Law Under Curious Minds Youth Advocates:
A Black and Latinx Youth Centered Virtual Public Investigation
of the Impact of COVID-19 in Chicago

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Morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 disproportionately affect Black and Latinx families in Chicago and nationwide (Fortuna et al., 2020), undermining children's human rights to health, education, and a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, 1989). Research suggests these trends are predictable due to systemic inequities persisting before the COVID-19 outbreak (Kim & Bostwick, 2020). This formative evaluation highlights how youth of color are positioned to exercise their human right to be heard, and also can improve conditions for their communities when they become community researchers and activists (see also UNICEF, 2020). We describe lessons learned from the Empowering Counseling Program's (ECP) virtual engagement with 46 youth of color (ages 14-19) in Chicago as co-researchers in a participatory public investigation (Torre, Fine, Stoudt & Fox, 2012) of their community members' concerns during the pandemic. Key implications of the project for human rights advocates and program designers are described below.

Context and method. The Empowering Counseling Program provides free supportive after school and summer social services for marginalized youth of color, responding to structural oppressions by engaging youth and community members in participatory action programming and research. The ECP has served over 750 youth in Chicago in 14 years, achieving 90% youth engagement by co-designing services with youth and building capacity with community partners (schools, social service organizations, and churches) on Chicago's South and West sides.[1] Since 2017, the ECP has facilitated Law Under Curious Minds (LUCM), a human rights-based after school and summer program. LUCM utilizes critical participatory action research and critical civic inquiry (Torre et al., 2012; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017) to build resistance and resilience against structural oppression in marginalized youth. Additionally, ECP MSW interns provide humanistic-based individual and group mental health support services throughout programming.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early Spring 2020, the ECP transitioned all programming from in-person to virtual instruction. In response, ECP re-designed programming to respond to and mitigate the disproportionately toxic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for marginalized Black and Latinx communities. ECP staff facilitated three remote summer programs: two based in West Englewood and one on the Near West Side of Chicago. All three programs adhered to the same general schedule and structure. Using Google

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[1] https://empowercounselprog.wixsite.com/ecp-luc

Classroom, staff held virtual synchronous and asynchronous sessions for six weeks. Youth in West Englewood met virtually for nine hours each week (54 hours total), Monday-Friday. Near West Side youth met for seven hours per week (42 hours total), Monday-Thursday. All staff and youth met during one-hour synchronous sessions for "whole group meetings," while asynchronous sessions consisted of "small group meetings," scheduled drop-in hours, and independent work assigned to advance the public investigation. All youth were paid stipends for their participation.

The ECP's rights-based after school and summer program, Law Under Curious Minds: Youth Advocates (LUCM), engaged youth in creating and administering a COVID-19 community needs assessment of citizens' experiences and needs (N=326). Staff took daily ethnographic field notes, detailing each session's activities, capturing youth reactions, and critically reflecting upon their own engagement in this public investigation.

During the public investigation process (Torre et al., 2012), youth examined four key community sectors such as human services, law enforcement, healthcare, and education to target toxic impacts of COVID-19 throughout marginalized communities in Chicago. In each of the four key community sectors listed above, participants identified disparities across various city wards and defined populations at most risk. Staff trained youth to be interviewers to gather data through a needs-assessment survey that youth co-designed. Youth developed a snowball, convenience sample and interviewed respondents while entering data into Qualtrix software. Questions addressed included the availability of food, water, and accessible, trustworthy medical care; losses experienced due to death from COVID-19; family illnesses due to COVID-19; and stresses related to racial injustices such as the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.[2] The youth interviewed a total of 326 fellow citizens in low socio-economic communities of color about their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of resources, and the impact of health and racial stressors. Then youth co-analyzed data and co-created action-oriented projects. Findings were used to co-create a website, blog, zine, and PowerPoint presentations to map citizen needs aimed at informing Chicago's COVID-19 emergency responsiveness and connecting community members to available resources. Youth-co-created findings and policy recommendations were presented to stakeholders and policymakers at a virtual community forum. More than 97% of the youth completed the program, an accomplishment in itself.[3]

LUCM Youth Advocates was grounded in the following youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) principles, (1) Inquiry-based: topics of investigation are grounded in young

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[2] Chicago, like other U.S. cities, was rocked by police violence and unrest during this time, including primarily peaceful protests but also some destructive protests (for example, https://www.blacklivesmatterchicago.com/press-release-on-the-englewood-police-shooting/).

[3] Engagement of youth in after school and summer programs in disadvantaged communities is problematic. Supportive service and mental health programs are much less available in low-income communities of color compared to privileged communities (Bringewatt & Gershoff, 2010). Only 10-15% of eligible low-income youth participate in after school and summer programming (Deschenes et al., 2010). Even when programs are school-based and available, attrition rates can be as high as 50% (Heller et al., 2017).

people's life experiences and concerns; (2) Participatory: young people share power with adults in making decisions about their project; and (3) Transformative: the purpose is to improve the lives of marginalized youth and their communities (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

Results and Implications. First, Black and Latinx youth are aware of race, class, and gender-based injustices. They are intent on exercising their right to be heard (Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, 1989) and are motivated towards positive social change for their communities. Many stated that they joined LUCM to make positive social change in their communities. A staff member's field notes reported, "Black and Latinx youths' goals in attending the program were to learn how to act against racist and discriminatory practices and help their communities. For example, one youth stated, 'I want to learn how to take action to help and improve the circumstances of marginalized communities.'" Youth responded to their marginalization and oppression by increased motivation for carrying out positive community action, including exercising their human right to be heard.

Second, high youth engagement (97% program completion) in LUCM suggests that this rights-based model of programming promotes youths' participation and potential benefit from after school and summer programs. Youth consistently stated that the LUCM summer virtual program helped them communicate more openly about their feelings and process their traumatic experiences. One youth stated, "This program exceeds my expectations of what I thought it was. It is helping me to communicate more openly and I never really had that before." The participatory nature of the program's structure enabled youth to engage peers and instructors in innovative ways, increasing their engagement.

Third, Youth Advocates demonstrated youth are capable allies in remedying human rights violations and can be mobilized and taught to assist community members and their families to make improved connections with resources and to advocate with policymakers for policy improvements. Youth were highly engaged in discussing the social and economic impact that COVID-19 had on their communities, as one youth shared, "African American communities are severely impacted by various socio-economic issues, and COVID-19 has amplified that. Brown and Black communities lack resources like groceries to buy healthy food, and the lack of access to healthcare." Another youth mentioned, "I come from an immigrant community and some of them are meat workers or front-line workers. Knowing the information that we learned . . . it's important to know what is happening within the U.S. so we would have a better understanding on how certain individuals and groups are impacted by COVID-19." Utilizing a participatory action research framework allowed youth to connect interviewees with crucial resources while also satisfying their motivation to be justice-seeking community activists.

Fourth, research orientations that center youth voice in human rights discussions can lead to valuable insights that are not available otherwise. LUCM youth offered deeply reflective insights on structural racism and how it impacts their identities and daily lives. For example, a youth shared "Racism impacts different parts of your life. Like when you're in school or trying to get a job, racism impacts . . . how much money a person earns. It does not matter how hard my parents work; they do not earn enough money."

Finally, we argue that the youth have the right to grow up in a society that bases its portrayals of them in truths grounded in facts rather than in racist negative assumptions. Experiencing the highest rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences of any subgroup (Finkelhor et al., 2011), including traumas such as gun violence, Black and Latinx youth internalize multiple social worlds that can negatively condition their existence (Farmer, 2010; Sung, 2015). Much public media and scholarship normalizes narratives that low-income youth of color engage in gang violence and other violent crimes, and that their low life expectancy is self-generated. But in fact, the vast majority of Black and Latinx youth do not engage in violence or unlawful activity (Anderson, 2009; Papachristos & Kirk, 2015) and are constructively motivated, as demonstrated in LUCM Youth Advocates. Structural inequalities perpetuated by adults, such as inadequate nourishment, health care, and environmental and legal protections, actually are responsible for marginalized youths' reduced life expectancy by comparison with privileged peers (Frederick, 2018).

It is important to challenge every inaccurate narrative reinforcing racism and oppression. For their parts, LUCM youth challenged negative social narratives about their choices, cultures, and communities through their public investigation and its presentation. By co-creating Youth Advocates, the youth developed their self-determination of their own constructive identities: defining problem areas requiring improvement, diagnosing reasons behind current social conditions, developing best approaches, and taking action with observable positive impacts.

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