

Final Report for the Project: Engaging Chicago LGBTQ communities in a Community Discussion about Racism, Public Safety, and the Rights of Young People

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During the 2011–2012 academic year, three community organizations (Affinity Community Services, UCAN’s LGBTQ Host Home Program, and the Broadway Youth Center) and the UIC Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy came together to build community and create a dialog in Chicago’s LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer and Gender Non Conforming) communities around issues of racism, public safety, and the rights of young people.

Funded by a grant from the UIC Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement, we organized a series of events focused around two main lines of community dialog. First, we held a series of conversations to hear from LGBTQ youth of color in Chicago about their experiences around safety, violence, and policing in different neighborhoods of the city. Second, we had two dialog events with youth workers in Chicago about the policing and surveillance of youth spaces.

Background

In the summer of 2011 the stabbing of a man in a parking lot in Boystown, Chicago’s iconic LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) community on the North Side, led to a controversy surrounding race, class and youth. Attempts at civic engagement and public discourse around this controversy failed. Some residents and business owners blamed youth coming from the South Side and West Side of Chicago, who are mostly Black and Latino/a, for the increase in crime and violence in the neighborhood, calling them “mobs of delinquent teens”.¹ Some residents and business owners also blamed youth centers and youth service providers such as the Center on Halsted, the Broadway Youth Center, and Night Ministry for the presence of youth, especially Black youth, in Boystown, and advocated the closing of the Center on Halsted.² Following the stabbing, an initiative called “Take Back Boystown” was created on Facebook, advocating for citizen-led patrols. Members of the “Take Back Boystown” initiative also requested that the Night Ministry bus stop using a neighborhood parking lot to deliver its services to homeless and struggling young people in Boystown, claiming that the people the bus services are making the neighborhood unsafe.³ A look at crime trends in the area however shows that since 2006 crime rates have been fairly steady in Boystown, which is in fact one of the safest communities in the city.⁴ Despite this, the Northalsted Business Alliance, which represents local business owners, allocated \$50,000 towards private security in the neighborhood. Together with other youth advocates, members of Gender Just (a collaborating organization on this proposal) met with the treasurer of the Alliance to request that a similar amount be allocated for youth services in the neighborhood.⁵ Two CAPS meetings about the stabbing, in July and August, failed to create a community dialog because stakeholders (youth,

¹ Demarest, Erica, “Boystown stabbing leads to racial controversy,” Windy City Times, 6/29/11.

² Demarest, Erica, “Boystown stabbing leads to racial controversy,” Windy City Times, 6/29/11.

³ Sosin, Kate, “Lakeview Residents want Night Ministry bus out,” Windy City Times, 7/27/11.

⁴ Demarest, Erica, “Lakeview Crimes: The Numbers,” Windy City Times, 7/27/11.

⁵ Sosin, Kate, “Activists challenge Northalsted biz group on youth funding,” Windy City Times, 8/24/11.

youth advocates, residents, business owners, etc.) were unable or sometimes unwilling to effectively communicate about their needs and concerns and problem-solve.

Analysis

Postings on the “Take Back Boystown” website referring to youth who “lack the funds and/or age required to get into bars”⁶ show that this controversy is not simply about crime, but sits at the intersections of sexual orientation, age, race, public safety, equitable distribution of resources, and gentrification. This controversy is also not just about Boystown. The events that unfolded this past summer in Boystown occur with some regularity in other areas of the city, such as the South Shore neighborhood on the South Side, revealing that the Boystown events are a symptom of a citywide phenomenon. LGBTQ youth and adults of different races/ethnicities, of different backgrounds, incomes, and neighborhoods access LGBTQ-identified neighborhoods specifically for the services and amenities that they provide, and because they are perceived as relatively safe zones for LGBTQ people. However, some white, middle-class, adult, LGBTQ residents and business owners (who like everyone else including young people desire a safe, crime-free neighborhood) identify Black and Latino/a, low-income, sometimes homeless, youth and young adults as a nuisance and a source of crime. Concerns about violence, nuisance issues, quality of life, and intimidation fears are real, but they are exacerbated by racism and anti-youth sentiment. Understanding and discussing these issues means addressing issues of public policy, such as youth services (their presence, location, funding), public safety (police involvement, use of private security), and local ordinances used to enforce public safety (loitering ordinances, increased parking fees, curfews, etc.), and how these policies affect the most disenfranchised groups in the city.

Youth and Safety

For this part of the project we organized three small, moderated community dialog groups with LGBTQ youth of color in three locations in the city (Irving Park on the West Side, Hyde Park on the South Side, and the UIC campus in the West Loop). Youth were asked about their experiences of feeling safe and unsafe, welcome or unwelcome in their residential neighborhoods and in other neighborhoods they frequent. The participants came from Kenwood, North Kenwood, Auburn Gresham, Stoney Island Park, Washington Park, downtown, Lawndale, Englewood, Humboldt Park, Bronzeville, South Shore, and Northside (neighborhood not specified).

The experiences the participants shared, not surprisingly, vary. Some youth feel safe in their own communities, while others witness and fear violence near their homes, including homophobic and transphobic harassment and violence, and gang- and drug-related gun violence (“I feel unsafe in my community ‘cause it’s a lot of men out at night and they say things to me that make me uncomfortable;” “I have been jumped a couple of times, now I run”). Some youth feel threatened and unwelcome in neighborhoods they frequent but do not live in, such as Lakeview, Lincoln Park and Wrigleyville. Some participants agree that Lakeview and Boystown used to be safer and more accepting of all LGBTQ people, but have turned hostile in recent years towards LGBTQ youth of color (“I started going to Lakeview because I was bi but then started seeing racism in the neighborhood;” people in the neighborhood “got mean and aggressive”). Youth saw a marked shift in Lakeview after the stabbings in the summer of 2011 and the ensuing CAPS meetings (“It became less about the stabbing victim and more about low income kids in the area;” “Lakeview was where I felt the most welcomed until the CAPS meeting. [Now] they hate you”). Experiences also range from feeling unwelcome because the youth do not have money to spend in these neighborhoods, to feeling unsafe because of direct verbal and physical assaults. Youth agreed that the Broadway

⁶ Ecker, Keith, “Boystown is burning: Prejudice takes root in the community,” Windy City Times, 7/9/11.

Youth Center and Teen Living Program are safe and welcoming spaces, while the Center on Halsted has become less welcoming.

In the first two community dialog meetings, youths' opinions and experiences also varied regarding police interactions and the need for more or less policing of neighborhoods. Thus, the third meeting included presentations by community organizers to youth participants about the criminalization of Black and Brown youth, the prison industrial complex, the relationship between crime and policing, and the impact of PODs (Police Observation Devices, also known as "Blue Lights") in high-crime areas. This Youth Teach-In event was meant to give youth participants tools to develop a more informed opinion about what amount and the type of police involvement they and their communities need and want.

At all three dialog events, youth were asked what would make Chicago neighborhoods safer and more welcoming for LGBTQ youth of color. Their answers have been collected in the attachment. Overall, they expressed a need for places where they can be themselves, be in charge, be supported, and enjoy themselves regardless of income, race, sexuality, gender, and gender expression. The following are policy recommendations based on our findings:

1. That people and institutions interested in, and responsible for, addressing neighborhood violence and youth safety involve youth directly and authentically in the process of devising and implementing solutions.
2. That the suggestions and recommendations that youth propose (such as the ones in the attachment) be funded and implemented.

Policing and Surveillance of Youth Spaces

For this part of the project, we organized one small, brainstorming preparatory meeting, and one large open meeting about policing and surveillance of youth spaces. At the first meeting, about 10 youth workers were invited to share their thoughts and insights about their organizations' policies (or lack thereof) regarding the policing and surveillance of their facilities. Organizations included Project NIA, the Transformative Justice Law Project, La Casa Norte, and the Young Women's Empowerment Project, in addition to the organizations organizing this project. Issues addressed included:

1. Current practices about policing: how to prevent and stop violence in youth-serving organizations; relations with the police; allowing police access to youth facilities; calling or not calling police when violence occurs; presence of (armed) security guards on the premise.
2. Current research and data on the relationship between violence and policing: is research available; does increased policing and surveillance prevent crime and violence; etc.

Based on the input from this meeting, the second meeting, called "Whose Security Is It Anyway?", brought together 30 youth workers from the organizations mentioned above, plus After School Matters, The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, the Center on Halsted, and About Face Theater. Lara Brooks, Manager of the Broadway Youth Center, gave a presentation about the connections between institutional violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the impact these have on LGBTQ youth of color in Chicago. Data from schools show that the presence of (sometimes armed) security guards does not make schools safer; rather, it leads to more suspensions and expulsions, and ultimately more incarceration of youth. Data also show an increase in violence against LGBTQ youth *perpetrated by* security guards and police officers in several institutional settings, such as shelters and schools.

The second part of the event was a discussion of draft documents presenting Best Practices for organizations with security personnel onsite. Based on the feedback from event participants, our goal is to develop a toolkit for youth workers and their organizations aimed at developing policies around policing and surveillance at youth facilities.

Based on youth worker input, we recommend that organizations serving youth in the city of Chicago, especially those serving LGBTQ youth of color, develop an internal assessment and policy regarding policing and surveillance of their facilities. This process could be guided by the toolkit to be developed from this project. It should also be based on data and research about the impact and consequences of policing on rates of violence and crime, and the effectiveness of policing for violence prevention.

Attachment: Responses by youth in the community dialog events to the question: “What does a neighborhood need to have to make you feel safe and welcomed? What do you and your communities need and want?”

Police Involvement

- More police and police cameras in neighborhoods with violence
- Better police/neighborhood relations
- Teen victims’ access to police at organizations they frequent
- Black businesses and vendor spaces without police involvement
- Police-free/security guard-free zones

Safe and Supportive Spaces

- Spiritual counseling or a spiritually-focused group, places where people can share
- Open, BYC-like spaces where *youth* are in charge
- Education/literacy/free legal resources for all youth
- More financially-accessible spaces for youth
- More places like Host Homes – housing options for LGBTQ youth
- Positive male figures and mentors
- Educational and art programs
- Something to make youth feel ownership
- Positive images of Black and Brown people, against mainstream media images, including on Facebook and Twitter
- Speed bumps (to keep youth from being targeted by cars)
- More access to, and expansion of, drop-in programs and youth spaces
- A map of places where youth can use the bathroom for free without hassle and without having to buy anything

Recreational Activities

- Gay group activities (like ice skating or something fun)
- Cultural institutions for people to gather at
- Tourist attractions outside Downtown
- A community book club (not just old people), block clubs and block club parties, interactive activities for the community
- An art center, a space for artists, a place to do graffiti, a place to express oneself
- Roller skating rinks, movie theatres and bowling
- Community gardens

- Green spaces, parks, a chance to grow one's own food
- A cultural center, a meeting place, a recreational center with air conditioning and water fountains
- More places with wi-fi
- Utilize vacant lots
- Fun events at night on the weekend, for youth by youth

Community Education

- Conferences for neighborhoods to learn to be more LGBTQ-affirming
- Educational spaces/resources for straight allies in LGBTQ spaces
- More respect
- Courses on tolerance and awareness throughout Chicago
- More community/neighborhood activities
- Businesses with caring, responsible owners in neighborhoods
- Openness to people with different levels of economic resources
- Building relationships

Employment

- Creating youth jobs