What are Root Causes?

A **root cause** is an underlying reason or condition that leads to an undesirable occurrence or outcome. Often there may be several root causes for an issue, or a chain of root causes that have grown from one another. By identifying and addressing root causes we can create lasting, systemic change; rather than addressing the surface level symptoms of the issue which only offers a temporary "band aid" solution. In addressing root causes we move from a community that reacts to problems, to a community that prevents and solves problems before they escalate, or spiral out of control.

How to identify root causes?

We identify root causes to community problems by doing community-based research, one-to-ones and critically learning about issues.

An easy approach to understanding root causes is the "5 Whys" technique, which is simply asking the question "Why?" successively five or more times to get at the deeper causes of each answer given, and to understand the relationships among different root causes of a problem. This process should be repeated and asked of various people and stakeholders to understand what a community believes are the root causes to a problem they are facing. The conceptual objective is to keep questioning why each thing happens, instead of assuming that the first 'cause' which comes to mind is the root cause.

<u>Example</u>

- **What is the problem?** Low high school graduation rates

- **Why is that happening?** Students don't value their school experience.

- **Why is that?** Because they don't feel the adults care and all they do is punish students.

- **Why is that?** Because adults are trying to keep the school safe through rules and consequences.

- **Why is that?** Because adults are responsible for student safety.

- **Why is that?** Because they care about students.

From this example, we find that one root cause for low high school graduation rates may be ineffective communication between students and adults. We might start to address this issue by thinking of alternative actions and communication that could support a safe school environment and demonstrate more respect for students.

Finding Root Cause: 5 WHYS Worksheet

What is the problem?

Why is that happening?

Why is that?

Why is that?

Why is that?

Why is that?