

The Harvard Square Pit

A Report to the City Manager

JANUARY 16, 2003

Submitted by
the Cambridge Public Health Department
in consultation with the
Cambridge Police Department
Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs
Cambridge Community Development Department

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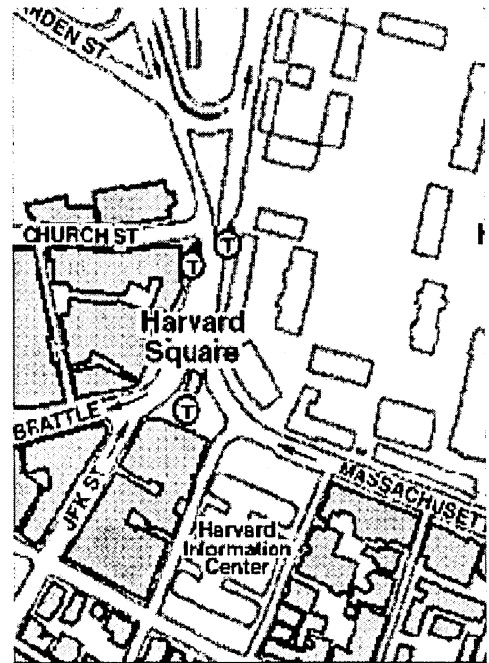
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INTRODUCTION

At the request of the City Manager, the Cambridge Public Health Department began meeting with representatives from the Community Development Department, the Cambridge Police, the Department of Human Service Programs, the MBTA, Harvard Square businesses, and community-based organizations in early 2002 to discuss the Harvard Square “Pit” following the highly publicized murder of a young homeless woman.

The “Pit” is the sunken amphitheater that encircles the Harvard Square T stop. It was built during the mid-1980s as part of the renovation of the Harvard Square T station. Designed by the architecture firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, the Pit was intended to be an insulated space for spontaneous street music performances.¹ Instead it became a favorite hang-out for a diverse group of teenagers and young adults, as well as tourists and older homeless adults.

Some civic leaders and local business owners have stated that the appearance and behavior of the so-called “Pit kids” may be intimidating to tourists and shoppers in Harvard Square. On a typical summer night, it is estimated that as many as 100 to 200 young people gather in the Pit area. A significant proportion are homeless. Many kids have tattoos and body piercings.



A small number of “Pit kids” have been linked to violent crime, particularly aggravated assault and street robbery. While these crimes have focused negative attention on the Pit, the reality is that the vast majority of street kids in Harvard Square are more likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators. According to police officers and social services staff interviewed for this report, Harvard Square street youth (especially those who are homeless), are at risk for prostitution, drug use, coercion into gangs, and are vulnerable to other predatory behaviors.

The victimization of Harvard Square street youth was clearly evidenced in November 2001 when a young homeless woman was raped and then brutally stabbed to death along the banks of the Charles River. Io Nachtwey was a 22-year-old Hawaiian native who had been hanging around the Pit for several months. She was penniless and homeless, according to teenagers who knew her.² Nachtwey had refused to join a criminal gang that was operating in Harvard Square. Prosecutors believe her murder was intended to intimidate other homeless youth into joining the gang.

The murder of Io Nachtwey brought to the fore longstanding issues about the Pit. This report addresses the social, public safety, and architecture issues that define the “Pit problem.”

¹ Flint, Anthony. “Slaying of a street kid draws critics’ eye to ‘Pit.’” *Boston Globe*. November 23, 2001.

² Burge, Kathleen. “5 held in woman’s riverside slaying.” *Boston Globe*. November 10, 2001.

Social issues focus on the young people who gather at the Pit. Who are they? What draws them to Harvard Square? What risks do they encounter on the street? What services are available to them in Cambridge and Boston? What needs of these youth are currently not being met? Finally, what is the city's role in addressing these issues? For instance, should the city consider a regional approach to the issue given the regional demographics of the "Pit kids"? What are other solutions?

A discussion of public safety, enforcement, and jurisdiction issues related to the Pit raises several separate but related issues: Do the current users of the Pit pose a threat to public safety? If so, how has the Cambridge Police Department responded to such threats? Who has jurisdiction over the Pit?

Issues related to the Pit's architecture are pedestrian traffic flow, the location of certain seating benches, its appeal to street youth, and its sunken design.

As this report makes clear, the public safety, design, and social issues that define the "Pit problem" are inseparable. Any fundamental alteration to the Pit's design could profoundly affect the health and safety of a vulnerable population of homeless teenagers and young adults. Likewise, criminal activity perpetrated by or against Pit users is often linked to broader social and public health issues including substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness.

The Pit: Street Youth in Harvard Square

For at least 40 years, teenagers and young adults have gathered in Harvard Square. Through the decades Harvard Square has been a haven for beatniks, folksingers, hippies, student radicals, homeless people, drug addicts, punk rockers, and runaways. Before the Pit, Holyoke Center and the Cambridge Common were the two most popular youth “hang outs” in Harvard Square.

The traffic peninsula that currently houses the Harvard Square T, Out of Town News, and the Pit was built in the mid-1980s. Prior to the renovation, the T station was situated on a triangular traffic island with a narrow sidewalk around its perimeter. While pedestrians could navigate around the T kiosk, the traffic island was hardly conducive to “hanging out.”



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When the Pit opened in the early 1980s, it became an instant destination for members of the local punk rock scene, some as young as 12 or 13. Today it is a favorite hang-out for a diverse group of teenagers and young adults, as well as tourists and older homeless adults.

Some civic leaders and local business owners have stated that the appearance and behavior of the so-called “Pit kids” may be intimidating to tourists and shoppers in Harvard Square. On a typical summer night, it is estimated that as many as 100 to 200 young people gather in the Pit area. A significant proportion are homeless. Many kids have tattoos and body piercings.

As early as the late 1960s, social service providers had identified a subset of young people hanging around the Harvard Square T who needed medical, psychological, and social services. In 1970, a group of concerned teachers, physicians, and clergy members founded Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and began counseling street youth. That same year they introduced the nation’s first mobile medical van to provide health care, crisis counseling, and survival aid to street youth in the greater Boston area.

In 1999, the City of Cambridge, the Cambridge Public Health Department, and local community agencies got involved with the “Pit kids” issue following a series of *Boston Globe* articles on adult predatory behaviors toward kids in the Pit. The articles also discussed the risk behaviors of the kids themselves. The *Globe* exposé disabused the popular stereotype that “Pit kids” were largely a bunch of bored middle-class suburban teenager posing as punks, runaways, and delinquents.

In summer 1999, the Teen Health Center, the Cambridge Public Health Department, and Health of the City collaborated on a health survey of the “Pit kids.” In October 1999, findings were presented to health and human services providers, who formed a committee to address health and

safety issues identified in the study. In November, the Multidisciplinary Working Group, led by Harold Cox of the Cambridge Public Health Department, released a comprehensive report on homelessness, public intoxication, and nuisance behaviors in Cambridge. What emerged from the reports and community meetings was Youth on Fire, a drop-in center for homeless youth based in Harvard Square (for more on Youth on Fire, see p. 9).

To successfully address the needs of homeless or at-risk youth (ages 13 to 17) and young adults (ages 18 to 24) in Harvard Square, it is important to understand who comprises these populations, what draws them to Harvard Square, and what risks they encounter on the street. It is also imperative to identify services currently available to this population, as well as gaps in services.

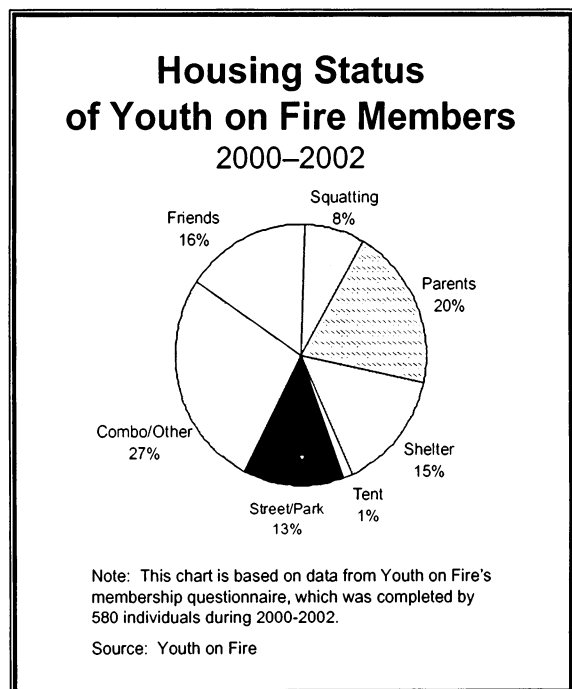
Who Are Those Kids?

The “Pit kids” are a mixture of homeless and housed teenagers (ages 13 to 17) and young adults (ages 18 to 24). Youth on Fire anecdotally reports it has members from Massachusetts (including many from Boston), Connecticut, Maine, Florida, Georgia, and even Cuba.³

According to the 1999 Teen Health Center study, about 13% of the sample population (104 individuals) were from Cambridge, 17% were from Greater Boston, 46% were from outlying suburbs, and 23% were from other U.S. communities.⁴ In 2002, the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA), a Boston-based advocacy group, conducted a one-night census of homeless young adults (ages 18 to 24) across Massachusetts. The census counted 323 young adults, 88% of whom had lived in Massachusetts for more than a year. Approximately 32% of those interviewed by MHSA had lived in foster homes.⁵

Some homeless and precariously housed minors in Harvard Square are runaways; others are “throwaways.” *Runaways* are teenagers who have often fled situations in which they didn’t feel safe or comfortable. One provider stated that the situations the teens are choosing to leave (e.g., family, DSS, DYS) are often traumatic. *Throwaways* are teens who have been kicked out of

Table 1



³ Youth on Fire, personal communication, Feb. 6, 2002.

⁴ Raphael, J. “Just Who Are Those Kids who Hang Out in the Harvard Square Pit Anyway?” A survey conducted for the Teen Health Center, Cambridge Public Health Dept., and Health of the City. Summer 1999.

⁵ “Annual Census of Homeless Young Adults.” Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. 2002. Note: The MHSA census, while valuable, probably underrepresents the number of homeless youth in Massachusetts since it only counted individuals in emergency shelters, day programs, and street outreach programs. In addition, a number of homeless youth (age 18 and younger) may have been overlooked during the count because most of them cannot or do not want to access emergency shelters. The MHSA census also does not account for youth who are precariously housed (i.e., shelter that is not permanent or secure).

their homes for reasons ranging from behavioral problems and substance abuse to sexual orientation.

A number of young adults who are homeless or precariously housed in Cambridge have been involved in the state's Department of Social Services (DSS) or Department of Youth Services (DYS) programs, according to several providers interviewed for this report. This observation is supported by a recent Youth on Fire survey in which 25% of Youth on Fire members reported they had been involved with DSS or DYS.⁶ When these kids aged out of the state system, they did not receive adequate support and ended up on the streets.

At present, there are no solid statistics on the number of homeless teens and young adults living in Cambridge. In part, this has to do with the general difficulty of quantifying homelessness. In addition, homeless individuals under age 25 often fail to meet standard definitions of homelessness because they may "couch surf," which means staying at different friends' homes for several days at a time; they may "camp out" under bridges, in parks, or along the Charles River; or they may even spend some nights at their parents' homes. In fact, 20% of Youth on Fire members report they live with their parents (see Table 1). However, these stays with parents are often typified by abuse and neglect, according to Youth on Fire staff who conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with these individuals.

Another barrier to reliable homeless counts is the fluidity of the street youth population. In the past several years, outreach workers from Bridge Over Troubled Waters (Bridge) have observed greater mobility among the youth homeless enclaves in Harvard Square, Copley Square, and downtown Boston.⁷ Finally, most "one night" homeless censuses do not capture the unsheltered youth population since this group cannot legally access adult homeless shelters.

Perhaps the best proxy for estimating the size of the homeless teen and young adult population in Cambridge is the membership of Youth on Fire. Since its inception in 2000, about 580 teens and young adults have joined Youth on Fire. About 480 of those individuals participate in the program throughout the year. On any given day, about 40 to 50 youth use the program during open hours.

What Draws Street Youth To Harvard Square?

Social services providers have reported that Harvard Square is an entry point for adolescents onto the streets. They identified three key attractions of Harvard Square to this population.

Public transportation hub. Harvard Square is the public transportation hub of Cambridge. The MBTA subway and bus lines that pass through Harvard Square greatly impact the geographic composition of the "Pit kids," according to providers. Youth from Quincy, Milton, and Mattapan can travel directly to Harvard Square via the Red Line. Public buses bring in teens from Belmont, Watertown, Arlington, and other suburbs.

⁶ "DSS/DYS Involvement and [Mental Health]Diagnosis: An optional anonymous intake survey of 66 Youth on Fire members, 2000-2001." Youth on Fire. 2001.

⁷ Bridge Over Troubled Waters, personal communication, Feb. 14, 2002.

Availability of medical/social services. Harvard Square is also a hub for medical and social services for homeless youth. Providers include several churches, Bread & Jams, Youth on Fire, and the Bridge medical van.

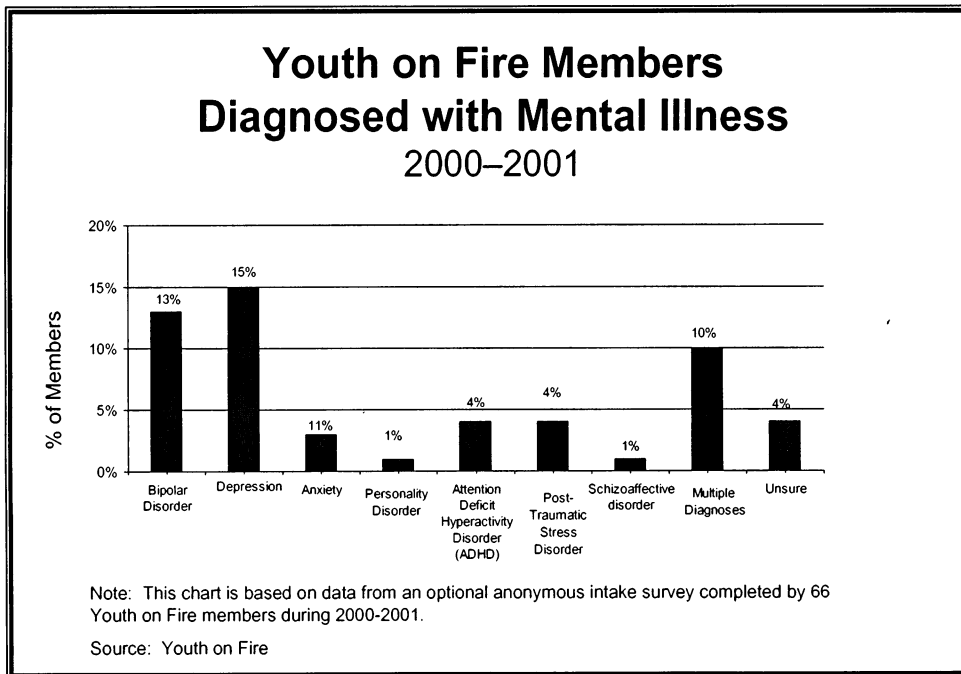
Sense of community. For many marginalized teens and young adults, the Pit offers a sense of community. One provider reported the Pit community has its own social norms, and that street youth try to protect each other from harm.

Health & Safety Risks Encountered by Street Youth

Runaway and homeless teens and young adults are at greater disadvantage on the streets than older homeless individuals. Many street kids come from a background of trauma including abusive families, bad foster homes, and exploitation in youth prison. Because of their age and often fragile emotional status, street youth are vulnerable to predatory behaviors of older adults, including criminals and older homeless individuals.

Many homeless youth are unsheltered due to lack of beds in shelters; others avoid adult shelters because of safety concerns. Several providers stated that older teens and young adults face potential exploitation at adult homeless shelters by chronically homeless older adults, substance abusers, and individuals with serious mental illness. (Note: Most Boston--area shelters do not accept homeless or runaway teenagers under age 18 because of the legal challenges posed by sheltering minors.)

Table



Unsheltered youth are at risk for exposure, disease (particularly STDs and HIV), and violence. Those who sleep outside sometimes “camp out” along the Charles River and in other secluded areas in Cambridge. Those who sleep indoors sometimes “couch surf” from one friend’s house to another; they may trade sex or drugs for a place to stay; or they may pool money for a hotel

room. Sometimes street youth are “adopted” by college kids who view them as “fun to party with.”⁸ In most of these scenarios the kids do not have full control over their circumstances.

For a variety of reasons, many street youth are not in a position to become economically independent. In the absence of shelter and adequate means of legitimate income, street youth are likely to turn to illegal means of support, including prostitution and fraudulent check-writing. A criminal record, in turn, makes it that much more difficult to secure a job and housing.⁹

Social Services for Street Youth

While a variety of services for homeless people and at-risk youth exist in Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston, the number of young people who take advantage of these services is unclear. This section describes some of the most frequently used resources by street youth in Harvard Square, as well as gaps in those services. Information is based on conversations with the Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP) and a comprehensive needs assessment conducted by the Homeless Services Planning Committee in 2000-2001.

Community meals programs. Street youth use some of the community meals programs, especially those in and around Harvard Square. Programs used most frequently by youth are:¹⁰

- Harvard Square Meals Program at Christ Church serves dinners on Thursday nights.
- Youth on Fire serves lunches on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.
- Bread & Jams serves pastry breakfasts and dinners on Sunday nights at St. James’s Church in Porter Square (Oct. 15-April 30) and on the Cambridge Common (May 1-Oct. 15)

In addition, dinners are offered in Cambridge on the remaining days of the week by the Mass. Ave. Baptist Church in Inman Square; the First Parish Church in Harvard Square; the Salvation Army; Union Baptist Church; and the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Central Square.

Shelters. At present, shelters that tend to attract young adult homeless (age 18+) are those with a reputation for being “friendly” to teens and young adults. Shelters used most frequently by homeless and runaway youth in Harvard Square, according to Cambridge DHSP, are:

- Harvard Square Shelter at University Lutheran Church¹¹
- St. Patrick’s Shelter in Somerville, women only¹²
- Long Island Annex at St. Francis House¹³

⁸ Youth on Fire, personal communication, Feb. 6, 2002.

⁹ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

¹⁰ Cambridge Department of Human Services Program, personal communication, February 10, 2002.

¹¹ Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs, personal communication, February 10, 2002.

¹² Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs, personal communication, February 10, 2002.

¹³ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

Other Boston-area youth shelters are:

- Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Inc. (Boston). Through its various programs, Bridge provides housing each year to 60 teens and young adults, and 17 children.
- Wayside/Shortstop, Inc. (Somerville) provides emergency shelter for children (ages 8 to 18) and transitional housing for homeless adolescents and young adults (ages 18 to 21). It also offers a life learning center and a peer leadership program. Shortstop Inc. is run by Wayside Youth and Family Support Network (capacity is 9 adults, ages 8 to 21).
- Just A Start House (Somerville) is a transitional housing program for pregnant homeless adolescents, ages 13 to 19, and their children.

Bridge and Shortstop may be less popular with street youth because both shelters are highly structured and, according to Cambridge DHSP, they are designed for youth who are ready to get off the streets.¹⁴

Gaps in Shelter Services. Homeless teenagers and young adults confront numerous barriers in accessing Boston-area shelter services. One barrier is the shortage of available beds in the shelters. One Cambridge provider reported that Boston area homeless shelters have been at 125% capacity for more than two years. The situation is expected to worsen this winter following recent state budget cuts. The cuts have also reduced funding for substance abuse prevention, MassHealth, and Department of Social Services programs. A reduction in these services may contribute to an increase in youth homelessness over time, according to Cambridge DHSP.¹⁵

Another barrier is that shelter services are generally not available to younger teens because of the legal challenges posed by sheltering minors. Cambridge DHSP believes that providers are not likely to step forward soon to shelter this population.¹⁶

For young adults, ages 18 to 24, there is a dearth of shelters specifically geared to their needs. The few existing youth shelters set rules and curfews that some young people find too restrictive. In its needs assessment, the Homeless Services Planning Committee stated, “Many [young people] forego access to services in favor of the freedom to dress as they please, to stay with their partners, to sleep when they need it.”¹⁷ Rigid curfews and check-in times also hamper the ability of homeless teens and young adults to become financially stable. Since the standard check-in time at most homeless shelters is between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., this means young people who work or are seeking employment cannot accept late afternoon or evening shifts.

¹⁴ Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs, personal communication, Oct. 7, 2002.

¹⁵ Cambridge Department of Human Services Program, personal communication, Oct. 7, 2002.

¹⁶ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

¹⁷ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

The Homeless Services Planning Committee has identified a need for:

- **Separate shelter space for young adults** (ages 18-24). According to the committee, homeless young adults need their own shelter space. They should not be housed in the same shelters as older adults, who are often chronically homeless, substance abusers, or have serious mental illness. The committee believes homeless youth and young adults need a shelter service that offer resources such as continuing education, employment counseling, and substance abuse treatment. Such a shelter would balance the need for structure and rules that protect the safety of youth/young adults, with their reluctance to accept services that (a) come with “too many” strings attached, and (b) in the opinion of the young people, treat them as children when they feel like adults.¹⁸

Homeless teens and young adults at Youth on Fire identified additional shelter needs:¹⁹

- A night center or shelter that would be open all night and have no curfew. The center/shelter would have laundry and shower facilities.
- A need for youth shelters to provide both wet and dry living facilities.

Daytime Drop-in Programs for Youth. Daytime drop-in programs for youth provide a safe place for homeless teenagers and young adults to spend time off the street during the hours when shelters are typically closed, 7 a.m.– 6 p.m.

At present, Youth on Fire is the only daytime drop-in program in Cambridge geared specifically for homeless and at-risk youth (age 14 to 24 years). Youth on Fire is run by Cambridge Cares About AIDS at the Harvard Epworth Church in Harvard Square. The program operates from 12 noon to 6 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Youth on Fire is built on the philosophy of harm reduction. The program builds trust with its young clientele and links them to health care and an array of social services they otherwise might not access. Youth on Fire also offers its members a soup kitchen, clothing bank, and information on housing, health care, safer sex, substance abuse, employment, and education. Organizations that collaborate with Youth on Fire include:

- HomeStart – Field-based case management
- Cambridge and Somerville Program for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Rehabilitation (CASPAR)
- Justice Resource Institute (JRI)
 - Sidney Borum Jr. Health Center
 - Wayne Wright Resource Center – HIV/AIDS testing/counseling
- Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC)
- Cambridge Health Alliance – Department of Psychiatry
- Tri-City Mental Health and Retardation

¹⁸ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

¹⁹ Information based on informal interviews with seven young adults. Interviews were conducted by Fred Berman, City of Cambridge Department of Human Services, on January 25, 2002.

- The Greater Boston Food Bank
- Harvard Legal Defenders
- Artists for Humanity
- Impact Employment
- Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA)

Cambridge DHSP reports that Harvard Square street youth also visit the Bread & Jams adult drop-in at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church, especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Youth on Fire is closed. Bread & Jams operates from 10 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Gaps in Daytime Drop-in Services. The high utilization of Youth on Fire highlights the need for homeless teens and young adults to have a safe, constructive place to spend time during the day. At present, Youth on Fire lacks funding to operate more than three days a week. Based on the Youth on Fire model, a youth drop-in center would offer:

- access to clinical and social services
- access to services related to education, housing, and employment
- an opportunity to spend time with adults who accept them and provide guidance
- opportunities to contribute to the community

The Homeless Services Planning Committee identified the need for additional drop-in capacity at Youth on Fire. This would require increasing staffing and expanding hours of operation. An alternative would be developing new drop-in sites. However, in the current budgetary climate, there is no real prospect of funding to develop new drop-in programming, according to the Homeless Services Planning Committee needs assessment.²⁰

Medical Services. Street youth in Harvard Square receive health care primarily from the Sidney Borum Jr. Health Center and the Bridge Over Troubled Waters mobile medical van. They also occasionally visit the Teen Health Center and The Cambridge Hospital clinics and emergency room.²¹

- **The Sidney Borum, Jr., Health Center** in Boston provides primary care, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, HIV counseling, testing and risk reduction reinforcement, and other clinical and social services to young people, ages 13 to 29.²² The health center also provides on-site medical services at Youth on Fire.

The health center serves young people who fall outside the traditional health care setting, including youth who are homeless; youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; and youth involved in street life and the sex industry. The center also serves young people who have been placed in a residential facility or group home because of serious

²⁰ “Unranked List of Priorities Identified in the 2000-2001 Needs Assessment Process,” Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs.

²¹ Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs, personal communication, February 11, 2002; Cambridge Cares About AIDS, personal communication, February 2002; Cambridge Health Alliance Health Care for the Homeless, personal communication, Oct. 16, 2002; and Teen Health Center, personal communication, Oct. 16, 2002.

²² www.jri.org.

social and behavioral dysfunction, and youth whose medical care has been disrupted because of multiple placements with DSS.²³ The health center is affiliated with Beth Israel Deaconess Medical and Boston Children's Hospital.

- **Bridge Over Troubled Waters.** The Bridge Over Troubled Waters mobile medical van and outreach workers provide on-site medical services to street youth (ages 14 to 25) in Harvard Square. The Bridge van offers acute care, HIV testing, crisis counseling, support, and referrals to health care providers and human services.
- **Teen Health Center** at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. Of the hundreds of clients registered at the Teen Health Center, only five to seven are homeless youth.²⁴ An Alliance physician who specialized in health care for the homeless commented that the Teen Health Center is not a good match for many homeless youth, especially those who are DSS dropouts or have warrants, because given the clinic's location in the high school many fear being questioned and possibly turned into DSS or DYS.
- **The Cambridge Hospital Emergency Room.** There are no statistics available on the number of homeless young people (ages 13 to 24) who have been treated at The Cambridge Hospital Emergency Room, but a representative from the Alliance's Health Care for the Homeless program believes the number is small. Homeless young people shy away from hospital emergency rooms for the same reason they avoid seeking care at the Teen Health Center, according to this representative.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Teen Health Center, personal communication, Oct. 16, 2002.

The Pit: Public Safety

A discussion of public safety, enforcement, and jurisdiction issues related to the “Pit” raises several separate but related issues: Do the current users of the “Pit” pose a threat to public safety? If so, how has the Cambridge Police Department responded to such threats? Who has jurisdiction over the Pit?

For the purposes of this report, *public safety* is defined as the quality of life that allows Cambridge residents and visitors—including homeless individuals—to feel secure in their everyday lives by being free from danger, injury, and damage. A *threat to public safety* in the context of the Pit would be an action or event that adversely affects quality of life, such as drug trafficking and substance abuse, violent crime, property crime, and harassment. A threat to public safety would also include the perception that Harvard Square is unsafe.

Do “Pit Kids” Pose a Threat To Public Safety?

In the opinion of the Cambridge Police, “Pit kids” do not pose a significant threat to public safety. According to officers interviewed for this report, Harvard Square is a relatively safe place given its urban setting. Violent crime incidents reported in Harvard Square comprised a small fraction of the total violent crime reported citywide in 2001.

The Cambridge Police believe that few violent crimes occur in Harvard Square because of the large number of tourists, students, commuters, and residents who traverse the Square on a daily basis. In addition, Harvard Square and Central Square are two of the heaviest patrolled areas in Cambridge (see “enforcement” section in this chapter). Nonetheless, a handful of violent crimes—mostly aggravated assaults and street robberies—and a significant number of commercial crimes occur in Harvard Square every year. The following two sections examine crimes committed in Harvard Square, including those attributed to Pit denizens.

Commercial Crime in Harvard Square

The Cambridge Police Department considers Harvard Square a commercial district, as opposed to a neighborhood. In its *2001 Annual Crime Report*, the Police Department reported on the following business-related crime that occurred in Harvard Square: larceny from building, larceny from person, commercial burglary, commercial robbery, shoplifting, and fraud/flimflam/counterfeiting. Commercial crimes that occurred in Harvard Square in 2001 are included in Table 3.

Harvard Square has historically had the highest incidence of business-related crime among the city’s ten business districts. Nonetheless, the total number of reported crimes in Harvard Square has dropped significantly in the last decade, from 500 incidents in the early 1990s to 338 in 2001.²⁵

Larceny from person was the highest reported crime in Harvard Square in 2001, accounting for more than a third of all reported incidents. *Larceny* is the unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession of another. It includes crimes such as shoplifting,

²⁵ 2001 Annual Crime Report. Cambridge Police Department. 2002.

pick-pocketing, thefts from motor vehicles, thefts of auto parts and accessories, and bicycle thefts, in which no use of force, violence, fraud, or trespass occurs.²⁶

Of the 124 reported larcenies from person reported in 2001, the vast majority involved professional pickpockets who stole wallets and purses hanging on the backs of chairs in restaurants and bars. The Cambridge Police believe this group is comprised largely of drug-dependent individuals, not “Pit kids.”

Shoplifting was the second highest reported crime in Harvard Square, with 97 reported incidents. Record and clothing stores were the primary targets of shoplifters, the majority of whom were juvenile suspects.

Table 3

Commercial Crime in Harvard Sq.	2001 (incidents)	2002 (incidents though Nov. 19)
Larceny from building	68	61
Larceny from person	124	137
Commercial burglary	10	24
Commercial robbery	6	5
Vandalism	74	52
Shoplifting	97	75
Fraud/flimflam/counterfeiting	33	77

Source: Cambridge Police Department Crime Analysis Unit

Larcenies from buildings was the fourth highest reported crime in Harvard Square in 2001, with 68 reported incidents. *Larceny from buildings* are non-burglary thefts from commercial establishments (i.e., no force is used to gain entry to the building). Laptop computers from offices along JFK street were among the prime targets.²⁷

In 2001, there were six reported commercial robberies: two note-passers at Mass Ave. banks, one Oxycontin drugstore robbery, and three convenience store robberies. *Commercial robbery* is the taking or attempted taking of anything of value by force or threat of force from the care or custody of a commercial or financial establishment.

Pit-Related Violent Criminal Activity

A Cambridge Police crime analyst interviewed for this report stated that the majority of people arrested for violent street crime (e.g., robbery, rape, aggravated assault) in Harvard Square are either past or present Pit users, or are associated with people who hang around the Pit.²⁸ Over the last four years, these perpetrators have ranged from drifters to skinheads to gang member wannabes.

The Cambridge Police Department identified 31 violent crime incidents* in Harvard Square that occurred between June 15, 2000 and November 19, 2002 as being related to the Pit.²⁹ Of these incidents, more than half occurred in the immediate vicinity of the Pit. In all three years, the bulk of criminal activity occurred during late summer and fall.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ City of Cambridge Police Dept., personal communication, on May 14, 2002.

* This includes the murder/rape of Io Nachtwey. The Cambridge Police excluded this incident from its 2001 crime statistics because the crime occurred on state-owned land along the Charles River.

²⁹ “Violent Activity in the Harvard Square Pit: June 15, 2000 to Dec. 31, 2001,” City of Cambridge Police Dept., special report to the Cambridge City Manager, February 16, 2002.

Cambridge Police attribute most violent criminal activity in the Pit to a small group of perpetrators. For instance, in 2000 there were six incidents during a three-week period from mid-September through early October. Five of those incidents involved white males (ages 17 to 23) described as “skinheads” who assaulted residents and Harvard University students.

Cambridge Police believe Pit-related criminal activity was more organized in 2001 than in previous years. Cambridge Police officials attributed the surge of violent activity to a group of teenagers and young adults from Lawrence, Malden, Mattapan, and Milton.³⁰ This group, described by Cambridge Police as a “wannabe” gang, intimidated other teens who were hanging around the Pit, many of whom were runaways. In November 2001, six members of this “gang” were indicted on murder charges in connection with Nachtwey’s death.³¹ They included four men and two women (ages 17 to 27).

In 2001, there were 15 violent crime incidents linked to the Pit. Pit users were identified as the perpetrators of eight aggravated assaults and four street robberies. More than a third of their victims were other “Pit kids” or homeless adults. In addition, three “Pit kids” were victims of some of the Lawrence-Mattapan “wannabe” gang: a young man who was kidnapped and threatened with death, a young woman who was raped, and Io Nachtwey.

Table 4

Criminal Activity Linked to the Pit	2001 (incidents)	2002 (incidents though Nov. 19)
Murder	1*	0
Rape	2	0
Kidnapping	1	0
Street robbery	4	4
Aggravated assault	8	5
Simple assault	6	7
Vandalism	15	20
Drug arrests	14	15

*The victim was a frequent Pit user, but the crime occurred on state-owned land along the Charles River. As such, the Cambridge Police Department has excluded this incident from its official crime statistics.

Source: Cambridge Police Department Crime Analysis Unit

Aggravated assault describes an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.³² Weapons used in the eight Pit-related aggravated assaults were hands/feet, a bottle, an aluminum bat, a knife, and a metal hook. Three incidents resulted in victims being transported to Mount Auburn Hospital.³³ Pit-related aggravated assaults comprised 3% of the total 272 aggravated assaults reported citywide in 2001.

Robbery is the taking or attempted taking of anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear. This crime includes muggings, purse snatchings, and bank hold-ups.³⁴ In 2001, eight street robberies occurred in Harvard Square, four of which were Pit-related. In one incident, two

³⁰ City of Cambridge Police Department, personal communication, May 14, 2002; “Sixth Defendant Held in Murder of Woman on Railroad Bridge,” Suffolk County District Attorney’s Office, November 14, 2001.

³¹ Kathleen Burge, “Police to add murder charge,” *Boston Globe*, December 21, 2001.

³² 2001 Annual Crime Report. Cambridge Police Department. 2002.

³³ City of Cambridge Police Department, personal communication, May 14, 2002.

³⁴ 2001 Annual Crime Report. Cambridge Police Department. 2002.

Harvard University students were robbed by a group of male and female juveniles; the female juveniles told the students they had a firearm, though it was not exhibited. The four Pit-related street robberies comprised less than 3% of the total 147 street robberies reported citywide in 2001.

Other Pit-Related Criminal Activity

Other criminal activity that has frequently been linked to Pit users is vandalism and drug trafficking.

Vandalism, or malicious destruction of property, is the most commonly reported crime in Cambridge.³⁵ The Cambridge Police define vandalism as an act in which someone's property is willfully and maliciously damaged or destroyed. Vandalism includes tire-slashing, window smashing, and spray-painting. In Harvard Square, the majority of incidents in 2001 involved graffiti and several incidents of acid painted onto various business windows. According to the Cambridge Police, it is hard to link vandalism directly to Pit users without solid confirmation on suspects and arrests. The department's crime analysis unit estimated that about 30% to 40% of vandalism incidents in Harvard Square may be linked to the Pit (see Table 3 and Table 4).³⁶

In 2002, the Cambridge Police conducted numerous drug investigations in the Harvard Square area but made only a handful of arrests (see Table 4). An officer in the Cambridge Police's narcotics division stated that the Pit's high pedestrian traffic flow and its close proximity to the Harvard Square T entrance make it conducive to drug trafficking. Drug dealers can disappear unnoticed into crowds or slip into the T, where they escape from a different exit or hop onto the subway. In 2002, the highest number of drug arrests were for marijuana, followed by heroin. The type of drug arrests in recent years have ranged from simple possession to distribution of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and prescription pills.

Enforcement

In the past several years, the Cambridge Police have been successful in obtaining warrants for and arresting many of the alleged perpetrators of aggravated assaults in Harvard Square. Police officers have used Child in Need of Services warrants to locate minors who have run away from their families or from Department of Social Services or Department of Youth Services programs. Harvard Square and Central Square are the only squares in Cambridge which have two police officers on foot assigned to them 24 hours-a-day. Also, at least one patrol car (and sometimes two) is assigned to Harvard Square 24 hours-a-day. In addition, at any given time Cambridge Police officers from Vice, Investigations, Traffic and the Bicycle Unit might be patrolling the area.

Harvard University Police also respond to numerous calls related to the Pit. In most instances, Harvard Police refer calls to the Cambridge Police. However, when Harvard Police encounter a breach of peace incident on city property, they stabilize the situation and then contact the Cambridge Police.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ City of Cambridge Police Department, personal communication, November 20, 2002.

In Cambridge, the MBTA Police patrol the subway from Kendall Square to Alewife. As with Harvard, if MBTA Police witness a breach of peace on city property, they will take action and then contact the Cambridge Police. While the MBTA Police has primary jurisdiction in the underground stations, they also collaborate with the Cambridge Police, including conducting joint drills in the subway stations.³⁷

Who has jurisdiction over the “Pit”?

The Pit has been described as a “no man’s land in plain view” by urban planners, police, and Harvard Square business owners. This statement reflects the perception that no single enforcement agency has clear-cut jurisdiction over the Pit and that no single city agency or private property owner has responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the Pit.

Law Enforcement Jurisdiction. At present, the Pit area is patrolled by the Cambridge Police, Harvard University Police, and MBTA Police.

In fact, however, the City of Cambridge Police Department has the legal authority to enforce laws and preserve order anywhere within the City of Cambridge, including property owned by private universities, the MBTA, and the Metropolitan District Commission.³⁸ The traffic peninsula housing the Pit and Out of Town News³⁹ is located on City of Cambridge property; the Harvard Square T, including the headhouse, is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.⁴⁰ The Cambridge Police Department considers the Pit area its responsibility.

Nonetheless, the perception that the Pit is a “no man’s land” is not entirely ill founded. By definition, the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Police overlaps with that of the MBTA and Harvard University police departments. It is also probable that the public — as well as some members of the three police departments — are unaware that the Cambridge Police has jurisdiction over the Pit.

The official jurisdiction of the Harvard University Police Department (HUPD) is Harvard University property. However, Harvard police frequently respond to “breach of peace” incidents occurring in the Pit area, at Au Bon Pain, and elsewhere in Harvard Square.⁴¹ In these instances, once the situation is stable, Harvard Police contact the Cambridge Police. As sworn special state police officers and as Middlesex County deputy sheriffs, HUPD officers have the authority to make arrests off university property if they witness a “breach of the peace.”

A Harvard University police sergeant interviewed for this report explained that Harvard has a vested interest in helping the Cambridge Police patrol the Pit since members of the Harvard community regularly walk through the area.⁴² In addition, Harvard students have been the

³⁷ MBTA Police, personal communication, October 2002.

³⁸ City of Cambridge Police Dept., personal communication, September 9, 2002; *see also* “About the Cambridge Police” at www.cambridgepolice.org/profile.html.

³⁹ Note: Out of Town News has a lease agreement with the City of Cambridge.

⁴⁰ City of Cambridge Dept. of Public Works, personal communication, October 7, 2002.

⁴¹ Harvard University Police Department, personal communication, September 9, 2002.

⁴² Harvard University Police Department, personal communication, September 9, 2002.

victims of aggravated assaults linked to the Pit, and certain Pit-related crimes, such as drug trafficking, are sometimes carried out on Harvard property.

MBTA Police defines its jurisdiction on the traffic peninsula to include the T headhouse and the underground station to the top stair of the T entrance.⁴³ The 25-foot-long seating bench that faces the east side of the T headhouse is not MBTA property, according to MBTA Police.⁴⁴ Typically when criminal activity occurs in the Pit area, the Cambridge Police or Harvard Police are the first responders. If the incident occurs on MBTA property (i.e., underground or on the T stairs) and MBTA Police are not in the station, the responding police department will notify the MBTA Police Department.

Other forms of jurisdiction. A number of different groups share responsibility for cleaning, maintaining, and protecting the Pit area. Often, this shared responsibility simply creates confusion. For instance, the city's Department of Public Works is responsible for maintaining the walkways on the traffic peninsula, but is the MBTA responsible for removing garbage deposited at the base of the T headhouse? If a street performer is banging too loudly on the drums, who should be contacted, the Cambridge Police or the Cambridge Arts Council, which licenses street performers? Businesses in the immediate vicinity of the Pit are responsible for clearing snow from their sidewalks, but should they also play a role in crime prevention?

⁴³ MBTA Police Department, personal communication, September 9, 2002.

⁴⁴ MBTA Police Department, personal communication, October 2002.

The Pit: Architectural Design

The oval-shaped Pit is situated on a triangular traffic peninsula it shares with the Harvard Square T entrance and Out of Town News. It is bordered by Harvard Yard and Mass. Ave. to the east; the Harvard Coop to the west; and the Cambridge Savings Bank building to the south. The Pit could be described as two discrete spaces: a half-moon amphitheater that wraps around the Harvard Square T headhouse and a circular amphitheater directly east of the T headhouse.

Design Issues

The Pit has been criticized on several design fronts, including pedestrian traffic flow, the location of certain seating benches, its appeal to street youth, and its sunken design.

Pedestrian traffic flow. The Community Development Department and others have cited the brick walkway that intersects the Cambridge Savings Bank and the T headhouse as a bottleneck that constricts pedestrian traffic flow. Although the walkway is 12-feet wide, it often cannot accommodate the high level of foot traffic in Harvard Square.

The design of the Pit exacerbates to this problem because the two sunken amphitheaters effectively block easy pedestrian access to Mass Ave. (going in the direction of Central Sq.) on the north side of the T headhouse. As a result, pedestrians on the traffic peninsula heading east tend to choose the only direct route to Mass Ave. — the aforementioned brick walkway.

Seating bench at T headhouse. The Community Development Department and others have described the small “gully” between the slanted eastern wall of the T headhouse and the seating bench directly in front of it as a magnet for litter. People hanging out in the Pit often lean against T headhouse, rest their feet on the bench, and deposit food wrappers and other garbage in the gully. When interviewed for this report, one Harvard Square businessperson recommended removing the 25-foot-long seating bench and increasing the slope of the headhouse wall. Another option would be to redesign the seating bench to eliminate the gully.

Street Youth. One goal of the current Harvard Square design project (described later in this section) is to make all public plazas inviting and well used.⁴⁵ Some Harvard Square business owners have complained that the Pit attracts unkempt youth whose appearance and (actual or perceived) behavior may discourage tourists and residents from enjoying the plaza. Their argument is the Pit should be inviting to all users, not a single population of users.

The corollary to this argument is that the Pit should be made *less inviting* to street youth. Representatives from two Harvard Square businesses suggested the Cambridge police move along loiterers and that the city reduce the amount of seating so that street youth would be less inclined to “linger.”

⁴⁵ City of Cambridge Community Development Department, personal communication, Feb. 11, 2002.

Sunken Design. When architects from Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill designed the Pit, they intended it to be an insulated space for spontaneous music performances.⁴⁶ Critics of the design have argued the sunken amphitheaters are too insulated; that they discourage pedestrian use and invite nefarious behavior.

This section looks at three issues: (1) Does the Pit's sunken design discourage usage? (2) Does the Pit's sunken design invite criminal activity? (3) How feasible is it to "fill in" the Pit?

Pedestrian use. In his seminal book *City*, urban planner William Whyte wrote: "With only a few exceptions, sunken plazas are dead plazas. You see few people in them. . . . Unless the plaza is on the way to a subway, why go down into it?"⁴⁷ As discussed previously, the Pit is hardly a dead plaza. Its success can largely be attributed to its proximity to the Harvard Square T entrance and its prime location on the Square. In addition, the Pit is a relatively shallow sunken plaza. Although two street-level benches make it appear deeper, the amphitheater encasing the Harvard Square T headhouse is only 16 inches below street level. The second, more circular amphitheater ranges from 18 to 30 inches below street level.

Criminal activity. At the request of Mayor Michael Sullivan, Richard Gardiner, an expert on crime prevention through environmental design and safe neighborhood planning, met with representatives from the Cambridge Public Health Department in early 2002. Mr. Gardiner suggested that the Pit's sunken amphitheaters encourage negative behavior (e.g., assaults, drug use/trafficking, prostitution) because they are less visible to the public than street level plazas.

As discussed in the previous section on public safety, a small number of Harvard Square street youth engage in criminal activities. The issue here, however, is not whether street youth commit crimes but whether the Pit's sunken design materially contributes to the ease with which violent crimes are committed.

The belief that a sunken plaza, such as the Pit, might encourage criminal behavior has its basis in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), a movement in landscape architecture and urban design that began in the early 1970s.⁴⁸ Surveillance by the general public plays an integral role in preventing crime in public spaces, according to the CPTED philosophy. Consequently, the majority of CPTED design techniques are targeted at improving visibility, including improving the ability of a pedestrian to see what is ahead, scan for possible escape routes, and identify possible sources of help.⁴⁹

The problem with applying this theory to the Pit is that there is no qualitative or quantitative data linking the Pit's sunken design to actual violent crime. As noted previously, the Pit amphitheaters are relatively shallow and they are in clear public view.

⁴⁶ Flint, Anthony. "Slaying of a street kid draws critics' eye to 'Pit.'" *Boston Globe*. November 23, 2001.

⁴⁷ William Whyte. *City: Rediscovering the Center*. New York: Doubleday. 1988.

⁴⁸ Einwalter, Dawn. "Review and Critique of Defensible Space and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design." (unpublished), 2001. Available at web1.greatbasin.net/~lupine/.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Feasibility of “filling in” the Pit. Raising the Pit area to the sidewalk level is physically feasible. However, preliminary investigations indicate that it would require complete reconstruction of the entire area and might not significantly change how the space is used. The Pit, while lower than Massachusetts Avenue, is clearly visible from all directions.

The Pit area has a number of grading issues that make filling it in complicated. Massachusetts Avenue is significantly higher than Brattle Street, and the entrance to the MBTA is several steps below Brattle Street. In addition, the sidewalk in front of the Cambridge Savings Bank is at the level of the existing entrance to the Pit. Changing the elevation of the Pit would directly affect these other areas. Accessible walkways would have to be provided between each of these points.

If the Pit were to be filled in, several series of steps would have to be constructed to make the various grade levels meet. This project would be expensive, and is not recommended.

Current Design Activities

Since the 1985 renovation, no major infrastructure improvements have been made in Harvard Square.⁵⁰ In 1998, a group of local businesses hired a consulting firm to make recommendations for refurbishing the Square. In its report “Polishing the Trophy,” the consulting firm proposed recommendations for improving crosswalks, sidewalks, and street lighting.

“Polishing the Trophy” spurred city staff to take a broader look at transportation and environmental issues affecting Harvard Square. In its FY02 budget, the city allocated funding for a design and transportation analysis of the Square. With this funding, the Community Development Department launched the Harvard Square Design Project⁵¹ in April 2002.

The work of the Harvard Square Design Project is focusing on practical issues such as basic maintenance of sidewalks and streets; lighting; landscaping; and pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular access. The project team will evaluate all city plazas (including the Pit) for street lighting, landscaping, and seating. The goal is for all plazas to be inviting and well used.

Other Proposals to Alter Pit Design

Some Harvard Square business owners and civic leaders have proposed radically altering the Pit architecture so that it would be less conducive for hanging out and potentially a safer place for all users, including the “Pit kids.”

Less conducive to hanging out. The notion of sweeping away an unwanted population from a public space goes beyond aesthetics. It raises profound issues about what it means to be a community. Specifically, does the city have an obligation to ensure the safety of homeless individuals living in Cambridge?

⁵⁰ City of Cambridge Community Development Department, personal communication, May 13, 2002.

⁵¹ Note: The project is guided by the 16-member Harvard Square Design Committee, appointed by the City Manager and comprised of representatives from city agencies and standing committees; Harvard Square residents, employees, and business owners; and representatives from Harvard, including a student. The committee meets bimonthly.

A second issue to consider is the question of whether the Pit is actually an unwelcoming environment for tourists, residents and other potential users. Unlike some plazas in Cambridge, the Pit is not underutilized. The issue is whether all public spaces must necessarily be inviting to *all* people. It is also worth noting that, to date, no city agency or community organization has studied how the Pit is used and by whom. For instance, musicians performing in the Pit amphitheater on Saturday afternoons often draw large crowds, including parents, kids, and seniors. One weekday morning, a health department staff member spoke to a seemingly harmonious group of Pit users comprised of four middle-aged homeless men and women, a tour group of British senior citizens, two Irish backpackers, and several street youth.

Safety issues. The Pit is more than two concrete amphitheaters; it is “home” for an uncounted number of homeless teenagers, young adults, and older adults. According to social service providers, police officers, and health care providers, the Pit is a relatively safe place for street kids and is frequently visited by social services organizations like Bridge Over Troubled Waters. If street youth were no longer able to gather at the Pit, these providers believe they would gravitate toward less visible areas, such as the Cambridge Common and along the Charles River. These areas are considered dangerous environments for homeless individuals, especially teens and young adults.

As discussed in the “Public Safety” chapter, the Harvard Square Pit is also a relatively safe place for tourists, residents, and other individuals. It is well patrolled by the Cambridge Police and has a low rate of violent crime compared to other areas of the city.

The Pit: The City's Role

As a cosmopolitan city, Cambridge is a magnet for visitors from all walks of life including tourists, business people, academics, students, performers, and homeless individuals. A cosmopolitan city works to address the needs of all of its visitors.

As stated previously, the public safety, design, and social issues that define the “Pit problem” are inseparable. Any fundamental alteration to the Pit’s design could profoundly affect the health and safety of a vulnerable population of homeless teenagers and young adults. Likewise, criminal activity perpetrated by or against Pit users is often linked to larger social and public health issues including substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness.

What follows is an outline to help inform future discussions on the issues addressed in this report.

Issue	Report Findings	Possible Roundtable Participants	Discussion Topics
Defining the Problem	<p>The report concluded that the public safety, design, and social issues that define the “Pit problem” are inseparable. Individuals interviewed for the report, however, characterized the “Pit problem” in a variety of ways, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The Pit is a locus of violent crime; <i>solution:</i> deterrence. (b) The Pit is a visible gathering spot for vulnerable youth, thus an easy target for drug traffickers, gang recruiters, etc. <i>Solution:</i> Alter the landscape of Pit area so that it is less conducive to hanging out or do more to protect the young people who spend time there. (c) The Pit is a relatively safe place for street youth to gather there given its high pedestrian traffic flow, strong police presence, and availability of on-site medical services. <i>Solution:</i> Do not alter the Pit design; focus instead on the broader needs of this population. (d) Architectural design – Teenagers and young adults are the primary users of the Pit; the area should be inviting to all users not a single population of users. <i>Solution:</i> Redesign the Pit area in such a way that it would be welcoming to all pedestrians. (e) Architectural design – During certain times of day and in certain months, teenagers and youth adults may be the primary users of the Pit; the space is also a gathering spot for tourists and residents. <i>Solution:</i> Pursue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Councillors • City Manager • Department of Human Service Programs • Cambridge Police • Cambridge Public Health Department • Cambridge Community Development • Community-based organizations (e.g., Youth on Fire, Sidney Borum, Bridge Over Troubled Waters) • Harvard Sq. Businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are City Councillors and relevant city agencies defining the “Pit problem”?

	enhancements to the Pit area, but do not alter the space in such a way that young people would no longer gather there.		
Defining the City's Role		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Councillors • City Manager • Department of Human Service Programs • Cambridge Public Health Department • Cambridge Community Development Department • Cambridge Police Department 	<p>What should be the city's role in addressing issues related to youth and young adult homelessness?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator? If so, among whom? • Funder? • Something else?
Public Safety Issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime • Enforcement • Jurisdiction 	<p><i>Defining Public Safety</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The report defined <i>public safety</i> as the quality of life that allows Cambridge residents and visitors—including homeless individuals—to feel secure in their everyday lives by being free from danger, injury, and damage. • A <i>threat to public safety</i> in the context of the Pit was defined as an action or event that adversely affects quality of life, such as drug trafficking and substance abuse, violent crime, property crime, and harassment. The perception that Harvard Sq. was unsafe was also considered a threat to public safety. <p><i>Violent Criminal Activity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the opinion of the Cambridge Police, “Pit kids” do not pose a significant threat to public safety. According to officers, Harvard Sq. is a relatively safe place given its urban setting. • Violent crime incidents reported in Harvard Sq. comprised a small fraction of the total violent crime reported citywide in 2001. • The Cambridge Police have linked a small number of “Pit kids” to the majority of these violent crimes (predominantly aggravated assaults and street robberies). • The Cambridge Police and human service providers believe the vast majority of street youth in Harvard Square. <u>street youth</u> are more likely to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Councillors • City Manager • Cambridge Police • MBTA Police • Harvard University Police • Community policing partners • Cambridge Public Health Department • Community-based organizations (e.g., Youth on Fire, Sidney Borum, Bridge Over Troubled Waters) • Harvard Sq. Businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the current users of the Pit pose a threat to the safety of residents, visitors, and/or themselves? • If so, are there appropriate, efficacious, and feasible strategies for minimizing this threat? • What would be the best approach for educating the rank-and-file of the Cambridge Police, Harvard University Police, and MBTA Police about which department has primary jurisdiction over the Pit?

	<p>be victims of crime than perpetrators.</p> <p><i>Other Crime in Harvard Square</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvard Sq. has historically had the highest incidence of business-related crime among the city's ten business districts. • The total number of reported crimes in Harvard Sq. has dropped significantly in the last decade. • Larcenies from person were the highest reported commercial crime in Harvard Sq. in 2002. Police believe this group of perpetrators is comprised largely of drug-dependent individuals, not "Pit kids." • Vandalism is the most commonly reported crime in Cambridge and the third highest reported crime in Harvard Sq. • The Cambridge Police cannot link vandalism directly to Pit users without solid confirmation on suspects and arrests. The department's crime analysis unit, however, estimated that about 30% to 40% of vandalism incidents in Harvard Sq. may be linked to Pit users. • In 2002, the Cambridge Police conducted numerous drug investigations in the Harvard Sq. area but made only a handful of arrests. The Pit's high pedestrian traffic flow and close proximity to the T entrance make it conducive to drug trafficking. <p><i>Enforcement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvard Sq. and Central Sq. are two of the heaviest patrolled areas in Cambridge. • In the past few years, the Cambridge Police have been successful in obtaining warrants for and arresting many of the alleged perpetrators of aggravated assaults in Harvard Square. Police officers have used Child in Need of Services warrants to locate minors who have run away from their families or from DSS or DYS programs. <p><i>Jurisdiction</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At present, the Pit area is patrolled by Cambridge Police, Harvard University Police, and MBTA Police. • The City of Cambridge Police 		
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	<p>Department has the legal authority to enforce laws and preserve order anywhere within the City of Cambridge, including property owned by private universities, the MBTA, and the Metropolitan District Commission.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The traffic peninsula housing the Pit and Out of Town News is located on City of Cambridge property; the Harvard Square T, including the headhouse, is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. • The Cambridge Police Department considers the Pit area its responsibility. • The perception that the Pit is a “no man’s land,” however, is not entirely ill founded. By definition, the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Police overlaps with that of the MBTA and Harvard University police departments. It is also probable the public — as well as some members of the three police departments — are unaware the Cambridge Police has jurisdiction over the Pit. 		
<p>Design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Pit has been criticized on several design fronts, including pedestrian traffic flow, the location of certain seating benches, its appeal to street youth, and its sunken design. • Poor traffic flow – The Pit design contributes to the bottleneck that constricts pedestrian traffic flow between the Cambridge Savings Banks and the T headhouse. No solution was proposed in the report. • Seating benches – Proposed design modifications to seating benches in the Pit area included: Redesigning the seating bench in front of the slanted eastern wall of the T headhouse to eliminate the “gully” that is currently a magnet for litter. • Street youth & loitering – Critics of the Pit design have stated that the Pit attracts unkempt youth whose appearance and (actual or perceived) behavior may discourage tourists and residents from enjoying the plaza. They feel the Pit should be inviting to all users, not a single population of users. <p><i>Report comments:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Councillors • City Manager • Cambridge Community Development Department • Department of Human Service Programs • Community-based organizations (e.g., Youth on Fire, Sidney Borum, Bridge Over Troubled Waters) • Harvard Square Design Committee • Harvard Square businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the Pit actually an unwelcoming environment for tourists, residents, and other potential users? • Does the Pit’s sunken design materially contribute to the ease with which violent crimes are committed in Harvard Square? • Does the Pit’s sunken design compromise the safety of the young people who hang out there? • Does the city want to modify or overhaul the current Pit design? • If so, what would be the purpose of minor or major modifications to the Pit design? • How would these changes negatively or positively affect the safety and well-being of Harvard Square street youth?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To date, no city agency or community organization has studied how the Pit is used and by whom. • Street youth & safety – Critics of the Pit’s sunken design have stated that it may invite criminal behavior and compromise the safety the young people who hang out there. <p><i>Report comments:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No qualitative or quantitative data exists linking the Pit’s sunken design to actual crime. The Pit’s two amphitheaters are relatively shallow and in clear public view. <p>According to social service providers, police officers, and health care providers, the Pit is a relatively safe place for street kids and is frequently visited by social services organizations like Bridge Over Troubled Waters. If street youth were no longer able to gather at the Pit, these providers believe they would gravitate toward less visible areas, such as the Cambridge Common and along the Charles River. These areas are considered dangerous environments for homeless individuals, especially teens and young adults.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the city have an obligation to ensure the safety of homeless individuals living in Cambridge? • If so, what is the best way to protect these individuals from harm? • Unlike some plazas in Cambridge, the Pit is not underutilized. Must all public spaces in Cambridge be inviting to <i>all</i> people?
<p>Social Services</p>	<p>Compared to many U.S. cities, Cambridge and Boston offer a comprehensive array of social services to individuals who are either homeless or precariously housed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health care – Homeless teenagers and young adults in Cambridge are able to access health care at the Sidney Borum, Jr. Health Center in Boston and from the Bridge Over Troubled Water health van that provides on-site medical services to street youth in Harvard Square. • Food – Lunch is served three days a week at Youth on Fire, and dinner is offered seven days a week at various churches and community organizations in Cambridge. • Daytime drop-in programs – Youth on Fire provides a safe place for homeless youth and young adults to spend time off the street during the hours when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Councillors • City Manager • Department of Human Service Programs • Cambridge Public Health Department • Community-based organizations (e.g., Youth on Fire, Sidney Borum, Bridge Over Troubled Waters) • Harvard Sq. uare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is an appropriate level of services (e.g., food, social services, shelter, police) to provide for street youth in Cambridge? • What should be the city’s role in procuring these services, either as a funder or facilitator, or both? • Should the hometowns of the “Pit kids” bear some responsibility for support services in Cambridge? • What information is available on the current funding of

	<p>shelters are closed. Youth on Fire operates three days a week from 12 noon to 6 p.m.</p> <p><i>Gaps in Services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most profound gap in social services addressed in the report was the dearth of shelter services for homeless teenagers and young adults. Providers stated that this population faced numerous barriers in accessing Boston-area shelter services, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shortage of available beds in the shelters. - Shelter services are generally not available to younger teens because of the legal challenges posed by sheltering minors. - For young adults, ages 18 to 24, there is a dearth of shelters specifically geared for their needs. <p><i>Suggestions from individuals interviewed for the report:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve other communities or the state in funding services – Youth and young adult homelessness is a regional problem that is being played out in the Pit. The city’s dilemma is that while the kids may be from elsewhere, they are currently residing on the streets of Cambridge. One provider suggested that the city might seek funding from the state, as well as federal dollars for housing options for the kids. • Provide job skills training and employment opportunities – According to the Homeless Services Planning Committee’s needs assessment, the inability to legally generate a stable source of income to help with food, clothing, and housing exacerbates the risk that street youth will turn to illegal means of support, prostitution, and self-destructive substance abuse. The Harvard Square Business Association suggested developing a business partnership with teens and young adults at Youth on Fire that might include job training, mentoring, and possible employment. Funding would be required to hire a liaison/coordinator at Youth on Fire. 	<p><u>Businesses</u></p>	<p>public and private social service programs that serve the youth and young adult homeless population in Cambridge?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are other medium-sized U.S. cities dealing with this issue?
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6.

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE • EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

Robert W. Healy, City Manager

Richard C. Rossi, Deputy City Manager

March 24, 2003

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached for your information The Harvard Square Pit Report, submitted by the Cambridge Public Health Department in consultation with the Police, Human Services and Community Development Departments.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/mec
Attachment

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Consent Agenda #6

The Harvard Square Pit Report.

In City Council March 24, 2003

**REFERRED TO HUMAN
SERVICES, PUBLIC SAFETY
AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING
AND EMPLOYMENT
COMMITTEES.**