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Understanding Gun Violence Affecting New American Youth in Vermont - Final Report December 30, 2023

Introduction

The Vermont New American Advisory Council (VNAAC) was established in early 2020 as a coalition of New American leaders striving to increase civic engagement, dismantle barriers to a sense of belonging, and expand opportunities for New American communities to thrive socially, culturally, and economically in Vermont. VNAAC is made up of an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse group of New American leaders who work in many sectors across Vermont. Members include, but are not limited to, elected officials, program directors and managers, health care providers, educators, and business owners. For more information about VNAAC and its members please visit www.vnaac.org.

In 2022, a young adult from the Somali Bantu community was murdered in Burlington. This tragedy shook people from the community at large and from New American communities in particular. The fear and frustration were palpable. The sense of unjust and discriminatory treatment was also felt. Trust and respect for the city government and its police department were rapidly eroding.

In response, in July 2022, the Vermont New American Advisory Council submitted a proposal to the City of Burlington requesting \$20,000 to conduct a project to understand the root causes of gun violence affecting New American youth in Burlington and to ultimately create a better system of care.

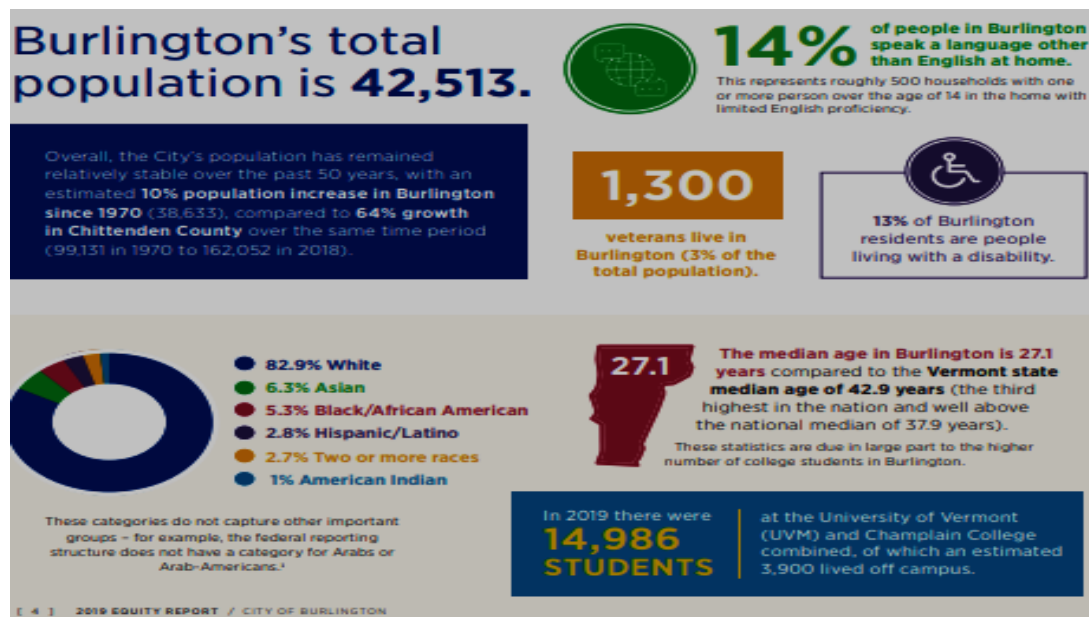
Gun violence and youth gang mentality among New American youth are complex and culturally sensitive issues. To address them, it requires a different approach regarding the engagement and participation of New American communities.

VNAAC proposed the following goals for this project:

1. **Come to a common understanding of the root causes of gun violence among New American youth.**
2. **Create a safe place to start the healing and rebuilding of trust.**
3. **Shape a fairer and more inclusive community safety system in the City of Burlington and beyond for New American families.**

Background

Chittenden County is the most populated and diverse county in Vermont. With a population of nearly 170,000 people, 86% of the population is white, 2% is black, 3% is Hispanic, 4% is Asian, and 5% is multiracial. The City of Burlington is more diverse than the county as a whole, with 83% of the population being white. See below for a representation of Burlington's demographic data.





Graphic Source: City of Burlington

Burlington, Vermont has been a refugee resettlement site since 1980, and the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program (VRRP), also referred to as the US Committee for the Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is the official refugee resettlement organization. Refugees come primarily from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bosnia, Burma, Burundi, Congo Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and Vietnam. Upon arrival, refugees receive a comprehensive set of linguistically and culturally appropriate services, with a goal of attaining self-sufficiency. These services include Reception & Placement, Cultural Orientation, Case Management, Housing Placement, Health and Wellness, Cash Assistance, Workforce Development, Interpretation & Translation, Youth Mentoring, Digital & Financial Literacy, English Language Learning, Citizenship Classes, Community Partnership, and Volunteer Support.

With continued resettlement, Vermont is becoming more diverse. While the above services are funded by the federal government, post resettlement, very little investment is made to support New American families, specifically related to raising children in a new and different culture.

In Chittenden County, the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) was created in early 2000. This organization provides critical services that range from immigration legal service support, workforce development, case management services and more. In 2017, a new youth development program was created at AALV with a specific mission to reduce the disproportionate amount of minority youth entering the juvenile justice system. This program has seen an increase in youth program enrollment. According to Samel Dingba, the youth program coordinator, the main challenges faced by the program are lack of staffing to increase capacity to strengthen the youth mentoring aspect of the program. Creating a strong alignment between higher education entities such as the University of Vermont and Champlain College could alleviate this challenge and ensure that our youth participants access the academic support they need to be successful.

In the City of Burlington similar youth-focused organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, King Street Center, and Sara Holbrook Community Center provide free after school programs. VNAAC has found that these programs have limited spaces and in some instances the programs have costs associated with accessing them. We also found that the Burlington School District provides after school programs in all of its elementary and middle schools programs.

Project Implementation

Goal: Come to a common understanding of root causes

Five community meetings were convened with different ethnic community groups. VNAAC developed questionnaires and presented a Memorandum of Understanding for each community. Details of the MOU included the number of people to invite, contracting with an interpreter, providing refreshments and a stipend for attendees. The Somali Bantu Community Association had 32 people in attendance at their office headquarters on Riverside Ave. The Congolese Association of Vermont hosted 22 people at Northgate Apartments in the New North End of Burlington. 29 people from the Nepali and Bhutanese communities attended the community meeting at the Association of Africans Living in Vermont. The South Sudanese of Vermont held their meeting in South Burlington with 22 people in attendance. About 10 people from different communities had individual discussions with the VNAAC project coordinator. Over 110 people in total participated in the project to understand the root causes of gun violence affecting New American youth. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 69. All genders were included, but more men participated. About 86% of participants were parents or grandparents caring for their grandchildren. Around 10 percent were young adults.



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Photo: Nepali community meeting

A series of questions were developed by VNAAC in consultation with identified community leaders which were discussed during the meetings. Questions included:

- 1. Do you think the City of Burlington or Chittenden County is a safe place to live, work and raise children?**
 - a. Yes, please explain...**
 - b. No, please explain...**

For question #1, 80% of participants across all communities felt that the City of Burlington is a safe place to live, work and raise children, 15% felt the city was not safe, and 5% felt the sense of safety in Burlington is eroding. They spoke of spikes in gun violence affecting their children, an increased amount of car theft, and the unsafe conditions in City Hall Park as compared to the past.

One participant shared, *“Sense of safety is subjective. Burlington is safe compared to Rochester, New York where I came from to settle with my family, but*



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with recent issues it does not feel safe anymore to most people that have lived here for a long time before the pandemic.”

2. Do you have recommendations about things you would like to see changed when it comes to raising your children in Burlington and the State of Vermont?

Participants shared a wide range of changes they see as needed to support raising their children in Burlington.

Social isolation: One major theme affecting parents from New American communities is isolation. Social integration is a longstanding challenge for newcomers who do not speak English and more so in today’s world. Parents are isolated in their homes and have major responsibilities such as ensuring access to basic needs for themselves and for their children. They are often working long hours and have little to no time to meaningfully connect with their children. Parents are living under extreme stress trying to provide the most basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, etc. One strategy to address this would be to ensure a basic income for New American families. This could help alleviate parents’ burden of having to choose between their children’s well being and their jobs.

Additionally, opportunities for more social connectedness and social integration should be prioritized by the Burlington community. Social integration facilitates the exchange of culture, ideas and experiences leading to a more cohesive and inclusive society. Some New American communities are organized and try to do this themselves, but they struggle to sustain their association due to costs associated with bringing people together.



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Photo: Somali Bantu visit with the Vermont National Guard

School Safety and Belonging: School should be a safe and supportive environment for each and every child, but currently there is substance misuse inside schools, leaving students feeling unsafe, and this must be addressed holistically. Additionally, New American youth are not utilizing the resources available to them in and out of schools, such as counseling. Unfortunately, mental health needs are still stigmatized in many New American communities.

After School Offerings: More opportunities and programs during after school hours are needed to keep children engaged and inspired. These opportunities will also greatly impact parents' ability to work without worrying about the care of their children when school is out of session.

Many New American children are no longer going to after school programs as what programs teach does not align with their cultural and religious beliefs. After school activities should reflect cultural and religious beliefs of children in the community.

Discipline: Provide opportunities for parents of New American children to discipline their children taking into account the rules and regulations governing child care in Vermont. The lack of education regarding these rules has

significantly contributed to tensions between educators and families, sometimes leading to the involvement of the Department for Children and Families (DCF).

There is a shared understanding of the role of DCF having the power to remove a child from his biological parent and place them in another family. It was shared that all youth killed due to violence have had some prior involvement with DCF. Parents feel that a child who has been in DCF custody has major discipline issues at home, school and community. It was mentioned on multiple occasions that the system of child protective services often increases behavior issues when a child returns home after being held by DCF or another family.

Parental Involvement: While the Multilingual Liaisons are doing a great job in terms of communicating with school teachers, administrators and parents, there needs to be more opportunities for parent involvement in a meaningful way.

Diversity: While Burlington's population has grown in diversity, its institutions and leaders are not reflective of this diversity. The city should recruit more people of color in the city government and all institutions in Vermont such as the schools, police, army, hospitals, and state government. Retention must also be a priority to ensure Burlington and Vermont's workforce continues to grow in diversity.



In summary, access to resources and services for both parents and children of New Americans should not be an afterthought. New Americans often face challenges in accessing essential resources and services due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the local systems and limited social networks. These challenges are highlighted with



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the lack of social connectedness and social integration. By providing opportunities for social connection and by connecting them with support organizations, educational institutions, health care providers and government entities, we can ensure that they receive the necessary assistance to strive in their new environment. This includes language classes, job training, health care, legal guidance and training around raising children in the new place they call home.

3. There is a rise in violence and gun violence in Burlington involving our New American youth. What is causing our youth to be part of it and could it be prevented? If so, how?

Children and youth without hope, aspirations and role models are more likely to fall into the cracks no matter what community they call home. The main theme across all communities was the need to empower parents as equals partners in the wellbeing of their children. A focus on awareness, education, and engagement for parents and families was discussed again and again, as was the need for more people of color in positions of power and leadership.

New Americans grew up in different countries and cultures without easy access to guns. The reality in America is anyone can have access to a gun. Making guns less accessible would be a good place to start. Strengthening gun control legislation already in place should be a priority.

Another element from the perspective of the New American parents is substance use and access to drugs. Parents have noticed an increase in cannabis use among youth since its legalization in Vermont and find this concerning but know little about the Vermont law that made this possible. As one parent said, “We lack opportunities to understand what legislation is being debated that will have an impact on us and our children. We need to be consulted and engaged in order for us to provide our thoughts before legislation is put in place for everyone.”



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An additional factor at play is that often New American teens, especially boys, move out of their family's home early. Many New American families are substantially larger than American families. The family sizes that exist must be taken into account for developing new housing in the Burlington area. A four bedroom house in Vermont does not typically work for a family of 10 or more members. So, New American teen boys are moving out of their family's home much sooner than most American youth. One parent shared, "We have seen our children move out at a very young age to rent with friends and be involved in illicit activities such as drug use and playing with guns."

Communities continue to ask for more from the police. The police force needs to build trust by holding consistent meetings with community groups as a key strategy in preventing future youth gun violence.

4. What are steps that we should take as parents and a community to understand and address the problems related to violence and gun violence facing our youth?

VNAAC found that the responses to these questions were embedded within the answers from the previous question.

It was also shared that rebuilding trust with safety institutions such as the Burlington Police Department is important. People reported that at times, they will call the police but they do not receive a police response. A family shared that there was a shooting at their primary home of residence, and the police came to investigate the matter but they have never reported back around their findings. They asked, "How do we trust the police when they do not respond to our call or they do not communicate with us when a major gun related incident took place at our home? The most important step is for us to know that the police are here to ensure our safety and the safety of our children." Others asked why criminals are not held accountable for their actions. Some people known by law enforcement and the court system are always back on the streets shortly after their arrest. New American families are confused and do not trust the system.

Others reinforced the need for tougher gun control legislation. It is not lost on them that they fled their countries to escape violence and settle in the U.S. for a better life, but the realities in this country around gun culture puts their children at risk.

Goal: Create a safe place to start the healing and rebuilding of trust

The VNAAC strategy was to identify a professional from the BIPOC community with expertise in helping those most impacted by gun violence to unpack their traumas. We identified a local psychotherapist of African descent. We worked with the community leaders to identify 12 parents whose children were either incarcerated, killed or accused of murder. The psychotherapist's recommendation was to have 10 group sessions. There were preliminary processes with a trusted interpreter to understand the process and confidentiality requirements.

Most of the sessions were about 1.5-2 hours to allow time for interpretation needs, the dynamics of the group, and prayer times during the session. This was one of the most impactful aspects of the project, providing these parents with critical support to begin healing and to know that they were not forgotten.

Recommendations were made for individual therapy for some families and for these group therapy sessions to continue. If they were to continue in treatment with the group, the therapist would begin with additional interventions like body based and pragmatic interventions: yoga, a walking group, a gardening and selling at the farmer's market group, navigation of societal systems here such as budgeting method of payment of bills, keeping of receipts, business transactions and much more.

Note that VNAAC's original proposal included a goal to implement a restorative justice circle among youth. However, this was not achieved for the following reasons:

1. Because a criminal case was involved, we were not able to know who the victims and the perpetrators were.
2. Some of the youth involved were already working with court probation officers, therefore it has become a court case and others were already in the juvenile detention system.

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3. Parents of other youth identified did not want their children to participate.

Goal: Shape a fairer and more inclusive system of care in the City of Burlington and State of Vermont

VNAAC worked extensively on rebuilding trust between minority communities and several city and state institutions by following up on sensitive and pressing issues that were raised during the community sessions. VNAAC convened specific meetings with several state entities such as Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and other members of the Vermont Department of Health, as well as the Burlington Police Department and the Chittenden County State's Attorney's Office. This work is ongoing as additional next steps were identified via these meetings.

New American Children in DCF Custody

VNAAC convened a meeting with the DCF Director of Policy and Planning, Beth Sausville, and her team to tackle the issue of minority children in state custody

One of the sensitive issues that used to come up in each and every listening session held with respective community groups is the issue of New American children in DCF custody. This issue has many moving parts that require ongoing discussions in order to ultimately find consensus around what is possible and what policy changes may need to take place. It was shared that all youth who were killed from the New American community had had an interaction with DCF in the past.

Parents shared the fact that their children taken away by DCF were placed in another household with no understanding about the child's culture or religion. Others shared that their children were being moved from school district to school district while in custody which disturbed the child's schooling. Others could not comprehend as to why the Woodside facility was closed; they recall that at least

their children were getting the necessary education they needed and parents were able to visit their children from time to time. When a parent is deemed unable to care for their children, DCF will place the parent(s) name into a registry. Some parents who have had their children removed from them decades ago, still have their names on that registry. Requests were made for DCF to identify ways of bringing records expungement processes as this issue has resulted in some parents not being able to perform jobs in the state.



Cultural Humility In Health Care - Autopsy Issue

VNAAC convened a meeting with the Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Bundock, alongside the Health Equity Team of VDH and New American Leaders to talk about Cultural Humility in Healthcare (autopsy issue)

As part of the listening session with several New American community groups about understanding the root causes of gun violence affecting New American youth, it was reported that after an autopsy of the people killed in Burlington, families received the bodies to start a proper burial taking into account their religious practices. It was shared with VNAAC during the meetings that none of the bodies returned came with the organs of the deceased. This was very upsetting to the families as it was counter to their religious and cultural beliefs. After some research with other communities, it was shared that their religious beliefs were not being taken into account in some similar instances.

The VNAAC project coordinator followed up with the state medical examiner office to better understand the issue of the corpses' missing organs after an autopsy is concluded and all the steps following a shooting - from pronouncing someone deceased, conducting an autopsy to then returning the bodies to the families.



VNAAC convened a meeting with Dr. Bundock alongside the health equity team of VDH. Both cultural and religious leaders of the Somali Bantu Association were in attendance. This meeting was full of wisdom, learning and sharing opportunities. Discussing sensitive issues is not easy but we were glad to facilitate a productive discussion and outline concrete next steps. This is going to be an ongoing effort for adequate changes, some of which may require legislative policy alterations. Elements of the discussion included the following:

- Rights of the families before an autopsy is conducted.
- Determining when an autopsy is required, types of autopsies and techniques used to close an incision.
- The importance of clear communication while families with language barriers are mourning.
- Increasing opportunities for medical professionals to gain a deeper understanding around processes of religious burials.
- Federal and state laws regulating medical examinations.



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- Opportunities for better communication & collaboration between law enforcement agencies, the judicial system and, in some cases, funeral homes
- As a follow up, paperwork and policy examination review support.

State of the Murder Investigation - Are we safe in the city?

VNAAC convened the leaders of the Somali Bantu Association and State's Attorney Sarah George alongside Chief of Police Murad on two occasions

These gatherings constituted the first follow up meetings following the death of Hussein Mubarak in 2022. The Somali Bantu community was still in shock and they had several questions for the Burlington Chief of Police, John Murad, and the State's Attorney Sarah George. While the community was mourning, most were also living in fear for themselves and their children. Some thought that they were being targeted. This sentiment was augmented by a belief that the police had not been responsive to their safety concerns over the years. It was shared that Hussein's family's house was once targeted with gunshots while Hussein was incarcerated and the police never came back with a report as to who was shooting at their home or provide a progress report of the shooting investigation.

It was apparent that the trust between the community and the police had eroded. Chief Murad took account of the concerns and will coordinate with the officer assigned in the case. Chief Murad reaffirmed that all resources of the BPD had been put into the investigation. This was the top priority case of the Burlington Police Department and they hoped to make an arrest soon. Chief Murad made a commitment to follow up with the community as the investigation unfolded.

The Chittenden County top prosecutor, Sarah George explained in detail the processes of a criminal investigation and the role of her office. Both George and Murad could not go into details of Hussein's murder investigation. Several steps would take place after the police make an arrest and present the suspect to the legal system.

The Somali Bantu community members were relieved to hear that this was not a target attack on them and the public should not feel in danger. Still they would have appreciated it if Chief Murad and his team could communicate with them around the shooting that took place at Hussein's home. They had remaining

questions related to the lack of protection provided to Hussein when he was known to be a target following the shooting at his family's house.

Several days later, when an arrest was made, Murad came back as promised to provide the report and prepare the community about what was next from here with the court system. This report brought some level of comfort and ease. We believe that it will take time to truly rebuild the trust between this community and the Burlington Police Department but that trust building is possible and these meetings were a good first step.

This work to rebuild trust will be ongoing and requires sustained focus to ensure safety for everyone.

Recommendations

Recommendations For City Of Burlington and Burlington School District

Recommendation #1: Create a position within the City of Burlington REIB Department to focus on New American Affairs.

This position will facilitate communication and trust building between city departments and New American communities, strengthen New American community engagement in City initiatives, and support coordination to address key issues identified in this report and others.

Recommendation #2: Allocate at least \$50,000/year equally distributed between established minority organizations.

This funding will be used to address ongoing costs for New American community organizations to build opportunities for social connectedness and social integration and support development of inclusive, community-oriented programs and activities.

Recommendation #3: Develop after school program opportunities by and for New Americans that will encompass their cultural/religious beliefs.

Having a diversity of after school programs and opportunities that reflect the diversity of New American communities in Burlington will provide both parents and children a deeper sense of belonging in Burlington.

Recommendation #4: Consider a citywide celebration when both schools and city departments are closed for the day for key religious and cultural holidays celebrated by New American communities, such as Eid al-Adha.

One of the best ways to ensure a sense of belonging is to recognize important cultural/religious practices and holidays. For example, recognition of Eid would strengthen the sense of belonging for Muslim families in Burlington and show that they are seen and valued in the community.

Recommendation #5: Increase and strengthen parent education opportunities and parent literacy such as the BSD Parent University Program.

Parent education activities should encompass substance use disorder, types of substances, state gun legislations that exist and civic engagement.

Recommendation #6: Prioritize building a diverse workforce across city departments; specifically target an increase in members of New American community groups.

Recommendation #7: The Burlington Police Department should continue to strengthen connections with New American community groups through regular meetings to build trust, listen to concerns, engage communities, provide education and support prevention.



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