CHANGING THE BEAT OF MENTAL HEALTH

AMPLIFYING OUR VOICE

PRESENTED BY COMMUNITIES UNITED

A Participatory Action Research Report
February 2022

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A Participatory Action Research report created by young men of color to transform mental health and the systems that serve them.

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS

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Caleb Reed

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February 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the many people and institutions that supported this effort, including the adult allies at Communities United and Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

We would like to thank Forward Promise for supporting this initiative to shed light on the voice and leadership of young men of color in reshaping systems that serve them.

We would like to dedicate this report in loving memory of youth leader and friend Caleb Reed. Caleb was an incredible person who was one of our peer researchers in this project. We were deeply saddened when we tragically lost him to gun violence in the summer of 2020. Caleb shared a vision for a city that loves and supports our Black and Brown young men, and young people in general. Thank you, Caleb, for the work you have done. Your legacy continues to live in our minds, hearts, and actions.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
CALEB REED

Dear Readers,

Ujima is a group of young men of color who come together to collectively make a change in our communities, specifically on the issue of our mental health and wellness. While this research started in 2019, it was during the global pandemic that we conducted this research. During the pandemic, we experienced the loss of many loved ones including one of our peers. We experienced national racial justice uprisings, social isolation, remote learning, a loss of jobs, a loss of homes, and a lack of outlets. Ujima provided a space for us to share our emotions and experiences. Although the pandemic has been extremely hard, it was important to finish the research to carry on the legacy of those we lost, and the ones who are still here.

We focused on mental health at this time because we understand the connections to violence and other issues that are deeply rooted in generational trauma, alongside the disinvestment of our communities. While we have been going through a lot, and conducting this research was challenging during this time, we want a world where youth are able to go outside and have fun without having to worry about violence in our communities. We want a world where systems are built by us and for us.

This research was conducted by young men, and engaged other young men, to help us gain one key perspective into what we really need to address wellness justice. While that was the focus of the research, we understand that the fabric of our mental health is supported by mothers, grandmothers, and young women in our communities as well.

By learning directly from us about how we experience and understand stress and trauma, systems can gain a better understanding of how best to support us, and how to support our leadership in creating change.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with us.

Sincerely,

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS

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ABOUT THE PARTNERS

COMMUNITIES UNITED

Communities United (CU) is a survivor-led, intergenerational community organization in Chicago. CU unites Black and Brown communities across the city, serving the communities of Albany Park, Austin, Belmont Cragin, Roseland, and West Ridge. CU develops community leadership to build a shared racial justice analysis on issues impacting their communities. CU developed a "Healing Through Justice" framework, acknowledging and addressing present day and historical trauma in communities of color, while working to promote personal and collective healing through the process of transformative change.

ANN & ROBERT H. LURIE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OF CHICAGO

Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago is an Illinois not-for-profit corporation and a charitable organization. As one of the top pediatric hospitals in the nation, Lurie Children's delivers the highest quality, family-centered care and high-impact research. Over half of the inpatient care Lurie Children's provides is for children and adolescents insured by Medicaid. We are the largest pediatric specialty provider in the region, by volume, serving more than 220,000 patients annually with 364 licensed inpatient beds.

Lurie Children's Pritzker Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health provides high-quality inpatient, partial hospitalization and outpatient behavioral health services to children and adolescents. We are the largest provider for ADHD and Trauma-Related Disorders in the 7-County Chicagoland Area, and among the top five providers (by volume) of all pediatric outpatient mental health services.

Strengthening Chicago's Youth (SCY) is Chicago's largest violence prevention collaborative. SCY was launched by Lurie Children's in 2012 and brings together over 4500 individuals representing a broad range of sectors, neighborhoods, and experiences with violence and criminal justice. SCY pursues violence prevention through strategies that emphasize building connections among our partners, including advocating for policy and systems change, sharing what works, serving as a catalyst for innovation, and connecting our partners to data.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ujima is a group of Black and Brown young men, ages 14 to 21, that came together to research the issue of mental health among young men across Chicago. The first task was to name the group, and they landed on "Ujima," a Swahili word meaning collective work and responsibility. From February of 2019 to February of 2022, Ujima conducted youth-led Participatory Action Research (PAR) on the issue of mental health, a topic of pressing concern to youth and families across Chicago and the nation.
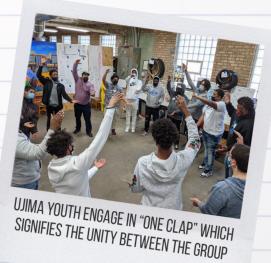
Participatory Action Research is an approach to research in which people who have lived experience on a particular issue drive the research on that issue (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Based on their lived experience, the young men of color researchers had the primary hypothesis that Illinois mental and behavioral health services are not meeting the mental health needs of young men of color. They developed the following learning question to guide their inquiry.

> ## LEARNING QUESTION:
>
> **As young men of color, what are the challenges we face and what are the resources we need to support our mental health and well-being?**

In the spring of 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic took effect and the young people needed to re-strategize as they continued their work. As the pandemic continued, Ujima tragically lost a vital member of the research team, Caleb Reed, to gun violence in August of 2020. With the loss of a team member coupled with the pandemic, Ujima youth paused their research as they focused on the needs of their families, peers, communities, and their own individual healing.

The young men of color who took on this Participatory Action Research have been leading efforts to transform systems, driven by their hope and vision to improve conditions and resources in their communities. Ujima youth come from communities that have faced disinvestment and other challenges long before the pandemic began.

UJIMA YOUTH ENGAGE IN "ONE CLAP" WHICH SIGNIFIES THE UNITY BETWEEN THE GROUP

Ujima youth researchers received training from staff at Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago on research ethics using CIRTification, a training program geared towards community research partners. The Lurie Children's Hospital Institutional Review Board examined and approved the research protocol. Ujima researchers conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups between August 2021 and January 2022.

A total of 41 surveys, 11 interviews, and two youth-led focus groups were conducted, along with a literature review. The purpose of the research was to go deep into the narratives and experiences of a cohort of young men of color.

The research elevates the lived experiences and solutions of young men of color in this moment, and provides a call to action for systems and communities to improve mental health resources, reduce access barriers, and address the mental health needs of young men of color in Chicago. Following are highlights of the findings and recommendations that emerged from this participatory action research project.

KEY FINDINGS:

66% OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR SURVEYED REPORTED THAT THEY ARE FACING CHALLENGES WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR SEE A DEEP CONNECTION BETWEEN SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES AND MENTAL HEALTH, OFTEN INTERNALIZING THE BLAME

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR FEEL THAT SYSTEMS ARE NOT BUILT TO SUPPORT THEM, AND THEY CANNOT SHARE THEIR FULL EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS WITHOUT NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR HAVE FOUND WAYS TO COPE DURING THE PANDEMIC THROUGH THEIR OWN SELF-INITIATED OUTLETS, INCLUDING:

- **SOCIAL NETWORKING THROUGH VIDEO GAMES**
- **MUSIC, PARTICULARLY HIP HOP**

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR WANT TO BE VIEWED FOR THEIR FULL IDENTITIES AND POTENTIAL FOR LEADERSHIP

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

CREATE A PILOT PROJECT FOR YOUNG MEN OF COLOR TO SHAPE MENTAL HEALTH POLICY AND PRACTICE TRANSFORMATION, INVOLVING THEM AS LEADERS AND AGENTS OF CHANGE.

CREATE TARGETED GOALS FOR BRINGING MORE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS INTO THE SYSTEM WHO ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR, COME FROM DIRECTLY IMPACTED COMMUNITIES, AND EMBRACE THE VISION YOUNG MEN OF COLOR HAVE FOR HEALING WITHIN THEMSELVES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES.

CREATE A FREE AND ACCESSIBLE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM THAT CONNECTS YOUNG MEN OF COLOR TO RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS.

CREATE CHANGE TO CHILD AND FAMILY FACING CARE SYSTEMS, INCLUDING CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS, THROUGH THE LEADERSHIP OF YOUTH OF COLOR AND FAMILIES. THE YOUTH IDENTIFIED THAT THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM IS OFTEN INACCESSIBLE, AND WHEN AVAILABLE CAN COMPOUND DISTRESS AND BE HARMFUL THROUGH BUREAUCRACY AND A FOCUS ON INSTITUTIONALIZATION.

CREATE A FREE AND ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY-BASED MODEL THAT INFUSES ART, HIP HOP AND OTHER FORMS OF MUSIC, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND ONLINE GAMING. THERE SHOULD ALSO BE CLASSES ON DE-STRESSING AND COPING MECHANISMS, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, RESTORATIVE PRACTICE, AND DE-ESCALATION YEAR ROUND.

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR RECOMMEND TURNING ABANDONED BUILDINGS INTO THESE CENTERS WITHIN COMMUNITIES ACROSS CHICAGO. THESE CENTERS SHOULD BE RUN BY PEOPLE FROM THE COMMUNITY. TRANSPORTATION (LIKE BUS CARDS) AND FOOD SHOULD ALSO BE PROVIDED IN THESE CENTERS.

This research provides a critical opportunity for institutions to not only rethink policies and practices, but to act upon the recommendations made by Ujima youth to make sure that the leadership of young people of color is at the center of driving change in our city.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

D'angelo Moore joined the Ujima research project when he was a senior in high school. Now age 20, he is working with Communities United as an intern who enjoys creating media content. Having moved a lot when he was younger, he has always been around the Austin community and got involved because he didn't want to see his community continue to hurt when he knew he could do something to change it. Inspired by his older cousins who are studying psychology, D'angelo plans to go back to school to be a psychologist and work in schools as a social worker.

Jermal Ray, or "J", has been a part of the Ujima research project since he was a junior at Curie High School. Now a high school senior, and 17 years old, he plans to go to school to be an architect and business man so he can open community centers in his neighborhood. When he is not inspiring others he enjoys wrestling, dancing, and reading.

Angelo McFarland, now 21 years old, became involved in this project when he was a senior in high school. His passion to stand up for his community and make change comes from his experience growing up in the Austin community. He wants change to be more than giving out school supplies, but providing affordable housing, addressing violence, and education. Aside from working in his community, he is focused on the music he writes and raps.

Derrick Ford noticed that growing up in Roseland is very different from now living in West Ridge. He sees that the youth on the southside do not have as many resources as they do on the northside. He noticed the differences and was able to talk about them in Ujima because he says it is like a brotherhood. He wants to continue the project to make sure his community and their stories are being heard. When he is not in meetings, he enjoys making music and hopes to go to college to major in computer science.

Alexander Villegas remembers when he was in elementary school attending meetings with his mother who is a Communities United leader representing Albany Park. Now age 20, he started with the Ujima project when he was a senior in high school because of his experience as a student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). He was treated differently and witnessed other people with disabilities getting pushed aside, and wanted to change the narrative of disability and mental health. With a love for geology and especially map reading, he hopes to work for the City of Chicago or a government transportation agency.

Deshawn Smith got involved to change the mental health system for future generations. A senior in high school when he started, the now 21 year old has felt the pressure to succeed because he is the youngest in his family and knows the mental toll that can take. He sees that there are more opportunities and resources for youth now than when he was in high school, and wants to continue fighting to make those resources possible for future generations. When he is not working, he enjoys playing basketball, and buying shoes that are collectible.

Daquan Ford began working with Communities United through his grandmother who is also a Communities United leader. The youngest of the Ujima youth, he began this project while he was in 8th grade. Now a freshman in high school, he feels the open and honest conversations within the group of young men was one of the reasons he felt he needed to be a part of the project. He enjoys reading comic books and gaming, and has a goal of becoming a scientist.

Terrence Smith understands the need for mental health since experiencing a lack of resources in the Austin community. At only 16, he joined Ujima because he believes youth are oftentimes overlooked due to their age, so he wanted to give the youth a voice. Besides taking care of his community, he makes music and hopes to one day become a well known musician.

Derrick Magee lives on the west side of Chicago in the Austin community. Derrick faced many challenges that centered around lack of investment in his neighborhood. He joined Ujima to help people like him access the help they need. A senior in high school, the 19 year old enjoys helping others and hopes to one day own his own business.

Derion Smith became involved in the Ujima project because he was interested in having the opportunity to become certified in research, which many youth do not have the opportunity to do and is something that is useful later in their life. He especially enjoyed going through the project process with other young men of color because he feels they are all able to bond over the similar challenges they have faced, but often not talked about. Now a high school graduate, the 21 year old enjoys going on long drives and working out, and is working on becoming an entrepreneur.

Marques Watts believes this work has helped him understand who he is, and through finding a purpose he has taken his life in a different direction. The now senior in high school got involved after hearing that the Ujima project was about young men of color helping to support their community. He feels that youth of color are forced to grow up and deal with situations that do not involve any help, leading to even more trauma and a cycle of gang-related death among young people. He wants to see young people thrive which is why after high school, he plans on attending college to study psychology to become a therapist and eventually open up a practice in his community.

Nathaniel Martinez is from the Albany Park community. He joined the Ujima research project because he wanted to be in a group where he felt he was able to be himself. A sophomore when the project started, the now 17 year old understands the importance of research around mental health because young men of color often do not talk about the troubles they may experience. He feels Ujima has provided the opportunity and space where young men of color are able to speak out.

Jacob Clayton believes mental health is important because everybody goes through experiences that can mess with their mental health. Having had experience with mental health challenges, he understands that it can be difficult for young men of color to even talk about what they are going through. However, he felt that being in a space where other youth are comfortable to share their own journeys has helped him. Now a freshman in college, music plays a large role in his life and he hopes to be a camera operator.

Josue Morales is a youth leader in Albany Park. The oldest child of a single mother, he got involved because he wanted to do something important for his community. He felt getting involved in this work allowed him to do something and set an example for his younger brothers. Along with music and rollerblading, being involved in this work was important because it was an escape and a distraction from reality. The now 20 year old is currently in the Marines and wants to become a musician to not only become a music teacher, but be a part of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Caleb Reed was a 17 year old resident of the Austin community and got involved in Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE). After his close cousin was killed due to gun violence, he shut down. However, he found purpose in working with VOYCE because he wanted to see change within the school system and within his neighborhood. Aside from playing basketball, he had a passion for American Sign Language (ASL) and wanted to be a licensed ASL interpreter since both of his parents are a part of the deaf community.
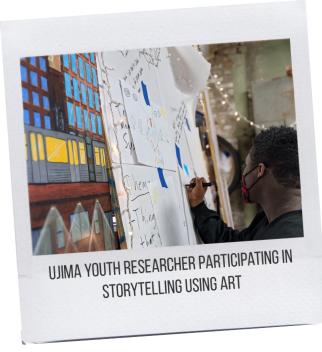
THE ROLE OF ADULT ALLIES

The Ujima researchers were also supported by adult male mentors who identify with the lived experiences of the young people and come from the same communities. In the mental health field that has long struggled to diversify its workforce to truly represent the communities it serves, this comprehensive research led by young men of color and supported by adult male mentors from those same communities provided the trust needed for honest and powerful conversations about the realities men of color are facing today.

ADULT ALLIES ENGAGE YOUNG MEN OF COLOR DURING A MEETING

ADULT MENTORS FROM COMMUNITIES UNITED

Luis F. Sinchi, Ujima Mentor
Anton Charles, Ujima Mentor
Korey Bilbro, Ujima Mentor
Jarvis Payton, Ujima Mentor
Juan Cruz, Research Support
Raul Botello, Research Advisor
Eduardo Montiel, Lead Graphic Designer

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHER PARTICIPATING IN STORYTELLING USING ART

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TEAM FROM COMMUNITIES UNITED

Maricela Mariscal, Research Support
Maria Paula Degillo, Research Support
Jennifer Arwade, Research Advisor
Jaqueline Romo, Co-Graphic Designer

LURIE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL TEAM

Dr. John Walkup, Principal Investigator
Dr. Claudio Rivera, Co-principal Investigator
Kevin Rak, Data Specialist
Erik Masias, Research Intern
Dion McGill, Research Support
Leslie Helmcamp, Research Advisor

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IMPLEMENTED BY UJIMA YOUTH?

From February 2019 to February 2022, Ujima conducted youth-led Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is an approach to research in which people who have lived experience with a particular issue drive the research on that issue (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Young men of color developed the following learning question:

A YOUTH SHARES HIS JOURNEY USING THE "RIVER OF LIFE" DURING A YOUTH DEVELOPMENT RETREAT

LEARNING QUESTION:

As young men of color, what are the challenges we face and what are the resources we need to support our mental health and well-being?

Two important events had a significant impact on the study development and implementation: 1) The global COVID-19 pandemic began in the spring of 2020, and 2) Ujima tragically lost a vital member of the research team, Caleb Reed, to gun violence in August of 2020. Due to the loss of a team member coupled by the pandemic, Ujima paused the research as they focused on the needs of their families, peers, communities, and their own individual healing. However, the young people reconvened and completed their research process.

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS SHARING EVENTS IN THEIR LIVES THAT HELPED SHAPE WHO THEY ARE THROUGH THE "RIVER OF LIFE" ACTIVITY

HERE IS A STEP BY STEP LOOK AT THE RESEARCH PROCESS

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEARNING QUESTION

The learning question was developed through a series of meetings in which Ujima youth researchers discussed their own experiences and areas they thought were important to explore to advance change rooted in the lived experience of directly impacted youth. The learning question informed the creation of the data collection instruments.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CERTIFICATION

As Ujima reunited to revamp the research in January 2021, staff from Lurie Children's Hospital trained Ujima youth on research ethics using CIRTification, a training program geared towards community research partners, with the youngest member at 16 years old and the oldest at 20 years old during the time of the certification. The Lurie Children's Hospital Institutional Review Board examined and approved the research protocol.

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Ujima youth researchers, in a guided consultation process with Ujima mentors, chose the data collection methods and developed and implemented all of the data collection instruments and protocols.

SURVEYS

Surveys were designed by the Ujima youth researchers to explore several areas of mental health, including the mental health concerns that young men of color face, how they cope with these concerns, their willingness to seek professional support, and the barriers they face in accessing such support. Respondents chose how they wanted to answer questions: they could answer on their own online, or have the questions read to them and their answers recorded by a youth researcher. Youth researchers surveyed 41 young men of color between August and October 2021.

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS CODE THE SURVEY DATA

ANALYZING THE SURVEY DATA

Ujima youth researchers utilized REDCap as a database to compile and analyze the survey data. Youth reviewed the surveys in an effort to obtain an overview of the perspectives and experiences of the young men of color surveyed. The youth researchers collectively analyzed the responses. A variety of approaches were utilized to tease out the complexity and nuance of the results. Ujima youth researchers also looked at the data through a race and gender lens to understand particular elements of the data in greater depth.

INTERVIEWS

Ujima youth researchers designed interview instruments based on the survey results to gather data that would allow them to go deeper in their understanding of the learning question. The youth researchers conducted 20-40 minute interviews with 11 youth to gain deeper understanding of their perspectives centered on the learning question and the narrative of their lived experience.

ANALYZING THE INTERVIEWS

Ujima mentors designed an activity to help analyze the interviews. In this activity, transcribed interviews were printed and given to the Ujima youth researchers. In pairs, Ujima youth researchers were asked to highlight any similarities and outliers within the interviews. After this, they engaged in a discussion on these different themes that came out, highlighting any key findings that helped to support the identified themes. Then the data was cross-analyzed with the survey analysis. The information that came out of this activity was used to help inform the focus groups.

UJIMA YOUTH TRIANGULATING DATA

FOCUS GROUPS

The Ujima youth researchers created focus group questions to dive deeper into the information that was shared during the surveys and interviews, using the same participants involved in both data collection sets. These questions included why the young men of color used the tools they did to cope with mental health challenges, why the research participants felt it was important that the research was centered around young men of color, and solutions to the different challenges they laid out in the surveys and interviews. Four 90 minute focus groups were conducted virtually by two Ujima youth researchers with an average turnout of 5 young men of color. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed.

TRIANGULATING THE DATA

Ujima youth researchers used two types of triangulation, the first being methodological triangulation that focuses on the gathering of the different data sets (Guion, 2002). Additionally, they used investigator triangulation where multiple youth researchers gathered to analyze the data as well as review the coded data separately to see if there was a common consensus on the themes and findings. Using this same method, the Ujima youth researchers used the data findings and analysis to create recommendations.

INCORPORATING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to direct surveys, interviews, and focus groups, Ujima employed additional measures to provide context for the data. Youth reviewed relevant literature, and academic articles addressing the elements of the research questions, as a part of the triangulation process. This provided an external resource against which the youth could compare and contrast elements of their research findings.

PARTICIPANTS AND ENGAGEMENT - CREATING A SAFE AND BRAVE SPACE IN UJIMA

Participatory Action Research presents unique opportunities and challenges. The pandemic exacerbated both logistical issues that had to be navigated and also increased the need to ensure the care and wellness of youth researchers throughout the process. Before and throughout the research process, the Ujima team went through extensive leadership development that included:

- **Team-building exercises**

- **Reflection training**

- **Communication skills training**

- **Trainings on how to create and maintain a space where there is trust among the group to hold honest and challenging conversations**

To prepare them for their role in this project, the adult mentors supporting the Ujima researchers also went through similar processes of training and capacity building prior to begining their work. Some of the additional themes that adult mentors covered and engaged around included how to facilitate spaces with an understanding of intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and the need to dismantle toxic masculinity, as well as teaching and demonstrating vulnerability, and providing ways to help heal.

Because the pandemic created the need to have virtual, hybrid, and more limited in-person engagement, all of the activities mentioned had to be delivered using engaging and creative platforms.

UJIMA YOUTH ENGAGING IN CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH MENTAL HEALTH

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

THEME 1: MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

Finding 1.1: 66% of young men of color surveyed reported that they are facing challenges with their mental health.

Finding 1.2: 52% of youth who identified that they faced mental health challenges had two or more concerns.

Finding 1.3: Young men of color see a deep connection between systemic inequities and mental health, and often internalize the blame.

Finding 1.4: There is a significant contrast between the dominant narrative created by media and society about young men of color, and how young men of color view themselves.

THEME 2: COPING AND DE-STRESSING AMONG YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

Finding 2.1: Trauma is often normalized for young men of color.

Finding 2.2: Young men of color have found ways to cope during the pandemic through their own self-initiated outlets. Two of the key outlets have been 1) social networking through video games, and 2) music - particularly hip hop. In addition to these outlets, young men of color also use physical activity, art, and other social interactions as a way to cope and de-stress.

THEME 3: ACCESSING SUPPORT, AND CHALLENGES WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Finding 3.1: Young men of color feel that systems are not built to truly support their mental health and wellness, and that young people cannot share their full experiences and emotions without negative repercussions. For example, young people fear involvement with the child protective system and also fear being institutionalized by the mental health system.

Finding 3.2: Young men of color identify inequities in the mental health system, and the quality of care that is available to them.

Finding 3.3: 55% of young men of color surveyed stated that they would, or probably would, take advantage of professional counseling if offered the chance.

THEME 4: YOUNG MEN OF COLOR WANT TO BE SEEN FOR THE ASSETS THEY BRING TO THEIR COMMUNITIES AND IN OUR CITY

Finding 4.1: There is a significant contrast between the dominant narrative created by media and society about young men of color, and how young men of color view themselves.

Finding 4.2: Young men of color want to be viewed for their full identities and potential for leadership. Young men of color feel they are viewed by society through a binary lens of race and gender, and the stereotypes that come with that, rather than being viewed as whole people with contributions to give to the world around them.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS

THEME 1: MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

FINDING 1.1: 66% OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR SURVEYED REPORTED THAT THEY ARE FACING CHALLENGES WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH.

FINDING 1.2: 52% OF YOUTH WHO IDENTIFIED THAT THEY FACED MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES HAD TWO OR MORE CONCERNS.

The top three responses that young men gave to researchers when asked if they experience any of the following most days of the week (4 days or more per week) were "I feel anxious, constantly worried, or extremely nervous," "There are troubling things that have happened in my life that continue to affect me," and "It's hard to control my anger." It is also notable that 31.9% stated that they experience none of the challenges listed. It is unclear without further exploration if the young men that stated they do not experience any of the challenges are not in need of additional support, or if they were not open to sharing through the survey.

DO YOU EXPERIENCE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING MOST DAYS OF THE WEEK (4 DAYS OR MORE PER WEEK)?
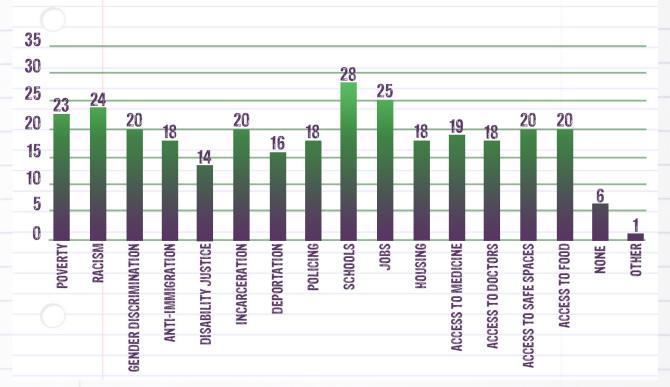
(PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
I FEEL ANXIOUS, CONSTANTLY WORRIED, OR EXTREMELY NERVOUS	11	27%
IT'S HARD TO CONTROL MY ANGER	9	22%
THERE ARE TROUBLING THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED IN MY LIFE THAT CONTINUE TO AFFECT ME	7	17%
I FEEL LONELY, I DO NOT FEEL I HAVE ENOUGH EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN MY LIFE	7	17%
I FEEL DEPRESSED OR VERY SAD	5	12%
I FEEL I NEED SUPPORT AS A YOUTH	5	12%
I FEEL I NEED SUPPORT IN MY RELATIONSHIPS	5	12%
I FEEL UNDER PRESSURE TO DO THINGS THAT I DON'T WANT TO DO	4	10%
I FEEL I NEED SUPPORT AS A PARENT	0	0%
OTHER	1	2%
NONE OF THE ABOVE	14	34%

Young men who completed the survey identified a broad range of systemic factors that are connected to mental health. While **schools, jobs, racism and poverty** ranked the highest, the responses were spread broadly across a wide range of issues impacting young people and their communities.

HOW MUCH ARE THE FOLLOWING THINGS CONNECTED TO MENTAL HEALTH?

Category	Value
POVERTY	23
RACISM	24
GENDER DISCRIMINATION	20
ANTI-IMMIGRATION	18
DISABILITY JUSTICE	14
INCARCERATION	20
DEPORTATION	16
POLICING	18
SCHOOLS	28
JOBS	25
HOUSING	18
ACCESS TO MEDICINE	19
ACCESS TO DOCTORS	18
ACCESS TO SAFE SPACES	20
ACCESS TO FOOD	20
NONE	6
OTHER	1

Through surveys, interviews and focus groups, here is what young men had to say about the connection between systemic issues and mental health:

"Stress is the biggest mental health (issue) affecting people in Chicago. Youth have stress because they feel the need to work to help the family with home expenses, rent, food, clothing. Young people taking bigger responsibilities at home."

"People think mental health means they have a problem, people mostly think that mental health runs in the family and what goes on in the neighborhood"

"Poverty: I think it is how they [young people] view themselves and how they compare themselves to their friends and I feel like poverty is in the middle of mental health."

"It has to do with more. It's like if you want to cook healthy from home, but all you have around you is the corner store. You feel helpless, and that contributes to mental health."

"Policing - connected because of police brutality and they picking us out and killing us off."

Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, young men of color also viewed mental health in a negative light, often internalizing the blame, and feeling like mental health was an inability of individuals to control their emotions.

"Mental health means you don't know how to control your emotions, you're not taking care of your health, and maybe going a little bit insane."

" Mental health means being out of energy, stressing out, killing yourself mentally, being out of energy, and over thinking a lot. "

"Not having a support system, and also someone being unable to seek help for themselves. Also feeling like they don't have people there for them. It means a lot to me because I struggle with depression and when I was at the lowest point, I didn't have anyone or any way to help myself so it was hard to get out of that state. However, I learned to cope with it and I'm still in this state but one thing we can do is spread awareness."

" Mental health means not being a social person, not being able to interact with others, being by yourself a lot and avoiding people. I think of depression, because your mom, and aunt had it. "

FINDING 1.4: THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT CONTRAST BETWEEN THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE CREATED BY MEDIA AND SOCIETY ABOUT YOUNG MEN OF COLOR, AND HOW YOUNG MEN OF COLOR VIEW THEMSELVES.

During the focus groups and interviews, young men of color repeatedly spoke about the dominant narratives they see and hear about themselves in the media and broader society. It is notable that rather than internalizing this issue, they consistently showed resistance to this narrative.

"I want to bring up what Trump said a few years ago when he said we are all murderers and rapists. That's how some of society may view us, but we are not like that at all."

"If the news said a bunch of kids did drugs, but did not have suspects, they always blame Black people or a person of color because a white person is never guilty."

"As a kid from the southside, people view me as stupid, dangerous, ghetto, and uneducated just because of the stigmas and stereotypes that come from living in an impoverished community in Chicago. I am none of those things."

"When you watch the news you see them talking about it being our fault. You know, like Black people aren't getting vaccinated...and you know they are not giving us enough resources to fix it so they are just blaming us."

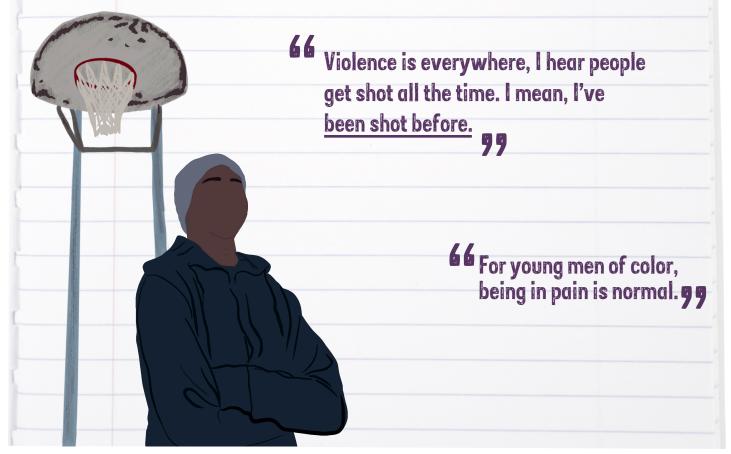# THEME 2: COPING AND DE-STRESSING AMONG YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

FINDING 2.1: TRAUMA IS OFTEN NORMALIZED FOR YOUNG MEN OF COLOR.

"In a previous mixed methods YPAR study with Chicago youth, 251 Chicago youth ages 13 to 19 were surveyed, with a majority (71%) reporting they are most comfortable talking about mental health with their friends"

(Rivera, C. & Rosado, S. 2017).
* Youth Participatory Action Research

While the researchers were checking in and talking about their communities, one youth mentioned one of his friends who might know the other youth. While asking for the details of the mutual friend, the first youth mentioned that he was no longer around. The second youth replied with, "Oh, R.I.P, my condolences," and the first youth said, "it's all good," and moved on to talk about other potential mutual friends.

During one of the Ujima meetings, there was a gunshot that could be heard. The researchers then paused and laughed at the fact that they all knew it was a gunshot. Knowing the sound of a gun is something that every one of the youth researchers recognized.

" Violence is everywhere, I hear people get shot all the time. I mean, I've been shot before. "

" For young men of color, being in pain is normal. "

FINDING 2.2: YOUNG MEN OF COLOR HAVE FOUND WAYS TO COPE DURING THE PANDEMIC THROUGH THEIR OWN SELF-INITIATED OUTLETS.
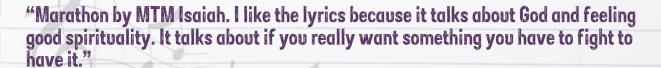
The top two outlets that young men of color identified that they use to cope and destress are video games and talking with friends. These are followed by going for a drive/taking a walk/going a bus or train; making music or art; and exercise.

WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DO YOU DO TO DEAL WITH STRESS AND YOUR EMOTIONS?

(PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)

	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
PLAY VIDEO GAMES	30	75%
TALK WITH FRIENDS	23	58%
GO ON A DRIVE/TAKE A WALK/TAKE A TRIP ON THE BUS OR TRAIN	22	55%
MAKE MUSIC OR ART	18	45%
EXERCISE	18	45%
TALK WITH FAMILY	13	33%
I GO TO A COUNSELOR OR SOCIAL WORKER	5	13%
OTHER	4	10%
I TAKE MEDICATION	2	5%
I TALK ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN GROUP THERAPY	1	3%
NONE OF THE ABOVE	1	3%

Through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups, music was a key theme that young men of color elaborated on further. They stated that they often use music to help understand how they are feeling. They feel connected to songs through their beats and lyrics because it reflects their emotions and what they are going through, or have gone through. The words in the music can relate back to experiences young men of color had and/or are going through such as post traumatic stress disorder, loss, depression, and relationship problems. Music also helps them grow mentally and spiritually.

Here are a few examples of what young men had to say when asked what songs they relate to or that connect to mental health:

"Summer friends by Chance The Rapper—in that song he tells the story about gun violence in the city and how there are racial disparities."

"Marathon by MTM Isaiah. I like the lyrics because it talks about God and feeling good spirituality. It talks about if you really want something you have to fight to have it."

"Music does help you concentrate on what's going on in life and you can take that and use it as a therapy session."

THEME 3: ACCESSING SUPPORT, AND CHALLENGES WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

FINDING 3.1: YOUNG MEN OF COLOR FEEL THAT SYSTEMS ARE NOT BUILT TO SUPPORT THEM, AND THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CANNOT SHARE THEIR FULL EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS WITHOUT NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, young men consistently spoke of the need to have outlets where they can share the full range of things they have experienced without negative repercussions from systems. Here is what young men had to say:

"When a kid goes to a counselor or a teacher, they backstab them by telling DCFS, and they get sent to a mental hospital, and that makes their mental issues way worse because it shows that they can't trust people with their words, who they thought were their friends."

"In high school when you are telling a counselor or teacher something, they go around and tell your parents."

"They [young men of color] don't really get a chance to speak up and actually talk to someone. People think that the kids in the west side schools or south side schools will grow up and be nothing. That's why they don't really get them support or anything. A lot of kids are really going places and some people and empathic adults in their communities make them feel heard, cared for, and wanted."

"I think every community needs resources to be safe like someone to talk to, people struggle and sometimes people need an outlet."

FINDING 3.2: YOUNG MEN OF COLOR IDENTIFY INEQUITIES IN THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM AND THE QUALITY OF CARE THAT IS AVAILABLE TO THEM.

"When it comes to men of color, we kind of brush off mental health. When we actually admit we have issues like PTSD people will deny it. They tell us, how is that even possible, and that there is nothing wrong, so they don't help us. But if a white person said they had it, they would treat it right away."

"If you live in (my community), in order to find a mental health place you'd have to go to the Cook County medical center and it's not even good. You can be waiting there for 5 hours and not be helped. It's the least cost, so while you are there, think about the people who are at the hospital down the street at Rush. They have better equipment, better staff, and everything. The people who go there have insurance and money. The people who go to Cook County are low income."

"Mental and behavioral health services are the top concern for many individuals in low/very low opportunity neighborhoods, driven largely by quality concerns, inadequate reimbursement, stigma and workforce shortages."

(chna-2019)

FINDING 3.3: 55% OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR SURVEYED STATED THAT THEY WOULD, OR PROBABLY WOULD, TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING IF OFFERED THE CHANCE.

IF YOU WERE OFFERED THE CHANCE TO HAVE PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING, WOULD YOU TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY?

		COUNT	PERCENTAGE
YES OR PROBABY YES	✓	22	55%
NO OR PROBABY NO	✓	18	45%

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS PARTICIPATING IN A "POP-ED" ACTIVITY TO MAKE EDITS ON THE REPORT

THEME 4: YOUNG MEN OF COLOR WANT TO BE SEEN FOR THE ASSETS THEY BRING IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND IN OUR CITY

Finding 4.1: Young men of color want to be viewed for their full identities and potential for leadership.

Through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the theme of identity was consistent. Young men of color feel they are viewed by society through a binary lens of race and gender, and the stereotypes that come with that, rather than being viewed as whole people with contributions to give to the world around them.

" I would say maybe like, look at the whole rather than like a part and you know just respect all of it you know cause I feel like I have more to offer than just my skin color like me being a brother, and you know like a grandson and you know chose everything else. "

"Society views my identity as the older brother, so they think highly of me. They want me to be more than I am right now. High expectations. They ask more of me and expect me to be better."

"I believe society views us as their workers. They look at us as if we work for them to push for what they want."

" Society views us as people they can use. They try to take our money, our identity, take away our homes, and jobs, but they still blame us for (the community's problems).

" They'll [society] tell you to sell drugs or go rob. Those are the outlets they are given instead of using their creativity and being able to go out and create and being really producers instead of consumers. "

UJIMA YOUTH LEADING A JUNETEENTH MARCH

ANALYSIS

Young men of color face daunting challenges to their mental health due to conditions in their communities and systemic issues such as racism and poverty. This already grave situation has been made worse during the pandemic, with growing inequities and a disproportionate impact on communities of color.

This research report focuses on the first-hand testimonies and lived experiences of young men in the city of Chicago, and their reflections on their mental health and wellness. While interested in getting support, they often have to navigate on their own a mental health system that lacks resources, has access barriers, and is culturally incongruent with the lived experience of young men of color.

UJIMA MENTORS LEADING A DISCUSSION ON THE SURVEY DATA SETS

While the report focuses on the experiences of young men of color and the challenges they face with mental health and access to care, the report does not intend to speak for the whole community. There is an ongoing need to elevate the voice and leadership of all young people of color.

While the pandemic impacted the scope of the research, the results powerfully reflect the significant depth of the lived experiences of young men of color; their vulnerabilities and wisdom regarding their own mental health; the mental health needs of their communities; and their hope that their recommendations will lead to better outcomes for all people of color.

The research results also provide an opportunity for mental health systems to learn from young people. Fostering the leadership of young people can drive change, create new and transformative pathways to mental health and wellbeing, and improve outcomes for youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a pilot project for young men of color to shape mental health policy and practice transformation, involving them as leaders and agents of change.

2. Create targeted goals for bringing more mental health professionals into the system who are people of color, come from directly impacted communities, and embrace the vision young men of color have for healing within themselves and their communities.

3. Create a free and accessible mental health system that connects young men of color to resources to support their mental health and wellness.

4. Create change to child and family facing care systems, including child protective services and mental health systems, through the leadership of youth of color and families. The youth identified that the mental health system is often inaccessible, and when available can compound distress and be harmful through bureaucracy and a focus on institutionalization.

5. Create a free and accessible community-based model that infuses art, hip hop and other forms of music, physical activity, and online gaming. There should also be classes on de-stressing and coping mechanisms, leadership development, restorative practice, and de-escalation year round. Young men of color recommend turning abandoned buildings into these centers within communities across Chicago. These centers should be run by people from the community. Transportation (like bus cards) and food should also be provided in these centers.

UJIMA YOUTH RESEARCHERS

APPENDIX

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Thank you for taking this survey! We're asking young people and people around them about their mental health to try to understand what young people are going through, where they go for support, and what makes it hard for them to get help. Please answer the following questions. If you don't want to answer something, you may skip it.

Do you experience any of the following most days of the week (4 days or more per week)? Please select all that apply.
• I feel depressed or very sad
• I feel anxious, constantly worried, or extremely nervous
• It's hard to control my anger
• I feel I need support as a parent
• I feel I need support as a youth
• I feel I need support in my relationships
• There are troubling things that have happened in my life that continue to affect me
• I feel lonely, I do not feel I have enough emotional support in my life
• I feel under pressure to do things that I don't want to do
• None of the above
• Other_____

How much are the following things connected to mental health? Please check all that apply.
• Poverty
• Racism
• Gender discrimination
• Anti-immigrant discrimination (xenophobia)
• Disability justice
• Incarceration
• Deportation
• Policing
• Schools
• Jobs
• Housing
• Access to medicine
• Access to doctors
• Access to safe spaces
• Access to food
• None of the above
• Other _____

What kinds of things do you do to deal with stress and your emotions? Please select all that apply.
• Exercise
• Make music or art
• Talk with family
• Talk with friends
• I go to a counselor or social worker
• I talk about what's going on in group therapy
• I take medication
• Play video games
• Go on a drive/take a walk/take a trip on the bus or train
• None of the above
• Other _____

If you were offered the chance to have professional counseling, would you take advantage of the opportunity?
• Yes
• Probably Yes
• Probably Not
• No

What are the things that make it difficult for you to access emotional support by a professional? Please select all that apply.
• Cost
• Lack of transportation (Can't get a ride or a bus/L card)
• Lack of childcare
• Lack of health insurance
• I would feel judged as "crazy" or "weak" or something else
• My family/friends would not approve
• These services don't exist near me
• I don't know where to go for support
• The hours aren't convenient for me
• I do not believe these services would help me
• Services aren't available in my language
• I want to see someone my age who has experienced things like me, but most counselors aren't like that
• None of the above
• Other _____

What is your gender identity pronoun?   **What is your race/ethnicity?** _____

 • he/him/his

 • she/her/hers

 • they/them/theirs

 • Another pronoun not listed: _____

Where are you from?

 • Chicago

    Drop-down: What neighborhood are you from?

    Drop-down: What neighborhood are you currently living in?

 • Other: _____

INFORMING THE ILLINOIS MENTAL & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM THROUGH THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AND VOICES OF BYMOC: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We are part of a research team of boys and young men in Chicago who are asking about all the things that influence mental health. The following questions are part of what we want to explore in learning about ways to promote mental health in Chicago. I'll be asking the questions, and my man (___insert name of note-taker___) will be taking notes. As a reminder, all responses are voluntary.

Mental Health Interview

1. How do you de-stress? Examples:
A. Music
B. Video games
C. Sports
D. Something else

2. What is a song you relate to the most? What about that song speaks to you?

3. What song do you think of when hearing the word mental health?

4. What does mental health mean to you? How would you describe it?

5. What are some of the major mental health concerns affecting young people in Chicago?

6. How much do you think the following things are connected to mental health? (show interviewee the list OR go through one-by-one)
A. Poverty?
B. Racism?
C. Gender discrimination?
D. Policing?
E. Access to doctors?
F. Something not on this list?

7. How do resources on the south side and west side of Chicago differ from those on the north side and downtown, and how do those play a role in mental health?

I want to stop here a second to check in with you. This can be pretty intense for some people. How are you doing? (wait for response) Do you want to keep going with the interview?

8. How much do the following institutions address the mental health challenges young people face (by helping or hurting)? (show interviewees the list OR go through one-by-one)
   A. Schools?
   B. Hospitals?
   C. Businesses?
   D. Parks?
   E. Libraries?
   F. Churches or other religious organizations?
   G. Community agencies?
   H. Media?
   I. Any other institutions?

9. What are things that make young people and their communities feel well? Healthy? Safe? Happy?

10. Do you think having money or financial support would help with their mental health?

11. Do you think it would help people's mental health to have more investment in their communities?

12. If you could instantly change things radically for the better, what is the ideal version of health and well-being for young people and communities now and in the future?

13. What other factors that we haven't discussed yet are important to consider when discussing mental health?

Background information: Please tell me the following information about yourself:

14. How old are you?

15. What is your gender identity? OR What are your gender pronouns?

16. What racial or ethnic groups do you identify as?

17. Do you live in Chicago? If so, which neighborhood?

Close-out

Before we go, I want to check in with you one last time. How are you doing? I have some mental health resources I can share with you. Or, I can have a Communities United staff member come in and talk about getting connected to services. Would you be interested in either of those?

What are some of the identities you use to identify yourself?
- This can include race/ethnicity, age, community, mental/physical abilities/disabilities
- It can also include relational identities (being a son, brother, uncle, etc)

How would you describe how society views your identity?

How would you describe how you would LIKE society to view you?

From your experience (or opinion), what are some of the biggest challenges that boys and young men of color face?

Has this changed since COVID-19? If so, how?

What are your thoughts about the mental health system and how it administers support to boys and young men of color?

After reading each of the themes, research findings, and examples (see below)

What did you think about what you just heard? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Is this relatable to you? Why or why not?

Is this an important piece of information for boys and young men of color? Why or why not?

Is there something that you would like to tell the researchers about regarding this specific theme?

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For more information, please contact Communities United at info@communitiesunited.org
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