# Beyond the Bell: Leveraging Community Assets for an Expanded Learning System

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# Acknowledgments

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CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

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Schools can't do it all. We have known this for a long time, yet we often seem to deny this reality in policy and action. For decades we have piled expectations onto our schools, asking them to develop scholars, citizens, and workers and to provide for the academic, nutritional, social, and developmental needs of children. Schools, as critics are quick to point out, invariably fall short of these expectations.

But that hasn't stopped us from adding still more. Today we look to the future of work and see an urgent need to better develop children's complex reasoning, creativity, and mental agility. We look ahead to a time when our society will be forced to address the causes and consequences of climate change, rising income inequality, and aging populations and are pressed to provide children with the intellectual and emotional capacity to take on those issues. We look at our children today and see so many of them dealing with the mental and physical effects of trauma brought on by the stress of poverty, addiction in families, and exposure to violence and racism. And we look to our schools to take on all of these issues.

Schools have been working hard to deliver on these needs in important ways. Educators are beginning to engage in discussions about the principles of trauma-informed care and what they mean for the work of schools. Schools have been providing both extracurricular and academic opportunities that engage students in the world outside school in meaningful ways.[1] Schools have also taken up the call to develop students' capacity beyond their academic skills to include pillars of social and emotional learning.

At the end of the day, though, schools must have partners to meet these needs. Medical institutions must lead the way in providing care to students suffering from trauma. No one is better equipped to connect children with their community than community members themselves. Individuals who work in and interact daily with a range of industries and fields are much better positioned to provide students with exposure and mentorship in those areas than teachers, whose experience might be secondhand. Participating in a sports team, band, drill team, theatrical production, or community project offers students more realistic, complex, and rich opportunities to build cooperation, problem solving, perseverance, and a sense of shared goals and accomplishment than any artificial class project can do.

Access to these opportunities is far from straightforward and universal (see Ashley Jochim's essay on educational equity). Resources and opportunities for support and learning are not evenly spread across cities. Information on these opportunities are rarely coordinated, leaving significant disparity in parents' knowledge of what is available. Programmatic and transportation costs, as well as the logistics of juggling work and shuttling children to activities, force families into difficult tradeoffs or prohibit their children from participating. While the current system of fragmented independent providers seems to work for middle-class children—whose families have the resources, time to search, and many social and professional contacts to build opportunities—the challenge is to broaden access to these networks.

If children's growth, opportunity, and fulfillment depend on the experiences they have outside the bell schedule, we must do two things: find ways to meaningfully integrate out-of-school learning into our vision for education, and remediate the inequality that persists in access to out-of-school learning.

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To date, the field has paid considerable attention to community impact models that provide an intensive wraparound approach. These systems are highly coordinated networks that bring together providers from the education, health, and community spaces to offer integrated support. They seek to overcome interagency conflict and competition by heavily investing in establishing agreements about goals, approaches, and memoranda of understanding about respective contributions and coordination of support. The result is a sturdy partnership agreement, but one that requires tremendous coordination and investment by all participating parties, making them difficult to sustain and replicate. They also ultimately provide limited choice in the approach and combinations of care and opportunity families can access.

What might a more organic—and potentially more agile—structure to coordinate community assets look like? This essay profiles three such initiatives—Remake Learning, CommunityShare, and ReSchool Colorado—and describes how these networks allow communities and families to leverage regional assets through dynamic and agile systems, what they have learned about building such systems, and what questions these relatively young and evolving initiatives are still wrestling with.

## Building Networks for Support and Opportunity

In Pittsburgh, the Grable Foundation set its sights on making the city "the best place to be a kid and to raise a kid," according to the foundation's executive director. With that mission, the foundation helped to launch and continues to invest in Remake Learning, a regionwide network of learning providers, including schools, YMCAs, independent makerspaces (open workshops where children have access to a range of design-and-build tools, such as 3D printers, screen printing machines, and computer-aided drafting software), libraries, museums, and many more. The lean staff at Remake Learning provides a gentle center of gravity for the network, asking members only to commit to a set of values, share information about their organization, and be an open and sharing

partner to other network members when called on. For this modest commitment, organizations can engage in and receive support through coordinated shared learning at whatever level they want, and they are part of an annual showcase of local talent and energy during Remake Learning Days.

In Tucson, educator and photographer Josh Schachter discovered the need for and power of networks while working with English language learners in a local high school. When Schachter and his colleague, Julie Kasper, asked their students to provide a representation of "home," the students responded with images showing isolation, disconnection, and boredom. In response, Josh and Julie spent the next eight years connecting their students' passions, goals, and projects with nearly 100 community partners who served as mentors and project collaborators, while building bridges between the students and the broader Tucson community. The social and political capital resulting from these partnerships led to transformational real-world learning opportunities, ranging from the creation of a citywide youth refugee coalition to a student-led Congressional briefing in the U.S. Congress. But this capital, as Schachter came to realize, would evaporate when he left, so he turned his attention to finding a way to reveal, connect, and share the social, intellectual, creative, and cultural capital in a community that was not dependent on a single coordinator.

A survey of teachers revealed that the vast majority want more community connections in their classrooms but need help finding and connecting to community resources. In response, Schachter launched CommunityShare, an initiative through which local citizens offer their talents to teachers for class projects or other learning experiences. The organization aggregates the offers into a searchable online platform that Schachter refers to as a "human library." CommunityShare applies the principles of crowdsourcing evident in today's sharing economy—a central platform for connecting and an open invitation to participate.

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Today over 600 Tucson community members have profiles on the platform and are committed to providing a minimum of four hours annually to engage with teachers and their students. The teachers, 750 of whom have profiles on the site, can search for partners based on their curricular plans and student interests. Through meaningful engagements with community partners, students experience the real-world application of what they are learning in school, connect with caring adults and resources in their community, explore new passions and career paths, and imagine a future they perhaps never knew existed. Since launching CommunityShare in 2015, community partners have connected with nearly 7,000 students in the Tucson region.

CommunityShare aims to do more than connect students to their community. The organization also hopes to reweave the social fabric and capital of the city by providing network connections among students, educators, and community members across socioeconomic, institutional, racial, and ethnic lines. CommunityShare's goal is that the personal connections between community members, students, and educators will transform the community members into informed and inspired advocates for a more equitable education system.

In Colorado, leaders at the Donnell-Kay Foundation, frustrated with the pace of improvement for low-income students and students of color in Denver's schools, turned their attention outside the schools. Here they found what so many other cities have found—opportunities for rich experiences exist, but they tend to be unevenly distributed and difficult to access. Colorado is an outdoor playground, but low-income children are less likely than their affluent peers to stomp around the state's mountains and trails. The city is rich with museums, libraries, recreational centers, and more, but despite efforts to create affordable access to these resources, many low-income parents don't know about them or don't know they can get affordable access.

Donnell-Kay launched ReSchool to build the structures and systems that will allow parents in Denver and surrounding areas to maximize the community's assets. Still early in its initiative, ReSchool launched the Blueprint4SummerCO in 2018, a searchable online guide that aggregates summer activities. Blueprint4Summer was first created for the St. Louis, Missouri, community in 2015 by the Clark-Fox Family Foundation. When Colorado joined the platform, they offered more than 3,300 summer camp opportunities, ranging from half-day to multiweek experiences. Over half of the listed programs were free of charge to participants. ReSchool raised money (including matching funds from summer program providers) to provide scholarships for summer learning; in 2018, almost 200 children received summer learning support.

ReSchool has also launched a Learner Advocate Network (LAN), which provides direct and, for some, longitudinal support to families as they seek out-of-school learning experiences to complement their children's in-school experiences. ReSchool is currently partnering with two local hospitals, which employ many low-wage workers, to provide LAN support to hospital employees.

Though different from one another, these three initiatives illustrate key principles of the agile learning system surfaced in this collection of essays. The initiatives also reflect some big unanswered questions that must be wrestled with in order to better leverage community assets in these kinds of agile systems.

## Creating an Agile System of Community Assets

These three initiatives shine a light on what resources can be offered to children outside of schools. They also show the power of an open invitation, platforms to present opportunities, a responsive touch, and a facilitating hub to bring these resources to families.

### An open invitation surfaces dormant energy

Rather than beating the bushes, each of the initiatives started with an open invitation and a low bar for entry to be part of the learning system. It takes less than ten minutes to join Remake Learning's network, and the requirement is as simple as agreeing to a set of core values to support and engage children equitably in learning and to submit information on your organization. In similar fashion, nearly all talents are valued and accepted into CommunityShare—reaching teachers is as simple as creating a Facebook profile. Partners, as they are called on the platform, include artists, STEM experts, parents, nonprofits, local businesses, government employees,

academics, graduate students, retirees, philanthropists, and others, all of whom offer a spectrum of experiences. ReSchool's Blueprint4SummerCO is open to any organization offering summer learning opportunities and only requires that the organization submit descriptive information on the offered activities. In short, anyone willing to engage can, and at very little cost.

## A platform makes the implicit explicit and helps families connect the dots

Each of the programs offers a platform that makes community assets visible to each other and to the community. These platforms provide a venue for individuals and organizations in a community to present themselves, and for others to find them. While these platforms are often online where they can be self-populating and instantly updated, they don't need to be. Well-tended listservs, catalogs, and directories all can serve as platforms.

Tucson's CommunityShare platform, for example, connects individuals—who want to participate in schools but don't know where their unique talents and real-world experiences are most needed—to the teachers, who want community members to engage with students but don't know how to find good sources. Few of the organizations listed on ReSchool's Blueprint4SummerCO platform are new to the Denver area, but for some families, their introduction to the website was the first time they learned of these programs. In Pittsburgh, where the Remake Learning network is designed to serve both the organizations and the community, one member of the network noted that it offers a kind of "proprioception," or sixth sense, meaning that the presence of the network and knowing it can be accessed at any time means he doesn't have to constantly connect with other organizations separately to know that good work is happening across the city.

## A responsive and flexible touch gets everyone what they need

Along with ease of entry, these initiatives offer a wide range of engagement. As Director Sunanna Chand of Remake Learning explains, the network's participation level ranges from 1 to 100. Many members do little more than list their organization in the directory and receive the newsletter. Others seek out support from the Remake Learning team and other network members. Still others eagerly engage in and attend network learning sessions, at times agreeing to host network events and meetings themselves.

Similarly, CommunityShare makes very few demands on its community members who offer their help or the teachers seeking help. In fact, it offers partners eight different ways to support educators, ranging from simply sitting down with a teacher to help them plan out content and curriculum related to their field of expertise, to building a longer-term project with a teacher and helping to implement it. As a result, partners with CommunityShare have a wide range of engagement that matches both teachers' needs and partners' comfort levels.

ReSchool knows that some parents will conduct a few searches on the website and move on, while other parents will seek out deeper, ongoing support—the kind of support their Learner Advocate Network is prepared to provide. Like other organizations profiled in this essay, ReSchool is building a support model with capacity for a range of engagement.

## A role for an active hub (or portfolio manager)

Though each of these organizations is built around organic principles, they all recognize the important role they play as hubs for their networks, including identifying gaps and areas of need in the community by determining who is served and what is available, then using their network to fill those gaps. They also see a role in building the constituency for the opportunities available through the network.

Remake Learning launched its initiative with a gap analysis and is using that information to inform the community about pockets of need. Before building the network, it mapped out the Pittsburgh region's makerspaces—facilities equipped with technologies that allow children to create and make projects. This exercise revealed where these spaces were and weren't in the city, giving the organization direction for future investment. Though Remake Learning relies on organic engagement with the network, they have also taken on the issue of equitable access and distribution of opportunity throughout the region, helping to build awareness for community learning where gaps appear in the network.

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Likewise, ReSchool knew that the cost of activities can be a tremendous barrier to participating in summer learning. Before launching Blueprint4SummerCO, ReSchool explicitly targeted and engaged local organizations that provided free and low-cost summer programs to make sure they knew about and submitted information to the website. ReSchool continues to keep tabs on the network's coverage and the extent to which it is meeting families' needs by analyzing search data from the Blueprint4Summer platform. Last year, for example, this analysis revealed that while parents search most actively for enrichment activities in sports, outdoor adventures, and the arts, the available activities lean toward the academic.

CommunityShare also tracks which teachers are tapping the network as a way to understand which students in Tucson are getting rich community-connected experiences and where CommunityShare may need to reach out for more educator engagement.

The hubs also build constituents for their networks and community assets. ReSchool actively recruits community learning programs for its platform and has established formal relationships with local employers as a way to reach parents. It also markets Blueprint4SummerCO at numerous events and in schools across the city and offers scholarships to help families pay for summer programs.

Remake Learning and CommunityShare not only actively recruit members to their networks, they also provide professional development to their members, which builds demand for the learning opportunities available through the network. CommunityShare also offers seed grants and artist-in-residence grants to help facilitate the demand for partnerships. As CommunityShare expands to new regions and allows for broad adaptation of the model, its leadership sees staff and strategic regional partners committed to educator outreach as essential components of the model.

# The Challenges of an Organic Approach

For all their successes, each of these initiatives is still young, and community assets remain relatively fringe elements of formal education systems. Several challenging questions remain, and the answers likely will shape the extent to which these community assets continue to exist on the fringe or become an ongoing and integral part of children's learning.

## What is the outcome, and how do we measure it?

The initiatives profiled here aggregate and connect families, learners, and learning opportunities. They do not directly provide learning opportunities and as such face challenges measuring learning outcomes across all these experiences. As CommunityShare's Schachter notes:

> Being an open network where you are not the direct service provider but instead weave connections and host a cloud of social capital raises some interesting questions about how you measure impact. When I am teaching a photography workshop I find it much easier to assess students before and after to see if they've learned the language of photography and technical skills. At CommunityShare we are creating a public space for people to connect online and then learn from each other in person, making it much harder to track the learning outcomes directly. Some of the most profound learning experiences have occurred when a community partner works with a classroom and then engages their broader social network on a project, which expands the impact, but it is challenging to track these social capital ripples.

Remake Learning's Chand echoes these sentiments: "It is really hard as a network to have a single learning goal." Every organization in her network has its own approach and goals. Chand's objective as a network leader is to support organizations as they do their work while helping them understand that they are part of a larger community of providers. As she says, "Row your own boat, but let's try to row in the same direction."

If, as these leaders note, the goal is to connect children to a wide range of experiences by interacting with any number of providers who individually identify the learning goals, how do you assign and attribute learning to these initiatives? If the initiative is targeting an entire region of children, how do you collect not only academic progress but also information about social and emotional development for children who may touch down in any number of public and private school systems?

If the initiative is meant to engage the community constructively, are there social and community goals to consider? What are they? How do we observe and measure community-level change? How do we position these community-level goals vis-à-vis the student-level goals? Is it enough to see communities change if we don't measure changes in children's learning?

Remake Learning, CommunityShare, and ReSchool all have a clear theory of action that centers on setting up the conditions for learning, improving availability and access to learning opportunities, and empowering individuals—parents, children, educators, and community members—to access those opportunities. Their current measures of impact relate to the conditions for learning. CommunityShare, for example, measures its impact based on teacher, student, and partner surveys via indicators such as teachers' and students' perceptions of student engagement and knowledge of real-world careers; teachers' shift in pedagogy and willingness to tap a community partner again in the future; and partners' willingness to continue to work with educators, and how their understanding and perception of schools and education changes. Eventually, CommunityShare would like to measure its impact on social capital across regional geographic and socioeconomic lines as well as measure changes in community partner agency to become advocates for schools and education. ReSchool, at least for now, is identifying its impact through Blueprint4SummerCO website activity and the engagement of parents participating in the Learner Advocate Network. Remake Learning gauges its impact based on the number of participants in the network.

None of these initiatives have identified specific measurable learning goals for children, and it isn't clear that such goals are even reasonable measures of their impact.

## Will a tighter connection to formal learning systems undermine the organic and "big tent" ethic?

Each of these initiatives grew because they put out an open invitation and asked anyone to engage at any level. As such, the big tent includes members of varying capacity and quality. Though these initiatives clearly interact with the formal K–12 systems, to date they remain distinct from them and the demands—and especially the performance demands—that come with being part of a state-funded system.

This distinction offers out-of-school spaces room to innovate. Chand is wary of compromising that distinction. She notes:

> I'm not thinking about a future where schools don't exist. We're going to have regulatory systems that put pressure on schools and teachers. But in the museum space, for example, they can do anything they want. There is no pressure being placed on what they can do.

Instead of pushing out-of-school learning to be more regulated, Remake Learning is fostering informal connections between school-based educators and out-of-school-based educators to, as Chand explains, "bring structure to the informal and un-structure to the formal."

Amy Anderson, ReSchool's executive director, also sees potential in less formal quality assurance strategies. She sees learner advocates who work closely with families and are familiar with learning opportunities outside schools as an important quality filter. Anderson explains:

> **Parents partner with the Learner Advocate Network to help them figure out the best way to access resources and build their agency to navigate the system, but also as a check and balance. The advocate network can hold some level of quality assurance that the resources that are being spent [on behalf of the child] are going to credible opportunities—though the families are still the ultimate decisionmakers.**

In this vision, quality assurance is less formal than the accountability systems we know today, but more focused on individual families and built and supported by the trusting relationship between families and their Learner Advocate Network.

If the goal is to go beyond informal cross-fertilization toward things like stackable credentials that allow students some sort of credit for out-of-school learning that they can use in the formal system, the calls for quality assurance will be inevitable. The question is, can (and how can) these initiatives maintain the organic and open nature of engagement while paying attention to quality?

## Ensuring equal access in systems founded on opt-in supply and demand

In each of these initiatives, those supplying learning opportunities and those demanding learning opportunities (families) opt in to experiences. But if the community assets are to chip away at the inequality of opportunity rampant in our system today, we must find ways to ensure equal access to these out-of-school opportunities, possibly holding systems to account for equal access outcomes.

Each of these initiatives has found value in taking on the role of an "active hub," scanning their networks for gaps and reaching out to fill those gaps. In some cases this has meant seeking out new members to provide a richer diversity in the network. In other cases it has meant finding providers in underserved areas. These supply-side efforts have made important strides in improving access. For example, knowing that many families would require low-cost summer options, ReSchool's Blueprint4SummerCO team actively sought and recruited free and low-cost providers to list in its platform. More than half of the summer learning opportunities listed on the website are free to participants.

These organizations have also invested in the demand side of the equation. Remake Learning Days is an annual citywide event where network participants showcase their programs, generating enthusiasm for children and families currently involved with the organizations and inviting new families to see and sample the learning opportunities. ReSchool sends representatives to any event that involves parents to engage them in conversations about summer learning and to market the Blueprint4SummerCO tool. ReSchool also has raised funding to provide scholarship resources for families seeking summer learning opportunities and negotiated the entry of the child-focused transportation provider HopSkipDrive into the Denver market in an effort to reduce two key barriers to access for low-income families—money and transportation. ReSchool also targets local hospitals, which employ a large number of low-wage service sector workers, for its early pilots of the Learner Advocate Network. Its short-term goal is to build the agency of families who work with the advocate network. In the long term, ReSchool

hopes that parents who have worked with advocates can provide that same kind of support to their family and friends, exponentially expanding the capacity of families to build their children's learning experiences.

These efforts all try to increase the supply and demand of learning opportunities, but in what remains a fundamentally opt-in arrangement for both supply and demand, these organizations acknowledge that their efforts still fall short of addressing the access challenges of their cities' most isolated families. If these out-of-school learning opportunities become more essential rather than extra, but remain opt-in experiences (as is likely necessary to allow for personalization), the field will need to wrestle with these questions: Can there be accountability for equal access in an opt-in system? If so, who should be held accountable and how?

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## Creating coherence in the unbundled experience

One advantage of the highly coordinated and structured wraparound community model is that great care is taken to ensure that there is a comprehensive and coherent bundle of resources likely to be needed in a community. Though parents may have limited choice in the approaches offered in the wraparound network, tapping a range of academic, health, and social services requires far less individual navigation than in more open and loosely coordinated networks.

Currently, the three initiatives discussed in this essay focus on learning opportunities. Though their models could—and may in time—incorporate more types of resources, including those from the healthcare sector, for now parents must access that support from other networks. The three initiatives profiled here also rely on individual navigation and bundling. Families still must seek out and pull together the learning opportunities that make sense for them. Teachers still must develop a curriculum and reach out to community partners to find a match for their plans.

In different ways, however, these organizations are taking on the navigation challenge. ReSchool's Learner Advocate Network provides parents with one-on-one support for building an out-of-school learning plan for their children. Its goal is to not only build the capacity of individuals who participate in the network, but also to have this individual capacity become a community resource through parents' social networks.

CommunityShare is improving the functionality of its online platform to enable teachers and partners to post proposed projects and then automatically recommend partners whose profiles seem like a good match for the project. This feature would relieve teachers of some of the search and navigation burden. CommunityShare is also developing a resource guide of strategies and tools to support schools and regions in building a culture of community-engaged learning.

## How to sustain: What is the business model?

Each of these organizations is lean but not without cost. To date, philanthropy has provided the resources needed to launch, pilot, and grow these initiatives. Indeed, networking community assets may need to become a coordinated and central initiative for local philanthropy and business youth initiatives. But at some point, these initiatives must find a sustainable model. Shifting the costs to the users (families, teachers, schools, community providers) could

compromise the initiatives' underlying goals. ReSchool is currently taking steps toward sustainability. The two employers partnering with ReSchool to give their employees access to Learner Advocate Network advocates are paying for this support. CommunityShare is exploring license fees for regional adoption of its platform, as well as technical support around implementation. But is there an argument for public funding? If so, what would the mechanism be?

## Conclusion

To understand why it is worth taking up these challenging questions, look no further than the ongoing recovery of education in New Orleans, which shows how limiting a schools-only focus can be. Since the city's devastating floods following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans has invested a tremendous amount of money and innovative capital remaking the city's public schools. Today, students are achieving academic proficiency, graduating, and going to college at rates well above pre-Katrina rates.[2] But progress is slowing and it is increasingly clear that meeting the developmental needs of New Orleans children—40 percent of whom live in poverty[3] and show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder at three times the national rate due to a variety of social conditions[4]—will require the system to look beyond schools for solutions. Children dealing with the most serious effects of trauma require clinical intervention and support from mental health and social services. These engagements are coming online in New Orleans. All children in the city, however, would benefit from exposure to a broader range of experiences and engagement with and support from individuals across their communities.

The gains that New Orleans made were, in part, the result of a radical restructuring of the entire school system. Doing better in New Orleans and elsewhere will likely require equally radical rethinking of how to connect students and schools to supports and learning experiences in their communities and beyond. As Lauren Fine, ReSchool's first Learner Advocate, notes:

> "We seem to want schools to solve all of the problems for kids, but there are these other organizations that can be part of the solution. We'd be better off if we thought about a network of support."

Remake Learning, CommunityShare, and ReSchool are providing an agile infrastructure for just such a network. Along the way, they are finding that some simple principles of open platforms, flexible engagement, and some judicious coordination can amplify the assets and talent already in communities. To meet more intense needs of children will likely require more formal networks between schools, families, and providers than these organizations can provide. But these organizations' pioneering efforts (and those working in similar veins around the country) have meant that more children and families are finding their way to the experiences they need and want.

# Endnotes

1. Betheny Gross et al., Are City Schools Becoming Monolithic? Analyzing the Diversity of Options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

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3. Vicki Mack, New Orleans Kids, Working Parents, and Poverty (New Orleans, LA: The Data Center, 2015). Poverty statistics are for 2013 and based on an analysis of the 2013 Community Survey 1 Year Estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

4. Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies, Emotional Wellness and Exposure to Violence: Data from New Orleans Youth Age 11-15 (New Orleans, LA: Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies, 2015).