



# 2024 Youth Empowerment Program

END OF YEAR SUMMARY 2024



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# OVERVIEW

Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) is a 9-session cohort for high school students that focuses on learning leadership skills, public speaking, and community engagement. Through the cohort, scholars learn to identify issues affecting their communities, along with developing and implementing plans for positive youth-led change. The program culminates in a Youth Empowerment Summit hosted and planned by the YEP scholars.

Using an asset-based community approach with an appreciative inquiry framework, the scholars identify community issues, determine what makes them issues and create solutions ranging from programs to policy. Scholars also take a CliftonStrengths assessment that identifies the measures their unique talents -- their natural patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving.

YEP has tier one scholars (first years) and tier two plus scholars (second and subsequent years). Tier one focuses on leadership vision with an emphasis on self-discovery, along with identifying community issues. Tier two plus focuses on forming a community action plan and implementing that plan, along with continuing their leadership vision.

YEP is offered by the MU Extension as a collaboration between Community Development and 4-H Youth Development programs. YEP provides access to community development principles in addition to the many opportunities of 4-H. Some opportunities include participating in local 4-H events, ACT prep days, national Conferences, and attending the statewide 4-H Youth Futures Conference at the University of Missouri campus in Columbia where they learned about college and career readiness.



Asset-based community approach  
"builds on the assets that are already found in the community and mobilizes individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to build on their assets, not concentrate on their needs."  
- Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas





# 2024 YEP COHORT

The 2024 YEP Cohort met on various Saturdays from January to June for a total of nine (9) sessions. These sessions culminated in the Youth Empowerment Summit where scholars shared their findings with the community and graduated from the program. YEP had 19 scholars successfully graduate and complete this year’s cohort.

## Tier One

- Manady Alhajjaj
- Akira Hill
- Ave’ March
- Alisha Shouldeen
- Jerry Benton
- Alexis Kinani
- Michael Purcell
- Bra’nae Stovall
- Kimberly “Kiki” Sanders-Fritz

## Tier Two plus

- Madisyn Benford
- Xavier Holmes
- Eunice Kumbe
- Antara Panwar
- Mahitha Donepudi
- Olivia Karanja
- Vedha Inampudi
- Akilesh Rajan
- Arthur Schmidt

## Mentor

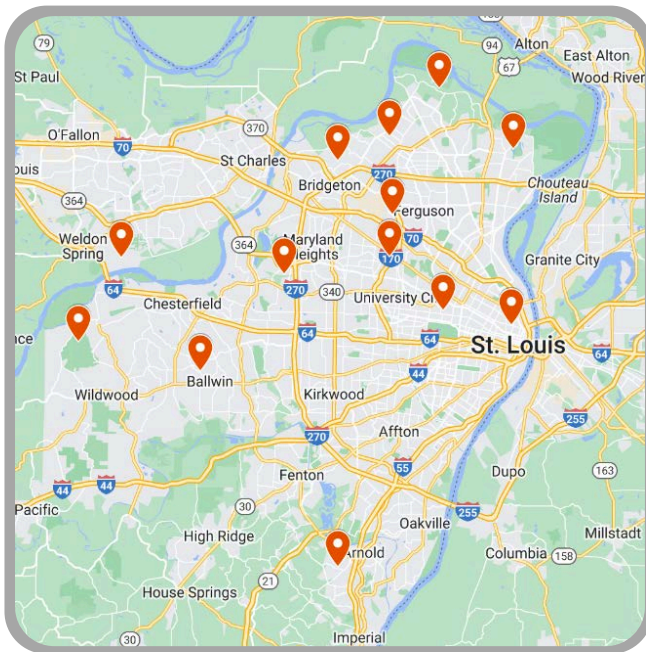
- Grace Gitau

# DEMOGRAPHICS OF 2024 YEP SCHOLARS

YEP serves youth from all across the St. Louis County and St. Louis City region. The 2024 YEP cohort had a total of 24 participants with 19 scholars graduating from the program.

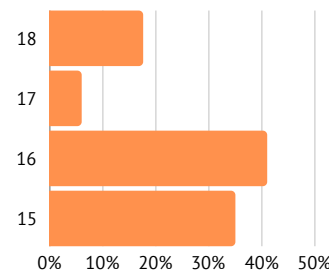
See graduate demographic information down below:

## LOCATION

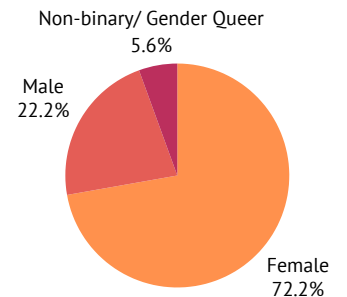


Scholar location ranged across St. Louis County and City

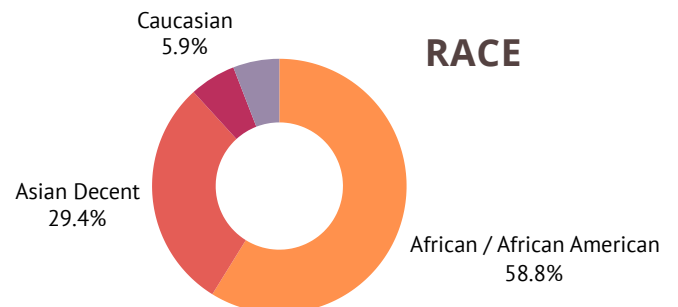
## AGE



## GENDER



## RACE





# DEFINITIONS AND DISCOVERY

Tier one scholars identified definitions of two community issues: Violence in schools and Education reform. Tier two scholars focused on three community issues: Diversity in education, Sex education, and Gun violence.

## DEFINITIONS

### Tier One

#### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM

- **Violence in Schools:** Violence in schools is often overlooked within our community, and there is a lack of guidance on resolving these issues.
- **Education Reform:** We want schools to be a safe, comfortable place with trustworthy adults and accessible opportunities for students to plan their futures.

#### BRAINSTORMED SOLUTIONS

- **Violence in Schools:** To bring awareness to some of the issues students contend with at schools. Making mental health resources more readily available, more investment in school counselors and student help.
- **Education Reform:** Incentives for teachers to invest in their education for their students, more readily available information about future paths for students, personalized education, and more reliable adults at schools.

### Tier Two

#### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM

- **Gun Violence:** The United States had the highest rate of firearm homicides in 2021.
- **Diversity in Education:** The lack of cultural and ethnic diversity and backgrounds when teaching both students and teachers.
- **Sex Education:** Everyone deserves the right to a proper sex education; kids, teenagers, and adults, regardless of race, sex, sexuality, and gender.

#### BRAINSTORMED SOLUTIONS

- **Gun Violence:** Breaking down the normalization and desensitization within our society. This includes promoting smart gun locks and bringing awareness to mental health.
- **Diversity in Education:** Understanding what is currently being taught, curriculum plans, connecting with educators.
- **Sex Education:** To promote awareness and the use of Comprehensive Sex Ed to everyone.

## DISCOVERY

Both tiers employed surveys developed by the YEP scholars to help them gather quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose of these surveys was to gain feedback on the relevance of the community issues, access community experiences, and to better understand existing community solutions. Scholars drafted questions that they determined would solicit the best responses. Scholars and Facilitation Team shared the survey link with their networks of peers, friends and youth organizations/programs. Below are some of the key take-aways the scholars collected from their surveys. Scholars will use this data as part of their research for future action planning.

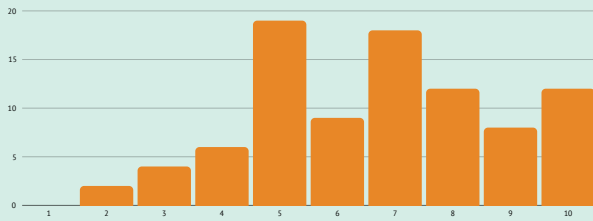
# TIER ONE: VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS - KEY TAKE-AWAYS

## Survey findings

From 91 responses

Scholars categorized the issue of Violence in Schools into various subtopics and distributed a survey to students, teachers, and parents.

### How safe do you feel in your school/community? (1-10)



### Summary:

- The average score for question one is 6.7.
- Pahokee & Gateway High School achieved the lowest average percentage of 3%.
- The average score of parents or non-high school students is 6.6

### Why?

Scholars focused on understanding the safety protocols in educational institutions and the communities around them. Their goal is to pinpoint areas that need attention to create a safe and secure environment for everyone involved.

### How has violence in schools affected you?

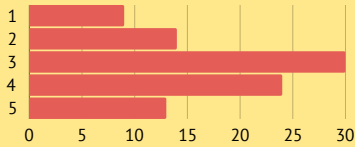
Scholars requested respondents to share how they believe these forms of violence in their community has impact them personally. Below are some example responses we have collected that we felt best displayed the severity of this communal issue:

A student from Gateway High stated that "Makes me feel unsafe but also vigilant and aware. It also affects my trust in people."

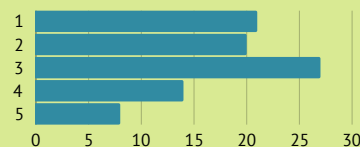
Another student from Hazelwood East High School shared that it, "Pours fear in me and others walking out of the house not know what to expect or if your gonna make it back home."

The feedback indicated that the situation has instilled a new sense of fear and caution in their lives, adversely affecting both their own and their friends' mental well-being.

### How much of an issue is violence in your school/community? (1-5)

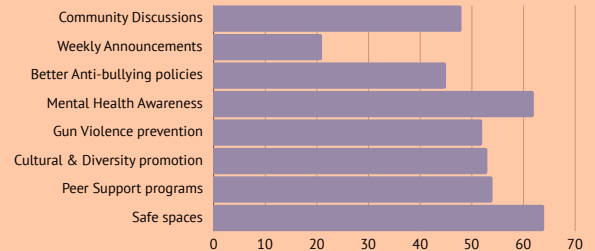


### How much are these issues talked about in your school/community (1-5)



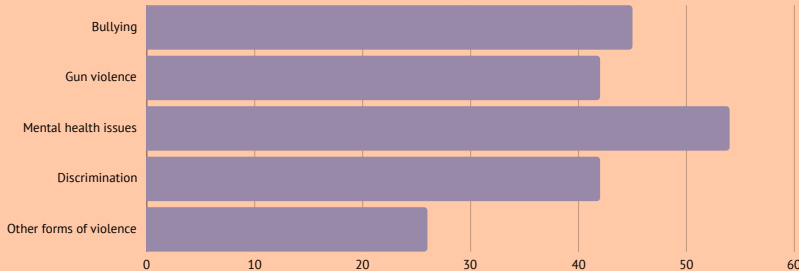
### Which of these do you feel would make a change in your community?

Multiple choice/check box responses



### What do you feel is the biggest issue is in your community?

Multiple choice/check box responses



### Summary:

Mental health issues & Bullying is the category that was chosen the most.

- 60% chose Mental health issues
- 50% chose Bullying

Others chose to write open choice options like:

Fighting, Ignorance of the problems mentioned, Drugs, Rapists, Followers. Social media, and People struggling with finding themselves.

### What Could Be?

"In order to bring awareness to the issue of violence in schools, Our goal is to educate students about the various forms of violence prevalent in our community.

We strive to create a healthy environment that allows students to feel comfortable enough to speak up and to educate those who aren't aware of the issue."

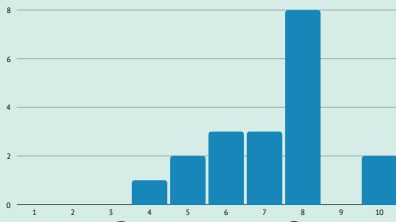
-Tier One 2024 YEP Cohort Scholars

# TIER ONE: EDUCATION REFORM - KEY TAKE-AWAYS

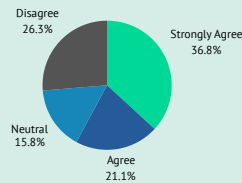
## Survey findings

From 19 responses

On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least safe/comfortable and 10 being the most safe/comfortable), how comfortable & safe do you feel at school?



Do you feel there are enough trustworthy adults in schools?



### Comfort Level:

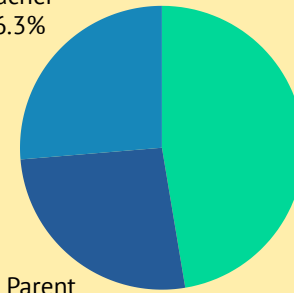
Based on the answers above, Scholars identified that most adults feel comfortable in schools. Several students explained how their relationship with teachers makes them feel comfortable in the classroom; however, many feel that there is potential for danger.

Main concerns with safety and feeling comfortable include:

- Violence
- Lack of representation (LGBTQIA+ and race)
- Inability to process emotions to make informed decisions
- Lack of involvement from staff in case of a situation
- Hard to find someone to talk to
- Not enough consequences for actions

Are you a high school student, parent, or teacher?

Teacher  
26.3%

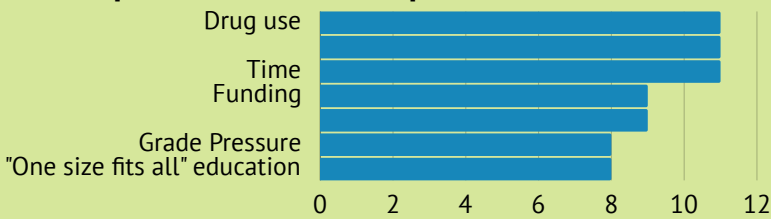


High school Student  
47.4%

Parent  
26.3%

### Top Issues In Education

Multiple choice/check box responses



### What Could Be?

"Our goal is to make school a safe, comfortable place with trustworthy adults and accessible opportunities for students to plan their futures."

-Tier One 2024 YEP Cohort Scholars

With this information in mind, scholars are asking community members to consider talking to local school boards, governmental entities, and any leaders within their community. Scholars encourage members to think about how these issues impact the educational environment and lead to members of school communities to feel less comfortable.

### Identifying possible solutions and obstacles

Scholars got many ideas from respondents about possible solutions along with potential obstacles. Below Scholars compiled the responses into the following data.

#### Possible Solutions:

- Educating parents about drug usage, providing programs with experienced speakers to connect with both students and parents
- Focus on individuals > groups to provide a specialized pathway
- Better pay for teachers and custodians
- Transparency with tax payers about educational needs for improved technology
- Adding 5-10 minutes for lunch times (for a total of 35-45 minutes)
- Modernization of schools to decrease problems related to cleanliness
- Maximize student learning time, not actively learning = ability to leave
- Teacher training for mental health support
- Increased gun control and safety precautions
- Take teachers' concerns about behavior seriously

#### Potential Obstacles:

- Unwilling adults (voters, administration, teachers, etc.)
- Funding
- False narratives
- Political influence in schools
- Lack of attention for school/people don't care
- Not enough student leadership opportunities
- Lack of parent involvement/denial
- Guns
- Poor representation in legislation (not enough teachers/principles)

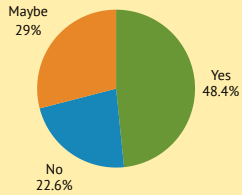


# TIER TWO: DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

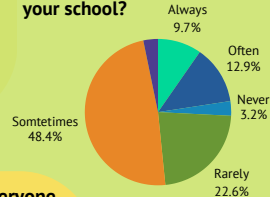
## Survey findings

From 31 responses

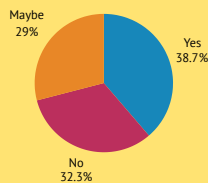
Has anyone ever made you feel bad about yourself in any way related to your race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or cultural background?



How often do you feel like diversity is talked about at your school?



Among your peers does everyone receive the same type of treatment despite differences like race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or cultural background?

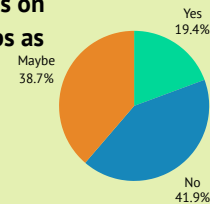


“We hope to establish an unbiased environment and culturally inclusive atmosphere through the alteration of the mindset of staff/educators”  
-Tier Two 2024 YEP Cohort Scholars

### Research:

- Studies have shown that having diverse classrooms helps develop tolerance and a greater sense of security when in environments with other foreign cultures present
- When working and learning with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, students gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter
- Teaching diversity in the classroom promotes creativity, as well as better education, as those with differing viewpoints are able to collaborate to create solutions

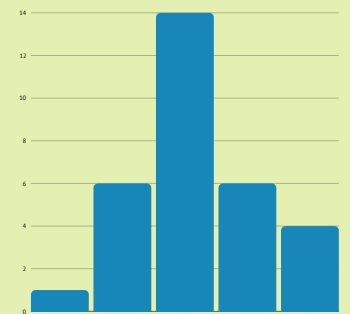
Does the curriculum you teach focus on minority groups as much as other groups?



If yes, how?

- consistently learning about cultures that are overlooked or not very popular
- frequent talks about different groups of people
- often focus on one-sided things and the western perspective

How often are minorities talked about/represented in your curriculum?



### Action Plan:

Scholars plan to get into contact with organization that can provide funds and support for future endeavors.

- L.O.V.E. project
- National Association for Multicultural Education

They also contacted administration at both the Rockwood School District and the Francis Howell District to present to teachers about their concerns with the current curriculum and teaching styles present in their classrooms.

Scholars planned and facilitated a student International Day at their school - pictured here:





# TIER TWO: SEX EDUCATION

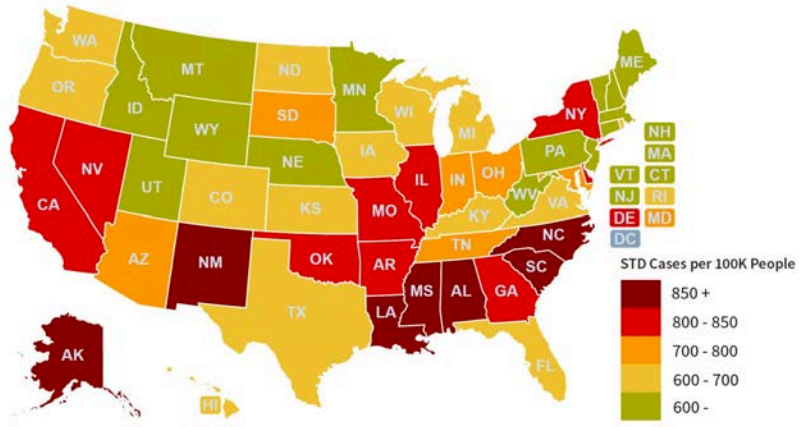
## Why we need better Sex Ed in Missouri

### Scholar Research:

#### What is current Sex Education in Missouri?

Missouri schools are not required to teach sex education. However, they are required to teach health education, including HIV/AIDS prevention education.

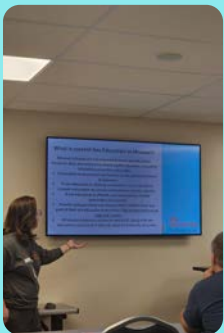
- Curriculum must present abstinence as the preferred choice of behavior.
- If sex education is offered, curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- If sex education is offered, curriculum must include instruction on consent.
- Parents and guardians can remove their children from any part of their sex education instruction. This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.
- All course materials related to HIV/AIDS, along with sex education curriculum if offered, must be medically accurate.



- In Missouri, approximately 10,000 people are living with HIV, with approximately 500 new infections reported each year.
- Black youth are nearly ten times as likely as white youth to be diagnosed with chlamydia between the ages of 15 to 19 in the St. Louis area.
- In a 2023 survey, the Saint Louis University Transgender Health Collaborative found that 6% of adults and 3% of youth in Missouri are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

- 47% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide in the past year, as well as 55% of trans and non-binary youth.
- In Missouri, it is estimated that one in three women and one in seven men has experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.

### Scholar Action:



YEP Scholar Arthur Schmidt facilitated group conversations during the Youth Empowerment Summit. These open conversations centered around the need for Comprehensive Sex Education not only in Missouri, but nationwide. Arthur also is involved with multiple different organizations dedicating to advocating comprehensive sex ed for all,



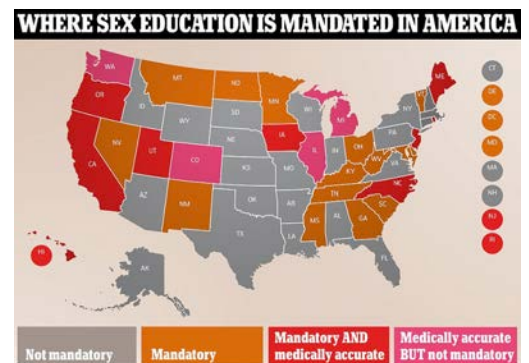
#### What is Comprehensive Sex Ed?

Comprehensive Sex Ed (CSE) teaches people the knowledge and skills they can apply to their relationships (sexual, romantic, and friendships), going in depth about boundaries, healthy vs. non-healthy relationships, how to focus on one’s own sexual pleasure, and critical thinking skills when faced with sexual encounters and conversations.

#### CSE also teaches:

- Intersectionality within sex
- Sexuality within disabilities
- Addressing racism in sex
- Sex, sexuality, gender, and gender expression
- Sexual violence and how to stay safe
- Skills for health and well-being

“Everyone deserves the right to a proper sex education; kids, teenagers, and adults, regardless of race, sex, sexuality, and gender.”



# TIER TWO: GUN VIOLENCE

## Scholar Research:

### Reasons For Gun Violence

#### Poverty

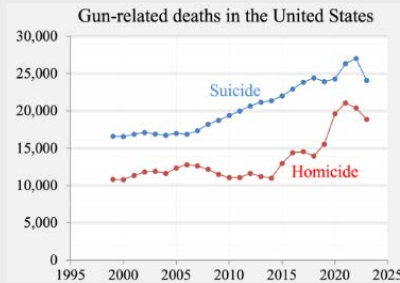
- Center for Economic and Policy Research, the United States experienced an increase in firearm homicides between 2019 and 2020 (start of COVID-19 pandemic and a rise in job unemployment)
- Counties with the highest poverty levels saw a higher increase in firearm homicides compared to counties with the lowest poverty levels

#### Lack of Education

- FBI violent crime statistics and US Census Bureau reports indicate a correlation between the number of people who do (or do not) attain a high-school and/or post-secondary education and violent crime rates
- Because of its strong links to economic instability, poor-quality education also contributes to an environment where gun violence is more likely.

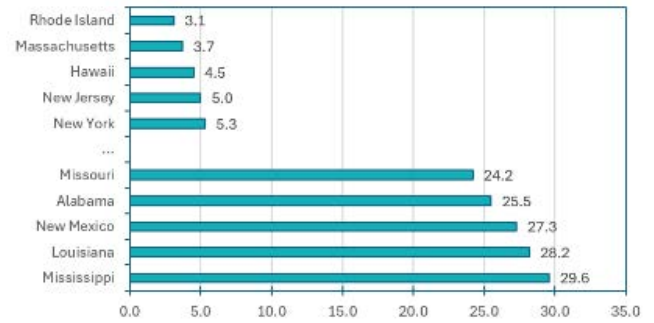
#### Gun Availability

- In 2017, U.S. civilians held an average of 120.5 firearms per 100 people, the highest rate in the world by a factor of more than two
- Age-adjusted firearm homicide rates in the US are 19 times greater than they are in France, and 77 times greater than in Germany
- The US has 33 times the rate of firearm homicide seen in Australia



### Gun Violence Statistics by State

Age-Adjusted Firearm Death Rate (per 100,000 people)



- Highest gun death rate: Mississippi (29.8)
- Lowest gun death rate: Rhode Island (3.1)

### Gun Violence Statistics by Country

- The United States had the highest rate of firearm homicides in 2021 (4.52)
- Japan had the lowest rate of firearm homicides in 2021 (0.00)
- The firearm homicide rate for the United States was over three times that of the second highest country (1.46)

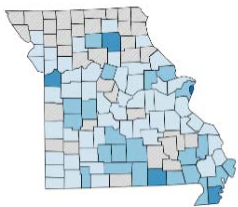
Scholars looked at Gun policy in the United States and how they compare to other Country's, along with how gun policy varies from state to state.

### Gun Violence Statistics by City/County

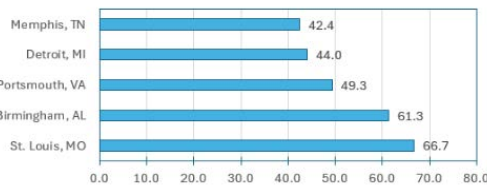
#### COUNTY VARIATIONS



- Highest gun death rate, 2019: St. Louis City (39.46)
- Lowest gun death rate, 2019: St. Charles County (8.84)



Gun Homicide Rates (per 100,000 people)



### Gun Safety Methods

Scholars identified two gun safety methods that community members can employ to help prevent Gun Violence.

#### First Method

The most common method for individuals to maintain gun safety is to keep them stored away safely.

Examples of safe gun storage:

- Keyed gun locks - Easy to use with a straightforward mechanism.
- Combination locks - Eliminates the risk of losing keys, provides access to multiple users.
- Lock boxes - High Security: Provides a robust physical barrier against unauthorized access.

#### Second Method

Although underrated, an effective way in keeping your guns and those around you safe is discussion.

It's important for parents to talk to their kids and their caregivers about gun safety.

- Parents should talk to their children that a gun they see on television or in a video game is very different from a gun in real life, emphasizing that a real gun can seriously hurt people.
- Teach them that if they ever see or find a gun, they should immediately tell an adult and never touch it.
- While these conversations are crucial, they are not a substitute for securely storing guns. Additionally, discuss gun safety with the grandparents and parents of your children's friends, ensuring they also store and secure guns properly.

YEP Scholars facilitated group conversations during the Youth Empowerment Summit. During these conversations, Tier Two scholars and guests discussed what Gun Violence is, its prevalence, and possible ways to prevent it.





## 2024 YEP + NLF COLLABORATION

For the fourth session, YEP partnered with the Neighborhood Leadership Fellows (NLF) for a joint session. During this joint session; the YEP Scholars and 19 NLF participants learned about collaboration, allyship, conflict management styles, and working through differences.

The mission of Neighborhood Leadership Fellows (NLF) is to increase and amplify the voices of North St. Louis City and County residents at the civic decision-making tables in order to produce more equitable regional policies for neighborhoods. The primary geographic focus area is neighborhoods within the St. Louis Promise Zone due to the well-documented need for more targeted investment.

### Feedback from YEP scholars:

“I learned that even though we are all different we still have some of the same ideas.”

“I learned a lot about personal experiences and the importance of them.”

“In the future, I would like to meet with the older/adult groups more.”

“I would like another session with NLF.”

“I liked the adult experience/interaction.”

**100% of YEP scholars in attendance rated their experience of this collaborative session at 4 or higher out of a 5-point Likert Scale**





# 2024 YOUTH EMPOWERMENT SUMMIT

On Saturday June 29, the YEP Scholars presented their findings to more than 60 guests. Summit attendees included parents, friends, leaders, elected officials and additional stakeholders.

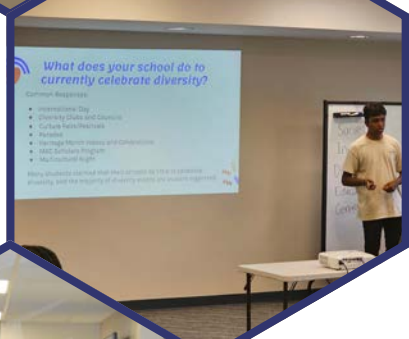
The 2024 Youth Empowerment Summit was planned and facilitated by the YEP Scholars, with each facet of the program being led by them with the support of the facilitation team.

Feedback from those in attendance:

“students were engaged and excited to share their work; good research topics of interest to students that can be shared; students learned good communication skills in working together and presenting.”

“Excellent program that prepares youth for future success!”

“Great experience for my son. The program definitely helped him with his presentation skills and enhanced his leadership abilities.”





# CONCLUSION

The 2024 YEP Scholars completed the Define, Discovery, and Dream stages of the Appreciation Inquiry Framework while developing their leadership skills in communication, facilitation, and personal brand. The majority of this years graduates have showed interest in participating in next year’s cohort and continuing their research and leadership journeys, with 100% answering “yes” to the final survey question of “Would you be interested in participating in a program like this in the future?”



## SCHOLARS SAY ...

“The staff/teachers who make this experience at YEP enjoyable.”

“I have learned so much about my topic (gun violence) but also just presentation skills which is a lifelong skill I will need.”

“I like being able to gain experiences + learn how to be a better leader.”

“I like that it helps me get out of my shell and it helped me with many things + gave me many opportunities.”

“I like sharing my opinion + working with my group as well as the icebreakers/ group activities.”

“I have learned better leadership and public speaking skills.”

“thank y'all for being Awesome :) !”

**76% OF THE YEP SCHOLARS RATED THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH YEP AT 4 OR HIGHER OUT OF A 5-POINT LIKERT SCALE**

# YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM



The Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) is for youth to acquire awareness, training, and engagement as community leaders; to recognize critical needs and issues; to learn how to develop and implement plans to address those needs and issues through policy; and to acquire the skills and support to improve their well-being and resiliency.

## 2024 YEP Facilitation Team

- Dwayne T. James, P.E., Ed.D.
- Keesha Byrd, Ed.D.
- Austin Dial, LCSW
- Peter Dry, Ed.D.
- Drachen Koester
- Melissa Scheer, Ed.D.

- YEP is a program of the University of Missouri Extension (MU Extension) in collaboration from The PDL Group and other independent consultants.
- Funding partners include Missouri Foundation for Health, Missouri 4-H Foundation, St. Louis Area Violence Prevention Commission, St. Louis Mental Health Board, and MU Extension.



2024 YEP Cohort Summit