

2012

Community Violence Initiative, 2013

Johnson Center

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STOP IT! COMMUNITY VIOLENCE INITIATIVE

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 GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY


















 Johnson Center
 at Grand Valley State University



On Jan. 18, 2013, the community involvement initiative Stop It! gathered more than 1,000 community members at Messiah Missionary Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to discuss responses to a recent increase in violent crime in the city.

Following that meeting, clergy members and other community leaders led eight community dialogues about six topics at various neighborhood locations.

The graphic below summarizes basic information about those meetings.

Topic	Date & Time	Location	Number of participants (approximate)
 Youth & Youth Workers	1/23/13 6:30 – 8 p.m.	LifeQuest Ministries 1050 Fisk Road SE	141 
 Criminal Justice/ Law Enforcement	2/5/13 5:30 – 8 p.m.	First Reformed Church 636 Bates Street SE	120 
 Education	2/7/13 5 – 7:30 p.m.	Gerald R. Ford Middle School 851 Madison Avenue SE	300 
 Church	2/21/13 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.	Brown Hutcherson Ministries 618 Jefferson Avenue SE	75 
 Service Workers	2/25/13 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.	Aquinas College Wege Ballroom 1607 Robinson Road SE	55 
 Criminal Justice	2/26/13 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.	Caesar Chavez Elementary School 1205 Grandville Avenue SW	30 
 Economic Opportunities	2/27/13 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.	Inner City Christian Federation 920 Cherry Street SE	30 
 Education	2/28/13 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.	Snedden Hall at Grand Rapids Community College 415 Fulton Street East	20 

PURPOSE.

At these meetings, clergy and community leaders presented participants with five questions designed by Stop It! steering committee members about violence in the community. The meeting leader facilitated a discussion to answer those five questions:

1. **What is the impact of violence in our community?**
(For example: children, older adults, parents, churches, businesses, others.)
2. **What is triggering community violence?**
3. **How does this level of violence compare to other years?**
4. **What solutions have you tried or would like to try?**
5. **If you could do one thing about the issue when you leave today, what would you do?**

Question 2 was answered with the most frequency and detail; Question 3 had the fewest responses. This summary combines the answers to Questions 4 and 5 because most participants offered similar answers, stressing community response, to both; few addressed steps they would make as individuals.

SETTINGS.

Churches hosted most of the meetings; schools hosted the others. At each location, a greeter asked participants to sign in with their name, the agency they worked for, and their phone number and email address. Each meeting consisted of a large group dialogue, breakout sessions, or a panel discussion. Two local news stations documented each meeting.

MEETING ATTENDANTS.

Researchers observed the meetings and referred to sign-in sheets to determine the number of attendees and note approximate ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds. About 300 people attended the first meeting, whose topic was youth and youth workers. The first three meetings drew nearly 600 people, while approximately 200 people attended the remaining five meetings. The majority of the attendants were African American and Caucasian; few Latino participants were present. About 45 youths participated in the eight convenings.

Appendix 1 lists the number of attendants at all of the meetings and the number of meetings each agency attended. The Grand Rapids Police Department had representatives at each meeting; Grand Rapids Community College had the most participants at all the meetings. Appendix 2 shows attendance at each meeting in maps; these maps indicate that participants were more likely to attend if they lived near the meeting location.



WHAT IS THE **IMPACT** OF VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITY?

(For example: children, older adults, parents, churches, businesses, others.)

The response to this question was similar at most meetings, no matter the topic. While most participants indicated that violence negatively affected the community, participants at two meetings noted a positive impact – that the violence has united the community. At each meeting, participants mentioned the emotional impact of community violence: fear, sadness, and the lack of a sense of security. Many participants mentioned desensitization to violence as it becomes more common. A few participants noted that violence exacerbates community members resorting to stereotypes and erodes positive youth identities.

FEELINGS.

Participants highlighted several negative emotions that have increased due to the level of violence in the community, including fear, sadness, hurt, loss, isolation, and hopelessness. Participants most frequently identified fear as an increasingly common emotion for both youth and adults. At every meeting, participants also identified feelings of isolation; they described community members as separated from their families, the police, and other key community support systems. Language barriers and cultural issues were also mentioned as factors in an increasing sense of isolation in general and specifically as a barrier to the participation of some community members at the meetings where solutions to the increase in violence were being discussed. Fear and isolation, participants said, produces traumatized individuals who feel unsafe in their community.

DESENSITIZATION.

Several participants described their family, friends, and neighbors as desensitized to violence: “Are youth becoming numb to violence?” one participant asked. This concern was raised consistently during the meetings and led to discussions about whether the community found violence to be part of daily life. What might appear to be desensitization, it was suggested, was a sense among youth that they need to be prepared to protect themselves – “a culture of violence that is passed down.” Participants frequently spoke of a heightened level of awareness.



Above is a visual depiction of the words used by participants to respond to the question: “What is the impact of violence in our community? (For example: children, older adults, parents, churches, businesses, others.)” This depiction supports the summarized findings that violence has provoked negative emotions, especially fear and hopelessness, in the community; perpetuated stereotypes; undermined positive images of youth; and led to a measure of unity within the community around the issue. The larger the word appears, the more frequently it was used.

STEREOTYPES AND YOUTH IDENTITY.

Participants said the atmosphere of violence perpetuated stereotypes in the community – in particular, the image of youth. Said one participant: “I believe that violence in the community gives evidence to those who already look negatively on some of the youth because they can say, ‘I told you so.’” The prevalence of stereotypes creates a divide within the community, said another participant: When some people identify a particular group as violent, “although someone may not be directly impacted, the mindset develops toward a particular population and prevents the community from working cohesively.” Many participants also shared their concerns about self-image among youth, which can be damaged by a lack of positive role models or by family members who are not present due to death or incarceration. One participant called for an “African American culture instead of a gangster culture,” stating that individuals are finding their identities within stereotypes that are being shaped by the community’s perceptions of and experiences with violence.

UNITY.

A few participants stated they found the community uniting around the issue of violence. “I see one positive,” said one participant; “who and where are the community leaders? Now they’re identified.” Said another, “A positive impact is the fact that the faith community is starting to come together, particularly in the black and brown churches, like they never have before.” She argued that violence is challenging the faith community to come together instead of isolating along denominational lines. Among the many negative impacts, a few participants have found this positive development from the recent increase in community violence.



WHAT IS TRIGGERING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE?

Many of the participants shared their opinions about what triggers violence. In most meetings, participants cited as a major trigger the inability of families to meet basic needs. They also expressed a belief that violence is an accepted part of the culture, and that is passed down from generation to generation. Participants pointed to discrimination, a sense of hopelessness, and the availability to weapons as aspects of this culture of acceptance that lead to more violence.

YOUTH NEEDS.

At many of the meetings, participants said there has been an increase in violence because so many youths in the community have basic needs that are not being met and lack meaningful personal connections, enriching entertainment, and the healthy sense of identity that such things help to build. A male participant said, “I think a lot of the triggers to the community violence consist of not having relationships, and kids going out to find relationships they lack at home.” Others stated that many youth lack father figures or otherwise have unstable home environments. “The problem is starting in the homes,” said one participant. “There’s starvation; physical, mental, and emotional abuse.” These conditions, participants said, lead to a lack of accountability for their actions among youth, who often look for substitute relationships on the street. Participants also noted that many youth in the community do not have positive outlets for activity, and specifically identified possible interventions for more positive outlets for entertainment and out-of-school time. Many participants said they believe the lack of resources for families and youth create an atmosphere conducive to violence in the community.

ACCEPTED CULTURE.

Less frequently discussed factors that participants nevertheless identified were issues of identity among young men and desensitization to violence among youth. Again, many participants identified a lack of male role models and the pervasiveness of violence, drugs, and sex in the media as contributors to this desensitization. Some participants said youth are simply acting out what they see in everyday life.



Above is a visual depiction of the words used by participants to describe triggers of violence. This was the issue discussed most extensively at all of the meetings. The depiction supports the summary’s findings that youth and families are living in a culture of violence and that inequalities in the community foster this culture. The larger the word appears, the more frequently it was used.

HOPELESSNESS.

Participants discussed a sense of hopelessness as a common trigger of violence. One participant observed that youth “have a feeling of hopelessness. If you don’t feel like you are going to live past the age of 21, you are going to cause as much damage as you can.” Another participant said that having no vision of a future “makes it that much easier to engage in violence, because you’re not expected to live past a certain age.” Another attributed the sense of hopelessness to a lack of economic opportunity and the cycle of poverty – the “lack of employment, being underemployed, or the inability to get over the criminal-record factor” that impedes the ability of the family to provide for itself and pursue “the American Dream.”

DISCRIMINATION.

Racism and sexism were also identified as triggers of violence. “I think the trigger is the big pink elephants that have never been discussed like racism and sexism,” one meeting participant said. Another argued that belief systems trigger racist mindsets: “It’s the system, the policies, the procedures,” she said. Another participant compared Grand Rapids to Detroit: Growing up in Grand Rapids, racism, classism, and sexism are not as noticeable as they might be in Detroit, but to an outsider such discrimination is very evident and “people are mad.” Another participant responded to that observation: “Not to say we have been rid of the scourge of racism, but I will say that an equally damaging scourge is the class separation that is very well established in our community.”

WEAPONS.

Many participants discussed the availability and volume of weapons on the street as triggers of violence. One participant observed that the accessibility of guns has led people to use them – a more deadly alternative to fistfights, for example, when firearms were less common. Grand Rapids Police Chief Kevin Belk noted that most guns used in crimes are illegally obtained and that it is difficult to regulate illegally obtained weapons.

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HOW DOES THIS LEVEL OF VIOLENCE COMPARE TO OTHER YEARS?

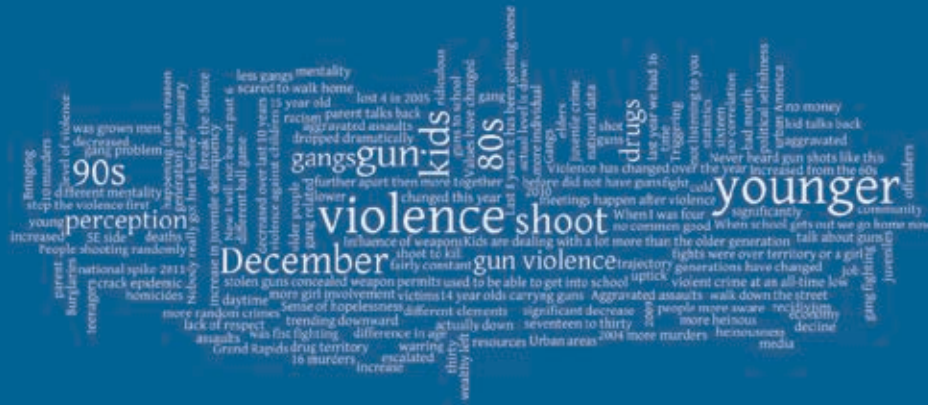
This question drew the fewest responses from participants. Those who did respond observed that the scale, the motive, and the typical perpetrator of violence have changed. At all the meetings, police reported that with the exception of the most recent spike in violent crime, the crime rate has decreased over the past several years.

GENERATIONAL CHANGE.

A participant who works in the juvenile justice system observed that there has been an increase in the number of juveniles committing violent crimes. Another participant argued that juveniles are impulsive and implied that she believes juveniles deserve a second chance if they commit a crime. As violent crime is increasingly committed by younger people, the crimes become more impulsive and motivated by pettier stakes. Some participants argued that the level of violence has changed due to different trends in crime. For instance, one man discussed the crime rate in the 1990s and attributed it to the crack epidemic and the drug trade. He said he believed that people committing violent crimes today are the children of those involved in crime in the 1990s. Another participant observed that young people today are “talking and acting like they are grown and carrying guns like they are grown.”

NUMBER AND SEVERITY OF VIOLENT CRIMES.

Chief Belk explained that although the number of violent crimes in Grand Rapids has risen in the last year, it is still much lower it was 15 to 20 years ago. “In the late ‘80s and ‘90s we were in the upper 20s for homicides,” he said. “Even last year we had 16. By the middle of December, we had 10 murders. In 2009 and 2010, we had 10.” He said that past years saw 1,500 to 1,600 aggravated assaults; in the last few years this figure has dropped to 500 to 600. Other violent crimes and burglary have also decreased, but the perceived severity of crime has risen even as the number of crimes has not. “The heinousness of what’s taking place is ridiculous,” said one participant.



Above is a visual depiction of the words used by participants to respond to the question: “How does this level of violence compare to other years?” Some of the highlighted information shows the community believes gun-violence offenders are younger than those in the 1980s and 1990s, and that drugs are not as much a factor in recent violence as they were in previous years. The larger the word appears, the more frequently it was used.

AVAILABILITY OF WEAPONS.

One participant blamed the increase in violence since the 1960s on the availability of guns. “There is an influence of weapons that were not available then,” he said. “It was a rare occasion; but now they have access. ... [Violence] increased because of the availability.” Another participant observed that children are even bringing guns to schools – something unheard of a generation ago. Police Chief Belk reported that there is no correlation between the rise in violence and permits for carrying a concealed weapon, although there has been an increase in the number of guns reported stolen recently.

MENTALITY.

Some participants said the motives and level of force for crime have changed. One participant observed that when he was in a gang, fights were usually over territory or a girl. “Now you get mad and you pull your gun and shoot. ... Nobody really got hurt before.” The change in mentality could be because of the age of the perpetrators now.

4 5

WHAT SOLUTIONS HAVE YOU TRIED OR WOULD LIKE TO TRY? IF YOU COULD DO ONE THING ABOUT THIS ISSUE WHEN YOU LEAVE TODAY, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

While many participants had suggestions for steps the community could take to decrease the level of violence, few stated what they would do as an individual. The following is a summary of the suggested solutions.

CREATE AND ENHANCE RELATIONSHIPS.

The participants recognized that youth succeed only with the support of mentors, family, and police. The family was mentioned as an important support. Youth “need genuine love, without ulterior motives,” said one participant. “Programs have replaced households.” Other participants pointed out the need to have positive relationships with police. “Police need to be in schools,” said one participant, “and have informal relationships for kids to see they are human, too. ... Make police more visible in a positive way.” Participants also discussed creating relationships and showing love to youth. One participant challenged people to make an honest commitment and be intentional about what they can do to show youth a better way.

INCREASE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT.

One participant said supporting families was an important solution because the problems youth face are the result of what is going on within the family and that the community has been reactive rather than proactive. But a participant who works as a counselor pointed out that parents might come to a counseling session once or twice, but do not pursue the full benefit of the services for themselves and their children. Participants repeatedly returned to the key role of parents, but did not fully address solutions.

INCREASE COMMUNITY COHESIVENESS.

Many participants agreed on the importance of working as a community toward solutions. “Being connected makes you more powerful,” one participant argued. Said one youth: “It takes a village. If parents aren’t outside, neighbors look out for children and say something if they see illegal activity.” Another attendee said the community should “find out what organizations are doing so you can guide others.” Other participants shared ideas to decrease crime as a neighborhood. Those who suggested community cohesiveness stressed the importance of grassroots efforts.

HAVE OPEN OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH.

Quite a few community members indicated they would like to start programs to help youth or families, and several expressed a need for “positive activities” for youth. One participant said services were needed specifically for African American youth, especially young males who, he said, are “looking for something to do.” Churches, schools, and households were mentioned as possible youth-support systems. One man said he planned to investigate the feasibility of a character-education course in the Grand Rapids school system.

IMPROVE GUN INTERVENTION.

One woman suggested holding a gun buy-back program similar to the “Guns for Groceries” program in Lansing, Mich., in which the Meijer chain donated \$10,000 and residents turned in about 130 guns in exchange for gift cards to the store; she suggested local philanthropic organizations as possible funders. One woman asked how someone could surrender an illegal gun and whether there are programs that reward individuals for turning in their guns to police. The police chief said the department does not have

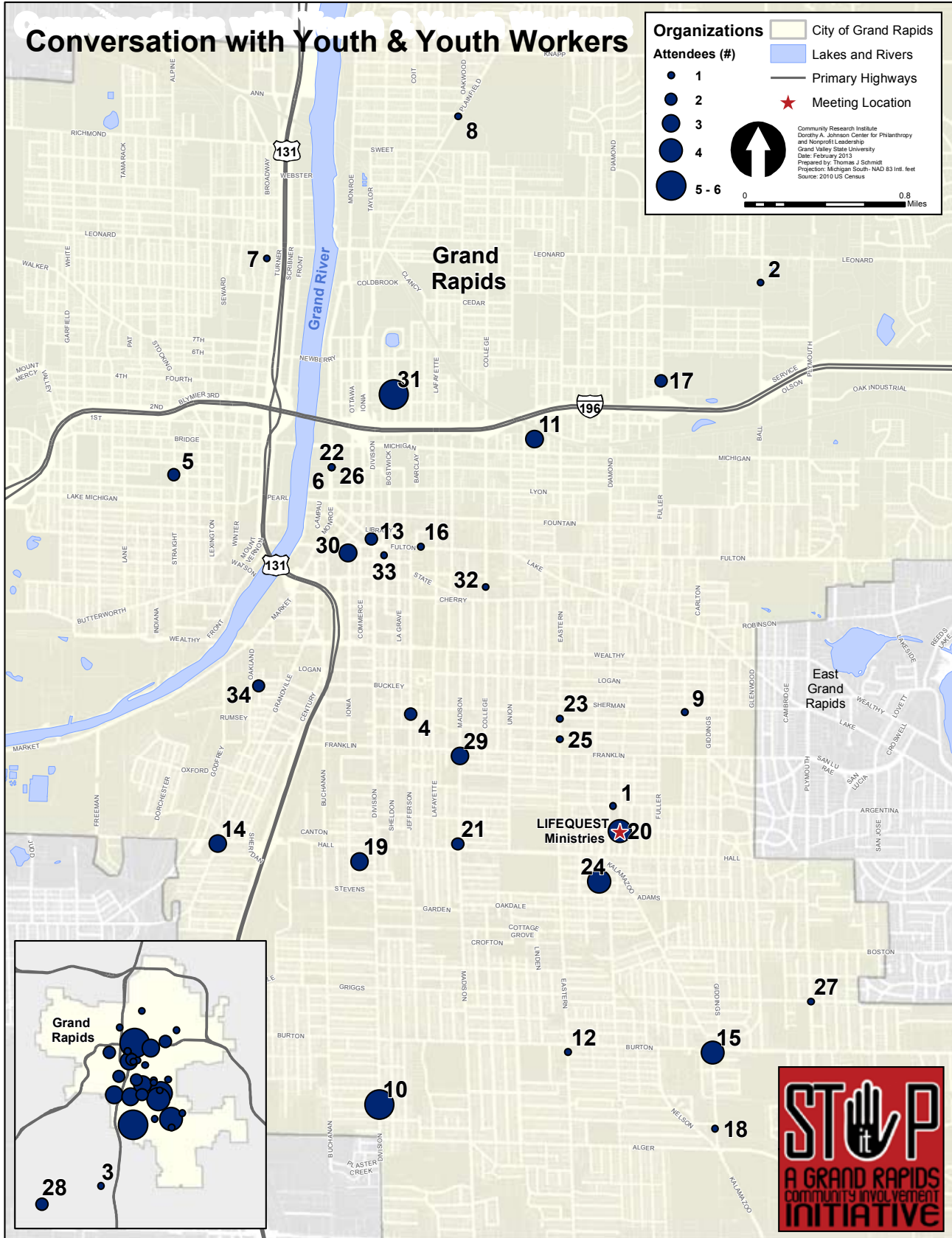
Agency	Number of People Attending	Number of Meetings Attended
God Church	1	1
17th Circuit Court	6	4
19th Circuit Court	1	1
Alger Middle School	1	1
Alpha Omega Ministries	2	2
Anneshia Freeman & Asso. Consulting	1	1
Arbor Circle	10	4
Army National Guard	1	1
Art Intelligence Therapy	2	2
Bates Place Ministries	1	1
Baxter Neighborhood Association	1	1
Bethany Christian Services	3	2
Bethel Abundant Life	2	1
Bethel S.D.A. Church	1	1
BHM	2	1
BHM YEL Program	1	1
Bone	1	1
Boys and Girls Club	4	2
Brown-Hutcherson Ministries	1	1
Camp Fire USA West Michigan Council	1	1
Camp Tall Turf	1	1
Carter Alexander F	1	1
Cass Block Group	1	1
Chaplain Kent County Sheriff's Dept.	2	2
Church of the Servant	2	1
City Hall	1	1
City of Grand Rapids	5	5
Clear	2	1
Coit Community Church	1	1
Consecrated King Production	1	1
CRC	1	1
Creston High School	1	1
Cure Violence	1	1
D.A. Blodgett-St. John's	1	1
Davis Memorial Hospital	1	1
Dawn Burrell Ministries	2	2
Deliverance Outreach Ministry	6	1
Disability Advocates of Kent County	1	1
Dominican Center	1	1
Dreamlight Entertainment	1	1
Duthler's Family Foods	1	1
Eastern Avenue Church of Christ	2	2
Easttown Ministries	2	2
Easttown Community Association	2	1
Edge Urban Fellowship	6	1
Emerging Hope Center	1	1
Family Outreach Center	3	2
First Christian Reformed Church	8	3
First Missionary Baptist Church	2	1
Fisher Electric	1	1
First United Methodist Church	1	1
Forgive and Find Peace University	1	1
Grand Rapids Area Black Businesses	1	1

Agency	Number of People Attending	Number of Meetings Attended
Gerontology Network	1	1
Girl Scouts	1	1
Girls Inc. of YWCA	1	1
Goodwill Industries	4	2
GR	1	1
GR Black Chamber of Commerce	1	1
GR CC Criminal Justice Department	1	1
Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce	3	1
GR Community Relations Commission	1	1
Grand Rapids Community Foundation	1	1
Grand Rapids Public Schools	4	4
Grand Rapids Urban League	3	1
Grand Rapids YouthBuild	2	1
Grace Christian Reformed Church	2	1
Grace for the Nations Church	1	1
Grand C.I.T.Y. Sports	1	1
Grand Rapids Police Department	9	8
Grand Rapids Times	2	2
Grandson PCB	1	1
Grand Rapids Community College	18	2
Greater Works Church	1	1
GR Fire Dept. Residential Safety Prog.	1	1
Grand Rapids Housing Commission	1	1
Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders	1	1
GROS	1	1
GRPD, Boys Girls Club	1	1
GR Police Dept./CLEAN	1	1
Grand Rapids Public Schools	3	1
GR Public Schools & Vertical	1	1
GR Public Schools GR 1st	1	1
GVSU Kirkhoff College of Nursing	1	1
Grand Valley State University	2	1
Hispanic Center	8	5
Hope Academy	2	1
Hope Church	1	1
Hope Network	3	1
Hope Reformed	4	1
Inner City Christian Federation	6	2
Icon Industries Inc.	4	2
Impact Counseling	3	3
Jubilee Jobs	1	1
Just Mediation	1	1
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.	2	2
KC Health	1	1
Kent County Sheriff's Department	1	1
Kent County Black Caucus	1	1
Kent County Health Department	1	1
Kent County Juvenile Detention	1	1
Kent County Prosecutor's Office	2	1
Kent County Sheriff's Chaplain	1	1
Kent Intermediate School District	1	1
Kentwood Community Church	3	1
Kingdom Life Ministries	1	1

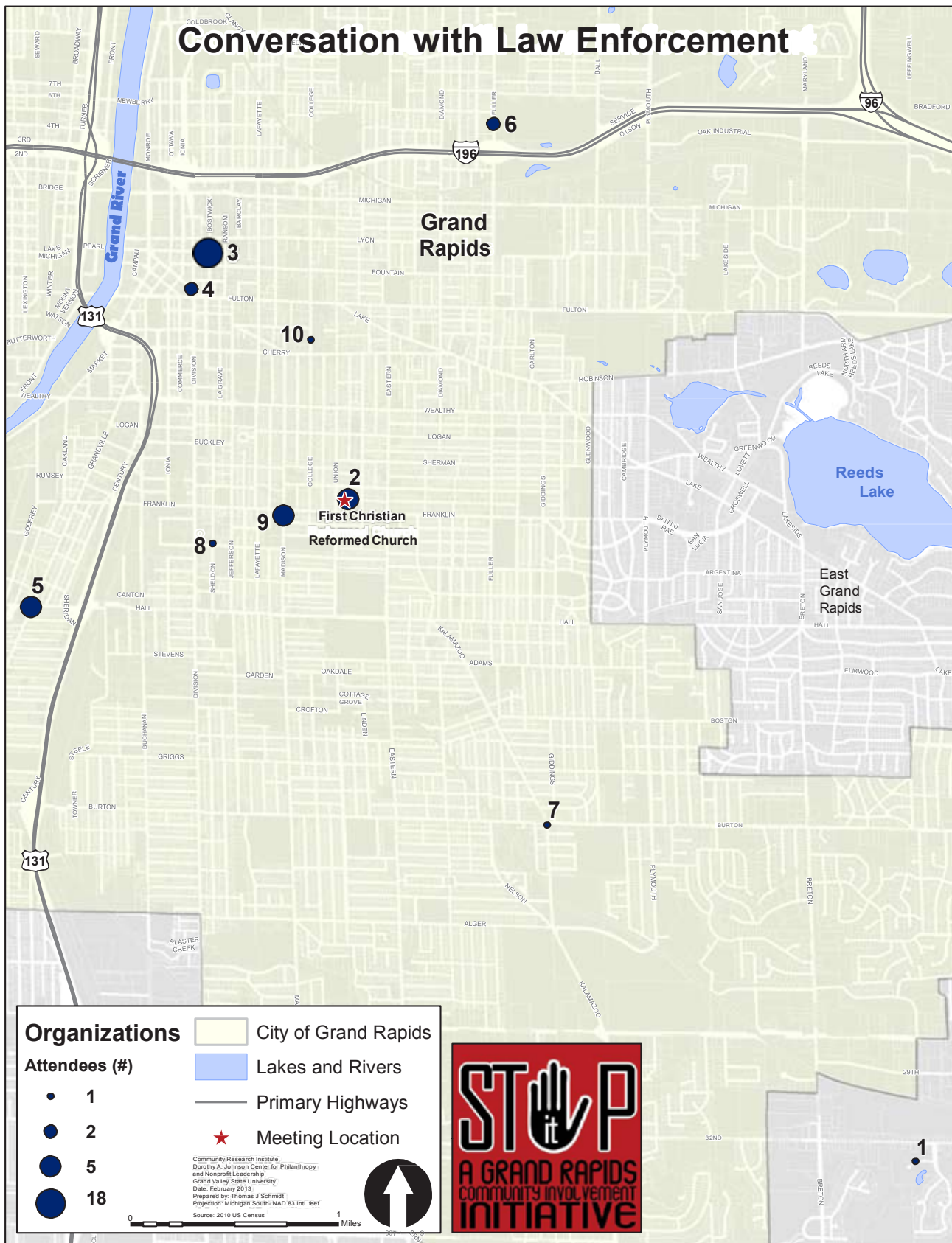
Agency	Number of People Attending	Number of Meetings Attended
Lamb of God Church	3	1
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	1	1
Leap Ministries	1	1
Legacy Grand Rapids	1	1
LifeQuest	5	2
Life's Connections	1	1
Lighthouse Full Life Center	2	1
Lighthouse Communities Inc.	4	2
LINC Community Revitalization Inc.	2	1
Madison Square Church	9	2
Mayor's Youth Council	1	1
McClain Properties	1	1
Mel Trotter Ministries	1	1
Messiah	1	1
Messiah Baptist Church	3	1
Messianic Torah Institute	1	1
Michigan Department of Civil Rights	1	1
Micah Center	1	1
Michigan Radio	2	1
Microphetic Voices	1	1
Miracle Hands Daycare	1	1
MLK	2	1
Moise's Minds	1	1
Moms Demand Action	1	1
National Organization for Women	1	1
Native News Network	1	1
Negro Business & Prof. Women's Club	1	1
Network 180	12	3
New Beginnings Restaurant	1	1
New Day Church	1	1
Nile Outreach Ministries	1	1
Oakdale Park Church	5	2
OCE Corporate Printing Division	1	1
Our Kitchen Table	1	1
Omega Life Alternatives	1	1
Onesa Hanse	1	1
OPC	1	1
Ottawa Hills High School PTA	1	1
Our Community's Children	5	4
PAL at MLK	1	1
Paris Block Club	1	1
Partners for Racism-Free Community	1	1
Performing Acts of Michigan	1	1
PGC Network 180	1	1
Pine Rest Reentry Village	1	1
Plymouth Hghts. Christian Ref. Church	2	2
Positive Opinions	1	1
Power Zone Agency	1	1
Praying Hands Ministry Church	1	1
Principal at MLK Leadership Academy	1	1
Project C.O.O.L.	1	1
Project CLIMB	1	1
Project Get Connected	1	1

Agency	Number of People Attending	Number of Meetings Attended
RCM Technologies Inc.	2	2
ReEntry Pastor	1	1
Relevan	1	1
Resurrection Life Church	2	1
Revolution Christian Ministries	3	2
River City Scholars	1	1
Roosevelt Park Ministries	1	1
Roosevelt Park Neighborhood Association	2	1
Samaria J's Salon	1	1
SELA	1	1
Shekinah Life	1	1
Shepherds of the Streets	1	1
Silent Observer	1	1
SOM	1	1
South Side Probation	1	1
Spectrum Health	2	1
St. Andrews & KCSD Chaplain	1	1
St. John's United Church of Christ	1	1
ST. Luke AME	2	2
Stapled on Streets	1	1
Stop the Violence	1	1
Strong Beginnings	2	2
Summer Basketball	1	1
Summit	1	1
TEA Christian Reformed Church	1	1
Team All the Way	3	1
The Edge	1	1
The Now Magazine	4	2
The Revolution	2	1
The Salvation Army	2	2
TM6 Promo	1	1
Trinity United Methodist Church	1	1
True Light Baptist Church	4	2
United Way	1	1
UofM PNP Grad Student	1	1
Urban Family Ministries	1	1
Urban Transformation Ministries	1	1
Urban Young Life	2	1
US AAY	1	1
UTM	5	2
Wedgewood Christian Services	3	2
Wellspring Church of Grand Rapids	1	1
W. Mich. Environmental Action Cncil	1	1
Westminster Presbyterian Church	4	3
Wil-Hues Associates	1	1
W. Mich. Hispanic Chmbr of Cmmerce	1	1
WOOD-TV 8	1	1
WZZM-TV	1	1
YMCA West Central Michigan	1	1
You and Me Daycare	1	1
Young Life Urban Jr. Trader	1	1
Youth Build Grand Rapids	2	1
Youth Development Institute	1	1
Youth for Christ	2	1

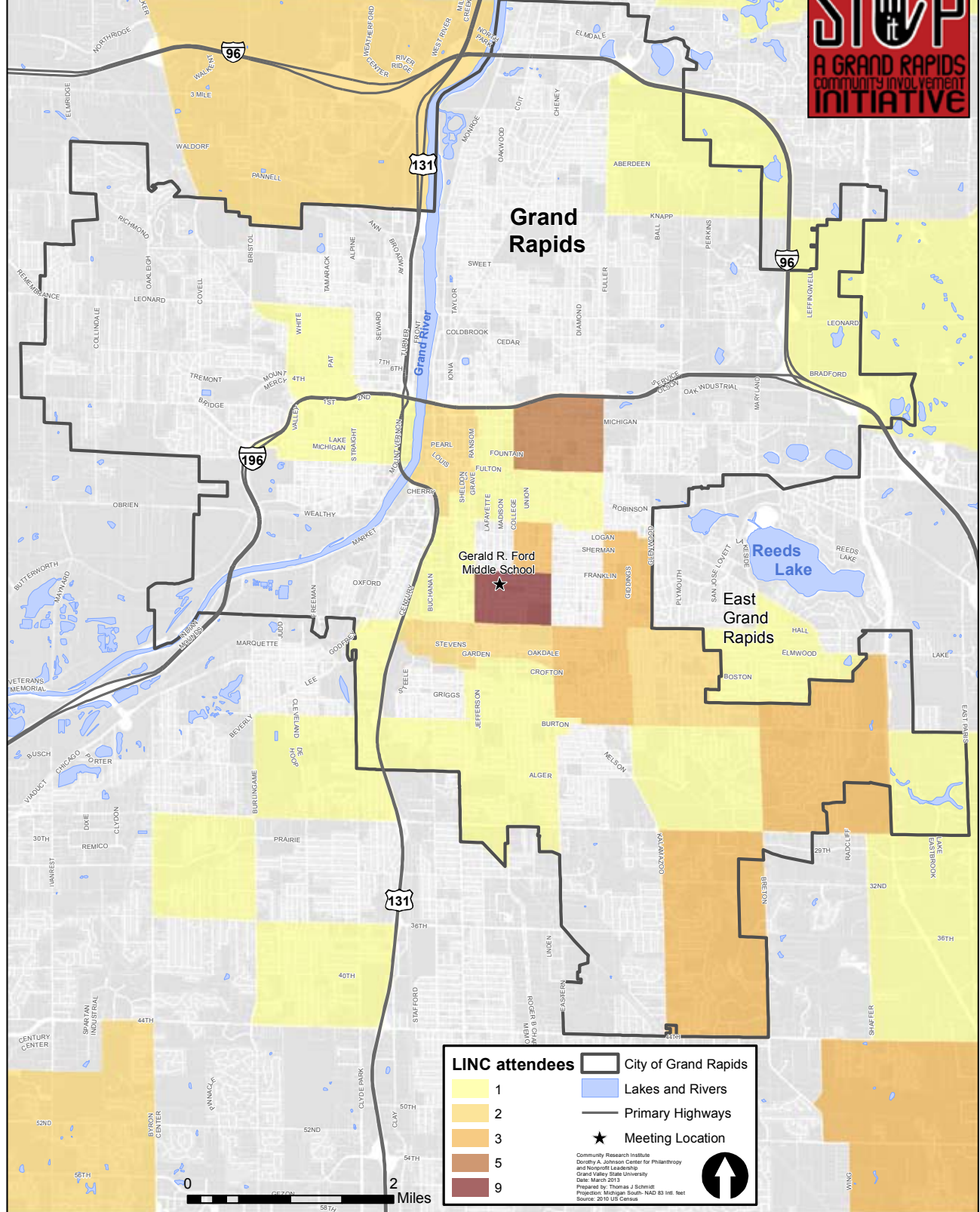
Conversation with Youth & Youth Workers



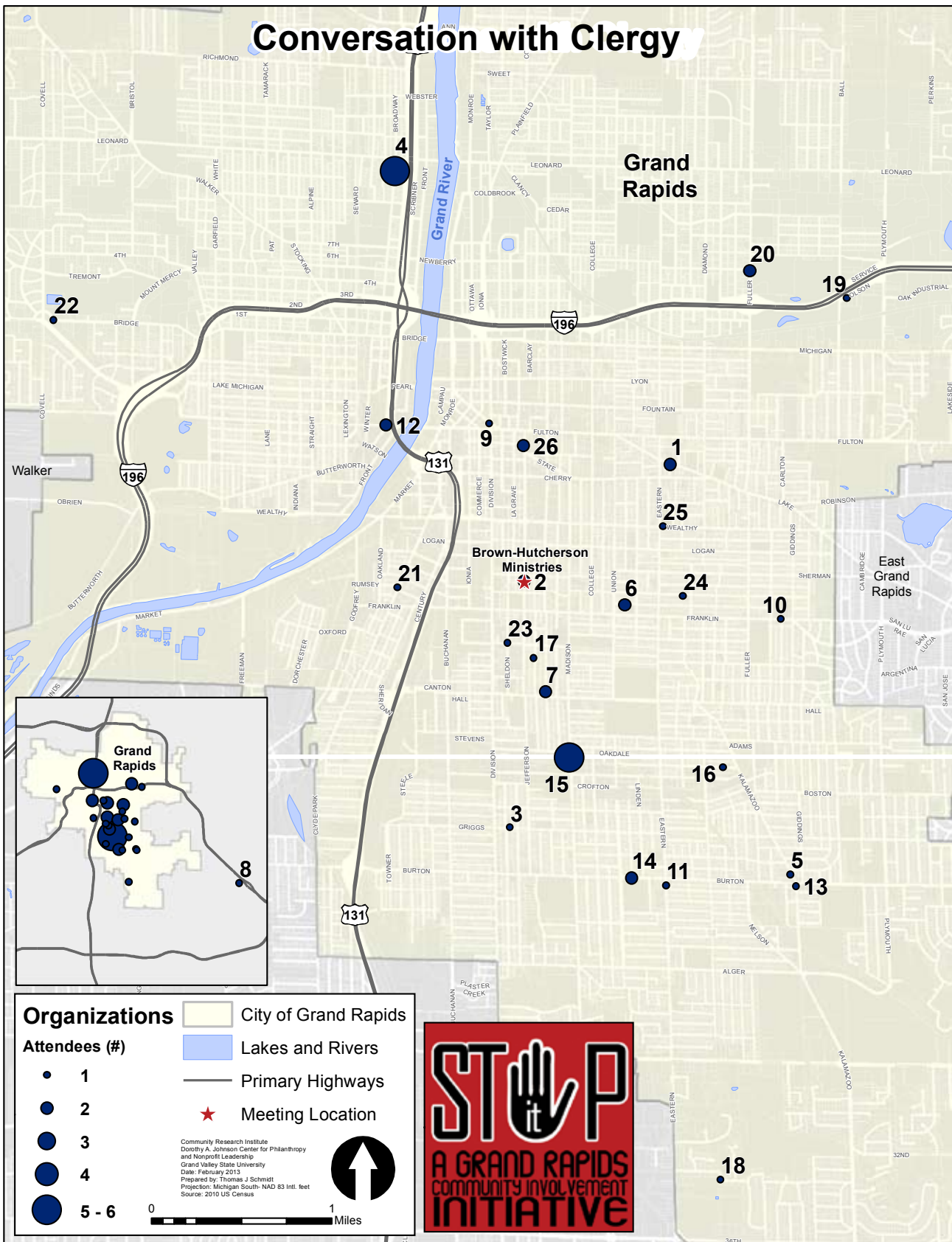
Conversation with Law Enforcement

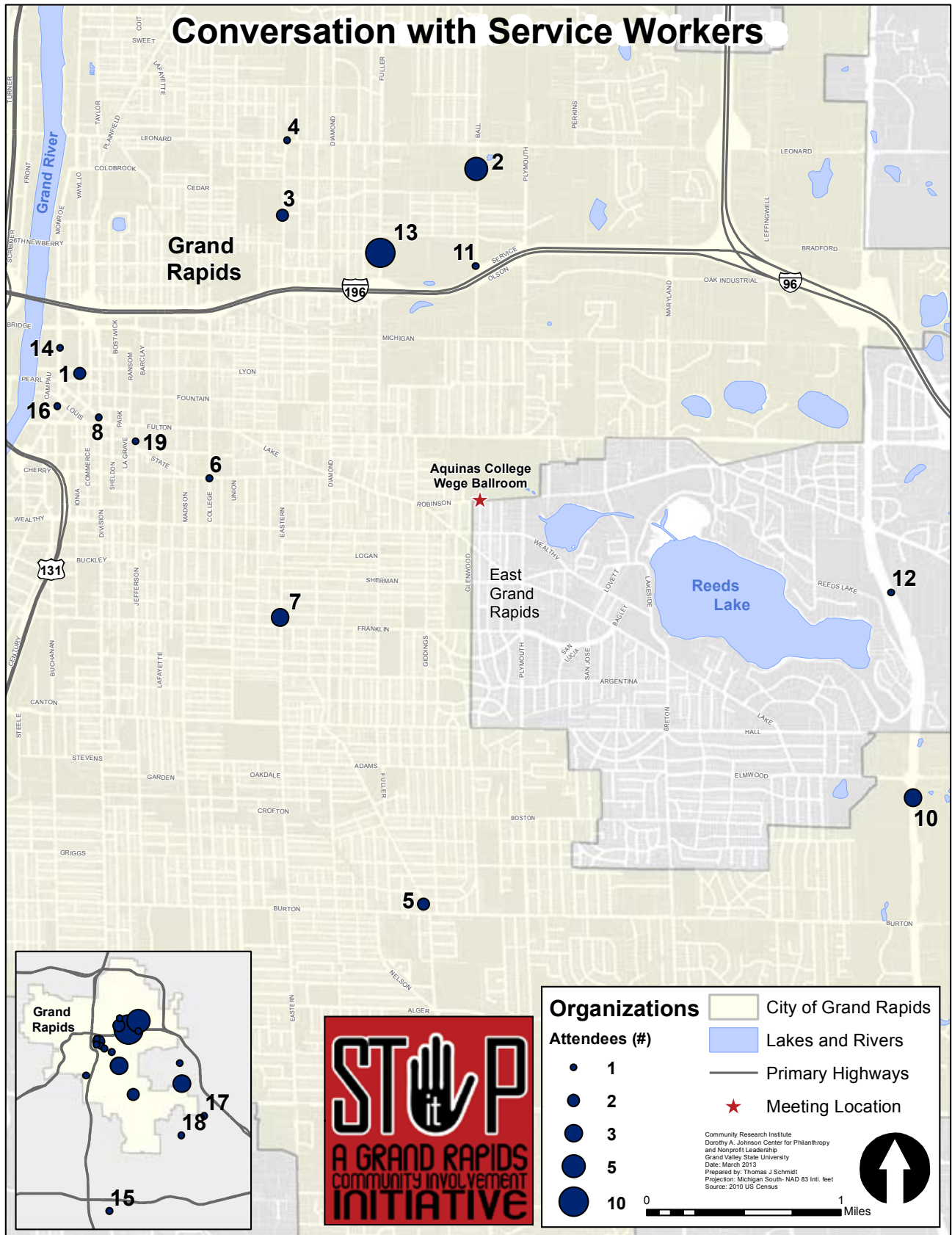


Conversation with LINC Community Revitalization Inc

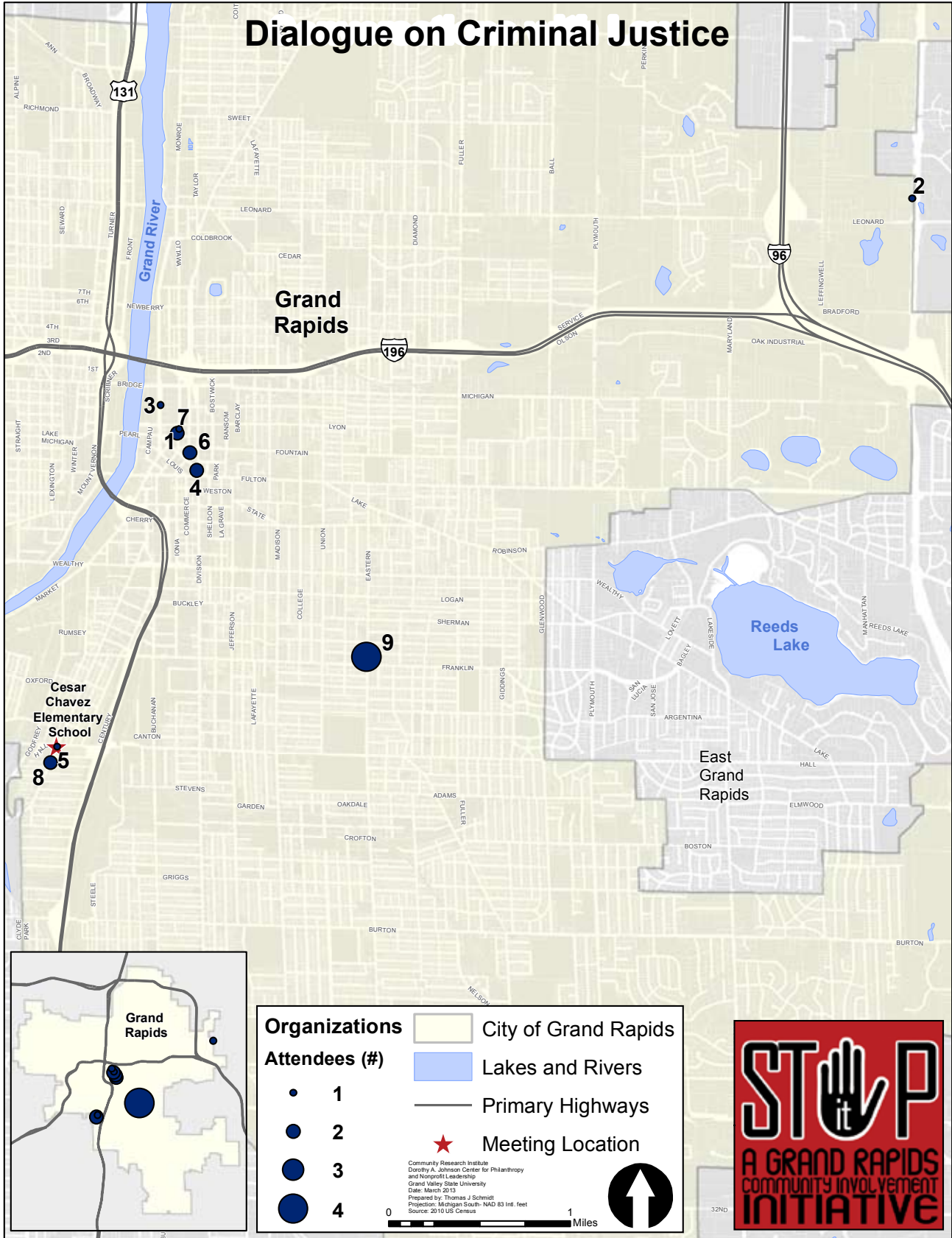


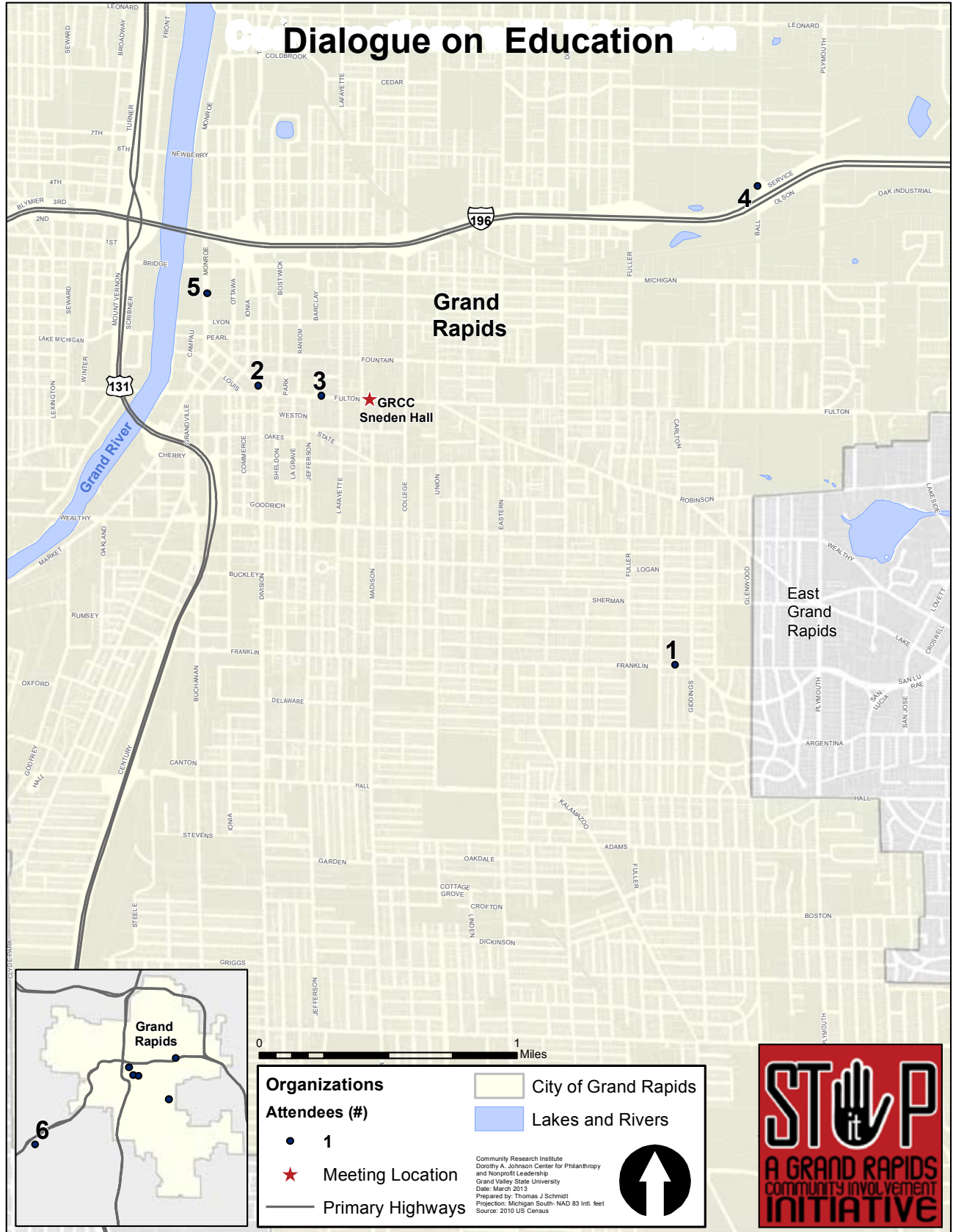
Conversation with Clergy



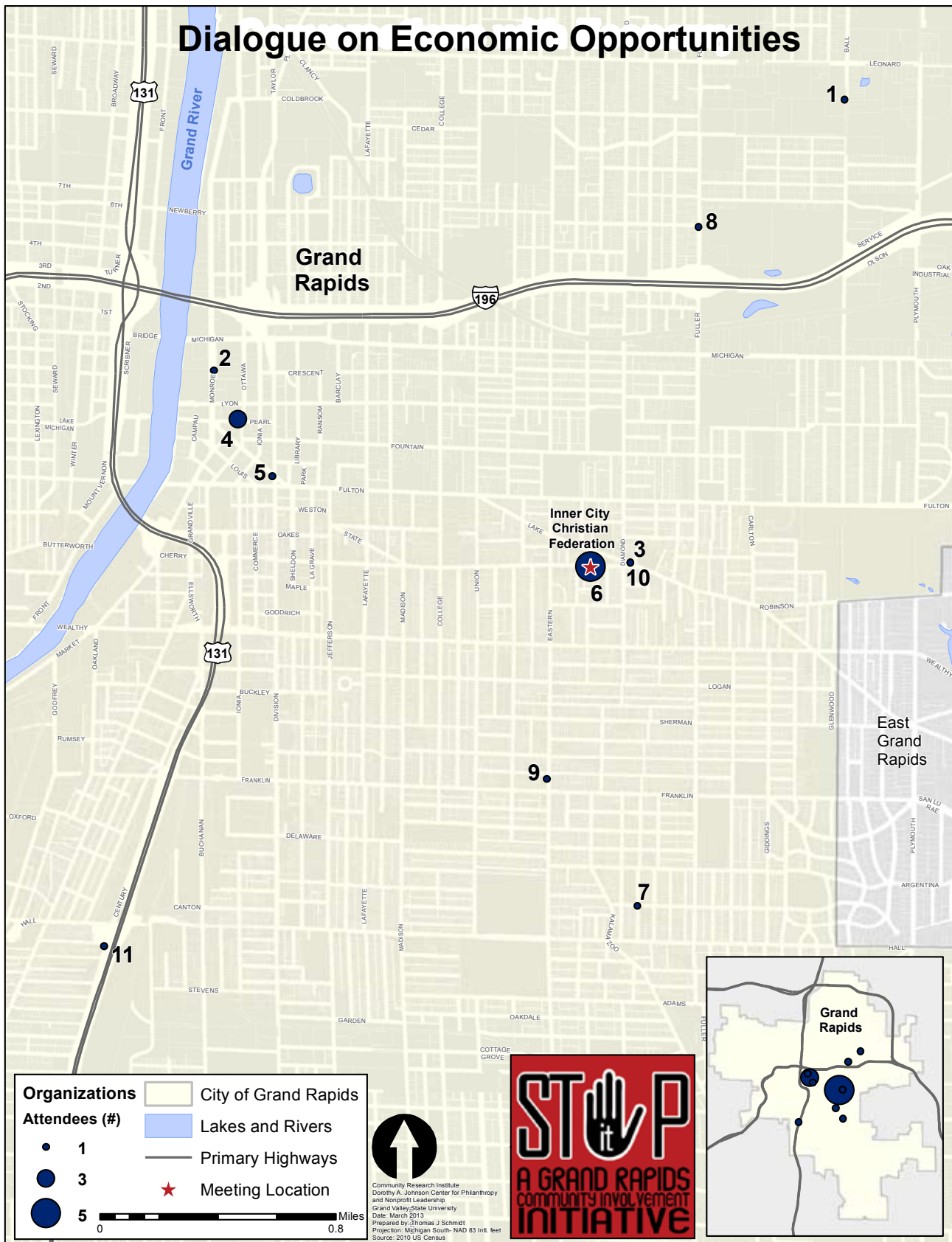


Dialogue on Criminal Justice





Dialogue on Economic Opportunities



The Johnson Center for Philanthropy would like to acknowledge the following individuals for making these meetings accessible to the community:

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Willie Patterson (LINC)

Darel Ross (LINC)

Joe Jones (Grand Rapids Urban League)

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Pastor Daniel Parker (Kingdom Life Ministries)

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City of Grand Rapids Police Department

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