Impact and Resilience: A Survey of Youth-serving Organizations During the Pandemic

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Abstract: The pandemic has shifted everyday realities of how we work and learn. Massive layoffs and shelter in place orders have led to unemployment and shuttering of local businesses across the country. There is widespread concern about youth and teen social and emotional health and loss of opportunities for meaningful engagement. While we know that youth-serving organizations are essential for youth learning and development, less is known about how those organizations are faring during this time. In this study, we present findings from a citywide survey of Chicago youth-serving organizations (N = 126) indicating that although there are challenges and needs resulting from the pandemic, there is also an important story of resilience and adaptation as the majority creatively shift their practices and engagement to the virtual space to continue to support youth and families in the communities they serve.

Keywords: COVID-19, out-of-school providers, equity, youth participation, resilience

Introduction

Concerns about academic achievement and social and emotional health for youth and teens are widespread. Researchers predict lower standardized test scores relative to a typical school year due to remote schooling (Kuhfield et al., 2020). Youth and teens are experiencing anxiety and fear, and the closing of locations where they spend time and connect with others means less structure and supports essential for mental well-being (World Health Organization, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). These and other studies (e.g., Dorn et al., 2020) suggest that negative effects of the pandemic may be greatest for low income, Black, and Hispanic young people.

Youth-serving organizations and program providers (e.g., mentors, library and parks staff) support young people in learning and developmental outcomes including and beyond traditional school measures, such as creativity, confidence, and plans for the future (e.g., Montgomery, 2017; Sebring et al., 2013). While those people and services are essential for youth in this time of crisis, the pandemic has destabilized employment and services across the country. Recent analyses of US Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveal that low wage, part time, young, and minority workers are the most likely to hold jobs in danger of being cut or reduced (Dorn et al., 2020; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2020). People who work with youth in out-of-school settings often fit such a profile and their lack of job security is documented in general (Baldridge, 2020) and during the current global health pandemic (Moore, 2020). Places where youth workers are employed are also impacted. A survey of nonprofits reported loss of revenue, reduction in services, and employment cuts (The Independent Sector, 2020). Despite this bleak picture, we also know that communities that have historically experienced some of the most social challenges also demonstrate immense resilience defined as "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of past or present adversity" (Riley, 2005).

Though it is apparent that structural challenges are even more visible during a pandemic, little is known about what youth-serving providers and organizations in particular are experiencing during this time and how they are adapting services. In this study, we present findings from a citywide survey of Chicago youth-serving organizations (N = 126) to explore the questions of: (1) How did organizations shifted their practices during the first wave of the pandemic (i.e., spring/summer 2020)? (2) What worked and what challenges do they face? and (3) What are their plans for the near-term future while the pandemic remains a reality?

Methods

A 22-question Qualtrics survey was designed to tap into four primary areas, including (1) information about the organization and who they serve, (2) strategies and capacity for communication with and opportunities for youth during the summer of 2020, (3) what worked and what they struggle with, and (4) needs of community and plans for the remainder of the calendar year. Questions included Likert-scale and multiple-choice responses as well as open-ended queries. Researchers are collaborators in *My CHI. My Future*, a Chicago Mayoral initiative conceptualized before the pandemic, focused on building a community of practice with citywide youth-serving organizations with the goal of equity in out-of-school time opportunities. An invitation and link to the survey was sent out in the initiative's weekly email. The survey was open from August 20 through September 25, 2020.

Participants

One hundred and forty-three individuals responded representing 126 unique Chicago youth-serving organizations, including city agencies (e.g., parks and libraries) and community-based organizations focusing on particular areas of learning and practice (e.g., technology, STEAM, arts, boxing) and youth services more generally (e.g., faith-based centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, BSA). Organizations served youth from preschool through 24 years old; most served multiple age groups and over three-quarters served middle (79%) and high school (84%) youth. They represented both smaller and larger organizational spaces (31% served 0-25 youth at one time in their physical space while 24% served over 100). Forty-one percent of organizations served youth across the city while the majority (59%) served one or more particular community areas closely (Chicago is broken into 77 geographically defined community areas). Sixty-seven communities were represented, with the highest representation of service in communities identified as most "socially vulnerable" (Center for Disease Control, 2020).

Findings

Organizational impact: "I don't know where to start; it feels like everything has been impacted"

Impact on organizations due to the pandemic was both positive and negative. At the time of the survey, 10% of organizations reported that they had lost their physical space, 3% were in danger of closing, and many described reduced funding streams in open-ended responses. Nevertheless, the story of impact is more complex than expected. Descriptions reveal details about the adaptive and creative processes organizations engaged in and most focus on short-term but positive predictions about the future, with one respondent saying, "We were at risk of closing but are finding our way forward day by day, [COVID] impacted the way we roll out programming."

Staff who kept their jobs gained knowledge and support. While a quarter of organizations (25%) reported that staff were furloughed or let go, respondents also reported personal and professional benefits for staff employed through the spring and summer. Over half reported staff developing new pedagogical knowledge about how to serve youth remotely (59%), and close to a third saw an increase in mental health/social emotional support for staff (30%) and internal staff bonding and organizational support (27%). Over half (59%) reported new or deeper collaborations with youth service providers and organizations outside of their own.

Despite reduction in programming, organizations continued to serve youth and families. Half of organizations offered fewer youth programs and limited hours of service during the summer (49%), but the vast majority (91%) did manage to continue providing programs, activities, and/or resources to youth and families and 64% did so regularly. Some were able to offer face-to-face opportunities (32%) but the majority adapted their usual approaches. Most moved online: 80% offered live programs virtually, 51% held Internet-based community events, and 50% offered asynchronous online activities for kids and teens to do on their own time.

Breadth of service was diminished but some saw increased depth and formed new relationships. While more than half of organizations (53%) reported serving fewer youth and families than usual, almost a third established new or deeper relations with youth and community they serve (29%) and broadened their reach to serve new youth (27%). Sometimes both happened simultaneously within the same organization. One respondent shared, "Though some of the youth and schools that we serve have not participated in our virtual programming, we have seen new students and new opportunities appear (in other words, we were able to serve fewer youth than normal AND we broadened our reach to serve new youth)."

Successful strategies: "Providing activities that opened [youth participants'] eyes to the world"

Organizations reflected on what worked during their quick pivot to remote learning and reflected on plans for continued services during the 2020-21 academic year, which Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began remotely. One provider advised, "Patience is key, and adjusting expectations for an online environment is a must."

Individual and synchronous methods of communication were preferred. Almost all organizations (96%) remained in touch with the youth and families during the summer of 2020. When asked which strategies were most effective for keeping in contact, almost three quarters (73%) identified video conference tools, half relied on mobile phones (52% through text messaging and 51% through direct calls), and some reported email (42% through listservs and 40% through individual correspondence). Most used multiple strategies, with one person saying, "Not all households are the same and youth may or may not feel comfortable with that and will not respond to any calls. We had to adjust in our approach and how we communicated with the youth in a safe and healthy way which for some were video calls, phone calls, and others it was text messaging." Many emphasized that personal approaches were essential, saying: "Individualized contact is very important. Reaching out and making sure that

families know that we are here to support in whatever way we can has made a difference and allows families the opportunity to open and share their thoughts, concerns, and feelings during this challenging time."

A range of participation strategies were utilized, with a preference for authentic opportunities. Most organizations offered remote participation opportunities for youth (87%) in a broad range of content areas, with the highest frequency in categories of music and art (18%), helping your community (16%), and digital media (15%). Organizations that offered opportunities for youth participation were asked what approaches they used (from a list of 12 possibilities identified through author participation in virtual *My CHI. My Future.* conversations) and how successful they were (on a scale from 1-4, with 1 being *not at all successful* and 4 being *highly successful*). Organizations utilized multiple strategies (M = 3.9, SD = 2.8) with a range of success (Table 1).

Table 1: Remote implementation strategies used and their perceived success by practitioners who used them

	N	% that used strategy (N = 126)	% of users that found strategy highly successful
Synchronous activities			
Structured online workshops or classes	86	68.3%	36.1%
Opportunities for youth work / community service	49	38.9%	47.1%
Access to mentor-led activities via live stream (social media)	37	29.4%	25.7%
Access to peer-led activities via live stream (social media)	11	8.7%	36.4%
Asynchronous project-based work			
Physical activity kits for projects (to be picked up)	49	38.9%	44.9%
How-to videos for self-directed exploration	48	38.1%	11.4%
How-to guides (printed) for self-directed exploration	27	21.4%	18.5%
Spaces to share and observe			
Virtual connections to people/places (e.g., tours, speaker series)	47	37.3%	47.8%
Online youth showcases (e.g., performances, gallery space)	33	26.2%	48.5%
Online youth challenges (e.g., talent shows, art contest)	27	21.4%	48.1%
Synchronous discussions/conversation			
Access to adult mentors through online/phone office hours	47	37.3%	25.5%
Peer- and topic-based town hall meetings or group chat	29	23.0%	34.5%

Structured online workshops or classes were most common (68%), as organizations translated existing in-person programs to an online format using Zoom or other video conferencing tools. Also common were work and community service programs for youth, physical kits that youth could pick up and work through at home, and asynchronous videos for youth to work through projects. Close to 50% of organizations who used the common strategies of physical kits and work/community service opportunities identified them as particularly successful. Both approaches have a focus on equity (i.e., opportunities that do not require high speed internet and where youth are paid for their participation) and were highlighted in open-ended responses asking providers about best practices. One organization wrote that "providing garden kits that they could tend to at home was engaging for both the youth and their families" and another provided kits with a mask-making activity, saying, "youth [were] able to send us a photo of their completed project…[and] some youth create more masks for their family members and others." City funding to pay youth for participation in remote jobs and internships was identified as critical "for youth who desperately need pay and stipends."

Less frequently utilized but with higher reports of success were opportunities that allow youth to contribute, share, and observe, including connecting them to people and places such as virtual tours or expert speaker series, and opportunities for youth to create and showcase their own work and see that of others through contests and showcase opportunities. This aspect of youth voice and choice was emphasized in open-ended responses, "Allowing the youth to be part of the program planning, scheduling and designing process."

Remaining challenges and plans for the near-term future

Nearly all of the organizations (90%) planned to offer virtual opportunities during the school year and 40% were planning non-digital remote approaches, but even while organizations adapted offerings in creative ways, getting the word out was a struggle. For example, one person shared: "We did offer our live streaming event interviewing music industry executives [over the summer], but unfortunately, it didn't really reach youth." Almost a quarter of organizations (22%) did not have their own physical space and relied on locations in the community, most of which remained closed, to both offer and advertise their programs. The majority of organizations (80%) had existing relationships with Chicago Public School (CPS) and depended on these relationships to connect with

youth and broaden their reach, but new mandates and requirements due to the pandemic made it such that most had lost this connection and there was confusion about new processes required for new partnerships. From a list of 18 organizational needs to support youth and families (including financial, personnel, and technology supports), clarity of information from CPS was the most frequently identified (61%), followed by technology equipment and hi-speed Internet for families (51%) and information regarding basic services (51%). Brokering information was a common theme in open-ended responses about community needs, "Wellness checks to the youth and families work very well. Families and youth shared what they were going through and were able to ask about the food pantry and other essential needs resources." Also of interest was professional development in remote facilitation (48%) and equity and social justice (45%).

Discussion

In this paper, we share results from a survey of 126 youth-serving organizations in the City of Chicago as they reflected on the first wave of pandemic-disrupted service while preparing for the 2020-21 academic year. While these organizations represent a range of communities, organizational size, and ages served, a limitation of this study is that we only heard from organizations that have the capacity to complete a survey during this stressful time. Nevertheless, results offer a more complex picture of organizational resilience during the pandemic than might be suggested. Findings suggest several directions for design and research, as organizations continue to offer opportunities remotely and in preparation for future events. First, providers have a lot to share and are struggling to find the information they need. Opportunities for youth-serving organizations to exchange ideas about what they are learning has the potential to increase professional capacity, strengthen community networks, and crowd-source connections to up-to-date information and resources. Second, approaches to engaging young people that providers found to be more successful align with informal learning literature that emphasizes youth voice and brokering connections to meaningful opportunities (e.g., Ching et al., 2015; Montgomery, 2017). Examples of how providers are doing this remotely can inspire new technologies to better support organizations to engage in synchronous and asynchronous communication and experience design. Finally, youth-driven experiences were less frequently implemented but rated among the more successful strategies. Including young people in this research is an important next step to understanding conditions and strategies *they* find engaging and to invite them as co-designers of potential future experiences, including opportunities for youth to take the lead remotely.

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