

Urban Suburban



Mirror Project

The Urban Suburban Mirror Project will explore issues related to youth, violence, community healing, and institutional change and make proposals for action. The project uses a method called “Transformational Social Therapy” to enable participants to become conscious of the ways they relate to violence and to get beyond the powerlessness, blame and sense of victimization that are commonplace among both victims and perpetrators of violence. By connecting the personal and the social, the process helps participants see how they themselves, through their action or inaction, are implicated in and contribute to perpetuating a violence whose roots are both personal and institutional.

As the process moves toward creating a leaderless, democratic group that understands and accepts its responsibilities, participants will translate the group's new collective understandings and sense of commitment into action directed toward institutional and community change. The facilitator will gradually become less of an influence on the group empowering the participants themselves to take charge of the outcomes.

The project will: (1) build collective intelligence and deeper understandings of the issues involved in youth and violence; (2) transform group participants by reducing prejudice, building respect for others, and creating a civic engagement process; (3) develop thoughtful and well-informed proposals for action; (4) engage community leaders as participants seek to implement institutional change; (5) articulate a well-researched approach to youth character development and community building through community engagement. The knowledge and stories heard through the group process will provide materials for articles, media presentations, and possibly a book that will highlight the seldom heard voices and perspectives of youth on violence-related issues.

The Urban Suburban Mirror Project will bring together diverse participants from urban and suburban settings, including young people, parents and caregivers, teachers, police, social and mental health workers, and others whose work brings them into frequent contact with young people. As they go through this process, group members move from closing ranks with their own self-defined groups and blaming others, toward mutual understanding and the acknowledgement of collective responsibility for the problems they face. This leads to exploration of action steps the group can take to reduce the pain they experience through violence. The facilitator then helps create bridges between different segments of the community and institutional change agents who can act on the group's proposals.

Two project groups of approximately 18 participants each will be drawn from a cross section of youth and adults from two Delaware Valley communities, one urban -- Camden -- and the other suburban -- Cherry Hill. Ninth graders in both communities are a main group targeted for participation, as they include young people who are expected to succeed academically and socially as well as those who are most in danger of dropping out of school and engaging in other at-risk behaviors. Out of school youth of the same age group (14-16) and young people in alternative institutions will also be targeted for participation. Differences represented in the groups will go well beyond residence, social class and race, as implied by the Camden-Cherry Hill divide. Participants will be identified through a planning process that will include soliciting letters on the topic for a "Community Voices" feature in the Philadelphia Inquirer. Project groups will be facilitated by Charles Rojzman and Daniel Gottlieb.