neighborhood Needs Assessment</i>	41
<i>Benefits of Neighborhood Needs Assessment</i>	47
<i>The Power of Community Partnerships</i>	49

<i>Strengthening the EBCC's Existing Partnerships</i>	50
<i>Fostering New Partnerships</i>	56
<i>Robust Partnerships</i>	58
<i>Systemic Partnership: Bradley University and John Seckler Design</i>	61
<i>Conclusion</i>	65
<i>Bibliography</i>	68

Abstract

The East Bluff Community Center (EBCC)'s mission is to "foster community engagement and neighborhood stabilization by providing a vibrant place to gather." This paper seeks to shed light on the role that community centers play in creating socioeconomic opportunities for at-risk youth in low-income, American communities. The author completed an 11-month internship through Illinois State University's Stevenson Center in which I was placed as a Community Engagement Coordinator at the EBCC. While at EBCC, I conducted a neighborhood needs assessment, strengthened existing and built new interorganizational partnerships, and launched a building revitalization within the context of the Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention (IPEI) Model. Using youth development, community development, and economic development as lenses through which I examine at-risk youth, substantial findings indicate that community centers may be a legitimate facilitator of socioeconomic opportunity for at-risk youth.

Introduction

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, millions of children in the United States of America are affected by one or more risk factors that put young people at risk of dropping out of school or living with poor health (Evans 2004). These risk factors include language barriers, lack of educational opportunities, and other socioeconomic factors that plague many poor communities in the United States. Namely, economic hardship is one of the most significant determinants of adverse outcomes in the education and health of poor

children (Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn 2002). Economic hardship manifests itself in various ways within low-income families: as a lack of access to nutritious food, lack of access to meaningful social networks and social capital, lack of access to transportation, lack of access to quality educational opportunities, lack of access to sustainable employment opportunities and much, much more. Further, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, poverty harms the health and well-being of children. These health issues include increased infant mortality; low birthweight and subsequent health and developmental problems; chronic disease frequency and severity; food insecurity, poor nutrition, and growth; increased accidental injury and mortality; problems with early brain and child development; poorer academic achievement and increased rates of high school dropout; and higher rates of teen/young adult criminal behavior and incarceration. Seeing as how good health and quality education are essential to rising out of poverty, it is critical to pay closer attention to economic hardship and its' effects on at-risk youth.

Youth who grow up poor in the United States are at-risk of not reaching their full human potential and subsequently, not accessing the fruits of the American Dream at all. The extant literature on youth development is primarily focused on at-risk youth in specific contexts: at-risk youth belonging to certain racial groups, at-risk youth of certain social identities, at-risk youth in schools, at-risk youth in urban areas, or at-risk youth in rural areas. Many at-risk, low-income youths do not develop the capacities necessary to succeed in the workforce or in life, and far too many end up living in poverty, incarcerated, or dead than their middle-class counterparts. Research on the economic vulnerability of many American youth and the negative effects of poverty on those youth has been notable, but not complete. Subsequently,

the capabilities of community centers are rarely mentioned in the literature in relation to their ability to instill socioeconomic capacity building in low-income, American youth.

More space must be made for the notion that youth are inherently economic beings who will one day become adults capable of joining the American workforce. With that said, the most effective youth development strategies must be analyzed in relation to their economic power-building ability. One important, but often overlooked, vehicle for socioeconomic betterment of poor children and their communities are community centers. Community centers, whether their focus is on community building activities, recreation, or community service opportunities that build the skills of youth, are indispensable institutions to low-income youth and the advancement of their socioeconomic potential. This paper seeks to shed more light on one important question: How do community centers facilitate effective youth development in low-income, American communities?

The most effective community centers utilize frameworks that reduce risk for, promote resilience within, empower, and facilitate interorganizational partnerships for the benefit of, at-risk youth. More specifically, these community centers employ strategies that foster community building, build youth's socioeconomic skillset, and increase low-income youths' social capital. Some of these strategies include facilitating mentoring between positive adult role models and at-risk youth, creating opportunities for young people to learn new things and many more which will be explored later. Community centers sit at a unique juxtaposition in youth development in that they can define their own operations and benefit at-risk youth in ways they see as most appropriate for their own locality, and secondly, community centers are

useful and unique hubs of community interconnection that are indispensable to building American civil society.

The two basic premises of this paper are that youth development, inherently, has economic and community dimensions to it and that, secondly, community centers are an effective vehicle for the socioeconomic betterment of at-risk young people. Thus, any credible community development strategy should include both sound economic principles and innovative youth development practices. This integrated approach, of viewing youth development through a socioeconomic lens, makes youth development, community development, and economic development more sustainable and in turn, more robust. By bolstering youth development operations within American community centers, this paper seeks to serve as a guidepost for these centers to better serve at-risk young people by exploring with the author the best practices of some American community centers. The framework of this paper is as follows: first, economic development and community development literature is highlighted and examined, with attention paid to the vacuity of research on how community centers build socioeconomic capabilities. Secondly, the literature on youth development is explored more closely. Next, youth development is explored through a socioeconomic lens due to its' inherent economic and social nature. Following an investigation of youth development in relation to community and economic development, case studies of youth development best practices are analyzed and drawn upon to form a more concrete theoretical understanding of how these best practices can be instituted into American community center operations. Lastly, the implications of youth development best practices are discussed in relation to an 11-month professional placement internship the author completed with the East Bluff Community Center

(Peoria, Illinois) in which I institutionalized the best practices of youth development included in the literature into the Center's daily operations and strategic trajectory.

Literature Review: Economic Development, Community Development and Youth Development

Economic Development:

Economic development is a tricky subject to define. Not in the sense that people do not know what it is, but in the sense that it is not always agreed upon as to what constitutes economic development. Different scholars from different disciplines emphasize different components of economic development. Should economic development be focused on businesses or consumers? Should it be focused on improving supply or demand? Should economic development prioritize the needs of the poor or of the owning class? These and many other questions permeate the field of economic development, and no singular definition is universally agreed upon amongst scholars. However, to contextualize youth development within both economic and community development contexts, we must sharpen our focus on what economic development is.

According to the International Economic Development Council, "the main goal of economic development is improving the economic well-being of a community through efforts that entail job creation, job retention, tax base enhancements and quality of life." This includes but is not limited to a wide variety of economic development strategies such as job creation by employers or the government, tax incentives designed to keep employers in a certain economic community such as tax breaks, tax credits, and other mechanisms, and other methods intended to keep the economy functioning smoothly. Economic development is not to be confused with

economic growth; growth involves growing the economy's size whereas economic development involves qualitative life improvements, such as increased wages, the construction of public infrastructure, and/or more job security through job training programs in communities (Blair and Carroll 2009; Partridge & Rickman 2003; Wiewel, Teitz, and Giloth 2012) in *Local Economic Development* book from Econ Dev class and Chap 11 of *Handbook on Comm Dev*). Research on economic development has explored it as a mechanism for national self-discovery or in relation to its' effect on entrepreneurship (Hausman and Rodrik 2003; Naude 2010). Further, the notion that economic growth alone always improves human well-being is not certain, despite perspectives within the United States that creating economic growth is the penultimate form of societal improvement (Kenny 2005). Investment by the state in improved transportation networks, education, and cultural, recreational, and vocational centers are aligned with economic development in that they promote quality of life improvements for residents within their economic community (Blair and Carroll 2009). Economic development, in the American context, operates within a capitalist framework. In a capitalist framework, the main motive of firms is to produce profit. In terms of political economy, the government is supposed to let the market work on its own and avoid interventions unless deemed necessary, such as in cases of economic depression. The hope is that by reducing government intervention, an efficient pricing system governed by the forces of supply and demand will take root. Although scholars of economic development readily acknowledge the role of processes such as business retention and business ventures, community revitalization through commercial investment, entrepreneurship, physical capital, education and training, labor-based development, and community organizing, they fail to recognize the neighborhood progress that socioeconomic

institutions such as community centers facilitate in low-income, American communities (Wiewel, Teitz, and Giloth 2012; Kenny 2005; Abramovitz 1962; Kuznets 1955). Other studies have pointed to the ways in which economic development, across national boundaries, impacts youth (Chernova et. al. 2020; Yoshikawa et. al 2012). Further, early socioeconomic adversity affects youth brain development; psychosocial resources such as educational attainment and the creation of social-emotional skills may explain why low-income youth fail in economic terms (Wickrama et. al. 2015; Deaton 2003). Studying more closely the impact of American community centers' strategies, such as creating opportunities for skill cultivation, on at-risk youth will allow for renewed understanding of successful models of youth-centric economic development. Research shows that sociopolitical development in African American, Latin-American, and Asian-American youth may have an impact on reducing economic inequality (Diemer et. al. 2010). What about socioeconomic status? Socioeconomic status does not necessarily deter low-income youth from developing positive views on success and career development (Kay et. al. 2017). As such, more research is needed to explore the nexus between at-risk youth and their economic potential.

Although capitalism has succeeded in creating the high living standards that are readily observable in the United States and other developed countries throughout the world, some groups of people, including ethnic minorities, the working poor, young people, the elderly, and those with disabilities, have at times been left out of the economic growth that comes with capitalism. Economists such as Beaugard (1993) have made the case that when economic development practitioners focus too much on the economic aspects of economic development singularly, social, and political considerations are overlooked. This leads to a substandard

quality of life for residents, particularly those with less societal privilege and power. For divergent and extensive reasons, some American communities do not have the means to participate in the effective, transformative economic development needed to address systemic, structural issues within their locality. A poor community in rural Alabama may lack jobs due to a dearth of industrial investment whereas a poor community in New York City may have jobs but those jobs may require education and training those residents have not had access to. Communities across the United States are ethnically, socially, and economically diverse and have varying levels of economic development. Some communities have accessible socioeconomic resources, and some simply do not. Hence, communities are just one piece of a larger economic development puzzle.

Communities operate within region-specific parameters that are dependent on industrialization, workforce development and other macro factors: “how a community is situated in the larger capitalist political economy plays an enormous role in enabling or constraining the abilities of individuals and households to realize their goals and aspirations” (Defilippis & Saegert 2012: 4). Considering that communities and individuals within those communities are the focus of economic development, no conversation or analysis of comprehensive economic development is possible without studying the social, environmental, and political considerations of a given economic policy on a community. Community development, a subfield of political science and economics, is a promising lens for contextualizing the social, political, and environmental impact of an economic development policy on a community. As such, it is helpful to define community development before contextualizing the salience of youth development within economic realms.

Community Development:

According to the St. Louis Federal Reserve, community development involves four key elements. These elements are attention to community members' needs, including recreational, occupational, and social considerations; local control of community development; the idea of creating self-sufficiency; and comprehensive approaches that encompass various factors and actions in a community. Two salient trends in community development are outlined by the St. Louis Federal Reserve. First, is a shifting toward "holistic approaches for meeting community needs" and secondly, a shift toward a "data-driven, outcome-based expectations" (St. Louis Federal Reserve 2020). Holistic approaches are those which incorporate multiple entities, multiply their collective power, and maximize community impact by working together. Local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private sector partners can accomplish a holistic community development project through meaningful partnerships. Data-driven, outcome-based expectations include those which come from funders like the federal government, private agencies, and community foundations. These funders want to see social benefits or financial growth, measurable outcomes, and a return on investment if community development projects are to be effective as well as funded in the future.

Furthermore, the Federal Reserve also outlines five core principles for constructive community development, including community engagement, leadership, collaboration, evaluation, and adaptability. The bedrock of these five principles is social capital, whether it is the community members affected or the leaders of community collaboratives. Social capital is the aggregate of the relationships between communities and their political leaders (Purdue 2001). Poor communities tend to have less social capital than affluent ones but if poor

communities create assets, establish goals at the local level, and use political power to drive economic growth for their locality, they can cultivate increasing levels of social capital (Wiewel, Teitz, and Giloth 2012). Social capital's most essential component is the relationships between the community development practitioner and the community: "trusting relationships, or social capital, can be considered the glue that holds the work of social entrepreneurs together" (Delgado 2004: 117). When communities and development professionals embark on this journey together, social capital can be generated and in turn, allow for more economic prosperity. Based on scholarly analysis, it could be said that social capital is a building block of comprehensive community development initiatives. Scholars such as Purdue and Delgado explain that social capital is the foundation upon which robust community development is built but missing from both of their arguments is a more thorough investigation of the entities which further youth development within communities, and how those entities cultivate social capital amongst low-income youth. Delgado explores *programs* that cultivate social youth entrepreneurship and Purdue explores leadership in the context of building social capital, but remiss from their discussion is the role of community centers in low-income American communities. Community centers in low-income neighborhoods may be effective vehicles for the cultivation of the resources necessary for community development by providing opportunities for residents to build social capital. More research on economic development must be dedicated to entities, like community centers, that instill in youth socioeconomic skills to succeed in a 21st century economy.

The purpose of economic development is to improve the economic well-being of a community. The purpose of community development, then, is to examine the ways in which

communities' access economic well-being for their citizens. Many strategies are used by communities to develop themselves, with job creation, education, and workforce development being just a few methods worth mentioning. However, as noted above, capitalism creates unequal economic outcomes and many communities in the contemporary United States consistently struggle with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and poor educational systems. Community development is both a process and an outcome (Phillips and Pitman 2009).

Community development is a process because "it includes developing and enhancing the ability to act collectively" (Phillips & Pitman 2009: 6). By acting collectively, communities can determine which specific socioeconomic barriers keep them poor and underdeveloped. After such an identification, effective interventions can then be put in place by utilizing collective action strategies such as community organizing or specific economic development strategies. Community development is also an outcome because collective action has the potential to create "improvement in a community in any or all realms: physical, environmental, cultural, social, political, economic, etc." (Phillips & Pitman 2009: 6). Once communities develop their social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and physical capital, they can then participate in capitalism as it was intended: as buyers and consumers. Until poor communities develop these essential forms of capital, they will continue to struggle with poverty and all the negative social outcomes it breeds, such as crime or housing instability. Therefore, the process toward community development is chaotic, difficult, and tumultuous. However, many low-income communities in the United States have community centers. These community centers, though often overlooked for more traditional means of economic development, may be a key catalyst in poor American communities' quest to build their social capital, create socioeconomic

opportunities for their youth, and thus, foster meaningful community development. We cannot study community development without further examining low-income communities (and their community centers) and the ways in which the people living in these communities are locked out of the American Dream (or the ways in which community centers may promote access to the American Dream). It could be said, then, that communities are the building blocks of economic development, but that not all communities have access to the same resources.

Communities in the context of the United States are places which are racially, ideologically, and economically diverse. From coast to coast, local economies are critical to the larger national economy. However, the national economy and its' volatility have at times subsumed localities, such as during mass factory closures due to globalization, during the Great Recession, or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities are caught between federal, state, and local pressures because "communities are in the contradictory positions of being vital for the maintenance of the larger political economy, but significantly constrained in what they can achieve in terms of shaping or transforming that economy" (Defilippis & Saegert 2012: 3). Additionally, communities have substantial impact on the individuals who live in them by shaping and supplementing the personal development, growth, and inter-personal social networks that humans need to survive. (Defilippis & Saegert 2012: 4) As a result, poor communities at times place pressures such as poverty, gangs, and subpar educational systems on residents. Thus, more space must be made for local communities, such as counties, cities, and even neighborhoods, to define their own unique placement in a wider economy and prioritize, for themselves, community development strategies that work within their own localized economic development policy apparatuses. Within this network of community

development strategies are the creation of, maintenance of, and innovation within community centers in low-income neighborhoods, a topic rarely considered when discussing community development structures that offer hope for at-risk youth.

Community development is a process and an outcome within a wider economic and political context. Development is fundamentally about sustainable growth paired with optimal social opportunities because development “is a process by which individuals, groups and communities obtain the means to be responsible for their own livelihoods, welfare and future” (Remenyi 2004: 25). Community development, as opposed to economic development, is primarily focused on the collective action of individuals, and includes an analysis on how non-economic factors affect economic opportunities. Using Remenyi’s definition, community development involves “individuals”, “livelihoods” and the “future.” The hope of community development, through the lens of Remenyi, is that individuals will create for themselves better livelihoods, and in turn, a better future for themselves and their communities. Considering that community development involves individuals, then surely that includes children. Community development also involves livelihoods, or the notion that people’s agency is tied to their economic standing, and lastly, it includes the future. If examining community development through the lens of it as both a process and an outcome as well as through the lens of it involving individuals, livelihoods, and the future, then surely youth development is a critical component of any credible community development program.

Community development is a promising lens through which scholars of development ought to look at youth development programs because community development occurs when “the conditions of surviving and thriving in a place are not being supplied by capital” (Defilippis and

Saegert 2012: 5). America's communities are filled with children, many of them poor. According to the Ann E. Casey Foundation, growing up poor places children at a higher risk for poor health, chronic illness, and falling behind academically. Eventually, these poor children become adults. If those children did not develop the necessary capacities to function in their economic context, then their communities, and in turn the United States of America, will suffer. That is why the significance of youth development within the context of economic and community development cannot be overstated: young people are the future of American communities, and their human progress is crucial in determining if they live a life in which they take advantage of socioeconomic opportunity or if they live in poverty. Now that youth development has been placed within the context of economic and community development, let us now move to the literature concerning youth development.

Youth Development:

What exactly is youth development? It is helpful to discover the history surrounding youth development before examining the definition of youth development in the modern sense. When studying the literature on youth development, the terms youth and adult often occur to differentiate the two from a biological-developmental standpoint. G. Stanley Hall and then Margaret Mead galvanized the birth of the concept of adolescence in the early 20th century. Up until that point, children and adults were not often viewed as operating in separate spheres but as being part of the same social group. Children and adults were interchangeable in social settings and there were no specific institutions that were geared toward youth themselves (Aries 1962). The history of this differentiation is rooted in psychobiological notions

of human development. Adolescence was examined in passing by scholars when studying other issues of psychological development but not in an explicit fashion (Freud 1900). The idea behind separating the psychological development of children from that of other humans was supported by agreements that human beings, at a certain age range having mastered biological processes and underpinnings, begin to explore their social cultures (Hall 1904). Seeing as how virtually all humans are raised in a culture of some kind or another, social cultures are an inherent part of childhood and of human development.

The premise behind more closely examining youth's social development was that during adolescence, young people are developing at such a rapid rate biologically that this specific period of human development was critical in understanding human nature and may explain why people do what they do as adults in the social realm. Other scholars, through anthropological studies, pointed to the role that social culture plays in determining self-identity and those specific social forces were placed on people during their teenage years (Mead 1928; 1977). Mead and Hall's conceptualizations of adolescence are to this day pertinent. The notion that "the developmental stage begins with puberty and ends with the individual's assimilation into the adult world" and that "adolescence runs roughly through the teen years" are still powerful determinants of what scholars determine as being "youth" (Baxter 2008: 45). As a result of these 20th century studies on human development, we have modern categories such as youth and adolescents to distinguish them from fully developed adults. Modern scholars still emphasize this difference into biological and cultural understandings of human development, with many agreeing that behaviors stemming from teenagers are inherently social (Esman 1990). To this day, the categorization of "youth" is validated by a growing youth development

movement beginning in the United States of America in about the 1950s. Around that time, youth were becoming increasingly involved in the criminal justice system at exponential rates. Thus, the modern juvenile system was initiated to punish youthful offenders for their transgressions. Following decades in which intervention was the focus of youth development, prevention campaigns began to emerge in the late 1970s. These campaigns covered everything from teen pregnancy to drug usage amongst teenagers (i.e. DARE). The focus of prevention programs was to prevent youth from engaging in risky behavior in the first place. Since prevention has been shown to have mediocre results, the youth development field shifted toward supporting treatment options for at-risk youth. Scholars of child development such as Benson (2003), Damon (1997), and Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray and Foster (1998) evaluated the old guard, such as Freud, Hall, and Mead, who defined at-risk youth as troubled, difficult, and in-need of social corrections, and began to pay more attention to youth from a more socially assistive standpoint. Prior to re-evaluating scholars such as Freud, Hall, or Mead, positive development of young people (not to be confused with the positive youth development movement) was conceptualized as the *absence* of problem behaviors rather than the *promotion* of positive behaviors (Lerner et. al 2005; Benson 2003). As such, scholars (Catalano et. al 1999) begin to focus more on what can be done to discuss which assets, rather than liabilities, youth inherently possess.

As time went on, scholars of child development began to debate about the nature of children. Are children resilient? Are children sensitive? The first psychological studies related to children being more resilient than fragile came in the 1980s (Damon 2004). Prior to this era in youth development studies, at-risk youth were often viewed as being fragile, helpless, and

victims of their own circumstances. As more studies were done, the narrative began to flip. Some research pointed to the direction that children were somehow immune to life's risk factors such as poverty, trauma, and other social ills, that they could merely overcome adversity by nature of them being developing humans. Other research indicated that youth were able to overcome severe stress and overcome their odds (Garmezy 1983). Other scholars such as Werner (1982) did cross-cultural analyses between Hawaii and the rest of the United States and found that youth were often able to overcome their odds due to their resiliency, regardless of social culture (Damon 2004). Further, scholars pointed to the notion that at-risk youth develop coping skills to help them survive in at-risk environments such as abusive homes, poor neighborhoods, or scenarios in which youth find themselves homeless, such as resiliency (Luthar 2003; Olsson 2003; Virgil 1990; Festinger 1984). Resiliency is an example of an "adaptive response pattern" to trauma (Damon 2004). Resiliency or resilience is the "successful adaptation in the presence of risk or adversity" (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony and Forrest-Bank 2013). Other adaptive response patterns, which are essential coping skills that all children *can* learn during childhood, include persistence, hopefulness, hardiness, goal-directedness, healthy expectations, success orientation, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, belief in the future, a sense of anticipation, a sense of purpose, and a sense of coherence. Just because youth *can* learn these skills does not mean that their communities, their mentors, or their parents *teach* them; it is to say that a youth with a sound mind and no cognitive or mental disabilities can learn these skills through life experience simply because they are a human being. Missing from Bernard's response patterns is the ability to delay gratification, to join civic organizations such as a Boys and Girls Club, or the power of youth sports on youth behavior.

Increased teenage crime rates and gang activity in the late 1980s and early 1990s led the United States to place programs for at-risk youth front and center on the collective American conscience. These programs focused on boosting academic achievement, reducing school expulsion and school dropouts (Pellicano 1987). Many scholars began to focus on the risk factors associated with at-risk youth in the 1980s (Pellicano 1987; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, and Guilfoyle 1989; Slavin 1989). Studying more closely the risk factors that may harm children allowed youth development practitioners a method to determine which behaviors are at-risk behaviors and which are developmentally (biologically) related (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). Some programs may reduce risk factors that are associated with being low-income (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, and Forrest-Bank 2013). Delgado (2004) studied the effects of youth social entrepreneurship programs such as Young Aspirations/Young Artists (YA/YA), which helps at-risk youth learn skills, earn income, and develop an appreciation for music as well as business. When defining “at-risk” youth, Delgado (2004) acknowledges that the general public pays too much attention to the term “at-risk” and many Americans surmise that without programming like YA/YA, these youth would have certainly ended up dead or in jail. This is not necessarily true. Youth social enterprises and youth programs, albeit an effective mechanism for teaching life skills, are not a panacea or a universal solution. However, they may be critical catalysts in a wider range of programmatic structures driving youth development, including community centers. Although the youth in the YA/YA program do not hail from the wealthy part of New Orleans, they are not necessarily destined for poverty or incarceration. Instead, Delgado states that “a better description of participants is youth who do not have extensive resources to explore or access to opportunities. However, they do have varying

degrees of access, and some have limited economic resources” (Delgado 2004: 164).

Essentially, YA/YA does not save lives; it cultivates, augments, and legitimizes tangible opportunities for young people who may not have that opportunity otherwise. As Delgado points out, many at-risk youths have at least some economic resources at their disposal. Programs such as YA/YA limit the pervasive influence of risk factors such as being low-income or in a single-parent household.

Students who may fail out of school, not graduate and/or lack basic skills after graduation are one category of at-risk youth (Slavin 1989). Other categories of at-risk youth include youth who are involved in the criminal justice system, youth who are truant from school, gang members, low-income youth, school dropouts, African American youth, Native American youth, Hispanic American youth, and teenage parents (Reglin 1998: 10). Scholars have pointed that these subpopulations of youth face risk factors at higher rates than other youth. For the sake of this paper, it is important to determine what I mean by “at-risk youth.” I find that Slavin and Reglin’s definitions are most pertinent for this paper because their frameworks are economically pertinent and comprehensive, respectively. Slavin emphasizes that those students who struggle to graduate high school or leave school without basic skills are “at-risk” because they will not be economically independent without the foundational skills to succeed in their own socioeconomic trajectories (Slavin 1989). Reglin acknowledges that there are multiple groups of at-risk youth, which is a comprehensive definition. There is not an at-risk youth prototype. Rather, youth are determined to be at-risk if they are exposed more often to risk factors such as poverty than other young people. (Reglin 1998). As such, I define at-risk youth as being young people who are exposed often to risk factors, be it gang affiliation, school

dropout, or being low-income, and thus are “at-risk” of not developing their full socioeconomic potential.

When studying community development, economic development, and youth development simultaneously, two biological analogies emerge as useful tools: symbiosis and synthesis. First, symbiosis. Symbiosis is the process of two organisms living in close physical association to one another. This association can lead to mutually beneficial relationships between the two organisms. Youth and community are symbiotic. Youth contribute to the community by attending school, going to work, and participating in civic engagement activities; communities build schools, fund teen work programs, and develop youth sports leagues for youth to become involved in their community. More space must be made for the notion that youth are contributors to community wellbeing and not detractors of community life. The second powerful concept that traces its’ roots to biology but is useful for this paper is synthesis, or the idea that a variety of things can unite to form a singular system. At present, youth, community, and economy are viewed in silos. Youth, especially at-risk youth, are sometimes viewed as economically clueless and even as an economic burden to communities. Communities are too often viewed in relation to how they care for adults and often overlook the capabilities of the young people in that community as trivial or illegitimate. The economy is frequently viewed solely in terms of how adults operate in it; the role of economic inequality on youth is seldom examined and must be studied more readily.

Today, youth development has been framed as being a natural process consisting of specific principles and practices that assist youth in their biological development (Hamilton,

Hamilton, & Pittman 2004). Additionally, youth development has been framed as being comprehensive, promotional, developmental, and symbiotic in terms of how it builds youth capacity (Benson and Pittman 2001). Just as community development's definition is not readily agreed upon, neither is the definition of youth. Adolescence in the 20th century was often seen as "a period fraught with hazards" and, unfortunately, framed "many young people as potential problems that must be straightened out" before they make life-altering mistakes (Damon 2004: 14). As a result, youth prisons and half-way homes were built in the early half of the 20th century and into the 1970s. Additionally, this "problem-centered vision of youth has dominated most of the professional fields charged with raising the young" for decades (Damon 2004: 14). Scholars studying risk factors and the resilience of at-risk youth built the foundation upon which "positive youth development" was built (Jenson et al 2013). In fact, positive youth development may have never been so eagerly defined had it not been in direct opposition to prior schools of thought that framed youth as problematic. Damon (2004) writes that "the positive youth development perspective emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people –including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories" (15). In other words, positive youth development revolves around the notions that youth are contributors, that youth have inherently positive attributes, and that at-risk youth behavior can be corrected with the right types of encouragement, validation, and resource availability.

Positive Youth Development

Some of the most effective youth serving organizations utilize a model known as positive youth development. The goal behind positive youth development is to avoid being deficit-based and focusing on strength-based approaches. Instead of acknowledging that a juvenile delinquent stole a car and that demonstrates she is a bad person, positive youth development would re-examine this youth's situation and assess what they did do right thus far. The hope is that at-risk youth will begin to display positive behaviors and connect the dots between positive actions and positive consequences. Effective positive youth development programs are:

“approaches that seek to achieve one or more of the following: promotes bonding; fosters resilience; promotes social competence; promotes emotional competence; promotes cognitive competence; promotes behavioral competence; promotes moral competence; fosters self-determination; fosters spirituality; fosters self-efficacy; fosters clear and positive identity; fosters belief in the future; provides recognition for positive behavior; provides opportunities for prosocial involvement and/or fosters prosocial norms” (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins 101-102).

An incredibly effective means to creating positive youth development and developing the just-mentioned capacities within at-risk youth is by means of programs that fuel youth capacity and growth. Another method worth noting for this analysis is community building.

Community building is a promising lens through which nonprofits such as EBCC can view and augment their community development operations. According to the Ann E. Casey Foundation, community building involves comprehensive approaches, emphasis on strengthening the social fabric of poor neighborhoods through resident leadership cultivation and community organizing, focusing on community planning, more intention to use

neighborhood residents in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community development projects, and making organizations more accountable to the neighborhoods they reside in (Ann E. Casey Foundation 2020). Further, community building is “an ongoing process where members of a community share skills, talents, knowledge, and experiences that strengthen or develop themselves and the community” (Traynor 2012: 209). According to Boston Foundation’s Persistent Poverty Project, community building is centered around resident inclusion, valuing cultural and racial diversity, political empowerment, asset-based community development, equal access to socioeconomic opportunity, support for children and families, and fostering a shared vision within a neighborhood whereas United Way of America defines community building as the “process of engaging diverse stakeholders, including residents and others, in sustained, collaborative, strategic efforts to strengthen and improve conditions in an identified geographic area” (Nitzberg 2005). Community building involves empowering residents in low-income communities to control their own socioeconomic destinies by equipping their residents with the skills and resources they need to become self-sufficient.

If community building is an effective mechanism for driving community development, then perhaps it is an underutilized tool for community centers to drive positive youth development. Nitzberg (2005) developed five goals utilizing the Boston Foundation, Ann E. Casey Foundation, and United Way of America’s definitions as a theoretical foundation. These goals include “young people developing a sense of belonging and a stake in the place in which they live”; schools, city agencies, and other organizations collaborating with youth to plan, develop, and deliver effective responses to the needs of young people and the people who

work and live with them; young people developing social, personal, and related skills for independent and successful community living; young people being assisted in the transition toward economic independence” and lastly, reducing barriers to young people’s well-being, trajectory, and progress (2005: 13 – 14). Historically, the primary focus of community building activities has been the construction of affordable housing rather than more comprehensive approaches (Traynor 2012). As such, a renewed interest has been shown in the ability of comprehensive approaches such as community organizing, community planning, resident engagement, and collaborative relationships amongst nonprofits as tools of community development (Traynor 2012). Despite impressive research by top-tier organizations such as the Boston Foundation, Ann E. Casey Foundation, the United Way of America, and academics, very little space has been given to the entities that drive community building. More space must be made for the notion that community centers in low-income neighborhoods are an effective vehicle for community building, and in turn, drivers of positive youth development.

Although there has been significant investment in community building programs that focus on place, such as the construction of new houses, less space has been given to the “infrastructure of relationships” that is necessary to sustain robust community development (Traynor 2012: 211). Considering that fostering relationships is the essence of social capital and social capital is considered the “glue” of community development work, then surely alternative approaches such as resident engagement (which was done through the survey) and collaborative relationships deserve more attention in relation to community development (Delgado 2004; Purdue 2001). The aggregate of a community’s relationships is something that Traynor calls a “structural framework for community” (2012: 216). Community building is a

thoughtful, potentially consequential community and youth development theory. What else may drive positive youth development?

Afterschool Programs as a Community Development Mechanism

Afterschool (also known as OST, or out-of-school time) programs in the United States trace their origination to the latter half of the 19th century; the creation of settlement houses and the need for immigrants' children to have pro-social opportunities spawned many of the nation's "boys and girls clubs" (Bodilly & Beckett 2005). Today, there are thousands of afterschool programs that range from delivering services in schools after hours to sports leagues to programming at community centers. These programs are found in urban, suburban, and rural areas, yet it is important to note that low-income youth have lower access to these programs than their middleclass counterparts. Currently, afterschool program foci are diverse, but the need for them is particularly high in low-income neighborhoods that have higher risk exposure and fewer protective resources for at-risk youth. Hence, more research as of late has been geared toward the role that "community-based organizations" such as community centers that "provide OST programming" can facilitate in developing proactive systems of care (Bodilly and Beckett 2005: 67). Two of the essential things that these OST programs provide are supportive relationships and opportunities to belong (Bodilly and Beckett 2005: 67-68). Creating a place for youth to develop relationships with positive role models and practice social-emotional skill regulation (both examples of protective factors that the IPEI model emphasizes) are central to reducing the effects of the risks low-income American youth face daily.

According to studies on crime and youth involved in the criminal justice system, there exists a spike “in the number of youth arrested or who were victims of crime in the hours immediately after school, especially between 3 and 6 p.m.” (Bodilly and Beckett 2005: 17). Considering that many at-risk youths have unsupervised time after school due to parents working or other risk factors, it is imperative that afterschool programs become part of a wide range of community development tools that benefit at-risk youth and their families. In fact, it is a public policy benefit to steer at-risk youth away from negative risk factors such as joining gang, going without essential resources, or worse: “criminologists estimate that steering just one high-risk delinquent teen away from a life of crime saves society \$3 million to \$6 million in reduced victim costs and criminal justice expenses, plus increased wages and tax payments over the young person’s lifetime” (Cohen and Piquero 2009). In addition to providing critical safe space for at-risk youth in low-income, risk-heavy neighborhoods, afterschool programs allow for at-risk young people to build relationships with staff and positive adult role models. As such, it is important for these staff to practice positive youth development strategies, such as rewarding good behavior, promoting pro-social skills such as caring and competence, and help youth find the resources they need to live healthy, safe lives (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, and Forrest-Bank 2013). According to the National Afterschool Association, youth development professionals should have the following competencies: child and youth growth and development; learning environment and curriculum; youth observation and assessment; interactions with children and youth; youth engagement; cultural competency and responsiveness; family, school, and community relationships; safety and wellness; program planning and development; and professional development and leadership (NAA 2020). These

traits of exceptional youth development staff, as well as a safe space, allow for at-risk youth to begin the process of cultivating their own personal success.

Programs such as afterschool programs or recreation leagues may have promising effects on minimizing the risks faced by many low-income youth (Powlick 2011; Witt and Crompton 1996). Afterschool programs and recreation leagues are suitable vehicles to instill in youth characteristics that are central to their biological and social development, but less space has been made for evaluating the roles that American community centers play in lifting the lives of at-risk youth, particularly those from low-income households. These community centers often have the capacity, resources, and tools to effectively contribute to the implementation of PYD in their communities. However, they have largely been overlooked in the literature. For exceptions, see Wong (2008), London et. al (2010), and Rhodes and Schecter (2014). Empirical research on positive youth development (PYD) has shown that focusing on youth strengths, as opposed to deficits, and conceptualizing PYD as the Five C's (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) holds promise for at-risk American youth (Lerner et. al 2005). Thus, how do community centers enact PYD? Is PYD the most effective theory for helping at-risk youth? These questions guide us to a new model of youth development, the Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model, which holds immense promise as a framework for helping at-risk youth overcome socioeconomic barriers by reducing risk, promoting resilience, utilizing PYD, and crafting interorganizational partnerships for the benefit of at-risk young people.

The Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model

The Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model, or IPEI, mentioned in the literature review on Youth Development above, is the most promising framework that youth-serving nonprofits such as the East Bluff Community Center could enact. The IPEI framework, revolving around meeting the needs of at-risk American youth, incorporates and integrates the most promising elements of four competing youth development theories into a comprehensive configuration.

First, the IPEI respects and understands that many scholars of youth development are concerned with the *risks* associated with being a low-income youth in the United States, such as lacking food, housing, or educational opportunities. At-risk youth, such as youth of color or low-income youth, face individual, interpersonal, and environmental risk factors (Jenson et al. 2013). Individual risk factors include sensation-seeking orientation, poor impulse control, attention deficits, and hyperactivity whereas family communication and conflict, family alcohol and drug use, school failure, and association with antisocial peers constitute some of the interpersonal risk factors at-risk youth face (Jenson et. al 2013: 10). Environmental factors, the least controllable by at-risk youth, have pervasive effects. Environmental risk factors include poverty, limited economic opportunity, and neighborhood disorganization (Jenson et. al. 2013: 10). These risk factors can compound and exacerbate one another. For example, a youth who has poor impulse control *and* whose family has a history of drug addiction *and* lives in a poor neighborhood is more at-risk than a youth who has poor-impulse control alone. The IPEI considers the risk factors that harm at-risk young people and promotes programs that minimize such risks, such as afterschool programs, access to nutritious food, and those which augment social-emotional skill development.

Secondly, the IPEI builds upon the research of scholars who view at-risk youth as *resilient* enough to overcome the risk factors in their lives by promoting the institutionalization of resilience-building activities into youth programming. These activities foster what Jenson and colleagues call “protective factors.” Protective factors at the individual level include those which promote pro-social skills like problem-solving, intelligence, and pro-social activities (Jenson et. al. 2013: 10). When it comes to interpersonal protective factors, at-risk youth benefit from getting involved in extracurricular activities, having harmonious relations with family, and being committed to school. Lastly, environmental protective factors include those that cultivate educational and employment opportunities and give at-risk youth access to positive role models (Jenson et. al. 2013: 10). These protective factors form what youth development scholars’ term “resilience.” When at-risk youth are equipped with the skills necessary to overcome obstacles, they become more resilient and thus are more likely to lead lives that are happy, healthy, and productive.

Third, the IPEI absorbs the promising “positive youth development” school of thought by supporting the whole child, viewing at-risk youth as capable changemakers of their own destinies, and viewing youth as assets rather than liabilities. Positive youth development is often framed as the 5 C’s, which are used to describe the “psychological, social, and behavioral” traits that a successful young person possesses (Jenson et. al 2013). The 5’c include competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring (Jenson 2013). These traits allow youth to navigate their world much better than if they had not learned these essential skills. Since positive youth development also recognizes the criticality of protective factors, it aligns nicely with both risk and resilience (Jenson et. al 2013: 34). Further, positive youth

development, risk, and resilience all view youth as part of a larger system that includes individual, peer, family, school, and community factors (Jenson et. al 2013). By incorporating formerly competing theories of youth development, the IPEI situates itself as a premier theory of comprehensive positive youth development.

The fourth and final element that IPEI includes in its' framework is the theory of interorganizational collaboration, which involves organizations working together to solve social problems. Partnership building is an evidence-based practice (Palinkas 2019). In an interorganizational partnership, entities such as youth-serving nonprofits work together by sharing resources to solve a common problem. Interorganizational collaboration is a capacity builder because it encourages organizations to share staff, knowledge, and spearhead initiatives together. By adding interorganizational collaboration to the IPEI, Jenson et al. 2013 have created a modern, innovative, and appealing youth development model that fuels youth social development, lays a foundation for community-center driven community development, and promotes economic development.

As a result, the IPEI is the most comprehensive framework for effective youth development because it builds upon and informs research on risk, resilience, and positive youth development, integrates these formerly competing theories into a singular framework, and adds a dimension of socioeconomic capacity building by promoting interorganizational collaboration within youth-serving organizations. Theory is the bedrock of the IPEI and explains the "why" of youth development, but IPEI takes theory a step further by including in it an evidence-based, actionable process called interorganizational collaboration. The

comprehensiveness of the IPEI model is why I chose to study it, incorporate its' tenets, and implement it at the East Bluff Community Center (Palinkas 2019; Jenson et. al 2013).

What if community, economic, and youth development are intrinsically interrelated? What if youth have an essential role in both the community and in the wider economy, a role that has been ignored for far too long? At-risk youth face difficulties that their more affluent peers do not, but does that mean that at-risk and low-income youth cannot contribute to community life and their own economic potential given the opportunity to do so? A substantial void exists in the modern literature on the institutions which most effectively help at-risk youth. Very little attention has been paid to the role of community centers in low-income American neighborhoods and the power they can have to transform the lives of at-risk young people, and in turn, foster significant socioeconomic skills. Consequentially, these questions guide us to a more comprehensive question: how do community centers facilitate effective youth development for at-risk youth in American communities? It is for this reason that I chose to implement the IPEI framework over other youth development models while I completed my professional practicum at the East Bluff Community Center (Palinkas 2019; Jenson et al 2013).

Case Study: The East Bluff Community Center

The East Bluff Community Center (EBCC)'s mission is to "foster community engagement and neighborhood stabilization by proving a vibrant place to gather." Additionally, the EBCC's vision is "to be everyone's first choice gathering place for recreation, celebration, the arts, life-long learning, and community services." The EBCC was founded in 2011 in a former Catholic grade school building known as St. Bernard's School. Having sat vacant for years, the EBCC was

founded by volunteers and is in Peoria, Illinois', East Bluff neighborhood. The East Bluff neighborhood is a low-income neighborhood that struggles with poverty, gun violence, and housing instability. To boost the capacity of the EBCC and to better serve the East Bluff's residents, the EBCC Board of Directors voted to hire and fund an Applied Community and Economic Development (ACED) Fellow through Illinois State University's Stevenson Center in August 2020 and its' first full-time Executive Director, Kari Jones, in September 2020.

As the ACED Fellow assigned to the EBCC for my professional practice, I took on the role of "Community Engagement Coordinator" and worked closely with Executive Director Kari Jones to improve operational efficiency throughout the duration of my professional practicum. Fundamentally, my job as EBCC's Community Engagement Coordinator was to improve the Center's community outreach endeavors. My primary tasks as Community Engagement Coordinator were to design, conduct, and evaluate a neighborhood needs assessment of the East Bluff neighborhood; maintain existing and foster new strategic partnerships between the EBCC and Peoria's private, public, and nonprofit sectors; develop and implement marketing strategies that build the EBCC's brand awareness and community relevance; and develop a structure to recruit, train, utilize, and retain volunteers. While placed at EBCC, Kari Jones and I implemented the Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model. Before exploring the work I undertook at the EBCC, we must first contextualize community development from the perspective of a neighborhood such as Peoria's East Bluff.

Neighborhoods: Why Do They Matter?

Neighborhoods are subunits of communities. Paul A. Jargowsky (1997) utilizes United States Census tract data to analyze the relationship between poor neighborhoods and their geographic location. Poor neighborhoods have physical, economic, and social structures that allow scholars and citizens alike to identify them (Jargowsky 1997: 92 – 115). Jargowsky (1997) emphasizes that poor neighborhoods are identifiable by social characteristics such as single parent families, low educational attainment, and high rates of high school dropout. This paper benefits from Jargowsky's analysis of poor neighborhoods rather than an analysis of low-income individuals because my professional placement was at an organization which is wedged into one of Peoria, Illinois' highest poverty neighborhoods. The East Bluff *neighborhood* struggles with many of the same social problems that Jargowsky analyzes. This paper utilizes Jargowsky's work because it offers insights to the characteristics of, and social issues within, poor *neighborhoods* and not just in the lives of poor *individuals*.

The East Bluff Community Center (EBCC) accomplishes neighborhood wide change by connecting people to comprehensive resources at a community center rather than connecting specific resources to specific individuals. By offering comprehensive resources, the EBCC is a focal point in a poor neighborhood. The work that EBCC undertakes is neighborhood-based, not individual based. That is not to say that some organizations in the EBCC's walls do not serve individuals, they do. Turning Point Recovery Services, a self-help group for those recovering from substance abuse, is one such organization. However, the EBCC is focused on being a neighborhood hub for community services rather than serving individuals one resident at a time.

Implementing the Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention (IPEI) Model at EBCC

The IPEI is an innovative model of youth development. The IPEI is comprehensive; it was founded on existing theories of youth development, most notably risk, resilience, and positive youth development. The IPEI also incorporates evidence-based practice, such as interorganizational collaboration, into its' model. The incorporation of an evidence-based practice into a comprehensive youth development model has never been so thoroughly researched and adds strength to the youth development theories the IPEI was built on. Theory is critical, and adds to scholarly insight of the "why" of youth development: why do risk factors harm at-risk youth? Why is building youth resilience essential in aiding us in our understanding of the ways in which risk factors harm at-risk youth? Why is positive youth development important to include in a youth development framework? The IPEI integrates these three formerly competing youth development principles into a singular, complementary, and coherent framework. Additionally, the inclusion of evidence-based practices such as interorganizational collaboration into the IPEI gives youth practitioners a more comprehensive understanding of *how* to accomplish the reduction of risk, the creation of resilience, and the utilization of positive youth development effectively, and that is by collaborating with other youth-serving organizations to establish a network of service provision (Jensen et. al. 2013).

Neighborhood Needs Assessment

One of my primary tasks as the EBCC's Community Engagement Coordinator was to design, implement, and evaluate the results of a neighborhood needs assessment. This task was immensely rewarding as well as difficult, but most importantly, the neighborhood needs assessment, and its' results strengthen the EBCC in its' quest to grow its' capacity. In the first subsection, the process of creating the assessment within the context of the IPEI is discussed.

Secondly, the process of implementation is explored. Third, the result of the neighborhood needs assessment is investigated. Lastly is a discussion of how the neighborhood needs assessment strengthened the EBCC in three ways: as the beginning of a community building process in a low-income neighborhood, as a source of evidence-based practice and data, and as a north-star for the EBCC's future programming direction.

Utilizing the IPEI To Create the Neighborhood Needs Assessment

How does conducting a neighborhood needs assessment align with the tenets of the IPEI? The neighborhood needs assessment I completed while working at the EBCC is in alignment with IPEI in three distinct ways. First, the neighborhood needs assessment informed the EBCC's understanding of the East Bluff's risk factors. The IPEI emphasizes the importance of youth-serving organizations such as community centers understanding the risks the youth in their neighborhoods face. By facilitating a door-to-door survey which asked residents to describe what they think the neighborhood needs, crucial information on the East Bluff's risk factors emerged. These risk factors include a dearth of youth development programs, crime and a lack of safety, and the absence of neighborhood unity in the neighborhood. The presence and acknowledgement of these risk factors inform the EBCC on crafting potential solutions.

The second way that the neighborhood needs assessment is in alignment with the IPEI is by promoting the creation of protective factors, the foundation of building youth resilience, that will guide at-risk youth. When asking East Bluff residents what hobbies, interests, skills, or gifts they would like to share with others, the most common responses were things like home improvement, gardening, sports coaching, mentoring, cooking, and crafting. As a result of these

responses, Kari Jones (Executive Director of EBCC) and I sought to create partnerships that would allow for East Bluff residents to teach these skills, including to at-risk youth, in the neighborhood. The results of this survey catapulted the EBCC into the role of a community builder, an organization who is now facilitating the creation of legitimate socioeconomic opportunities through partnership building. The survey results informed and catalyzed a community building process that promotes factors that facilitate protection and promote positive youth development through the establishment of a cooking partnership with a local chef, a partnership with the Peoria Arts Guild in which East Bluff residents can showcase their art skills to others, and a partnership with Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Central Illinois. These program partnerships lay the groundwork for the institutionalization of positive youth development programming into the EBCC's wheelhouse and equip youth with protective factors such as problem-solving skills, better temperament, and increased confidence.

The final way in which the neighborhood needs assessment aligns with the IPEI is that the survey results established a platform upon which the EBCC can build community partnerships (also known as interorganizational collaboration in the IPEI) that serve the needs of the East Bluff. As defined by Jenson et. al (2013), interorganizational collaboration refers to collaborations across organization to accomplish shared goals. According to the IPEI, protective factors include things like "social and problem-solving skills, high levels of commitment to school, and opportunities for education, employment, and other prosocial activities" (Jenson et. al 2013: 12). Once I understood the risk factors present in Peoria's East Bluff, I began to establish interorganizational collaborations with dozens of non-profit, private sector, and public sector entities that could help the EBCC drive positive youth development and promote the

protective factors present in the IPEI theory for the East Bluff's youth. Since many East Bluff residents wanted more youth development opportunities for the neighborhood's kids, I deliberately met with dozens of youth development providers. This partnership building process is detailed more below after this section on the needs assessment.

Creating the Neighborhood Needs Assessment

Beginning in August, I analyzed documents from Board Members Jane Genzel and Steve Fairbanks, Building Manager Tom Eertmoed, and former Executive Director Jim Combs. Many of the documents provided by EBCC related to community development initiatives that have taken place thus far in Peoria. These documents include but are not limited to the Glen Oak Zone Plan Survey (2008); East Village Growth Cell Tax Increment Financing Redevelopment Plan and Program (2011); Grow Peoria Comprehensive Plan (2011); Build it Up East Bluff: Report and Visioning Session (2014); and the East Bluff Planning Committee SWOT Analysis (2017). This took a few weeks to comb through old files, discuss the files with EBCC folks, and analyze the results. This process was foundational to my understanding of the East Bluff and the people living here. Many of the documents pointed to common themes amongst residents of the East Bluff, including resident desire to decrease crime, beautify the neighborhood, and provide more educational and social opportunities for youth and families. That process helped shed light on the trials, tribulations, successes, and failures of public policy initiatives in the East Bluff and contextualize my work here at the East Bluff Community Center and in the Peoria community.

The analysis of any older documents related to past programs and events at the EBCC helped me gain an understanding of what has been tried in the East Bluff. Former Executive

Director Jim Combs was instrumental in this process as he is a lifelong resident of the East Bluff and a wealth of institutional knowledge. Upon reviewing Jim's files, I found that various activities from Saturday morning basketball leagues to cooking events to 5K runs have used the East Bluff Community Center as a home base at one time or another. Additionally, I utilized Peoria's 2020-2021 Community Impact: A Guide to Peoria-Area Nonprofits & Philanthropic Opportunities, a guide created by United Way of Central Illinois, to discover local nonprofits with whom we could potentially build partnerships with. With this information, I created a spreadsheet of potential programmatic partners. I met with Third District Councilman Tim Riggerbach who also assisted me in understanding the Peoria community and its' nonprofit landscape.

After analyzing the results of past surveys, the Board, Executive Director Kari Jones, and I developed a survey to conduct in the East Bluff. The survey has three questions that pertain to residents' thoughts on initiatives we (EBCC) should focus on, residents' skills and abilities, and what residents deem as assets in the East Bluff neighborhood. The second question of the survey was a two-part question that asked residents both what skills and abilities they could share as well as those they wished to improve. Upon receiving the completed survey from EBCC's Board of Directors, I cut the East Bluff neighborhood into one large square using Google Maps and a snipping tool. I used the most accepted East Bluff border streets as boundaries. Those border streets in the East Bluff are McClure Avenue as the northern border, Knoxville Avenue as the western border, Prospect Avenue as the eastern border, and Glen Oak Avenue as the southern border.

From there, I subdivided this large square into four equal quadrants. These quadrants were titled the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast quadrants. The northwest quadrant was bordered by Knoxville Avenue to the west, McClure Avenue to the north, Wisconsin Avenue to the east, and Frye Avenue to the south; the northeast quadrant was delineated by Wisconsin Avenue to the west, McClure Avenue to the north, Prospect Road to the east, and Frye Avenue to the south; the southeast section of the East Bluff is delineated by Kansas Street to the north, Wisconsin Avenue to the west, Prospect Road to the east, and Glen Oak Avenue to the south; and lastly, the southwest quadrant (which contains the EBCC), is delineated by Knoxville Avenue to the west, Frye Avenue to the north, Wisconsin Avenue to the east, and Pennsylvania/Glen Oak Avenue to the south.

Implementing the Neighborhood Needs Assessment

Upon dividing the East Bluff neighborhood into four quadrants, I began the process of canvassing these segments of the neighborhood two to three times per week. Armed with a clipboard, some EBCC flyers our new Executive Director Kari Jones purchased, and a positive, can-do attitude, I hit the streets of the East Bluff beginning in mid-September. As I canvassed, I began to ponder how many surveys I should have completed to be a sound sample of the East Bluff. Board of Directors member Shannon Techie used to work for the City of Peoria, Department of Community Development, and she stated that there are roughly 2,200 households in the East Bluff of Peoria. As a result, the Board, Kari Jones, and I concluded that at least 220 surveys would need to be collected to be representative of the East Bluff's perspectives. I completed the implementation of the EBCC survey in mid-November. When it came to implementing this survey, EBCC Director Kari Jones was instrumental in reaching out to

the East Bluff's Spanish-speaking population. Other than receiving assistance from the Peoria Health Department and a couple EBCC Board members, I completed this survey largely on my own. Doing a door-to-door survey during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult. However, I utilized PPE, social distancing, and wrote survey respondent's answers on the survey forms to ensure safety while completing this important task. The next section discusses the results of this survey and how it informs the EBCC's work.

Results of EBCC Neighborhood Needs Assessment

In the process of conducting this survey, I requested resident's names, phone numbers, and addresses. Sometimes, residents shared their age.

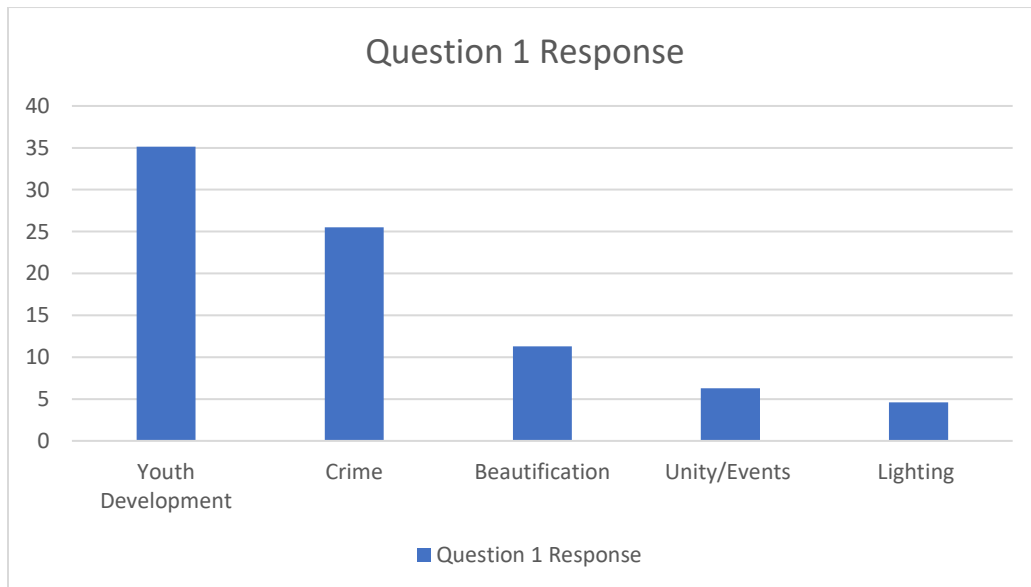
1. When asking the first question of:

"In order to improve your life, what's the one service the East Bluff Community Center should bring to the neighborhood, the top thing we should focus on?"

The most common responses are:

- Youth Development/Engagement/Education: 84/239 or **35.14%**
- Crime/Reducing Gun Violence/Safety/Police Reform/Speed Bumps: 61/239 or **25.52%**
- Beautification/Litter: 27/239, or **11.29%**
- Neighborhood Unity/Engagement/More Awareness: 15/239, or **6.27%**
- Lighting: 11/239, or **4.60%**
- These five responses account for **82.82% of the survey responses.**

- Over 8/10 East Bluff respondents mentioned youth development, crime, beautification, neighborhood unity or lighting as their top issue.
- More than one in three East Bluff residents want the East Bluff Community Center to play a pivotal role in fostering youth development opportunities.
- Roughly one in four residents of the East Bluff want the East Bluff Community Center to play an active role in reducing crime.
- Other responses (17.18%) include: “I don’t know”; “I just moved here”; a grocery store; a nutrition class; community services; helping the elderly; lawn-related issues; decreasing noise; childcare resources, home ownership programs, art programming, more access to fresh produce, and absentee landlords.



2. When asking the second question of:

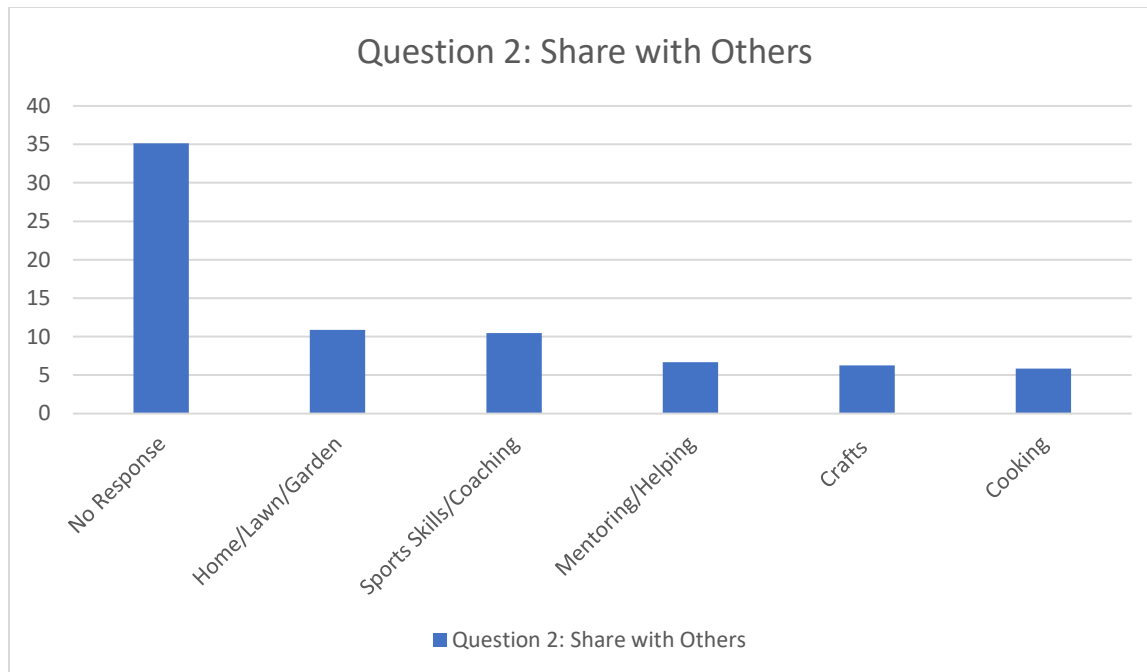
*What hobbies, interests, skills, or gifts do you have that you would like to improve or **share** with others?*

The most common responses are:

- N/A: 84/239 (**35.14%**)
- Home Improvement/Lawn Care/Gardening: 26/239 (**10.87%**)
- Sports and Sports Skills/Coaching: 25/239 (**10.46%**)
- Helping Others/Mentoring: 16/239 (**6.69%**)
- Sewing/Quilting/Knitting/Crafting: 15/239 (**6.27%**)
- Cooking: 14/239 (**5.85%**)

Other responses include things like yard work/maintenance, mentoring, CPR and First Aid, computer skills, gardening, music, mentoring, and much more.

- For the Sports and Sports Skills/Coaching response, the responses were usually related to basketball but also were related to soccer, BMX, volleyball, dance, roller skating, and other recreational activities.
- More than one in three East Bluff residents did not know which skills they possess that they think they could share with other community members.
- **75.28%** of respondents stated one of the six responses (above) for part one of the survey's second question.

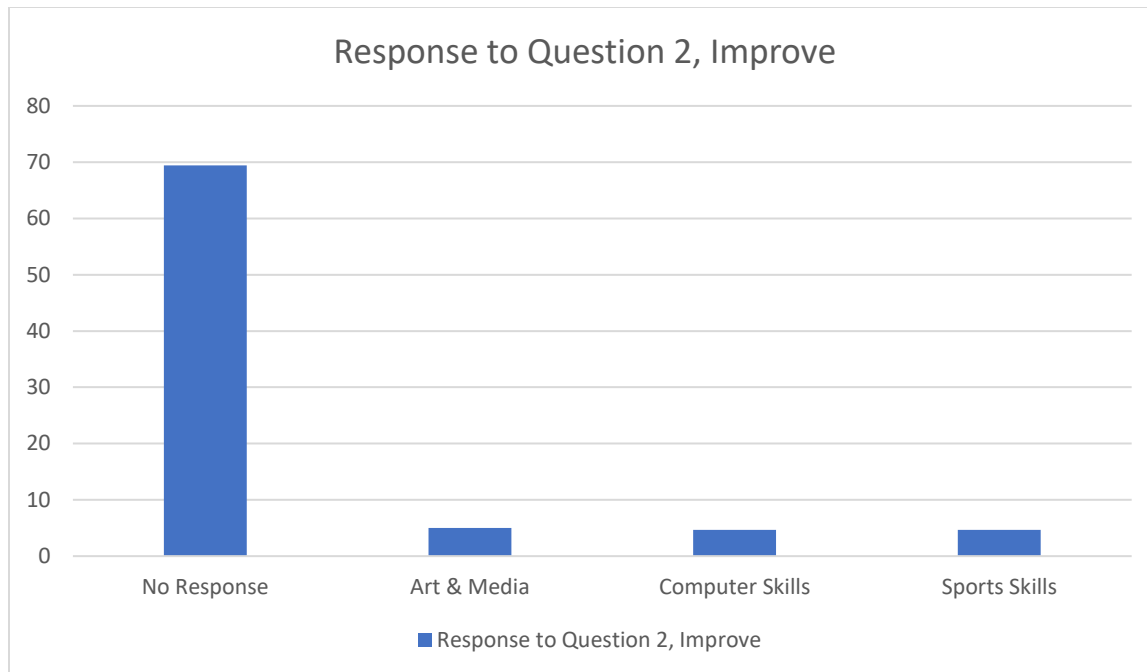


2(b). When it comes to the portion about what skills residents would like to **improve** on:

The number one response is:

- N/A: 166/239 (**69.45%**) (Seven out of ten residents in the East Bluff do not want to improve their skills based on how this survey was framed.)
- Arts/Crafts/Photography/Painting: 12/239 (**5.02%**)
- Computer skills: 11/239 (**4.66%**)
- Sports skills (basketball, dance, swimming): 11/239 (**4.66%**)

Other responses include more education, job assistance, guitar, exercise and more.



3. When asking the final question of

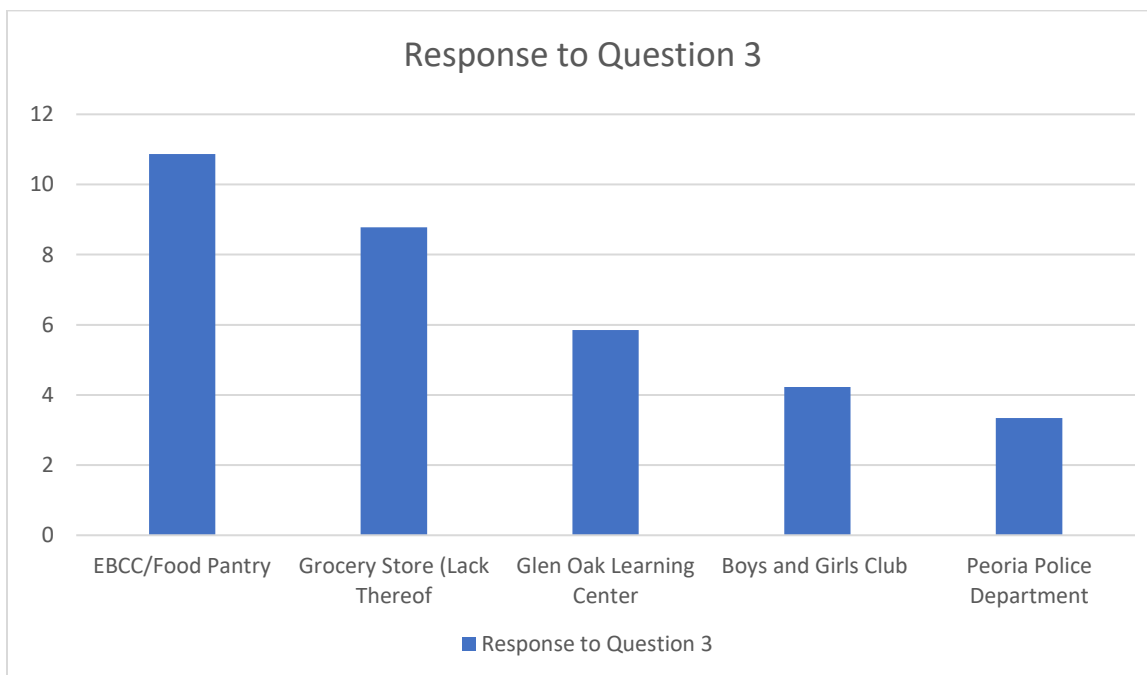
“Which people, businesses, resources and neighborhood groups do you find valuable in the East Bluff community?”

The most common responses are:

- East Bluff Community Center or our Food Pantry (or Food Pantry Manager Willa Lucas herself): 26/239= **10.87%**
- Grocery store related (lack thereof): 21/239, or **8.78%**
- Glen Oak Learning Center, 14/239 or **5.85%**
- Boys and Girls Club: 10/239, or **4.23%**, many of which stated EBCC and BGC in the same breath
- Police Department/Police Resource Center/Neighborhood Officer: 8/239, **3.34%**

Other common response for this question are Glen Oak Learning Center, Glen Oak Park, area businesses (Amir’s, Mi Familia, and La Tienda Mexicana were the most named), The East Bluff News Facebook page, EBNHS, and more.

The East Bluff Community Center has historically not done enough community outreach to expect vast awareness within the East Bluff neighborhood, but more community outreach such as the survey would be a beneficial focus moving forward.



All the resident responses for the EBCC neighborhood needs assessment were tracked, organized, and uploaded to an online database that the EBCC can refer to for years to come. This database is in the form of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that breaks down the survey respondent’s answers by question, as well as providing their address, phone number, and names. Any data kept and utilized by EBCC was with the permission of East Bluff residents when they answered our survey questions. Upon completion of the survey, I created four concluding,

evaluative documents for the EBCC to use as they find necessary: a short Microsoft PowerPoint presentation; a more extensive Microsoft PowerPoint presentation; a short Microsoft Word report, and more extensive version of that report as well.

Benefits of the Neighborhood Needs Assessment

Although Traynor (2012) argues that community organizing is often a pre-requisite for the creation of a structural framework for community, remiss from his discussion is the role that a comprehensive community center could have in spearheading the creation of a structural framework for community, which in turn could lay the foundation for an effective economic and community development apparatus that incorporates the views and desires of a neighborhood's residents, including at-risk youth living there. During my professional placement at the EBCC as its' Community Engagement Coordinator, I sought, with the guidance of EBCC's Executive Director, to lay the foundation for the beginning of a community building process. This community building process took root in the EBCC's Board of Directors collective desire to design, implement, and evaluate a new neighborhood needs assessment. Once I was hired on as an ACED Fellow, I worked with EBCC Board members and the Executive Director to create an assessment that gathered the data the EBCC needed to inform its' decision making. Once created and administered, the neighborhood needs assessment acted as the catalyst for community building in the East Bluff neighborhood in the form of resident engagement, and later, the spark for increased inter-organizational collaboration.

The second essential benefit of the neighborhood needs assessment was that the survey results provide the EBCC with a legitimate source of data and are an example of evidence-based

practice (or EBP). EBP is a promising framework for youth-serving community centers because it includes “interventions, programs, policies, and treatments that are supported by empirical evidence” (Palinkas 2019: 4). Scholars of EBP have stated that there is a large gap between the creation of evidence-based programs that prevent the risks associated with being a low-income American youth and the provision of these programs for at-risk youth (Palinkas 2019). It doesn’t make financial, social, or ethical sense to fund programs that, although good in intention, don’t help low-income, at-risk youth overcome their obstacles; in fact, it is morally abhorrent to not pay closer attention to how data-driven approaches may assist at-risk youth in leading better lives. Further, “evidence-based programs, policies, and practices are important because they aim to provide the most effective care that is available, with the aim of improving service user outcomes” (Palinkas 2019: 4). Gathering data, or evidence, and using it to make decisions, is an EBP. The EBCC, as I was there, did not make any strategic planning decisions without at least consulting, if not directly enacting, the desires and wishes of the East Bluff residents in the neighborhood assessment data. The data from the neighborhood needs assessment will inform the EBCC for many years to come by providing a structure upon which meaningful youth program partnerships can be founded.

The third and final benefit of the neighborhood needs assessment, on top of being a catalyst for community building and as a source of EBP, was that the data gleaned from the assessment will now serve as a “north-star” for the EBCC’s strategic planning. The Executive Director of EBCC, Kari Jones, emphasized that the role of the EBCC was to serve the East Bluff and not the other way around. Once we learned that East Bluff residents wanted far more youth programming, had skills and talents they can share with their neighbors, and view many

existing neighborhood institutions as assets, we began to shape our strategic plan around the creation, maintenance, and building of partnerships with Peoria's public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Within our goal to increase partnerships, there was a special emphasis on youth development as that was the East Bluff neighborhood's primary concern for EBCC to address. Interorganizational collaboration, the framework we utilized to build EBCC's Strategic Plan, was central to our understanding of how the EBCC could do more despite being lowly-funded, lacking staff, and having minimal financial capacity. Collaboration allows for organizations such as EBCC to accomplish more because "organizations face increasing budget restrictions and are challenged to do more with less." (Palinkas 2019: 77). Rather than doing less, organizations can engage in partnership-building that multiplies impact and boosts effectiveness. As a reminder, interorganizational collaboration is a central tenet of the all-encompassing integrated prevention and early intervention (IPEI) youth development model that the EBCC implemented while I was there. Not only was the data gathered from the assessment informative and evidence-based, but it is also in alignment with the best practices of youth development as well. Next, I will explore my second task of bolstering, strengthening, and creating new programmatic partnerships between the EBCC and other local organizations and businesses.

The Power of Community Partnerships

As mentioned prior, my work at the East Bluff Community Center revolved mostly around executing community outreach strategies that built the EBCC's capacity. My second primary task following the completion of the neighborhood needs assessment was to strengthen existing and cultivate new partnerships between the EBCC and Peoria's private, public, and nonprofit sectors. After evaluating the results from the neighborhood survey and

analyzing the data, Kari Jones (Executive Director of EBCC) and I agreed that prioritizing partnerships with other youth-serving organizations would be in alignment with resident needs, that we should keep a special focus on skill-building activities, and that we should collaborate with other “anchor institutions” in Peoria’s East Bluff neighborhood. This section first explores the work of strengthening existing partnerships that EBCC had prior to my arrival. Secondly, I discuss the process of cultivating and stewarding new partnerships with new agency partners. Lastly, I make partnership recommendations for the EBCC moving forward.

Strengthening Existing Partnerships

Partnerships between nonprofits and other entities are a central way to boost program capacity, create strong service networks, and drive community development in poor communities. “Partnerships serve to strengthen a program’s ties to the immediate and broader community. Further, these partnerships also create commissions and act as a source of potential referrals for program participants” (Delgado 2004: 163) Within the East Bluff Community Center are agencies, programs, and individuals who rent space, utilize the EBCC’s proximity to the community, and provide programming or services of some kind. When I arrived, the EBCC had several existing partnerships. These are the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Peoria, YMCA’s youth basketball program (Rebound), Knock Out Kings Boxing Club, Peoria Opportunities Foundation (an affordable housing developer), Turning Point (addiction recovery support group), WAZU 90.7 Strictly Hip Hop radio station, John Seckler (graphic design professional), Young at Heart (senior-to-senior organization), Peoria Humanists, and the EBCC Food Pantry. Of those organizations, I met with, worked alongside of, and built relationships with a representative or a director of each. While working at EBCC, I had a close working

relationship with some organizations, and I had a basic rapport with others. Those organizations whose work aligns with the EBCC and with the community development work I was conducting became the strongest relationships, whereas other organizations knew what I was doing but did not engage in active partnership. I worked extensively with Boys and Girls Club of Greater Peoria (including Director of Development and Programming Brooke Sommerville, Site Manager Shonda Brown, and Assistant Site Manager Eli Coenen); Knock Out Kings Boxing (Founder Robert Bell); John Seckler of John Seckler Design; EBCC Food Pantry (Manager Willa Lucas); and the Peoria Opportunities Foundation (CEO Jane Genzel, who is also an EBCC Board Member). The nature of how I strengthened partnerships varied based on each organization. Some of EBCC's existing partners did their own work and didn't need as much of my assistance as others. For example, Boys and Girls Club of Greater Peoria (BGC) and Knock Out Kings (KOK) readily design, administer, and sustain their own programs and activities prior to, during, and after my placement at EBCC. When it came to the just-mentioned organizations, I mainly provided programmatic, operational, and logistical support to these organizations. However, I worked more extensively and crafted robust partnerships with the EBCC's Food Pantry, Peoria Opportunities Foundation (POF), and John Seckler Design because their work aligned directly with mine as Community Engagement Coordinator and they lack the staff capacity and social capital that BGC and KOK Boxing have, respectively. The next sub-section explores the importance of afterschool programs for at-risk youth before contextualizing the EBCC's afterschool programs, the BGC and KOK.

The BGC has been located on the third floor of the EBCC roughly since the inception of the Center. This was one of former Director Jim Comb's first established partnerships. As such, I

was committed to keeping our primary afterschool (also known as OST, or out-of-school time) program in the EBCC for years to come. Boys and Girls Club of Greater Peoria, or BGC, offers academic support, snacks, and recreational time for East Bluff youth every day from 3:00 – 6:00pm. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hours of BGC were extended from 3:00pm to 1:00pm due to shortened (or completely virtual) in-person school hours. When it came to strengthening the EBCC’s partnership with BGC, I collaborated with them on building-related matters, acted as a sounding board and primary contact for their concerns, and assisted them in planning and implementing community building events such as their “Trunk or Treat” Halloween event or their annual Christmas party for their youth. Another one of former Director Comb’s earliest partnerships within the EBCC was with KOK Boxing, which is a youth development program that teaches young people the sport of boxing while instilling character development and academic achievement as well. When it came to strengthening our partnership with KOK, I built a strong relationship with founder Robert Bell and assisted him in marketing his program via our Facebook page by taking photos of his program and interviewing youth in his program for the EBCC Storytelling Initiative.

Both OST programs offer East Bluff youth access to safety, positive adult role models, nutritious food, and opportunities to explore and realize their recreational and social interests. In other words, both BGC and KOK are the dominant drivers of positive youth development at the EBCC. Collaborating with afterschool program providers are just one way that community centers can drive youth, community, and economic development. Both the KOK and BGC programs view young people as assets, as gamechangers in their own destinies, and in the power of young people to steer their own successful trajectory, all central to PYD. Both the KOK

and BGC afterschool programs encourage the 5 C's of positive youth development: competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring (Jenson et al. 2013: 26). Afterschool programs, in collaboration with community centers, may be an effective youth development model that incorporates elements of community and economic development principles. These afterschool programs boost youth quality of life by providing resources in neighborhoods where poverty is high, adding to that community's development. Further, these programs often teach soft skills such as patience, critical thinking, and teamwork that are central to succeeding in a 21st century economy. Although often discussed in relation to how they help youth, more research (such as this) should be geared toward the economic potential of OST programs such as the BGC and KOK at the EBCC. In addition to acknowledging the risk youth face, promoting protective factors, and implementing PYD through afterschool programs, the EBCC also increases access to nutrition (a protective factor) in a neighborhood that is considered a "food-desert."

The EBCC Food Pantry is the very first program that existed in the EBCC. It is operated by a group of hardworking volunteers, with Willa Lucas being the EBCC Food Pantry's manager. The partnership we strengthened with EBCC revolved around growing the pantry's capacity, improving its' operational efficiency, and innovating new programs. I consistently helped Willa Lucas with unloading, organizing, and storing groceries from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodity foods program, local grocery stores with whom Willa had established relationships with, and the wider community. Additionally, I helped bring emergency food bags to elderly and disabled residents in the East Bluff on countless occasions. I planned and executed special events such as a food drive with Notre Dame High School, a

Christmas-time toiletry drive with Richwoods High School, and a 150 food-box collection and distribution event for needy families in partnership with Peoria Police Department's Focus Deterrence Project Manager Chris Johnson. In addition to helping the food pantry with general operations and special events, I helped facilitate the placing of a Food Pantry and Nutrition Intern with the food pantry. I developed the framework for the internship and explained the role to the intern, George. His tasks range from developing cooking demonstrations and exposing people to "new" food and improving the pantry's overall operations to strategizing ways that we can better serve our clients and advocate for the hungry. I established a framework for George that will give him a concrete understanding of food pantries from the perspective of clients, the USDA, grocery stores, food banks, and the pantry itself. Food insecurity is a major risk in the East Bluff due to high levels of poverty; the neighborhood's only comprehensive grocery store closed about two years ago. By acknowledging the risk that is food insecurity in Peoria's East Bluff, I was then able to institutionalize the IPEI into encouraging the EBCC Food Pantry to remain a protective factor for the neighborhood's youth and their families. All the activities I completed for the EBCC Food Pantry were done with the intention of boosting the food program's capacity. By boosting the capacity of the EBCC Food Pantry, I was in alignment with the IPEI's promotion of youth protective factors by strengthening a dominant nutrition provider for East Bluff families. Not only did I strengthen the EBCC's partnership with the OST programs and the food pantry, but I also augmented the partnership the EBCC has with the Peoria Opportunities Foundation.

Peoria Opportunities Foundation (POF) is an affordable housing development organization on the EBCC's second floor. POF is ran by Executive Director Jane Genzel, who also happens to

be an EBCC Board member. Jane Genzel is a wealth of knowledge on the East Bluff, housing, and community development in Peoria. She invited me to attend East Bluff Partners meetings (a newly created Community Comprehensive Initiative (CCI) of EBCC “anchor institutions”) and asked me to present my initial findings of the survey to her board members to boost their knowledge of the concerns facing the East Bluff. During my placement POF was amid a process of tearing down old properties, purchasing city-owned lots, and developing affordable duplex housing for low-income residents of the East Bluff. In conjunction with the creation of housing, POF hired an Outreach and Program Manager, Ashley, who I worked closely with on planning the Great American Cleanup by mapping the territory to be cleaned and recruiting volunteers. Ashley and I also conducted general community outreach three times in the parking lot of the East Bluff’s Family Dollar on Wisconsin Avenue. How does housing relate to the IPEI? To touch base, the IPEI acknowledges risk, promotes protective factors, and instills positive youth development through interorganizational collaboration. Housing instability is a major risk factor in the East Bluff. Many residents stated that “slum-lords” and lack of access to affordable, decent housing is a neighborhood-wide problem (see survey results above). Just as housing instability is a major risk factor, access to housing is a major environmental and familial protective factor (Jenson et al. 2013). Although POF does not concern itself with enacting PYD, it still is in alignment with the IPEI’s focus on risk and protection. Lastly, POF practices interorganizational collaboration because they work regularly with the EBCC on coordinated outreach campaigns, in the East Bluff Partners CCI, and with other organizations in Peoria.

Strengthening existing partnerships was central to maintaining the groundwork that Jim Combs and other EBCC supporters established before I was even considered part of the EBCC. It

is through these partnerships that the EBCC will maintain its' strength and only grow stronger. BGC and KOK provide critical safe-space, positive youth-adult relationships, and positive youth development programming for hundreds of at-risk, East Bluff youth each year. JSD is the only graphic designer located in the East Bluff. The EBCC food pantry serves thousands of individuals and families a year in a neighborhood that does not have a grocery store. POF is providing the means for East Bluff families to reach self-sufficiency through access to high quality, affordable housing. All these partnerships are in alignment with the IPEI by either decreasing a risk, promoting a protective factor, enacting PYD, by being in collaboration in Peoria's East Bluff, or some combination of them. Although the existing partnerships at EBCC were fruitful and valued by the neighborhood, not all the neighborhood's residents' needs are met. Hence, I sought to build many more partnerships while in Peoria at the EBCC. The next subsection of this section on partnership-building explores the cultivation of new programmatic partnerships with new organizations in Peoria.

Fostering New Partnerships

When it came to cultivating new partnerships with organizations and businesses in Peoria, Kari Jones and I focused primarily on organizations that served youth. We did so because the most common response (over 33%) to question one of the neighborhood needs assessment was that youth development and engagement should be the EBCC's focus. Thus, I began a campaign of outreach to local youth-serving organizations and other organizations that may be interested in beginning to serve the East Bluff's youth more intentionally. The new partnerships we established during my professional placement were diverse in scope, operations, and mission,

but Kari and I were focused on one critical question: how can these organizations help us serve the East Bluff's youth more readily, more thoroughly, and more thoughtfully?

By the end of my professional placement, the EBCC had met with almost 30 partners. Some of the meetings between the EBCC and other organizations were simply to build rapport and allow for exposure of the EBCC. Other meetings led to fruitful, involved partnerships that will serve the EBCC for years to come. The organizations we attempted (and at times, succeeded) to partner with were Children's Home of Central Illinois; Look! It's My Book!; Peoria-Area World Affairs Council; Peoria Art Guild; Peoria Corps; the Peoria Park District; the Peoria Public Schools Foundation; Ronald McDonald House of Central Illinois; American Red Cross; Big Brothers, Big Sisters of the Heart of Illinois; Bradley University's Braves L.E.A.D. program; CareerLink; Hawk-Attollo Solar Development; Heartland Health Services; Jewish Federation; University of Illinois Extension; the Acorn Equality Fund, Central Illinois Friends and Peoria Proud; Andy Diaz; CASA; the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council; Illinois Housing and Development Authority; Junior Achievement of Central Illinois; OSF; the Peoria Symphony Orchestra; Peoria Guild of Black Artists (PGOBA), Richwoods High School, and the W.D. Boyce Council.

Of our partnership meetings, we established the most promising, collaborative partnerships with Look! It's My Book!, the Peoria Area World Affairs Council, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Heart of Illinois; Braves LEAD at Bradley University; Heartland Health Services; Richwoods High School; Glen Oak Learning Center; and the Acorn Equality Fund, Central Illinois Friends and Peoria Proud (four way partnership). The other meetings went well, and it was important to introduce the EBCC to the community and the vice versa, but due to a lack of

mission alignment, resources, or other reasons, the other potential partnerships have not yet been fully established.

Moving Forward: Robust Partnerships

The most dominant partnerships that I helped establish were with Look! It's My Book!, Peoria Area World Affairs Council, Glen Oak Learning Center, Peoria Art Guild, Richwoods High School, Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Central Illinois, Heartland Health Services, Bradley University, Girl Scouts, and with a few LGBTQ organizations. First, the Look! It's My Book! partnership centers around literacy promotion. Each month, this organization brings in free books for youth who attend Boys and Girls Club. During my professional placement, we completed three book-drives (one each month) and the EBCC plans to continue doing so throughout the coming school year. Look! It's My Book! has distributed hundreds of books to low-income youth in Peoria's East Bluff. This partnership matters immensely because the East Bluff is in dire need of more educational resources. Secondly, we collaborated with the Peoria Area World Affairs Council, or PAWAC. PAWAC is planning with Kari Jones to host cultural literacy events in the fall at the EBCC which will highlight the different ethnic communities present in greater Peoria. The events will involve food, dance, music, and cultural competence building activities. The Peoria World Affairs Council also ran an "international book-drive" for the EBCC's library in which over 100 books were donated. As a reminder, high levels of commitment to school and learning are a central theme in the IPEI's youth protective factors. By promoting access to books and literacy, the EBCC institutionalized the creation of partnerships that fuel youth protection.

The third most promising partnership we established was with Glen Oak Learning Center. Glen Oak Learning Center is the East Bluff's primary K-8 school. The EBCC and Principal of Glen Oak Learning Center, Ilthea Suggs, established a relationship in which troubled kids from Glen Oak were placed at the EBCC for their remote learning. Many of the boys involved in this "School within a School" program were involved in altercations that distracted from their learning. The school's solution was to place these four young men at the EBCC with a teacher in one of our community rooms and do school that way. This is a promising alternative education model for at-risk youth at Glen Oak Learning Center. In addition to hoping this placement increased these boys commitment to school, it also encouraged them to take be accountable for their actions, think critically, and develop competence. These themes are in alignment with the EBCC's utilization of the IPEI's PYD model. By collaborating with a school to deliver innovative school programming, the EBCC is also institutionalizing an environmental protective factor by being an opportunity for education (Jenson et. al 2013).

Next, Kari Jones and I established partnerships with organizations that could teach neighborhood youth the 5 C's of PYD: competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring. These partnerships include the Peoria Art Guild, Richwoods High School, and Big Brothers Big, Big Sisters of the Heart of Illinois. The Peoria Art Guild and EBCC collaborated to offer sewing, painting, youth art, and other art classes at the Center, free of charge or at a low-cost. Further, they are using the East Bluff Community Center as their hub for their summer youth art camp being held in mid-July. After reaching out to the school administration at Richwoods High School, the EBCC and Richwoods youth collaborated on a toiletry drive for recipients of the EBCC food pantry. Additionally, many Richwoods students assisted me in the

building revitalization that took place in the EBCC in which we cleaned, painted, and refreshed the building's corridors and community rooms. EBCC established a strong working relationship with Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Central Illinois by discussing the possibility of the EBCC being a "Mentor Space" for BBBS volunteers. Additionally, I helped recruit potential "bigs" from the neighborhood for BBBS Program Manager Hannah Daly. Lastly, the Big Brothers, Big Sisters of the Heart of Illinois held a successful mentor event in our gym which I helped facilitate and plan with BBBS staff. The EBCC and BBBS plan to collaborate more in the future on innovative community building events in the East Bluff. Art programs, youth empowerment opportunities such as a building revitalization in which youth learn new skills like painting, and access to mentors are themes that wedge nicely into the EBCC as being simultaneously risk-reducing, protection-promoting, and teaching values that are in alignment with PYD through interorganizational partnerships.

Heartland Health Services co-sponsored a cooking demonstration with a local nutritionist graduate student from Bradley University and streamed it on our Facebook page. Additionally, we hosted a Día del Niño (Day of the Child) event for the East Bluff's Latino community. I assisted with outreach by putting up flyers at over twenty local businesses. This event was an enormous success in that we served dozens of Latino families (around 200 attendees) with food, games, and access to resources in our gymnasium. I collaborated with Heartland Health staff to accomplish this event and it was a rousing success. Poor health is a risk factor for many in poverty. Access to good health is another critical protective factor and partnering with Heartland Health Services allowed for the EBCC to tag on yet another protective factor in the form of healthcare and access to it. When discussing the reduction of

risk factors and the promotion of protective factors, another fruitful partnership is the Girl Scouts. The Girl Scouts and EBCC have partnered to recruit parents and families from the East Bluff to form a Girl Scout troop for girls in the neighborhood. The Girl Scouts now use Room 101 as their meeting hub on Tuesday nights for their newly forming troop. The Girl Scouts promote the use of PYD, one of the IPEI's central tools. By granting neighborhood girls more access to protective factors such as Girl Scouts, the EBCC further established the IPEI model with rigor. The final partnership we established was a four-way partnership with Acorn Equality Fund, Central Illinois Friends, and Peoria Proud. This is a four-way partnership amongst these three organizations and the EBCC. Acorn Equality Fund gives scholarships to LGBTQ+ youth, Central Illinois Friends is a pro-LGBTQ+ rights organization that advocates on behalf LGBTQ+ rights in central Illinois, and Peoria Proud is a gay-straight alliance between the families of gay and lesbian children and the wider community. These organizations and the EBCC discussed establishing a safe-place, mentoring lounge, and support services for LGBTQ+ youth living in the East Bluff. Being LGBTQ+ is a risk factor for many at-risk youths. Allowing for access to mentors, safe spaces, and skill development equips the East Bluff 's LGBTQ+ youth with more protective factors (IPEI) with which they can face barriers and hopefully, overcome those adversities.

Systemic Partnership: Bradley University and John Seckler Design

The three-way partnership established with Bradley University and John Seckler Design (JSD) was the most productive, effective partnership that I helped the EBCC establish as their Community Engagement Coordinator. Upon coming to the EBCC, I noticed that the interior of the building was dated, not welcoming, and was in dire need of fresh design. John Seckler Design agreed with my thoughts on the building. John Seckler Design is an independent graphic

design business founded and ran by graphic design professional John Seckler. He is a self-employed graphic designer who, at the time, was doing free-lance work out of his office, which was located on the second floor of the EBCC. As I came on board and built a relationship with John, we began to explore opportunities to create a youth arts program for the East Bluff called "Room 303." The partnership EBCC and I established with John Seckler was one that transformed the entire interior from an antiquated Catholic school into a vibrant, welcoming youth center. Once JSD was on board with the idea of transforming the Center, I reached out to Bradley University for volunteers. The Assistant Director of the Lewis J. Burger Center for Leadership and Service, Ben Wright. Ben informed me that the Center was going to be spearheading an initiative called "Braves L.E.A.D.", which stands for Learn, Empower, Achieve, Develop. This initiative gives Bradley students leadership development by encouraging them to read about social justice issues, discuss them with the Center's staff, and implement a "student social change project" for area nonprofits. Once I spoke with Ben and pitched him mine and JSD's idea to transform the EBCC's corridors and community rooms, he immediately put our bid in. Luckily, the EBCC is one of just two organizations in all of Peoria that was chosen.

The Bradley students arrived in February. I had a four-student team. Their names were Gabi, Maddy, Baloy, and Bailey, being three women and one man. The first task was for the students to meet John and discuss the building revitalization project with John's design ideas in mind. John wanted to keep the EBCC historic while also fueling vibrancy and transformation of the space. Once the students familiarized themselves with John and his ideas, the next step was for us to accrue the paint, supplies, and equipment necessary to clean, paint, and transform the EBCC. Upon reaching out to local paint companies, the Braves LEAD team and I secured a paint

donation of over one hundred gallons of paint. Additionally, we secured paint supplies from a different paint store in town. This process empowered these young people to grow their competence, instill in them community service (caring), and foster connection between themselves, which are all key themes in PYD. Once we secured the supplies necessary to paint the interior of the EBCC, we needed volunteers. The volunteers came from a broad, diverse group of individuals including but not limited to neighborhood residents, neighborhood youth, and those in need of community service hours. These seemingly divergent groups of people worked together to achieve a common goal of transforming the Center through cleaning, painting, and the creation of new, vibrant community rooms with new purposes.

While conducting the building revitalization, I sought to contextualize the process within the IPEI's definitions of meaningful partnerships. The IPEI describes three different partnership networks that range from embryonic on the low end to mature on the strong end (Jenson et. al 2013). Many of the partnerships we established while I was at EBCC were either obligational, meaning the organizations engaged in some form of exchange, or promotional, in which organizations worked together to pool resources and solve a problem in tandem (Jenson et. al. 2013: 54). Our partnership with the food pantry is obligational; EBCC provided space, the pantry provided nutrition for residents. The EBCC's partnership with Peoria Opportunities Foundation was promotional; the EBCC and POF shared resources (such as the results of the neighborhood needs assessment) to solve problems (such as housing instability in the East Bluff). However, the partnership with Bradley University and John Seckler Design took things a step further and can be classified as a "systemic partnership", the most mature and robust of the collaborations Jenson et. al (2013) write on (34). Systemic partnerships involve producing

joint products and services (34). When EBCC collaborated with Bradley University Braves LEAD and JSD, the EBCC's vibrant interior became a joint product. The EBCC could not have done this revitalization process without the coordination and effort of Bradley and other volunteers, nor could it have accomplished this endeavor without the design influence of John Seckler of JSD. This product, a freshly painted, renewed community center, can be utilized as a welcoming hub of family and youth activity in Peoria's East Bluff for generations to come. That is the definition of what Jenson et. al (2013) describe as systemic partnerships being group-oriented, sequential, and intense.

By the end of the community center revitalization process, the EBCC transformed its' main corridor, two hallways, and three community rooms into vibrant, beautiful spaces for generations upon generations of East Bluff residents to use. By painting the interior of the EBCC and making new community rooms, the EBCC was reducing environmental risk factors by becoming a more "vibrant place to gather" in a low-income neighborhood. By teaching young people such as college students and neighborhood youth the power of learning new skills such as painting, the EBCC instilled in them a myriad of protective factors, namely intelligence, temperament, and soft skills. Additionally, by showing young people that they have the ability to develop skills, we taught them the 5 C's of PYD without even mentioning that phrase: competence by building new skills; connection by introducing youth to each other and encouraging them to work together; character by teaching young people the value of community service; confidence in their ability to enact real social change; and caring for the community by engaging in a community building process in coordination with the EBCC.

Conclusion

This paper summarized the author's 11-month professional practicum at the East Bluff Community Center (EBCC) in Peoria, Illinois. The neighborhood the EBCC is in, Peoria's East Bluff, struggles with poverty, housing instability, and other social ills that plague low-income communities around the United States of America. This paper explored the existing literatures on community, economic, and youth development and found that very few works of writing have ever explored the notion that community centers *are* vehicles of effective youth-centric community and economic development. When exploring the literature on youth development, the Integrated Prevention and Early Intervention Model (IPEI) was the most promising model for delivering services to at-risk youth. The IPEI incorporates theoretical background into its' framework by facilitating the integration of risk, resilience, and positive youth development through an evidence-based approach called interorganizational collaboration. While placed as the EBCC's Community Engagement Coordinator, I institutionalized the IPEI into the Center's neighborhood assessment, partnership-building process, and building revitalization project. These projects sought to reduce risk, create protective factors, promote PYD, and facilitate interorganizational collaboration into the EBCC's strategic direction for at-risk youth.

Although the EBCC accomplished a lot during my tenure there, more research must be done to shed light on the power of community centers driving community and economic development for at-risk youth in low-income, American communities. Perhaps scholars will explore, more than I have, the power of workforce-private sector connections and their impact on youth joblessness. Perhaps practitioners of youth development will expand on this study to include more thoughtful analysis on how comprehensive community centers may drive

community and economic development for specific groups of at-risk youth, such as Native American youth, disabled youth, or LGBTQ+ youth. Maybe policymakers will use this study to inform their understanding of why community centers and their programs are so critically important for at-risk youth in low-income communities. My hope is that this paper acts as a guidepost for all those Americans who care as much as I do about at-risk youth and their socioeconomic trajectories.

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