Richmond’s burden of lowering crime remains nothing short of challenging. However, an equally insidious problem of daunting proportions remains underreported: a health epidemic among segments of underserved populations.

For decades, the 61st largest city in California has become a cautionary tale prefaced by statistics. Most recently, the Federal Bureau Investigation’s *Preliminary Annual Crime Statistics for 2010* cited Richmond, California, as the third highest city in the state for commissions of (reported) violent crime. An updated 2011 report by *CQ Press* ranked Richmond as the second most dangerous metropolitan city in California – surpassing Compton, San Bernardino and Stockton.

Common denominators among Richmond’s demographic include crime, poverty, lack of education, healthcare inequities, increased stress, and unhealthy physical and social environments. In common with these factors are higher incidences of sickness, disease, mental illness and premature death among Hispanics, Latinos and African Americans than their White counterparts.

According to the 2010 United States Census, The City of Richmond’s so-called minority population of 104,701 constitutes an actual ethnic majority of 39.5 percent Hispanic or Latino residents, followed by 31.4 percent White, 26.6 percent African American and 13.5 percent Asian residents. The remaining population is made up of Southeast Asian ethnicities, followed by smaller numbers of various ethnicities.

*A recipe for disaster*
As reported by Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS), people who live in Richmond, as well as African Americans and men overall, are more likely to die from heart disease compared to the county overall. African Americans and Latinos are also more likely to die from diabetes compared to the county overall. Throughout Contra Costa County, the hospitalization rate for African American children is nearly five times that of White children (63/10,000 and 13/10,000, respectively).
“Chronic disease, including asthma, heart disease and diabetes have become the leading causes of death and disability, disproportionately impacting low-income and minority communities,” according to the CCHS report. Coincidentally, Richmond suffers the highest death rates from diabetes in Contra Costa County.

In a March 2012 interview with Richmond Pulse, Registered Dietitian Jan Schilling reported an “obesity and food-related health epidemic” ravaging those living in limited-income communities. Schilling found that of the overweight Latinos and African Americans in these impoverished environments, a whopping 70 percent are afflicted with high cholesterol levels.

A 2011 report by Contra Costa Health Services, “The Impact of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption on the Health of Richmond Residents,” states that children in Richmond are more likely to be obese than children in other County districts. In fact, Fitnessgram physical activity tests revealed that more than half of 2,594 students surveyed were considered overweight, with 32 percent categorized as obese. More specifically, 33 percent were identified as Latino, 34 percent were African American, 25 percent were identified as Asian and 13 percent were White students.

Without profound intervention, it is projected that by adulthood, Richmond youths, who are determined as 24 percent obese, will grow up with nearly double the incidence of obesity to 42 percent. This alone increases their chances of premature death by 11 percent. Accordingly, related chronic diseases also increase with obesity. The prevalence of hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and stroke are not only compounded, but raise the risk of premature mortality rises by an estimated 18 percent.

Escalating the eventuality of childhood obesity and early diabetes is the consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks. A 2009 California Health Interview Survey revealed that beverage consumption was estimated at 24 percent for age zero to 11-year-olds. That number spiked among youths, ages 12 to 18, with an estimated 67 percent consuming one or more sweetened beverages daily. Complicating the problem is the increase of dental caries, of which sugar consumption is determined as the primary cause. California ranks the third worst in America for oral health. An assessment of Richmond’s elementary schools determined visible decay, ranging anywhere from 14 percent to 28 percent. Ironically, more scientific studies are connecting periodontal disease to systemic bacterial infections, including cardiovascular disease.

Poverty, crime and mental health
The poverty rate in Richmond is twice the average within Contra Costa County. Many live below the federal poverty line and over one-fifth of residents possess less than a high school diploma. In a prolonged recession, upwards of 18 percent unemployment levels has provoked a marked sense of hopelessness in individuals already fending off high stress due to lack of education and vocational training, physical and mental fitness and social impoverishment. History shows that such despair provokes the most vulnerable individuals toward drug abuse and addiction, extreme anger, crimes of theft and physical violence.
Professor Vicki Hines-Martin, of the University of Louisville, School of Nursing, states that finding a treatment for illness, such as depression, can be especially difficult for members of minority groups because they may face stumbling blocks to care. “Patients are dealing with the stress of lost jobs, eviction and foreclosure,” says Hines-Martin, whose study findings of 127 people in a low-income area revealed that poorer residents had nearly double the rate of depression as the general public. She surmised that “when you look at the economic factors, it makes perfect sense. The stress of constantly figuring out how to survive can wear a person down, and those factors are associated with depressive systems. If you have problems in several areas of your life, it can affect your mental health.”

**An ounce of prevention**

Is it any wonder that chronic disease has become widespread in Richmond? Clearly, prevention of sickness and a proactively healthy lifestyle is the sensible ounce of prevention that offers a pound of cure. With proper education and available resources, residents can become proactive in their own care to avoid a number of regrettable chronic afflictions and live more productive and satisfying lives.

According to a 2010 *New York Times* article, “Richmond’s New Priority, Taking Health Seriously,” Daniel Weintraub quotes Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin’s commitment to improve the overall health of Richmond residents: “We definitely believe we are on the cutting edge of showing how a city can work on this level, in terms of its thinking, its planning, changing its policies to focus on the basic health needs of the community.” Public works improvements include better road conditions to encourage bike-friendly pathways, better sidewalks to encourage walking, improved safety features, such as lighting and traffic enforcement, and beautifying the city to encourage outdoor physical activity and social interaction.

The City of Richmond’s General Plan contains standards for cleanliness by encouraging operators to apply the most advanced technologies to eliminate health impacts. The Plan also encourages working with industry to reduce pollutants that trigger asthma and promoting local stores and farmers’ markets that provide nourishing food to help ward off obesity.

Good health and disease prevention saves money, not only for individuals, but employers and taxpayers. An American Heart Association review in 2011 cited more than 200 research studies, concluding that most cardiovascular disease is preventable or can be delayed until old age by combining “direct medical care and community-based prevention programs and policies.” The review emphasized that “for every dollar spent on wellness programs, companies would save about $3.27 in medical costs and $2.73 in absenteeism costs.” In addition, “lifestyle changes in nutrition and activity reduced the incidence of Type 2 diabetes by 58 percent, compared to drug therapy, which only reduced the incidence by 31 percent.”

**Fostering a healthy community**
The desire to implement an effectual Health Initiative in the City of Richmond is a fundamental component in enlightening, educating, and equipping residents toward healthy living for individuals, families and future generations. The City also firmly believes that with the education of just one individual comes revelation. With revelation comes a series of actions. And when preparation meets opportunity, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

A program at the heart of the City’s efforts to empower and improve the lives of its residents is RichmondBUILD Academy.

Pioneered by Executive Director Sal Vaca in 2007, the innovative RichmondBUILD Academy was formed as a violence reduction strategy and to create career and employment opportunities for the residents of Richmond. Students commit to a 17-week intensive training program in which they develop multiple skills, in the classroom and onsite, toward employability in high-wage construction and renewable energy sectors. This “edu-vocational” immersion not only affords Richmond residents tools of the trade and real-life work experience; it fosters an environment in which residents may better other areas of their lives, too.

An integral component of the RichmondBUILD strategy and application has been its mission toward reducing violence within the community. With a sense of purposefulness come productivity and a more optimistic outlook. More than mere diversion, an about-face can occur from a lifetime of self-defeating patterns.

The success of the program continues to serve as a workforce archetype for other cities throughout the country. RichmondBUILD has also drawn state and national attention for its palpable ability to better the lives of its citizens. Honors include a presentation by U.S. FBI Director Robert Mueller, the 2009 Harvard Innovations in American Government award, and a Conservation Champion award presented by Senator Barbara Boxer. Job placement of its graduates in Richmond has ranged in 80%-90%, with living wages averaging $18.33 per hour.

Geared toward at-risk youths, ages 16 to 24, YouthWORKS offers case-managed services in an interactive program, which includes academic support, transportation assistance, cultural enrichment field trips, life skills development and pre-employment readiness training. Most recently, the City of Richmond reported that its Youth Services Division is collaborating with John Muir Charter School.
and Contra Costa Community College toward the formation of a Career Technical Training Academy, which will facilitate young adults, ages 17 to 24, who have not yet earned their high school diplomas.

In addition to accredited educational supplementation, students may attain employment skills, leadership training and pre-enrollment assistance at Contra Costa Community College toward Health, Hospitality and Green Hybrid Automotive fields. This preparation also helps facilitate enrollment into the RichmondBUILD Green Construction Academy.

**Building upon a solid foundation of health**
Critical to the City of Richmond’s ongoing efforts to encourage a vibrant workforce is the health and safety of the community. Because people thrive and grow in a wholesome environment, it cannot be ignored that Richmond’s education and career training can only be as successful as the well-being of its residents.

To help foster a healthier working community, the Healthy RichmondBUILD initiative was launched as an integral component of the RichmondBUILD Academy. Implemented in cooperation with educational, governmental and non-profit organizations from throughout the county, the initiative focuses on “educating and empowering RichmondBUILD students to make better choices about their health, nutrition and lifestyles.”

The Healthy RichmondBUILD initiative is embedded as part of the 17 week training program in the form of an all-day Health & Resource Fair for each cohort. Each student receives a “passport,” which is stamped upon participation at each Health Fair checkpoint. Available screenings for each student provide medical examinations and consultations and stations are set up to offer a variety of services. Blood pressure checks, blood glucose, cholesterol assessment, body mass index testing, dental and vision exams were provided so as to inform every student of potential health issues.
the Health & Resource Mini-Fair, local health providers and organizations, farmers, grocers, and others provided informational materials and answered questions. Nutrition classes gave instruction on healthy meal planning and cooking with practical advice and demonstrations by a volunteer chef. Even a “fueling station” served tasty snack and breakfast alternatives designed for busy workers on-the-go, and a rock climbing wall is set up to test the stamina of willing participants and to reinforce the value and benefits of daily exercise activities.

One recent RichmondBUILD graduate, a single-mother of two children, named Brandi, came away from the Health Fair with a new outlook on her own health. “I used to drink a 2-liter bottle of soda a day,” she said. “I hadn’t realized how unhealthy it was for me!” Initial steps such as these are indicative of the “aha’ moments that encourage further reassessment of the changes that can significantly improve one’s life and, accordingly, one’s life expectancy.

In the City of Richmond, this inseparable interconnection of health education, job training and community support are being proven to work successfully toward the personal empowerment of its residents. A resulting heightened sense of eligibility brings with it a revitalized sense of possibility and responsiveness toward improving one’s lifestyle in a myriad of ways.

Not only does a desire for a healthy lifestyle become evident, such as in Brandi’s case, it is often contagious. An impartation of vitality in just one individual can profoundly affect a family, a community, and even the City of Richmond. Where negativity and self-destruction decrease, and a positive and robust working environment increase, are where life will most greatly flourish in “The City of Pride and Purpose.”