UNPRECEDENTED TIMES:

LOUISVILLE YOUTH/YOUNG ADULTS OF COLOR RESPONDING TO THE TWIN PANDEMICS OF COVID-19 AND RACISM

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Recent data underscore how the COVID-19 pandemic and police brutality simultaneously emerged as inescapable crises killing non-White residents at disproportionately higher rates than White residents.[i] The past few years have illuminated the effects of racial traumas, oppression, and inequities, as well as mental health struggles, affecting people of color in the U.S. These struggles are consequences of broad-scale, systemic-level factors. Despite the family and community resources and collective community care models often employed by communities of color, stark racial inequities negatively affect youth and young adults of color in comparison to their White peers.

37%
of U.S. high school students report regular mental health struggles during COVID-19 pandemic[ii]
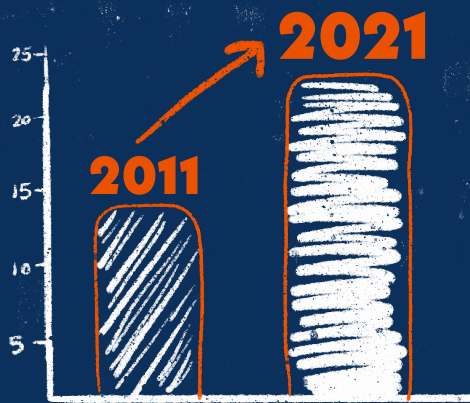
Between 2011-2021, the percentage of Black U.S. high school students seriously considering suicide increased from 13% to 22%, the largest increase amongst any racial and ethnic group[iii]
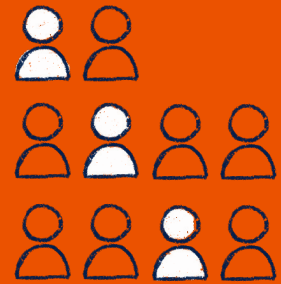
30%
of Black 10th graders in Kentucky felt sad or hopeless almost every day in 2021[iv]

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In Louisville, in March 2020, officials enacted legislation, including restricted hours and closings for schools and non-essential offices to address the COVID-19 pandemic. During that same month, Breonna Taylor was killed by police while sleeping in her apartment in Louisville. In December 2020, Louisville's mayor announced an executive order declaring racism a public health crisis in the city. The American Medical Association, other institutions and organizations, and cities and states across the U.S. have also recently declared racism a threat to public health.

Between 2020 and 2022, young people in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) experienced closed schools and uncertainties in the timing of in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such closures created compounding stresses and uncertainties in conjunction with unprecedented isolation, illnesses, deaths, and quarantining for young people. Young people (aged 12-24) of color living in Louisville experienced the "twin" pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, including racial traumas and stresses related to violence toward people of color and public debates on how to (or not) address racism, often with limited government, school, and other organized forms of support. While the passing of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 led to increased funding to help the country economically recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, federal, state, and local efforts to help with "recovery" have done little to address the impacts of racial traumas and mental health issues on youth of color.

This policy report presents research findings from 2021-22 listening session interviews with young people of color in Louisville to address the following questions: How are youth and young adults of color responding to and managing these unprecedented times? What do they need and want? What are their concerns and suggestions for supporting the mental health needs of young people of color in Louisville?

We highlight their understanding of historical disempowerment and voicelessness in Louisville and their responses to the "twin" pandemics. We discuss implications of our study for future polices, practices, and programs. We call for city offices, programs, and officials to center youth voices in decision-making, funding, and programming and to utilize new approaches to address mental health needs among young people of color.

Throughout 2021-2022, we worked with Louisville Metro Office of Youth Development (OYD) to recruit Black, Latina/o/x, and Asian American young residents of color between the ages of 12 and 24 who resided in Louisville. We invited these youth/young adults of color to voice their ideas, concerns, and responses to the uncovering of recent racial inequities and the COVID-19 pandemic. These residents participated in online (Zoom) and in-person listening sessions where we asked a series of questions on challenges faced by young people and local youth organizations during COVID-19, on strategies or priorities to address those challenges and barriers, on support needs in managing challenges, and on racial inequities and racism during recent years. At times, participants also directed the conversation, asked each other questions, and discussed and addressed community issues, programs, and policies on their own accord. In total, we facilitated listening sessions with 26 youth/young adults of color; although, here, we focus on sessions conducted during April 2021 to January 2022 with 17 participants (13 girls; 4 boys). Almost all were Black or Latina/o/x youth or young adults. Participants chose or were given fake names to protect their anonymity. All listening sessions lasted for 45 to 75 minutes, were recorded (with consent), and transcribed. To analyze these transcripts, we used Dedoose, a qualitative data software, read through all session transcripts, and generated, applied, and analyzed codes on emergent themes and issues identified by the youth/young adults of color.

STUDY FINDINGS:

In these listening sessions, most youth and young adults of color highlighted racism, racial oppression, police violence, and other racial injustices as salient during 2020 and 2021. Billy, a Latino young adult detailed how "racism is like, ingrained within our society... It's just the way our society is set up." Butterfly, a Black young adult said, "[Racism] is everywhere we go." Similarly, George, a Black youth, described how Black people's experiences with everyday racism were recently brought to the forefront: "Now, after COVID, [we] are more well-equipped to handle different racism interactions and racism in general."

Young people described their lived experiences with racism, illustrating the connections between their feelings of powerlessness and the resulting emotions of hurt, fear, frustration, anger, and anxiety.

"RACISM *is like, ingrained within our society...*"

Dee Dee discussed how "Caucasian older people... in this community" call Black people "porch monkeys and stuff," which prompted the visceral response of making her "skin crawl."

Other Black and youth of color expressed different emotional responses to racism and oppression. For instance, Amber, a Black youth, discussed that "it hurts" to think about how, no matter how she acts as "a good person," she will be judged "due to skin color." In response to general questions on their perceptions of racial inequities in Louisville, young people noted fears related to police violence independent of any prompting in that direction. Police "could kill you for no reason, ... and then you're just dead. You're just another number." Another Black youth said, "Every time I see police, I feel scared." During the past two years, these young residents of color managed a range of emotional responses to racism, racial violence, and inequities, often without adequate and accessible individual or community supports.

Repeatedly, the young respondents mentioned how COVID-19-related closures, uncertainties, traumas, and stresses affected feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. Kella, a Black youth detailed how constant uncertainties and stresses during the past two years were exacerbated by pandemic-related closures and limited spaces for mental-health support: "I didn't expect this [pandemic] to still be going on, and then, during the COVID times,... that was a really tough time for my mental health. I was going through like some depression and anxiety." Likewise, Bria, an Asian American youth stated, "You just need that social interaction, and you just feel like everything, like all of that stress weighs down on you, and you have no one to really like relate to you."

Another youth stated, "I just think Louisville hasn't done a good job at recognizing youth mental health and how COVID has impacted, like, ... overall wellbeing." She also described how the uncertainty over when school would be online or in person added to the multiple other stresses over the past couple years: "Go[ing] back and forth, and then the masks and the six feet apart, was also stressful on top of the schoolwork and maintaining sports and extracurriculars." To her, community recognition and outreach to support youth mental health was of utmost importance: "[Having] some people or some organization that basically reaches out to,... ideally, everyone, every teen... to just recognize that we are going through mental health, like, we have feelings and issues." Other young people felt that they could not talk to parents/guardians or school counselors or staff. School staff were busy and overworked and school closures meant that student-teacher/counselor relations were disrupted.

All respondents wanted greater access to and availability of safe, community spaces for young people to obtain mental-health and social support and to share voices and concerns. Isaiah, a Black youth described needing "a place to go... [to] get more human interaction." He went on: "It's been kinda hard these past couple of [years], what, this past year, actually... Maybe something like, where you can like... you know just talk to people." Billy in the same session agreed that Louisville needed more safe, accessible youth spaces: "Like [to] go [to] or to like vent emotions or frustrations and stuff... Like somewhere where they can just go and feel safe." He went on: "Where people can just like hear your voice and your opinion on topics and things... To be able to talk to someone and then see those, see those changes happening

in the community." These young people sought greater opportunities to share their struggles and concerns and to support other young people and the broader community to engage in collective and individual healing and wellness and make productive community changes.

Over and over, these young people said they lacked spaces to share and gain support and to collectively address and manage compounding issues. They often felt dismissed by adults and excluded or removed from spaces where they could engage in collective care as a community of young people. To them, collective care meant collective acts of caring for and sharing with each other to build community, show respect and support for each other, and create positive change. They wanted greater opportunities to engage in collective care, especially during these pandemic times, but they felt that adults excluded them from or did not promote these opportunities for young people of color. Amber summarized these feelings: "We just want to be recognized as actual people... We have adult responsibilities, but we're also viewed as a child, as a kid still."

CONCLUSION:

These research study findings illuminate impacts of the "twin" pandemics on the social and emotional health of young people of color in Louisville. Despite legislation to support economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, young people of color in Louisville faced anxieties and stresses related to unrelenting social problems, traumas, racial violence and inequities, and COVID-19-related uncertainties and isolation. These young residents expressed that, during 2020 and 2021, multiple and compounding inequities, injustices, and uncertainties heavily weighed on their minds. Yet, they lacked community and school spaces to collectively discuss, manage, and address these issues and anxieties.

Young residents of color felt marginalized and unacknowledged by adults in Louisville and excluded from and dismissed in public conversations and decision-making. In many ways, they felt powerless. They lacked spaces to share and act on their growing concerns and anxieties. Meanwhile, they underscored the benefits of accessible community and local spaces for youth mental-health support, collective care, and community-engagement opportunities in Louisville. They pushed for adults and city programs and officials to hear and support the mental health needs of young residents of color through new and revitalized city programs, practices, and funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES

Youth participants identified the need to increase the availability of spaces providing the physical and psychological safety necessary to process and explore their feelings and anxieties productively and collectively. In listening sessions, young residents of color in Louisville voiced problems with historical disinvestments within their communities and compounding mental health issues associated with racism and the COVID-19 pandemic. They described how the lack of infrastructures to support young people during this time took its toll on their mental health and wellbeing. They were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality, and experiences with racism, reflecting the ongoing health implications of systemic racism and oppression. Meanwhile, these young people faced inequities largely alone, often without access to safe places and spaces to engage community and collective care.

..reflecting the ongoing health implications of systemic racism and oppression.

The following policy recommendations reflect the suggestions by youth/young adult participants in response to the findings summarized above.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Prioritize funding to enhance and support youth/young adult programs and spaces that prioritize and intentionally incorporate youth and young adult voice, youth-adult partnerships, and youth and young adult empowerment.

For young people of color, this means increasing programs that make equity and positive identity development the central focus. The incorporation of youth voice in programs can include ladders of youth involvement. Organizations and programs should demonstrate how the incorporation of youth voice is intentionally sought, not only within daily programmatic activities, but also in addressing policies and practices at the organizational levels that impact young residents.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Prioritize the development and implementation of programs addressing mental health and well-being for young people of color that move away from individual-level interventions and problematic assumptions about young people of color.

The struggles of communities of color, born from collective trauma and rooted in legacies of chattel slavery and systemic racism, cannot be addressed strictly through individual-level interventions. As the root of the problem rests outside the individual youth and their decision-making, models of wellness incorporating collective support, mutual aid, and healing hold specific importance and value.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Ensure that training, programs, and models that receive promotion and funding are rooted in social justice and equity and sensitive to addressing racial trauma.

Trauma-informed care serves as a foundation for working with youth and communities experiencing trauma. But it requires organizations and practitioners to reflect on ways policies and practices may not adequately incorporate knowledge of racial trauma experienced by young people and communities of color.

RESOURCES

The process of seeking therapy or counseling can be overwhelming and stressful, and we may not want to seek out support until reaching a crisis point. It can be difficult to quickly find a therapist or counselor, especially when we have identities underrepresented within the mental health provider community. We all want and deserve mental health providers that are equipped to meet our needs, center our identities and experiences, and practice culturally sensitive therapeutic techniques. Here are 3 tips for youth and young adults of color and their families to consider when seeking out mental health providers:

QUESTIONS TO ASK PROVIDERS TO ASSESS THEIR LEVEL OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

• What is your familiarity with my community's beliefs, perspectives, and approaches regarding mental health?
• If you're not familiar, how will you learn more about my social and cultural backgrounds in order to provide culturally responsive therapy?
• Do you have any experience working with someone who shares my identities and backgrounds?
• How would you integrate aspects of my identity, such as: age, faith, racial, ethnic, gender, &/or sexuality identity, in my care?
• Are you or someone on your staff bilingual? Will I have access to an interpreter during our sessions if requested? Will it cost me extra?

SEARCHING FOR PROVIDERS/THERAPISTS

• Just as doctors and other providers have areas of specialties, so do therapists. Look for therapists that advertise skills and training related to your area of need. This includes looking for providers that understand your racial, ethnic, and other social identities and cultural backgrounds, either through extensive training or shared experiences.
• Look for or ask for referrals from racial/ethnic/identity-centered organizations in your community.
• Seek recommendations from family, trusted friends or organizations, and online guides, such as those listed below.
• If you or your parents/guardian have health insurance or employee assistance, ask the insurance or benefits program for a list of providers that work with or fit your social/cultural backgrounds.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

• If you have specific desires for therapy, such as including your family, discuss those up front with your therapist.
• Therapy is about "fit". You have to balance providing the therapist an opportunity to work with you and learn what will best serve your needs with recognizing when it is time to find a different therapist. You are not obligated to continue with a therapist that is not equipped to help you address your mental health needs.
• You can have more than one therapist and discuss different aspects of your well-being with each therapist. If this is the case, consider having both therapists involved in your care share information in order to better meet your needs.

Scan the QR code for an up-to-date list of resources in Kentucky and Nationwide or visit

linktr.ee/center4sjyd
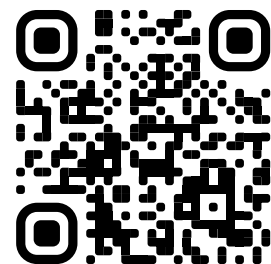
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