

Review

Maladjustment in Minority Youth from Community Network Disparities in the COVID-19 Lockdown Environment

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Abstract

Pandemic lockdown orders resulted in closures to critical community networks. One such infrastructure was community recreation centers/parks. This infrastructure serves a critical role in building psychosocial wellness for youth. Socioeconomic minority youth face baseline disparity in center/park distribution and services. Youth recreation activity declined 50% as result of lockdown orders with corresponding decline in youth mental health status. Despite overall youth activity decline, White and high socioeconomic demographic categories were associated with greatest recreation access during the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic



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exacerbated preexisting disparities in recreation access for minority youth and its benefit towards adaptive development. Minority youth experienced greater intra/interpersonal distress than majority youth in the lockdown environment. Reported indicators include negative coping and neighborhood violence outcomes. Experts advocated for the formation of innovative community recreation networks to support the mental health of vulnerable youth during the pandemic. The *Drive and Dish initiative* was a New Orleans' area outreach effort which aimed to address this demand. Home portable basketball equipment was delivered to local youth in need. This manuscript prefaces with a recount of a delivery and interaction with the recipient family. The introduction highlights quantitative research which describes youth community network disparity of the pandemic lockdown environment and references observational data which suggests the impact of this disparity on minority youth. We then overview methodology and results of the *Drive and Dish initiative* and infer its effect. We close with review of studies which analyzed minority youth adjustment indicators from intervening recreation programs developed during the pandemic.

Keywords

Minority youth adjustment; youth sports and resilience; youth and community centers; COVID-19 on minority youth; strength-based intervention; minority youth coping; youth and leisure experiences; community spaces and social justice

1. Preface - *Drive and Dish* Experience and Recipient Interview

In the background while Ms. James was being interviewed, were her two teenage sons who were joyfully dribbling their new basketballs which were delivered to their home by Oluwatomi 'Tomi' Akingbola and I. We were volunteers of a COVID-19 community outreach initiative called *Drive and Dish*. *Drive and Dish* provided home basketball to families in need. The aim was to limit maladaptive adjustment risks youth faced due to disrupted recreation access from community center closures imposed by COVID-19 lockdown orders.

It was the last drop off for Tomi and me on this humid New Orleans summer afternoon. Blight, lack of green space, and food desertion were apparent upon entering the community of Ms. James. As we were approaching her home, Ms. James and her two sons were already outside waiting excitedly. This was the 40th family of fifty we delivered to.

With tears, Ms. James reflected on the positive impact of the donation for her sons. She discussed how the donation would uplift her sons during pandemic challenges. She mentioned that their lack of recreation from recreation center closure has caused idleness which has led to problematic mood and behavior. She expressed her optimism in the donation being a source leading to stable mood and behavior. She suggested the same impact for other youth who received our donation. She also noted the significance of Tomi and I providing this outreach as Black men in Medicine. She suggested that our interaction with minority youth would also provide them with inspiration beyond the pandemic. She said that her and her sons had not seen a Black doctor before, and our meeting may help her sons/others form goal-oriented habits and the value of resilience.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Scope and Demographics of Youth Mental Health and Recreation Activity Decline

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared a growing crisis on the state of child and adolescent mental health as result of the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. Environmental infrastructure closures, such as that of neighborhood parks/centers disrupted recreation networks. These networks are known to mediate positive adjustment (one's ability to cope and adapt to intra/interpersonal challenges) and wellness for youth of all socioeconomic categories [2]. Faced with lockdown orders, youth recreation activity declined 50%, with corresponding decline in youth mental health status [3]. Despite its impact on all youth, recreation activity was highest for youth who were White and of higher economic class [3]. For example, more youth activity was observed in medium and high-income Los Angeles neighborhoods than low income [4]. In comparison, a retrospective study involving youth from multiple American states found greatest recreation access reduction in Black and low-income youth [5]. Nevertheless, much was already known pre-pandemic about socioeconomic disparity in neighborhood park/center distribution and services, and its negative impact on minority youth [6]. Alongside its declaration, The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's suggested that inbuilt structural inequities scaled disproportionate mental health outcomes towards minority youth [1].

2.2 The Toll of Community Recreation Disparity on Minority Youth

Closures to community recreation sites disproportionately hindered access to wellness for minority youth. Recreation centers/parks are cornerstone sites in minority communities that source self-efficacy for minority youth. These sites are culturally informed in structure and service style to mediate overarching socioeconomic stressors impacting wellness for such youth [7]. Hence, these sites serve a unique role in building an equitable form of positive adjustment for minority youth. This role indicates underlying socio-structural forces contributing to mental health status of minority youth. Pandemic related recreation infrastructure closures exacerbated an already complex mental health management for minority youth. Experts have linked closures to increased adverse internalized and externalized symptoms effects of minority youth seen in the pandemic [8]. Given preexisting mental health disparity concerns, A John Hopkins Children's Center study identified exacerbated rates of depression and anxiety in minority youth during the pandemic [9]. Moreover, experts have predicted long term mental health complications, such as more aggressive forms of mood and conduct disorders related to enhanced isolation and intervention lack from community network displacement imposed by the pandemic [10]. Ongoing reports of community recreation disparity and its effects faced by minority youth during the pandemic drove policies and modified frameworks for accessible structured recreation for high-risk youth. This support has involved municipal plannings which not only develop equitable recreation infrastructure but also incorporate flexible service delivery models which can be accessible in times of environmental displacements [11].

3. Overview of the *Drive and Dish* Initiative

The *Drive and Dish* initiative was a volunteer effort formed and operated by a group of medical students and physicians to support the mental health of youth in need during COVID-19 by providing home recreation equipment. We sought to deliver portable basketball hoops and balls to the homes of 50 New Orleans' area families with youth in need. A GoFundMe account was created to solicit donor support for the funding of 50 portable basketball hoops and balls. We created a home website which included a portal inviting parents to register to receive recreation equipment.

4. Procedures and Results of the *Drive and Dish* Initiative

Funds were raised to support the purchase of 50 portable recreation and balls. The equipment was stored at a local storage company. 50 families registered to receive our donation. Scheduled deliveries occurred between April 2020 to July 2020. On these scheduled dates, *Drive and Dish* volunteers used commercial moving trucks to deliver the equipment to the addresses of families. Recreation equipment was purchased and stored in a local U-Haul site. Commercial U-Haul moving trucks were reserved to transport and deliver the equipment to 50 families from April 2020 to July 2020. Deliveries were documented via photographs and interviews with recipient family and the volunteer team. Parents and their children provided recorded testimonials on the impact of receiving the basketball equipment. All interviewees suggested positive health benefits. We published and shared these interactions on social media. *Drive and Dish* efforts were featured on three local television news outlets [12-14]. New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell applauded our efforts in a released statement [15].

5. Discussion

The *Drive and Dish initiative* suggests having been successful in supporting mental health for youth by providing accessible recreation opportunity during the COVID-19 lockdown. This success demonstrates the role of recreation on adjustment for youth in need. Social displacement from community park/recreation infrastructure closures, imposed this deficit on minority youth. A systematic review exploring this dynamic confirmed this disparity [16]. A mixed-method study investigating park use during the lockdown found greatest reduction in socially vulnerable communities, Blacks, and those of low-income class [17]. A review which investigated literature exploring the mental health effects of COVID-19 on youth suggested that isolation led to heightened levels of anxiety and depression for minority youth [18]. In contrast, a longitudinal study reported reduced psychopathy of minority youth who were exposed to structured recreation programming and outdoor activity during the lockdown [19]. In response to these disparities, tailored policies and programs sought to establish recreation opportunities for high-risk youth during the pandemic. One such program in California was found to facilitate adaptive coping by implementing a virtual sports curriculum [20]. Another youth recreation program in Chicago adjusted its delivery to virtual/home and the outdoor setting in attempt to sustain its intra and interpersonal mental health benefit for minority youth [11]. The *Drive and Dish initiative* modeled these approaches by delivering recreation resources/services to a home-based format for minority youth.

Although park access is vital for creating equitable urban environments, neighborhood parks tend to disproportionately distribute in populations [21]. Moreover, despite a generalized 50%

reduction in park usage amongst all youth in the pandemic, Whites and those of affluence had greater access. Thus, the pandemic exacerbated mental health complications related to underlying structural justice issues. This inequity should encourage modern urban planning efforts for neighborhood park development and sustainability which ensure recreational opportunity for minority youth. Additionally, adaptable delivery of recreation services should be strategized to withstand events leading to structural displacement and social isolation, as seen with the COVID-19 lockdown environment. In attempts to facilitate recreation activity, multiple cities converted streets into shared streets, allowing walkable urban space. Analysis of this effort in Denver, Colorado demonstrated increased recreation opportunities for community members. This finding supports municipal planning efforts which ensure equitable recreation infrastructure [22]. Policymakers may serve minority youth by funding support for municipal recreation departments for the development and expansion of neighborhood parks and services. Park managers and coaches should develop strategies to deliver recreation curriculums to minority youth via portable means such as digital programming. Such adaptations stand to mitigate adverse mental health risks related to recreation access and activity for minority youth.

Neighborhood park closures during COVID-19 lockdown exposed minority youth to maldevelopment. The *Drive and Dish initiative* aimed to reduce this risk by providing recreation opportunities. However, the overall toll of recreation disparity has exposed minority youth to long term adverse mental health complications. Future studies should describe these adverse outcomes. These studies may provide value by comparing the incidence and recidivism of conduct disorder forms (aggressive behavior, destructive behavior, deceitful behavior, violation of rules) in the pandemic and pre-pandemic period of those minority youth enrolled in recreation programs targeting adjustment outcomes. Though both qualitative and quantitative methods stand to provide value, a mixed-methods approach may best clarify context and extent of minority youth maladaptation.

6. Conclusion

Youth rely on neighborhood park infrastructure for recreation to support their mental health. COVID-19 related lockdown orders led to youths being displaced from local park access. The mental health status of youth declined as a result. Various forms of mental health complications are documented. Minority youth experienced greater displacement from recreation infrastructure, and maladjustment from this displacement. Increased markers of maladjustment, such as stress and violence were seen. This background and its consequences highlight the impact of social network disparity operating on minority youth during the pandemic. Experts recognized the supporting role of recreation for minority youth mental health and encouraged implementation of adaptable recreation programming that can be accessible for minority youth home use. Digital recreation programming was an adapted strategy implemented by recreation programs during COVID-19 lockdown. The *Drive and Dish initiative* delivered home based recreation basketball equipment for minority youths in the New Orleans' area to limit maladjustment risk. Positive municipal reaction to this initiative suggests success of the effort in addressing pandemic related social network disruption. Policymakers and practitioners should consider urban planning/development strategies which aim for equitable recreation opportunities for minority youth. These strategies should include adaptable forms of recreation delivery that can allow for in-home use. This flexibility serves to

withstand events causing recreation infrastructure closures and displacement, such as that of COVID-19. Lack of these considerations in urban/planning development exposes minority youth to adverse mental health risks. Future studies should explore the scope and consequence of this adversity faced by minority youth during the COVID-19 lockdown. This clarity will support ongoing efforts to create an equitable and sustainable recreation infrastructure in minority youth communities.

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Author Contributions

Okoronkwo, Varnado, Akingbola, and Onor executed the procedures and methods of the *Drive and Dish initiative*. Okoronkwo and Mack wrote the manuscript. Okoronkwo, Alfred, Hardy, Osuji and Takyi revised the manuscript. Bailey established the framework to describe the concept of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability Statement

Written informed consent was obtained by all identifiable human subjects in graphic abstract. Otherwise, there are no disclosures to report.

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