A large, stylized silhouette of a family consisting of two adults and two children, all holding hands. The silhouette is filled with a light-colored woven or basketweave pattern. The background is a solid dark blue.

PORTRAIT

of **Vulnerable Families**
& **Community Needs**
in **Richmond's**
Northside

RICHMOND, VA
OCTOBER 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004, the Partnership for Families (PFF)—a nonprofit organization in Richmond, Virginia—was created by the Robins Foundation to support vulnerable families with young children in Northside neighborhoods. The intent was to enhance the school readiness of vulnerable children through a combination of high quality early childhood care and wrap around support to their families through community partner organizations.

Recognizing that much has changed in Northside since the model was first implemented, the Partnership for Families and its principal funder, the Robins Foundation, engaged Communitas Consulting to create a portrait of the needs and characteristics of vulnerable families with young children living in the Northside community. This portrait of families with young children was designed to understand families' daily experiences and perceptions of their needs and assets by culling data at various levels. Community indicators provided objective information on factors related to demographic and social risk of the communities in which families lived. Input from families—gathered through focus groups and surveys—provided an understanding of how these communities were experienced by families on a daily basis and imparted insight into individual perceptions of priorities, needs, and assets. Finally, interviewing organizational leaders serving Northside families provided a way to consider similarities between the perspectives of families and service providers.

COMMUNITY BARRIERS FOR VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Across the different sources of data, four prevalent community factors were linked directly to family experiences:



Concentrated Poverty, Neighborhood Distress, and Lack of Racial Integration

In Northside, the distribution of socioeconomic risk divides along geographic and racial lines. The families who are most likely to experience distress due to socioeconomic circumstances live in neighborhoods roughly east of Chamberlayne Avenue and are predominantly African American. The effects of enduring, concentrated poverty in some Northside neighborhoods can be seen in neighborhood health outcomes. Most strikingly, Gilpin, Highland Park Southern Tip, and Magnolia Industrial Center have the lowest life expectancies in the city.

Among many Northside families with young children, employment and family finances are daily stresses—both inherently and as they relate to serving the needs of their children. Thirty-nine percent of families Communitas Consulting surveyed indicated that finding work or a job and that getting food on the table are daily concerns. Stakeholder organizations view obtaining stable, living wage employment as a critical need among Northside families with children.



Insufficient Quality Child Care

According to stakeholders in nonprofit and public organizations, the single most pressing need for Northside families is high quality, accessible, affordable child care. Nine out of 10 families surveyed indicated that quality child care is one of the two most important factors in their children's development. Notably, families and professionals have different perspectives on what makes a program "quality," with families valuing good communication and convenience over outcome measures and national credentials.

In Northside, quality child care can be inaccessible due to limitations on capacity, geographic availability, cost, and program alignment with family needs. Some parts of Northside have limited formal child care: in 2015, there were no private, licensed child care providers in Brookland Park, John Marshall, Pine Camp, Providence Park, or Washington Park.

3 Mixed Performance on Third Grade School Tests

Elementary children's academic performance—especially reading ability—is predictive of their eventually graduating from high school, independent of socio-demographic characteristics. Research shows that in the absence of extra help, 75% of children who are struggling to read in third grade will continue to struggle, and remediation after that point is largely unavailable at levels sufficient to be effective. Early intervention and support to language and early literacy is seen as essential to providing children an equal chance at success within school.

Within Northside the extent to which the schools are a supportive protective factor to the trajectories of young, demographically at-risk children is mixed. Two of the schools serving distressed Northside neighborhoods lack accreditation by the Virginia Department of Education, due to inadequate performance (Ginter Park and Overby-Sheppard). A third school, in contrast (George W. Carver), is notable in its ability to support the success of its students, despite serving one of the most distressed neighborhoods in Northside and Richmond, generally (Gilpin). This 2016 blue ribbon school reflects the potential the education system has to offset risk for these young children, but schools are not currently a consistent protective factor in the paths of young children in Northside.

4 Concerns about Community Violence

A key characteristic of the daily environment in which families live their lives is physical safety—or the lack thereof. Northside residents pointed to violence as a pressing problem. About three in four (71%) families—across all areas of Northside—referenced violence as a concern they feel every day. One in five families named community violence as the single most important thing to change in order to make life better for young children.

PERSONAL BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING NEEDS

In addition to community factors, vulnerable Northside families reported personal barriers to addressing needs. Family poverty depletes the resources—including financial resources, time, psychological resources, and human capital—parents need to create an environment in which children will thrive, imperiling children's health and security. In Northside, the data pointed to four psychological and social characteristics of vulnerable families with young children creating barriers to greater security and support: community isolation, lack of trust, pervasive trauma and extreme stress, and a limited sense of self-efficacy.

Community Isolation

Vulnerable Northside families described being socially and physically isolated from other people, supportive resources, and enrichment opportunities for children. Parents described imposing a degree of physical isolation on their families due to concerns about safety, and described lacking access to children's activities and supportive resources due to pricing, distance from home, and limited transportation options. Many Northside families not only experience daily stress related to meeting basic needs, but do so in relative isolation from one another and from social structures. Only 18% of those surveyed could be considered highly connected; in contrast, half (51%) of survey respondents indicated that they have no one close by to whom they could turn for help. The physical isolation many vulnerable Northside families experience extends to isolation from other communities and resources due to transportation limitations. Nearly half of families (47%) indicated that being able to get where they need to go is a daily concern.

“Raising 3 kids by myself, it’s a struggle. I am still learning to be a mother. For me, it’s the learning experience.”

– Parent

2 Lack of Trust

Northside residents report a lack of trust and connection to their neighbors and to the institutions in their communities. As a result, individuals and families become further isolated from one another, unable to identify and draw upon one another’s strengths in times of need. In addition, a fundamental lack of trust toward neighbors eventually impacts the broader community as it diminishes residents’ collective efficacy, or willingness and ability to take action toward community improvement.

All stakeholder organizations described the importance of being known and trusted in the community in order for residents to come in for services. For some, personal presence, ongoing relationships, and word-of-mouth reputation are central to their operations. Several noted that lack of trust forms a barrier between Northside’s vulnerable families and the organizations that provide supportive services in the neighborhood.

3 Pervasive Trauma and Extreme Stress

Nearly all Northside families surveyed reported experiencing ongoing stress related to meeting basic needs, such as housing, safety, and food. 93% of families surveyed said they experience stress every day due to concerns about physical safety, reliable transportation, arranging and paying for

child care, and/or managing health. Nearly half (43%) of survey respondents indicated having four or more basic needs that cause them daily stress. Fundamental, ongoing difficulties in meeting basic needs can be particularly harmful to young children, as research suggests that the accumulation of stress may be a causal factor in young children’s social and emotional well-being and development. Families in Gilpin Court, in particular, stated that they experience stress due to pervasive violence, which interrupts their commute, social leisure, and time at home during the day and the night.

4 Limited Sense of Self-Efficacy

The challenges Northside families described facing—daily violence, multiple stressors, lack of social structures or support, and difficulties with transportation, health, and child care—are hallmarks of poverty that have noted impacts on children’s development. At the most fundamental level, families experience these challenges in a psychological way. When discussing their families and parenting, focus group participants demonstrated persistence, optimism, and humor—emotionally resilient characteristics that help mitigate the emotional toll of challenges or hardships. However, this evidence of resilience and optimism tended to be limited to parenting. Despite parents’ strong desire to support their children, they expressed feeling a lack of options and of capacity to make improvements in many other family and community challenges.

“Looking at [my children] grow is amazing to me. They do the funniest things.”

– Parent

WAYS TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

The study was designed with the Partnership for Families in mind and resulted in specific programmatic recommendations for its operations. However, the results also point to resources that would add value to vulnerable families in Northside more broadly.

1 Create Safe Places: Programs and Facilities for Children and Youth

What families with young children most want to see in their community is an increase in programs and recreational opportunities for children of all ages, from early childhood through high school. One in three families (34%) said that having programs and activities is the most important thing the community needs for children. Well-designed and implemented efforts could help address the family and community issues identified in this report—for example, by providing safe places, alleviating the stress and isolation families experience, and decreasing the amount of time children and youth spend unsupervised.

“There are no activities for children. They have to be a certain age to play football, do cheerleading. They need to get their energy out.”

– Parent

2 Increase the Quality and Accessibility of Early Childhood Care

Quality early childhood care and education can be inaccessible to vulnerable families in Northside. As a result, too many young children begin life at a disadvantage. Increasing the number of vulnerable children who are engaged in quality early childhood care requires attention on multiple fronts, including program physical location, demonstration of quality, cost of care, and convenience for families. For example, educators with quality programs may work to train and guide other existing child care centers and preschools to meet quality standards and participate in Virginia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Particular focus on programs in neighborhoods that presently lack any programs of demonstrated quality is needed. In addition, concerted community efforts to connect families with financial aid for early childhood care can put quality care in reach for more families.

3 Foster Trusting Connections and Relationships

To respond to a sense of isolation and distrust, public and private organizations can work together with citizens to create a healthier sense of community for residents, improved resident sense of self-efficacy, strengthened partnerships between residents and non-profit services, increased usage of services, and increased long-term engagement with social supports. Bringing partners together in intentional ways to ensure information sharing and shared practice guidelines (e.g., trauma-informed care, resident resilience building), using fun events and meaningful projects to engage residents and build trust, and making it easier to refer and recruit families can help build and strengthen relationships among neighbors and increase usage of available resources, services, and civic and faith-based opportunities.

“A lot of people work, but hourly wages, service jobs, shift work—those jobs are like quicksand. We want to help residents have more predictable and stable jobs because it typically leads to a less chaotic life and circumstances.”

— Stakeholder

4

Connect Families to Employment with a Livable Wage

More than one in three Northside families with young children struggles with finding and maintaining stable employment to provide for their family's needs. Securing employment that provides enough money to cover the costs of child care and is compatible with raising young children is an added difficulty for families with young children. There are currently at least four workforce development initiatives in the Northside across the partner organizations interviewed. These entities may seek to coordinate and target their offerings to maximize impact. Efforts to support young children in Northside overall will benefit from intentionally addressing the capacity of the parents to prepare for, secure, and sustain jobs that have a career trajectory over time. At the same time, increased public and private investments in regional economic development, training, and regional public transportation resources are necessary to better connect residents with available jobs.

The first years of life are critical to healthy development of young children. They are also a time when families are vulnerable to both systemic and community risks. No matter how dedicated a parent is to providing his or her children a thriving environment full of opportunity, where he or she lives will matter. In Northside neighborhoods, many children are at risk of starting kindergarten behind their peers, as they experience disparities in exposure to language and quality care based on socioeconomic status, compounded by social and economic isolation.

This portrait highlights the urgency of creating safe and enriching spaces for families and their children today, investing in accessible, quality early childhood development services that meet families where they are, and connecting families to jobs that have the promise of a family-sustaining wage. Above all, it is not only what services and networks are provided in Northside, but how and by whom. Effective engagement in Northside will depend on trusting, reliable, and respectful mutual relationships between community groups and vulnerable families.

INTRODUCTION

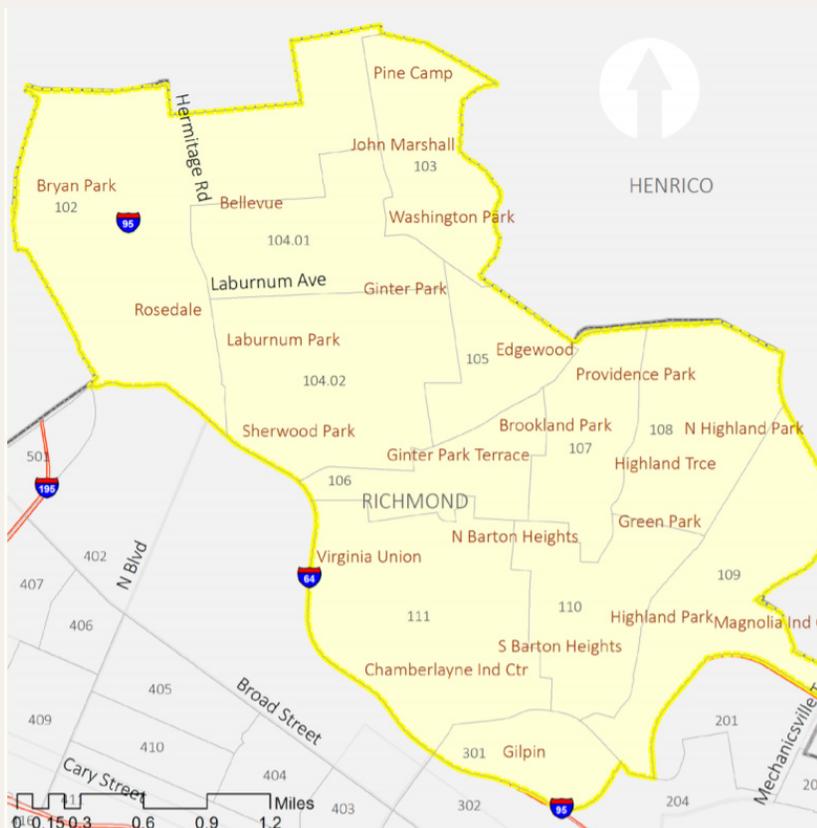
Background

In 2004, the Partnership for Families (PFF)—a nonprofit organization in Richmond, Virginia—was created by the Robins Foundation to support vulnerable families with young children. It worked to do so through high quality early childhood care and wrap around support to families through community partners. Northside was specifically chosen by the organizers as the area to serve due to both the high needs of families in the area and the socioeconomic diversity of Northside’s various neighborhoods, which was reflective of Richmond more generally.

Recognizing that much has changed in Northside since the model was first implemented, the

Partnership for Families and its principal funder, the Robins Foundation, engaged Communitas Consulting to create a portrait of the needs and characteristics of vulnerable families with young children living in the Northside community as a follow up to an evaluation of the Partnership for Families between 2012-2015. The intent of this study is to provide PFF and the Robins Foundation with a greater understanding of the needs of Northside families for creating a healthy and nurturing environment for young children. This information will be used to inform PFF program development and Robins Foundation investments. It is also meant as a resource for others working and living in the Northside area who are concerned with neighborhood health and well-being.

Figure 1. Neighborhood and Census Tract Overlay of Richmond’s Northside



- Bellevue
- Brookland Park
- Bryan Park
- Chamberlayne Industrial Center
- Edgewood
- Gilpin
- Ginter Park
- Ginter Park Terrace
- Green Park
- Highland Park Southern Tip
- Highland Terrace
- John Marshall
- Laburnum Park
- Magnolia Industrial Center
- North Highland Park
- Northern Barton Heights
- Pine Camp
- Providence Park
- Rosedale
- Sherwood Park
- Southern Barton Heights
- Virginia Union
- Washington Park

Neighborhoods of Northside Richmond

Source: VCU Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (Appendix B)

Voices of the Northside community members likely to be served by PFF and its partners are a central element of this portrait. To build healthy community programs and meet families' needs, resident perspectives are essential.¹

Northside Richmond is located in the portion of Richmond, Virginia that lies north of I-64 and east of I-95.² A demographically and socioeconomically diverse area, it includes 23 distinct neighborhoods (Figure 1) and is served by five Richmond Public Schools (RPS) elementary schools.³ Within Northside, there are pockets of economic and social stability—areas where family income, educational attainment, and resident employment surpass other areas of the city. There are also pockets within Northside that are among the neediest in Richmond, with concentrated social and economic risk.

Vulnerable Families

Childhood and family vulnerability has many dimensions. Although poverty often corresponds to vulnerability, the impact of poverty goes far beyond financial difficulty. Children in poverty may experience physical, socioeconomic, and social vulnerabilities, as well as institutionalized disadvantage.⁴ Children's vulnerabilities are intertwined with the vulnerabilities of the adults in their lives for what is often a two-generation (or more) layer of risk and need. At a family level, multiple, complex barriers are typically faced on a daily basis. This report examines the social and psychological realities for families with children under age 6, living in the Northside of Richmond, who are experiencing social and demographic risks.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This portrait of Northside families with young children was designed to capture Northside families' **priorities** for their children, **daily experiences**, and **perceptions** of needs

and assets, as captured by the following central questions:

1. **Why is the need urgent in the Northside?**
2. **What are families' priorities, experiences, and perceptions of needs and assets regarding their young children?**
3. **What are families' priorities, experiences, and perceptions of needs and assets within their daily lives (i.e., housing, food, health, transportation, safety)?**
4. **What are families' access to and relationships with social and community supports that may enhance both the quality of their daily lives and their capacity to support their children?**

In order to understand and create a portrait of Northside families' experiences and priorities, Communitas Consulting used four methods:

Talking directly with families. Northside families know what they experience and what they want for their children. Communitas Consulting directly engaged families in two focus groups, touching on resident needs, perceptions, and experiences. Focus groups were carefully set up to engage residents who are most directly affected by issues related to socio-demographic vulnerability and young children.

Gathering input through surveys. In conjunction with the focus groups, Communitas Consulting gathered input from many Northside families with young children. The survey was designed to yield a robust understanding of Northside families' perspectives, needs, and experiences, building on focus group findings. Additionally, Communitas Consulting analyzed a survey PFF staff had administered in Gilpin Court in 2016 about what matters to residents and where they feel empowered to take collective action on community challenges.

Examining community indicators. Input directly from families was supplemented with community data on demographic, socioeconomic, health, and education outcomes for residents of Northside and Richmond, compiled by the Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA) at Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, Virginia. The CURA indicators report is available as Appendix B to this report.

Interviewing organizational leaders serving Northside families. There are a number of organized efforts within Northside, Richmond, and the region working to build communities and support families. Many of these organizations work directly with vulnerable families with young children; others collaborate with the Partnership for Families. Interviewing leaders of organizations serving Northside families provided a way to consider similarities between perspectives of families and service providers.

Ultimately, this portrait is designed to combine the perspectives of families, experience of organizations, and context of community data in order to shape PFF's future strategic and organizational priorities. It is also intended to be of use to the broader community. A more detailed description of the methods used to create this community portrait is available in Appendix A.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY NEEDS IN CONTEXT

The needs of vulnerable children and families may be considered on two levels: the personal (or family) and the community (or environmental).

Community needs are directly shaped by social systems and community characteristics—such as transportation systems, the availability of child care, community safety, and present and past public policies regarding housing and education.

Personal needs are influenced by a person or family's characteristics—including their education

and employment, physical and mental health, social connections, and housing and food security.

This report examines personal/family and community needs as experienced in neighborhoods—as opposed to a more systemic or regional level—in order to focus on the particular challenges of Northside. Neighborhoods and community systems directly affect families' health, opportunities, and behavior. Family systems, in turn, affect children's resources, well-being, and capacity to learn and grow. Effort at both the community and personal/family levels is essential to effectively strengthening children and families, as well as the communities they live in. Systemic forces also affect family and child well-being, but are beyond the scope of this profile.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

The following section addresses Northside's community needs that present challenges to families with young children, and that are more likely to be addressed through coordinated community efforts, policies, or system change. These conditions shape the environment in which children learn and grow.

Northside community needs were examined through population indicators (from the U.S. Census Bureau and other data sources), themes from community input (via surveys and focus groups), and themes from organizational perspectives (through interviews with partners and stakeholders). From this, Communitas Consulting identified four areas of community need in Northside Richmond for families with young children:

1. **ELEVATED POVERTY AND NEIGHBORHOOD DISTRESS**
2. **INSUFFICIENT QUALITY CHILD CARE**
3. **MIXED PERFORMANCE ON THIRD GRADE SCHOOL TESTS**
4. **CONCERNS ABOUT COMMUNITY VIOLENCE**

ELEVATED POVERTY AND NEIGHBORHOOD DISTRESS

“Neighborhood distress” encapsulates a web of problems, which may include “crime and violence; physical and environmental blight; private-sector disinvestment, weak (or absent) institutions and services; high rates of joblessness, dropping out of school; and teen births; and low levels of social capital and collective efficacy.”⁵ A neighborhood’s poverty rate is a commonly used proxy for neighborhood distress. Certain Northside neighborhoods experience striking rates of poverty and associated forms of distress, elevating children’s risk of the life-long effects poverty has on health, education, and earnings.⁶

What Families Experience.

Employment and family finances are daily stresses—both inherently and as they relate to parenting—among many Northside families with young children. Thirty-nine percent of families Communitas Consulting surveyed indicated that finding work or a job is a daily concern. In addition, thirty nine percent of families separately stated that getting food on the table is a daily challenge. One mother explained, “I have one child and she feels like three kids!...She is always eating something. She says, ‘I wish we had more food.’ I’m like, who got money, you or me?”

Securing employment that provides enough money to cover the costs of child care and is compatible with raising young children is an added difficulty for families with young children. One mother explained that jobs that pay poorly and/or require weekend work are a substantial barrier, stating, “[I wish] I had a better paying job. If I go to work, then who is going to take care of the little one? I have to be at work on the weekends. I either stay home or spend money on daycare.” Jobs involving on-call or shift work with short scheduling notice compound parental stress when family and work responsibilities collide. One parent explained, “The hardest stuff is finding a babysitter. When I work for a temp agency, I get called right away. I need more notice. I just can’t find a babysitter.”

Families view a “good job” as the key to supporting their children’s potential, and in a number of cases, families hoped securing such a job would result in their leaving a difficult neighborhood.

What Organizations See. Community stakeholders corroborated the widespread need residents have for quality employment opportunities. Two thirds of community stakeholders indicated that what Northside families with young children need most are good, stable jobs. As one stated, “A lot of people work, but hourly wages, service jobs, shift work—those jobs are like quicksand. We want to help residents have more predictable and stable jobs because it typically leads to a less chaotic life and circumstances.”

Another stakeholder explained families’ set of choices in balancing employment and child care as being emotionally and financially straining across all options, stating “We need...better paying jobs for teens and adults. Many of our residents work, but they work low-paying jobs and no benefits. Sometimes it costs more for them to go to work or they break even, because of child care costs and transportation, so they opt not to work and be a stay-at-home mom or dad.” Multiple organizations in Northside are engaged in workforce development, and the study did not analyze the extent of coordination or alignment among them. When asked, stakeholders felt there was so much

need for job support in the community that the work could be strengthened through coordination but is not duplicative, because so many “people need good-paying jobs.” Stakeholders described needs for workforce development, adult educational attainment, quality child care, and housing as interrelated issues in the community.

What Community Indicators Show.

Some neighborhoods in Northside experience great poverty and neighborhood distress—most notably, Gilpin and the Washington Park/John Marshall/Pine Camp neighborhoods have a strong majority (50–80%) of children living under the poverty threshold. Many families in these neighborhoods are headed by single women (in Gilpin, Washington Park, John Marshall, and Pine Camp, 80% of households are headed by single women, compared to 43% citywide). Gilpin has a 74% poverty rate (78% among families), with 40% of residents living in deep poverty—earning less than half the poverty threshold—an outcome that is double Richmond’s rate of residents in deep poverty. Other Northside neighborhoods have relatively low levels of poverty.

A neighborhood divided. What is notable about Northside is that the distribution of socioeconomic and health risk divides along geographic and racial lines. The families who are most likely to experience distress due to socioeconomic circumstances live in neighborhoods roughly east of Chamberlayne Avenue that are predominantly black.⁷ Neighborhoods west of Chamberlayne Avenue have less socio-economic risk and are majority white.⁸ According to John Moeser, a Richmond academic and anti-poverty activist, racial segregation enforced by local, state, and federal public policies throughout the 20th century has resulted in a greater segregation of blacks and whites in Richmond today than in the 1800s.⁹ In Northside, racial segregation and neighborhood risk are aligned.

Eastern neighborhoods tend to fall significantly below Richmond’s median on numerous social and economic indicators, and some represent

more severe conditions (based on indicators family and child distress) than are typical across the city. Neighborhoods east of Chamberlayne with a low percentage of adults with at least a high school degree exhibit higher poverty and unemployment, lower median household income, and more concentrated poverty (see Appendix B). More than half (60%) of neighborhoods east of Chamberlayne Avenue have at least 1 in 5 residents in poverty, as compared to only 25% of neighborhoods west of Chamberlayne Avenue. Employment among two parent households with young children is lower in Barton Heights, Brookland Park, Gilpin, Highland Park, John Marshall, Pine Camp, Providence Park, and Washington Park than the average for Richmond.

Health outcomes. The effects of enduring, concentrated poverty in some Northside neighborhoods can also be seen in disparities in health outcomes. Gilpin Court, Highland Park Southern Tip, and the Magnolia Industrial Center have the lowest life expectancies in the city. Across the eastern portion of Northside, resident life expectancy is 4–14 years lower than that of their neighbors across Chamberlayne Avenue, and than Richmond as a whole. Additionally, these residents have higher levels of teen births (12%, as compared to 7% in Richmond). In contrast, the majority of neighborhoods on the western part of Northside tend to have significantly better outcomes compared to Richmond’s median for the same social and economic indicators.

Taken together, all sources indicate that there is substantial distress among families and neighborhoods in the Northside of Richmond. While poverty and distress are particularly concentrated in some of the neighborhoods east of Chamberlayne Avenue, there are families with need and vulnerability across Northside. Stable employment with a livable wage is viewed as central to families’ ability to thrive and support growing children among organizations. At the same time, residents of Northside neighborhoods have a number of barriers to achieving such employment, including low education levels and a high concentration of single parents.

INSUFFICIENT QUALITY CHILD CARE

Stable, nurturing care that supports rich learning between birth and age five is critical to ensuring that children—especially those from vulnerable backgrounds—are prepared to flourish academically. Not only is birth to age five a sensitive developmental period, but inequities later in life appear to begin early, as young children experience disparities in exposure to language and quality care based on socioeconomic status.¹⁰ As a result, lower income students entering kindergarten are already behind their upper income peers.¹¹ However, high-quality early childhood education has the demonstrated ability to decrease disparities in preparation and success, improving both academic achievement and young adult outcomes.¹²

Nine out of 10 families surveyed indicated that quality child care is one of the two most important factors in their children’s development. According to stakeholders, high-quality, accessible, affordable child care is the single most pressing need for Northside families with young children. Stakeholders indicated that—based on what they heard from residents and what they themselves witnessed—there is a gap in affordable quality child care: there are not enough quality child care opportunities for Northside children, and those that exist are not always accessible or affordable to residents.

Northside has child care programs, but the perspective of families and service providers in the area suggests a gap in accessibility. This gap may best be understood by considering the accessibility of quality child care options. A family-based framework for child care access considers four central dimensions of access to early childhood education.¹³ Within this framework, families’ access to quality child care means:

1. Care is easy to find and reasonably close
2. Care is affordable
3. Care is supportive of children’s healthy development
4. Available care meets parents’ needs and desires¹⁴

Although this study could not fully examine the reasons for a difference in availability versus perceptions of accessibility of child care, the data do highlight a gap and a need for further consideration of how to create affordable, accessible, high quality options for young children in Northside.

DIMENSION #1: Is Care Easy to Find and Reasonably Close?

Finding and arranging child care is a daily concern for many Northside families with young children. Forty-one percent of families indicated that finding or arranging child care is a daily concern for them. Because the families surveyed were recruited primarily through local child care centers, this means that even among families who are already generally engaged with formal child care, more than one in three experience daily difficulties related to it.

In 2015, Northside had 20 licensed private child care centers with capacity to serve approximately 1,050 children under age 5. However, there were no licensed private child care providers in Brookland Park, John Marshall, Pine Camp, Providence Park, or Washington Park. Further, only 6% of Northside child care slots offered preschool education (as compared to 22% of slots across Richmond as a whole). In addition to private child care options, Richmond Public

Schools operated six public preschool classrooms in Northside in 2015–16, for 405 children.¹⁵ Considered together, there are approximately 1,500 public and private child care slots in Northside—space to serve approximately 3 out of 4 Northside children under age 5.¹⁶

DIMENSION #2: Is Care Affordable?

The high cost of quality child care makes it unattainable for some families, particularly those in poverty. For some parents, child care is a sufficient financial burden that they leave the workforce altogether. One parent related, “It is hard to find child care and afterschool programs. I went somewhere and she told me \$200. I said you have a good day and walked out. I can’t pay that.”

There are public and private scholarships for quality child care in Richmond, but the extent of

their availability, ease of access, and cost coverage is uncertain. In Northside, stakeholders spoke of residents who were interested in high quality child care programs that offered scholarships, but for whom the availability of funding and an open slot for the appropriate age group at a high quality center did not align with their immediate needs.

DIMENSION #3: Is Care Supportive of Children’s Healthy Development?

Programs that actively support children’s development—rather than simply providing them with oversight while primary caregivers are away—confer the greatest benefit to children. Programs that have obtained national accreditation or participate in quality rating systems, such as Virginia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), signal to families that their quality is monitored. Because it is not child care itself but the quality of care that supports children’s development, it is important that quality care supporting child development be more widely available.

Across Northside, the proportion of private licensed child care slots with some form of quality recognition, through national accreditation or participation in Virginia’s QRIS, aligns with Richmond’s (40% in Northside vs 38% in Richmond). Taken as a whole, Northside has 830 public preschool and private child care slots with quality recognition, or quality child care capacity for 40% of Northside’s children under age 5.

“It’s not that impoverished families don’t know about the importance of early childhood development, but that they can’t afford it.”
— Stakeholder

In 2016, the annual cost of day care for one Virginian infant was \$12,220 (or \$10,088 for home-based care)—more than the annual cost of public college tuition, and nearly half the annual earnings of a typical single parent. Child care expenses for two young children exceed the entire annual income of a two-parent family living at the poverty line in Virginia.¹⁷

Notably, parents and professionals define quality in different ways. To parents in focus groups, high quality child care means a low teacher-child ratio, a clean facility, open lines of communication between parents and teachers, transportation, and minimization of illness contracted through the child care center. Parents shared:

“I love my child care. I pay out of pocket for transportation and daycare weekly....I know the daycare owner, she is excellent. I know the daycare is clean, she is great with the kids, communication....I just love it. It’s amazing.”

“When I pick my kid up [from child care], I like talking to teachers. I want to know what they ate, why did you change their clothes. Open lines of communication.”

In contrast, professionals define quality in terms of outcome measures and accreditation status.

DIMENSION #4: Does Available Care Meet Parents Needs and Desires?

Northside families and organizations discussed additional barriers to child care accessibility, including long wait lists that discourage parents from applying, child care models that require families to secure a slot at infancy (before the family is ready to send the child to care), the perception that some quality programs were not intended for vulnerable families, and a need for improved information and communication between programs and families.

Focus group discussions of child care also revealed that a substantial proportion (44%) of parenting hardships mentioned were directly tied to families’ child care concerns—most notably, quality and availability of care, relationships with teachers/staff, and difficulty when children contracted illness through child care centers. The difficulty these factors can cause for families may be why they define quality child care in terms of the extent to which child care limits problems with communication, cleanliness, and child illness.



“There are more child care centers, but we need more quality and affordable child care options.”

– Stakeholder

In terms of care’s availability to meet families’ needs, familial preferences on the timing of a child’s entry into child care may not align with the policies programs have set up. A stakeholder who helps Northside families with child care explained, “[A child care center] did call recently, but the spot was for an infant. We don’t have an infant ready for the spot. We have 2’s and 3’s. [The center says] they want to start them at infancy, but sometimes our residents don’t want to send their child that early.”

In summary, quality child care can be inaccessible to vulnerable Northside families: only a few child care programs in Northside are accredited or participate in Virginia’s QRIS, formal child care can be financially out of reach for families in poverty, program models are not prepared to accommodate the entry timeline families prefer, and families may become discouraged by wait lists for quality programs. This study did not assess the extent of informal and unlicensed child care arrangements. Prior to confirming a gap in care overall (vs. quality care), a more comprehensive review of the existing market of supply and customer demand is recommended.¹⁸

MIXED PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED SCHOOL TESTS

Elementary children’s academic performance—especially reading ability—is predictive of their eventually graduating from high school, independent of socio-demographic characteristics.¹⁹ Early school performance—and in particular, third grade reading ability—is a critical milestone. The impact of poor reading performance in third grade is extensive, as remediating reading difficulties after this point becomes increasingly difficult and links between third grade reading and performance in high school, as well as likelihood of high school drop-out, are evident.

Educators and policymakers have documented a correlation between a student’s race and standardized test scores, as children of color are more likely to experience poverty, which has a significant impact on educational outcomes.²⁰ The disparity in school poverty rates between black and white schools has been shown to be “the single most powerful correlate of achievement gaps.”²¹ This pattern of divergent educational outcomes is evident in Northside elementary school test performance, with exceptions.

A recent report by Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) of Virginia on the state of school and housing segregation in Richmond determined that area schools “are still separate and continue to be unequal...[T]he Richmond area is not seriously engaged in either school or housing desegregation policy.”²² Across Richmond, 71% of students are black and 12% are white. Elementary schools serving Northside are even more racially homogeneous: over 90% of students at George W. Carver, Ginter Park, Overby-Sheppard, and J.E.B. Stuart are black. Northside also has one elementary school that is more integrated: Linwood Holton. Serving Northside’s western neighborhoods, Linwood Holton is disproportionately white (33%) compared to both the city and other Northside schools.²³

Figure 2. 2014–17 Average 3rd Grade SOL Pass Rates and Outliers

Neighborhood	Reading	Math
Overby-Sheppard	47%	40%
Richmond Average	61%	65%
Northside Average	69%	68%
George W. Carver	90%	88%

School performance shows a mix of opportunity for children in Northside. Two of the schools serving distressed neighborhoods in Northside lack accreditation by the Virginia Department of Education, due to poor performance (Ginter Park and Overby-Sheppard). A third school, in contrast, is notable for its ability to support the success of its students, despite serving one of the most distressed neighborhoods in Northside and in Richmond, generally (Carver in Gilpin). It was one of only seven Virginia public schools recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Blue Ribbon School in 2016. It has a strong community of support for its students, and its student test performance far exceeds that of neighboring schools and Richmond’s average (Figure 2). The remaining two schools (J.E.B. Stuart and Linwood Holton) perform near and above Richmond’s average outcomes.

Among elementary opportunities available to Northside children, there is great inequality of achievement outcomes, reflecting the education system’s potential to offset risk for young children, and demonstrating that schools are not currently a consistent protective factor in the paths of the young children in Northside.

CONCERNS ABOUT COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Crime and chronic community violence place children and families in the position of experiencing repeated trauma, which affects their physical and emotional well-being. The effects of trauma are both immediate and long lasting: children as young as infants who have been exposed to violence in their homes or communities exhibit developmental differences,²⁴ and repeated traumatic experiences in childhood are demonstrated to increase the risk of adverse outcomes in adulthood.²⁵ In addition, parents are often traumatized by community violence, along with their children. Their capacity to parent is adversely affected as they become less emotionally available and experience helplessness at their inability to protect their children.²⁶

A key characteristic of the daily environment in which families live their lives is physical safety—or the lack thereof. Northside residents pointed to violence as a critical problem. Three in four (75%) families—across all areas of Northside—referenced violence as a concern they feel every day. One in five families named community violence as the single most important thing to change in order to make life better for young children.²⁷ In September 2017, a weekend of multiple murders in Gilpin Court strained the community, who felt the killings were “more of the same,” and that community violence puts neighbor bystanders in a double bind, in which “it’s not anything we can do to keep people from killing each other, and if we talk, we’re at risk.”²⁸

A violent environment has broad effects on the community, harming residents’ mental health, physical safety, and community cohesiveness.²⁹ In the Northside of Richmond, community violence causes chronic stress and apprehension toward neighbors and inhibits residents’ security to move freely within the neighborhood. It also leads parents to limit the scope of children’s play and exploration when few places are deemed safe. In focus groups, parents shared both personal experiences with community violence and illustrations of how a violent environment shapes the way they live and raise their children (Figure 3).

Northside families describe having a tentative relationship with the world beyond the walls of their homes, fears for their children’s immediate safety, and discouragement about the lack of playgrounds and public spaces they felt comfortable using as direct results of violence and crime in their community. One mother even felt insecure in her own home, stating, “There is nowhere safe to go. Your house or the church. May not be safe in your house. Drug addicts on the corner.” One resident, who generally liked what the neighborhood had to offer, felt it was not what she wanted long-term, due to violence. She stated, “I like my neighborhood, the doctor’s office, school. It is okay for now, but not forever. It is just not safe.”

As a result of violent surroundings—as well as limited affordable options for activities for children of all ages—34% of Northside families indicated that having programs and activities for children—to engage and support them during out-of-school times—is the most important thing the community needs for its children. This need for activities and safe spaces was families’ top community priority, and was frequently expressed as a preventive measure tied to community violence. Resident comments on the need for accessible programs and activities were often directly tied to community violence, such as

Figure 3. Parent Experiences with Violence

Personal Experience with Violence	Parenting Reaction to Violence
<p>“Surroundings. What you are surrounded by, things you can’t control.... I came home from work today during the middle of the day, there was about 50 people surrounding this fight. It’s 12 o’clock in the middle of the day. I was sitting in my porch, next to a car, pop, pop, pop, I froze. I just froze because if I moved, then my kids won’t have a momma.”</p> <p>“We got guns, fights. I don’t feel safe going outside. You can walk into anything. My kids can’t go outside. Maybe duck, can’t sit on the porch. Today I drove past four fights. I don’t want them to think that is okay.”</p> <p>“I was at a cookout one time. I ran this way because I heard the guns, then the people shot back. I am caught in the middle. I prayed I don’t get hit.”</p>	<p>“I stay in my house.”</p> <p>“I think they have a safe place—in my backyard. I need to see them.”</p> <p>“I don’t feel safe going outside. You can walk into anything. My kids can’t go outside. Can’t sit on the porch.”</p> <p>The most important thing for children to grow in the neighborhood is a “safe place to play. You never know—someone come shoot. Broad daylight. You always say ‘stay right here,’ but they don’t understand.”</p> <p>“The only thing you can do is explain to your kids what happens and let them know they should want better. Pray.”</p>

“[We need] something for the kids to do for all ages. The violence is terrible. We need something productive for them to do.” Families also focused on programs’ ability to provide safe places for enrichment and connection. One parent stated, “[what we need most is] positive, like [PFF’s] summer event—something to do that’s good, to do out of the house, other than just watch TV.”

Some areas of Northside appear to be well known by residents for violence; residents in areas such as Gilpin Court expressed specific and visceral fears and reactions to violence. But concerns about violent environments were common across the majority of families consulted as part of the research. Families expressed concern about both violence’s effect on their family’s immediate physical safety and the effect surroundings have on shaping child and youth perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. As a result of fears of and experiences with community violence, families described physically and emotionally isolating themselves, feeling defenseless in their neighborhoods, desiring safe community spaces for themselves and their children, and looking to programs and recreation

for children and youth to enrich and support, as well as prevent further violence.

BARRIERS FOR VULNERABLE FAMILIES

In order to provide the secure and nurturing environment that all children require, parents benefit from four forms of personal capacity—financial resources, time, psychological resources, and human capital.³⁰ Family poverty depletes all of these resources, imperiling children’s health and security. In Northside, the data pointed to four psychological and social characteristics of vulnerable families with young children that serve as barriers to obtaining security and receiving support:

1. COMMUNITY ISOLATION
2. LACK OF TRUST
3. PERVASIVE TRAUMA AND EXTREME STRESS
4. LIMITED SENSE OF SELF-EFFICACY

The challenges Northside families described facing—daily violence, multiple stressors, lack of social structures or support, and difficulties with transportation, health, and child care—are hallmarks of poverty that have noted impacts on children’s development.³¹ At the most fundamental level, families experience these challenges in a psychological way. Families consistently refer to community and family challenges (e.g., violence

in the community, lack of stable employment) as experiences of isolation, of lacking control (i.e., lack of self-efficacy), and of lacking trust and connection to other people and social supports. Residents’ experiences suggest the importance of intentionally considering not only what, but also how supports and services are delivered to create both system-level relief and positive psychological experiences for residents.

COMMUNITY ISOLATION

Vulnerable Northside families described being socially and physically isolated from other people, supportive resources, and enrichment opportunities for children. There is a clear body of evidence demonstrating that social isolation, in particular, causes numerous adverse health outcomes for people of all ages—including adverse health effects into adulthood for children who experience social isolation.³² Parents described imposing a degree of physical isolation on their families due to concerns about safety, and described lacking access to children’s activities and supportive resources due to pricing, distance from home, and limited transportation options.

Social Isolation. Many Northside families not only experience daily stress related to meeting basic needs, but do so in relative isolation from one another and from social structures. Only 18% of those surveyed could be considered highly connected;³³ in contrast, over half (51%) of survey respondents indicated that they have no one close by to whom they could turn for help. In one focus group, not one participant could name a neighborhood role model in their life or that of their child. In the other, parents named themselves as role models for their young children. Some families expressed having family unity, but expressions of social isolation were more common, shared in sentiments such as

- “No, I don’t have a community;”
- “Friends. I have one friend,” and
- “I don’t have nobody. I just bottle stuff in....I take my medication.”

Figure 4. Who Northside Families Would Turn to for Help

Percentage Who Would Seek Help	Entity
57%	Church
45%	Social Worker
28%	Government
26%	Community Center
22%	School
21%	Counselor
18%	Neighbors
17%	PFF

In addition to relative isolation from a personal network of support, Northside residents with young children feel disconnected from institutions and persons in positions of authority. When asked to consider a hypothetical scenario in which their family needs help and shown a list of eight

possible sources of help, only 18% indicated they would turn to neighbors, and two thirds of families (64%) indicated that they would turn to two or fewer sources (Figure 4). Openness to help from a particular entity is inconsistent. While families are most likely to accept help from churches (57%) and social workers (45%), they are least likely to accept it from neighbors (18%) or the Partnership for Families (17%).³⁴ What is striking is that these results were gathered from a segment of the population that might be considered more connected, because they engage with child care centers or came to a PFF-hosted community event, and also agreed to contribute their thoughts to the project.

The sense of personal isolation applies not only to individual families who may need help, but also to residents' capacity for collective action toward positive community change. The Partnership for Families "street team" asked residents of Gilpin Court what community issues were important to them and who else cares about the same issue. Residents listed priorities such as decreasing violence and having additional programs and activities for children, but 75% of residents could not name anyone else who cared about the same thing.

Isolation in Nurturing Children. Focus group participants had the overall perception that in raising their families, they are on their own, and few outside groups will provide supplemental support for children or a break from the demands of parenting. One mother expressed the constant requirements of child care as, "There is always something with kids or job. Play catch-up. Never have a break nowhere. What is a weekend?"

Families also feel unable to access enrichment and recreational activities for their children due to program costs and location. One parent explained the prohibitive cost of activities, "My daughter has interest in playing basketball... It is free, if you live in the neighborhood. Free if you

live in [Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority properties], but if you live in a house, you have to pay \$65 every 8 weeks."

Other programs are inaccessible due to location. Another parent stated, "I wish [we] had a community center, Boys and Girls Club... Chick fil A, Monkey Joe, something like [the] Children's Museum. [It's] so far to get there—not in neighborhood. [I'd like] somewhere to walk and play. Somewhere you don't have to say 'no.'"

Physical Isolation and Lack of Transportation. Some parents reported isolating themselves and their children in their homes in order to ensure physical safety. But the physical isolation many vulnerable Northside families experience extends further, to isolation from other communities and resources due to transportation limitations. Nearly half of families (47%) indicated that being able to get where they need to go is a daily concern.

In focus groups, participants shared stories demonstrating that for some, walking is their primary mode of transportation. This is borne out by the high value some Gilpin Court residents place on Gilpin Court's proximity to churches and grocery stores, and the barriers they describe to their children's participation in activities beyond Northside.³⁵ These residents report having limited access to any activities beyond their immediate neighborhood, isolating them from the communities and resources that are not physically close to their homes. Organizations serving Northside confirmed the central importance of connecting families with adequate transportation. One executive director explained, "there are actually a lot of parents and families that don't mind getting out, but [there's] no transportation to do it. They'll opt to stay at home with multiple children. That's a deterrent to do something [in the community]." Another stated more broadly, "With my experience, transportation is a big barrier, and affordability."

Isolation of Single Parents. Isolation can cause particular strain on single parents. Although Northside has approximately the same percentage of families headed by a single mother as Richmond more generally (47% and 43%, respectively), 80% of families in the distressed neighborhoods of Gilpin, John Marshall, Pine Camp, and Washington Park are headed by a single mother.

In focus groups, one quarter of participants expressed the feeling that they had no breaks or supports in the work of raising their family. The feeling was particularly strong among single

mothers. One stated, “It would help if I had more help. More hands-on stuff. If my kids’ fathers would be involved, then that would be helpful. Since it’s just me, I don’t get time off. I need a break.” With the necessity of balancing employment and child care—generally on low wages, and often with limited connection to affordable child programs and a personal network of support—these parents are tired. As one parent described, “Sometimes, doing it on your own, sometimes it [does] get tiring....Sometime you need a break sometimes, but you got to suck it up.”

LACK OF TRUST

Northside residents report a lack of trust and connection to their neighbors and to the institutions in their communities. As a result, individuals and families become further isolated from one another, unable to identify and draw upon one another’s strengths in times of need on an individual level. In addition, a fundamental lack of trust toward neighbors eventually impacts the broader community as it diminishes residents’ collective efficacy, or willingness and ability to take joint action toward community improvement. Low collective efficacy is a strong indicator of the level of violence and crime in a community.³⁶

Focus group participants and PFF organizational partners interpreted the reason for resident disconnection with available supports as stemming from a fundamental lack of trust. The lack of trust extends to both people and institutions, and highlights that families not only have unaddressed needs, but that they may not easily open up to help without concerted effort at building relationships and trust within the community. Focus group participants expressed limited trust of institutions ranging from direct rejection (“I don’t want to work with [that organization] to potential adversity (“Teachers may get in the way.”) to dismissal of capability (“It is real out there. You won’t know until you live it. [Their staff] goes home every night, they don’t know. People just don’t know.”).

Despite families’ reluctance to trust neighbors and organizations, they express craving a connection with the caregivers of their children. Family descriptions of quality child care included clear, open lines of communication as a critical element. Families who have found a child care provider they like express deep trust. (“I feel good leaving my kids. I feel like they are safe.” Or “I know the daycare owner; she is excellent. I know the daycare is clean, she is great with the kids, communication....I just love it. It’s amazing.”) In contrast, other parents indicated that they relied on family alone for child care, at times expressly because that is who they trust. (“My momma and grandma is her daycare.” “Basically, my momma watches him. I don’t really like using babysitters.”)

All stakeholder organizations described the importance of being known and trusted in the community in order for residents to come in for services. For some, personal presence, ongoing relationships, and word-of-mouth reputation are central to their operations. All felt that trust

is key to success of their missions, and several noted that lack of trust forms a barrier between Northside's vulnerable families and the organizations that provide supportive services in the neighborhood.

PERVASIVE TRAUMA/EXTREME STRESS

Toxic stress—the kind of stress that comes from a failure to reach basic needs of food, safety and housing—touches young children before they are born. Prenatal effects of a mother's toxic stress on infants is significant and can permanently alter the infant's brain. Some research shows it can even stop the presentation of genes that are needed for healthy development. Compounding this, the rapid brain development that occurs in the first five years of life can be muted as a function of young children's exposure to toxic stress. Impacts are seen on children's capacity for learning, memory, and handling emotions. Although research shows adult support and quality relationships in early childhood can help offset the impacts of toxic stress, it is important to recognize that many parents of vulnerable children suffer themselves from the impact of chronic stress. Supporting the health of parents experiencing chronic stress is part of creating a thriving environment for young children.

Nearly all Northside families surveyed reported experiencing ongoing stress related to basic needs, such as housing, safety, and food (Figure 5). 93% of families surveyed said they experience stress every day due to concerns about physical safety, reliable transportation, arranging and paying for child care, and/or managing health. Nearly half (43%) of survey respondents indicated having four or more basic needs that cause them daily stress. Fundamental, ongoing difficulties meeting basic needs can be particularly harmful to young children, as research suggests that the accumulation of stress may be a causal factor in young children's social and emotional well-being and development.³⁷

Families in Gilpin Court stated that they experience particular stress due to pervasive violence, which comes at all times of the day and has

interrupted their commute, social leisure, and time at home. Parents also pointed to shootings that occur when children are coming home from

Figure 5. Resident Daily Concerns

Percentage of families daily concerned with...	
71%	Keeping family safe
47%	Getting where we need to be
45%	Managing health
41%	Finding/arranging child care
41%	Keeping a roof over our heads
39%	Getting food on the table
39%	Finding work/a job
29%	Keeping peace in the family/ with neighbors

school or playing in the park as extreme family stressors. One parent summarized, “Surroundings [cause the most stress]. When you are surrounded by things you can’t control. We can’t control [it], but we are going to see it each and every day. Whether you work in day [or] night, you are going to see [it].” Other families pointed to

difficulty keeping up with bills and keeping up with the never-ending work that is required of them as posing the greatest challenge to them. Some participants highlighted these challenges as particularly difficult for them as single parents, but at the end of the day, all parents “are exhausted... making sure all the duties are done.”

LIMITED SENSE OF SELF-EFFICACY AND RESILIENCE

Perceived self-efficacy is a “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations;” it “influence[s] how people think, feel, motivate themselves, and act.”³⁸ Resilience is one’s ability to persist through adversity, adapt to change, and “get back up again” after experiencing setbacks or trauma. Together, self-efficacy and resilience constitute a strength that enables individuals and families to persevere in difficult circumstances.

When discussing families and parenting, focus group participants demonstrated persistence, optimism, and humor—emotionally resilient characteristics that help mitigate the emotional toll of challenges or hardships.³⁹ However, this evidence of resilience and optimism tended to be limited to parenting. Despite parents’ strong desire to support their children, they expressed feeling a lack of options and of capacity to make improvements in many family and community challenges.

When Communitas Consulting examined each mention residents made of hardships and looked for evidence of a related comment on self-efficacy—the sense that they could actively adjust, change, or problem solve—for each type of hardship, over half of all comments were paired with a low sense of efficacy to change the problem.

For example, residents of Gilpin Court listed a variety of neighborhood problems, and one in five (19%) could think of nothing that they

liked about where they live. Despite identifying these problems and barriers, 26% of residents surveyed had no suggestions for what they might do to address the issues and improve the communities, and 32% had no suggestions for how to improve children’s lives. Thirteen percent of respondents in the Communitas survey had no suggestions for how to improve the community.

Stresses due to community violence, lack of support, and difficulties meeting basic needs affect both adults and children. Families experience both personal and community challenges in a psychological way, consistently referring to these challenges as experiences of isolation, of lacking control, and of lack trust and connection to other people and social supports. Residents’ experience along with the neighborhood conditions suggest the importance of intentionally considering how supports and services are delivered to create both system-level relief and positive psychological experiences for residents.

WAYS TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

This study was designed with the Partnership for Families in mind and resulted in specific programmatic recommendations to PFF for building on community assets and addressing some of the barriers facing parents with young children. However, the data points to resources and supports that would add value to vulnerable families from a range of organizations, individuals, and policy makers.

Living in direct exposure to crime and violence adversely affects children’s well-being and development. In contrast, quality child care, safe out-of-school time activities, access to healthy food, and healthy public spaces enhance life for families. Northside families with young children expressed concerns about both the level of adverse factors and the absence or inaccessibility of protective factors that support healthy child development and healthy community life. Northside families were further challenged by the financial pressures of unstable and underpaid employment.

Figure 6. Summary of Difficulties among Vulnerable Northside Families with Young Children

Family-level	Community-level
1. Community isolation	1. Elevated poverty and neighborhood distress
2. Lack of trust	2. Insufficient quality child care
3. Pervasive trauma/ extreme stress	3. Mixed performance on 3 rd grade school tests
4. Limited sense of self-efficacy	4. Concerns about community violence

Build Safe Places: Programs and Facilities for Children and Youth

What families with young children most want to see in their community is an increase in programs and recreational opportunities for children of all ages, from early childhood through high school. One in three families (34%) said that having programs and activities for children and youth is the most important thing the community needs. Well-designed and implemented efforts could address the family and community issues identified in this report—for example, by providing safe places, alleviating the stress and isolation families experience, and decreasing the amount of time children and youth spend unsupervised.

Based on family feedback, Northside families with young children would like to see more places or programs that are (1) in walking distance of families, (2) free and low-cost, (3) safe for children to play freely, and that (4) operate during out-of-school times and (5) serve a variety of ages. Parents noted a lack of activities for children who have not yet entered kindergarten, as well as a need for ways to engage older children and youth constructively in the out of school hours.

Increase the Quality and Accessibility of Early Childhood Care

Quality early childhood care and education is inaccessible to a large portion of vulnerable families in Northside. As a result, too many young children begin life at a disadvantage. Increasing the number of vulnerable young children who are engaged in quality early childhood care requires attention on multiple fronts. In addition to opening up classrooms that are accessible to Northside families, the amount of quality early childhood care can be increased by assisting child care centers to meet quality standards and participate in Virginia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Educators with quality programs may, for example, work to train and guide other

educators in order to strengthen the reach and quality of care available in Northside. Concerted community efforts to connect families with existing financial aid and scholarship programs for early childhood care can put quality care in reach for more families. Educators can work with parents to adjust models of care to be mindful of families' needs, in addition to children's development. Where families prioritize non-traditional hours or initialization of care after infancy, educators and families can work in partnership. Prior to opening up more child care spaces in Northside, it is recommended that a more detailed examination of informal and non-certified day care is completed to understand the true market gap for vulnerable Northside families, and the qualities which would draw in the current market.

Foster Trusting Connections and Relationships

To respond to a sense of isolation and distrust, public and private organizations can work together with citizens to create a healthier sense of community for residents, improved resident sense of self-efficacy, strengthened partnerships, and increased usage of services and supports. Bringing partners together in intentional ways to ensure information sharing and shared practice guidelines (e.g., trauma-informed care, resident resilience building), using fun events and meaningful projects to engage residents and build trust, and making it easier to refer and recruit families can help build and strengthen relationships among neighbors and increase usage of available resources and services. A focus on networks, connections, and relationship-building with residents acknowledges that gaps in access may not simply be logistical—they may also be psychological and related to trust and relationships.

Connect Families to Employment with a Livable Wage

More than one in three Northside families with young children struggles with finding and maintaining stable employment to provide for their family's needs. Securing employment that provides enough money to cover the costs of child care and is compatible with raising young children is an added difficulty for families with young children. There are currently at least four workforce development initiatives in the Northside among the partners interviewed (Richmond Public Library, Better Housing Coalition, Partnership for Families/Ways to Work, and City of Richmond Office of Community Wealth-Building). These entities may seek to coordinate and target their offerings to maximize impact. Efforts to support young children in Northside overall will benefit from intentionally addressing the capacity of the parents to prepare for, secure, and sustain jobs that have a career trajectory over time. At the same time, increased public and private investments in regional economic development, training, and public transportation are necessary to better connect residents with available jobs.

A recent regional report noted that residents of economically disconnected neighborhoods felt "cut off" from employment opportunities due to a lack of local employers, a lack of transportation to employers outside the immediate area, and low educational attainment/lack of job skills.⁴⁰ While systemic barriers to living wage employment were not the focus of the present report, the data collected lend support to the idea that these same barriers may apply to Northside neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

The first years of life are critical to healthy development of young children, and it is a time when families are most vulnerable to both systemic and community risks. No matter how dedicated a parent is to provide his or her children a thriving environment full of opportunity, where he or she lives will matter. In the Northside neighborhood, children today are at risk of starting kindergarten behind their peers, as they experience disparities in exposure to language and quality care based on socioeconomic status early on, compounded by social and economic isolation.

This portrait highlights the urgency of creating more safe and enriching spaces for families and their children today, investing in accessible quality early child development services that meet families where they are, and connecting families to jobs that have the promise of a family-sustaining wage. Above all, it is not only what services are provided in Northside but how and by whom; effective engagement in Northside will depend on trusting, reliable, and respectful mutual relationships between community groups or institutions and vulnerable families.

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Finally, the authors would like to thank Sarin Adhikari and Michal Voscek of the Center for Regional and Urban Analysis (CURA) at Virginia Commonwealth University for their report on Northside indicators, which is the primary basis of demographic and socio-economic data in this report (Appendix B).

APPENDIX A



To create an actionable, resident-informed profile of Northside families with young children, Comunitas Consulting compiled both quantitative population indicators—mapped and analyzed by the Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA) at Virginia Commonwealth University—and quantitative and qualitative community input gathered through resident surveys and focus groups and interviews with key organizations operating in and around Northside Richmond on issues related to early childhood development and support for vulnerable families.

Quantitative Community Indicators

A broader discussion of Northside population indicators is available in Appendix B, “Mapping Neighborhood Distress Indicators for Richmond’s Northside Neighborhoods,” CURA’s neighborhood indicator report. It compiles pre-existing data on neighborhood services and resident characteristics from the sources described in the table below.

Quantitative Community Data Summary

Dataset/Source	Source Description
Child Care Aware of Virginia	Private child care locations, accreditation, and capacity. (2016)
Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond	Public preschool locations and capacity. (2016)
U.S. Census American Community Survey	Estimates of resident characteristics and activities based on surveys administered every year. Data available by Census tract. (2011–2015)
Virginia Department of Education	Third grade standardized test score outcomes in writing, mathematics, science, and history/social sciences. (2015-16)
Virginia Department of Health	Vital statistics on resident births, deaths, and life expectancy. (2002-2011)
Virginia Quality Rating and Improvement System	Preschool and early childhood care programs demonstrating quality or accreditation. (2016)

Limitations to the quantitative data employed in creating a profile of Northside families with young children include that most of the indicators are from 2015, and while largely reflective of the neighborhood in 2017, do not perfectly represent the current environment. Additionally, data from the Census American Community Survey represent current best estimates rather than exact population outcomes, and may be considered in conjunction with knowledge of on-the-ground outcomes and experiences.

Community Voices

The project employed surveys and focus groups to gather families’ perspectives on their priorities, daily experiences, and perceptions of assets and challenges. The surveys and focus groups also sought to understand families’ relation to community and social support systems. PFF had similarly conducted surveys of Gilpin Court residents using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach,¹ and the results of that survey were analyzed to supplement the other methods.

¹ Listening Conversation, <http://wendymccaig.com/2015/02/15/community-listening-the-abcd-starting-line/>.

Community Voices Research

Instrument	Who Conducted	Number Participants	When Conducted
Gilpin Court Resident Survey	PFF Street Team	53 Gilpin Court residents	Fall 2016
Communitas Family Survey	Communitas Consulting, with the PFF Street Team	52 families with young children	Summer 2017
Focus Groups	Communitas Consulting, with Troyana Cheatham of Commonwealth Parenting	13 participants across two focus groups	Summer 2017

Limitations to the community voices include that all information was self-reported and relied on those individuals who were willing to participate in providing feedback. The surveys were conducted by convenience (rather than random sampling), with recruitment targeted to families living in neighborhoods that PFF designated as vulnerable or distressed. All outreach was conducted in English, and vulnerable sub-populations—such as recent immigrant or homeless families—were not specifically examined.

Organizational Perspectives

The research team consulted leaders of PFF partner and community stakeholder organizations working to build early childhood education and care, combat poverty, and build communities in Richmond. These organizational perspectives were gathered to provide additional viewpoints and insights on Northside systems and needs, and were examined in conjunction with the project's quantitative indicators and resident perspectives.

Partner and Stakeholder Organizations Consulted

PFF-Entity Relationship	Entity	Contact	Area of Expertise
Partner Organization	Commonwealth Parenting	Shannon Venable President and CEO of the Children's Museum of Richmond	Parent Education
Partner Organization	ExCELL	Cynthia Hutchinson Program Director	Early Childhood Language and Literacy Development
Partner Organization	Family Lifeline	Amy Strite President and CEO	Early Childhood Home Visitation
Partner Organization	HumanKind	Mary Winston-Deacon Director of Ways to Work	Transportation to Employment, Self-Sufficiency
Partner Organization	IT4Causes	Tom Anderson Founder and CEO	IT Infrastructure for Nonprofit Organizations
Partner Organization	Reach Out and Read Virginia	Susan Rockwell Executive Director	Early Literacy and Health Support

PFF-Entity Relationship	Entity	Contact	Area of Expertise
Community Stakeholder	Better Housing Coalition	Greta Harris President and CEO Joyce Jackson Vice President, Community Social Work	Community Development and Affordable Housing
Community Stakeholder	City of Richmond Office of Community Wealth Building	Reggie Gordon Director Jenee Pearson Human Services Coordinator II, KID BLISS	Anti-Poverty Public Policy Development
Community Stakeholder	FRIENDS Association for Children	David Young Executive Director	Early Childhood Care and Education
Community Stakeholder	Richmond Public Library	Scott Firestine RPL Director Carrie Phillips Ginter Park Branch Diane Wilner Northside Avenue Branch	Literacy and Community Building
Community Stakeholder	Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority	Eliza Stokes Resident Services Coordinator for Gilpin Court	Affordable Housing
Community Stakeholder	Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond	Rich Schultz Executive Director Jacque Hale Director of Programs and Community Impact	Early Childhood Education, Community Coordination

Limitations to the organizational perspectives gathered include their relative distance from the lived experiences of Northside residents, including that some organizations do not specifically target their efforts to Northside. None of the organizations interviewed work on all aspects of what families with young children need.

NOTES

¹ For a thorough discussion of equitable community collaboration, see Wolff et al. "Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving beyond Collective Impact."

² The northern and eastern boundaries are Richmond's borders with Henrico County, roughly Forest Lawn Cemetery and Richmond Raceway to the north and Mechanicsville Turnpike to the east.

³ George W. Carver, Ginter Park, J.E.B. Stuart, Linwood Holton, and Overby-Sheppard. One school—George W. Carver—is a National Blue Ribbon School, recognized for academic excellence/closing achievement gaps. Another—Ginter Park—is a Title I Priority School, having been identified as one of the state's lowest performing schools. Status determined from Virginia Department of Education School Quality Profiles, <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>, September 26, 2017.

⁴ Brooks-Gunn and Duncan. "The Future of Children."

⁵ Turner, Edelman, Poethig, Aron, "Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods," 4.

⁶ Duncan et al. "How Much Does Childhood Poverty Affect the Life Chances of Children?"

⁷ Neighborhoods include Brookland Park, Chamberlayne Industrial Center, Gilpin Court, Green Park, Highland Terrace, Highland Park Southern Tip, John Marshall, Magnolia Industrial Center, North Highland Park, Northern Barton Heights, Pine Camp, Providence Park, Southern Barton Heights, Virginia Union, and Washington Park.

⁸ Neighborhoods include Bellevue, Bryan Park, Ginter Park, Laburnum Park, Rosedale, and Sherwood Park. Neighborhoods were identified based on VCU's Center for Urban and Regional Analysis's overlay of census tracts with neighborhood boundaries. Because neighborhoods do not perfectly align with census tract boundaries, outcomes are approximately—but not perfectly—aligned with the neighborhoods listed.

⁹ Siegel-Hawley et al. "Confronting School and Housing Segregation in the Richmond Region."

¹⁰ Shonkoff and Phillips. "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development."

¹¹ Halle et al. "Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)."

¹² Burkam and Lee. *Inequality at the Starting Gate*.

¹³ Campbell et al. "Early Childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes from the Abecedarian Project."

Campbell et al. "Effects of Early Intervention on Intellectual and Academic Achievement: A Follow-up Study of Children from Low-Income Families."

Howard. "What Matters Most for Children: Influencing Inequality at the Start of Life."

Ramey et al. "Persistent Effects of Early Childhood Education on High-Risk Children and Their Mothers."

¹³ Friese et al. "Defining and Measuring Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education (ECE): A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers."

¹⁴ Child Trends. "Providing Access to Child Care Means More than Providing Enough Spots."

¹⁵ Public preschool programs include Early Childhood Special Education, Head Start, Title I, and Virginia Preschool Initiative.

¹⁶ Ad hoc arrangements with family and friends and unregulated, unregistered home care are not included in this estimate.

¹⁷ Child Care Aware. "Parents and the High Cost of Child Care: 2016." <http://usa.child-careaware.org/advocacy-public-policy/resources/research/costofcare/>.

¹⁸ For example, in a recent study of child care slots in Philadelphia, Reinvestment Fund found that 23.6% of total slots were

uncertified. Reinvestment Fund. "Estimating Changes in the Supply and Demand for Child Care in Philadelphia."

¹⁹ Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey. "From First Grade Forward: Early Foundations of High School Dropout."

Hernandez. "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation."

Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters."

²⁰ For an overview of the link between education and socio-economic status, see the American Psychological Association's compilation of relevant research, at <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/education.aspx>.

²¹ Reardon. "School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps."

²² Siegel-Hawley et al. "Confronting School and Housing Segregation in the Richmond Region."

²³ According to Virginia's School Quality Profiles for 2016-2017, Carver Elementary is 92.4% black, Ginter Park is 96.3% black, Overby-Sheppard is 93.4% black, and J.E.B. Stuart is 91.5% black. In contrast, Linwood Holton is 57.7% black. <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>. Accessed September 29, 2017.

²⁴ Osofsky. "The Impact of Violence on Children."

²⁵ Dube et al. "Childhood Abuse, Household Dysfunction, and the Risk of Attempted Suicide throughout the Life Span. Findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study."

²⁶ Osofsky. "The Impact of Violence on Children."

²⁷ Similarly, in PFF's survey of Gilpin Court residents, 23% indicated that stopping the violence around them is the top thing they would change in their community.

²⁸ Williams. "Williams: As relations between police and community fray, Mayor Stoney must step up."

²⁹ Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls. "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy."

³⁰ Turner, Edelman, Poethig, Aron. "Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods."

³¹ Brooks-Gunn and Duncan. "The Future of Children."

³² A meta-analysis determined that both actual and perceived social isolation increase the risk of early death. Holt-Lunstad et al. "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review."

Caspi, Harrington, and Moffitt. "Socially Isolated Children 20 Years Later: Risk of Cardiovascular Disease."

³³ These residents have someone—friend or family—nearby to whom they could turn for help, and are also hypothetically open to help from at least three sources of support.

³⁴ When the proportion of families who would accept help from PFF considers only those who have heard of PFF, the figure remains relatively stable, at 19%.

³⁵ 13% of Gilpin Court residents indicated that its proximate location was what they liked best about their neighborhood.

³⁶ Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls. "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy."

³⁷ Evans and English. "The Environment of Poverty: Multiple Stressor Exposure, Psychophysiological Stress, and Socioemotional Adjustment."

³⁸ Bandura. "Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy in Changing Societies."

³⁹ Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, and Williamson. "The Resilience and Strengths of Low-Income Families."

⁴⁰ Zimmerman et al. "Health Equity in Richmond, Virginia," 36.

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