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Confident futures: Community-based organizations as first responders and agents of change in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic

Nastasja Ilonka Roels^{a,*}, Amarilys Estrella^b, Melissa Maldonado-Salcedo^c, Rayna Rapp^c, Helena Hansen^d, Anita Hardon^a

^a University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

^b Rice University, USA

^c New York University, USA

^d University of California Los Angeles, USA

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study of community organizations serving marginalized youth in New York City and Amsterdam utilized a novel ethnographic approach called *reverse engineering* to identify techniques for social change that are active in each organization, adaptable and translatable to other contexts. It found that youth-serving organizations led flexible responses to the crisis of COVID-19 as it affected those marginalized by race, immigrant status, housing instability, religion and gender. The organizations employed techniques that they had previously developed to cultivate youth well-being – among them connectivity, safe space, and creativity – to mount tailored responses to COVID-19 related crises. In New York City, these groups addressed crises of material survival resources (personal protective equipment, food, housing) whereas in Amsterdam, youth-serving organizations focused on social connections and emotional well-being as the government met more of participants' material needs.

1. Introduction

Health messaging to young people “at risk” often fails when it delivers top-down recommendations (Hansen et al., 2013; Adams, 2016). The limitations of top-down approaches are especially clear in communities that have been marginalized by race, immigration status, religion, social class and gender, as was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020; Bhagra et al., 2020; Carrera et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2020). Airhihenbuwa et al. (2020) argue that messages focusing on individual risks and prevention often fail to take into account the importance of community engagement, described as “acknowledging the voices of those in the community with culturally relevant solutions.” While community engagement is often seen as a central component of collaborative care, there are many definitions and interpretations of what it entails in the literature, and how best to engage citizens and identify community needs; this continues to be an important question for researchers and practitioners alike (De Weger et al., 2020; Milton et al., 2012; Osborne et al., 2021). Airhihenbuwa et al. (2020) argue that cultural competency is key to an effective

community-engaged communication strategy. They highlight strategies that center equity in order to enable “culturally grounded approaches to scientific inquiry” and challenging “the field from within itself to honor community agency and resilience.” This shifts the focus from individual behavior and judgements of youthful pathology toward community strengths and capacities. Here we analyze how grassroots initiatives used techniques designed to strengthen youth resilience to flexibly respond to COVID-19 related crises, becoming the first line of outreach for disproportionately affected youth. We use the term “first responders” to highlight how our partner organizations were able to recognize social and material problems quickly and respond to these needs first, often weeks, or even months, before the arrival of any municipal programs or emergency services.

Rather than inquiring about the specific causes of problems or why young people *fail* to do what professionals want them to do, our comparative ethnographic research in Amsterdam and New York City focused on what young people *successfully do* in practices of mutual care and aspirations for health, happiness, safety and well-being that inform their practices. In New York, these young people were largely from low

* Corresponding author. Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, Room C5.10 1018WV, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: n.i.roels@uva.nl (N.I. Roels), ae36@rice.edu (A. Estrella), mm659@nyu.edu (M. Maldonado-Salcedo), rayna.rapp@nyu.edu (R. Rapp), HHansen@mednet.ucla.edu (H. Hansen), A.P.Hardon@uva.nl (A. Hardon).

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income Black and/or Latinx neighborhoods, and in Amsterdam many young people from low income neighborhoods and/or families with migration backgrounds from, among others, Morocco, Suriname, and Turkey. Our goal was to learn from organizations that support young people affected by the long-term consequences of adverse childhood experiences within low-income, marginalized communities. We worked closely with nine grassroots initiatives designed to strengthen youth resilience in two international urban centers: Amsterdam and New York City. Each of the organizations strengthened youth resilience by connecting young people to peers, mentors, and role-models; they make use of a range of different activities, including theater, music, visual and movement arts, sports, urban gardening, and other means of self and group enhancement to engage and connect young people in building their resilience and confidence (see Table 1).

The connecting thread across these initiatives is that all employ techniques for attaching youth with peers and mentors, creating a health-promoting milieu in neighborhoods that otherwise leave youth vulnerable to toxic exposures and social isolation. Vulnerability is thus understood not only in terms of individual risks, but risk-filled environments. It demands a focus on the broader social and structural determinants of young people's health and wellbeing, including how histories of political marginalization, trust in the health system, and other social structures shape collective forms of vulnerability within communities (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020; Bourgois et al., 2017; Carruth et al., 2021; Osborne et al., 2021). Research on at-risk youth reports that young people's perceptions of certain behaviors as high or low risk is shaped by group norms and expectations (Graham et al., 2017).

Our research project, Confident Futures, has developed an original, experimental social scientific method, that of *reverse engineering*. In engineering, the term stands for laying bare the working mechanism in a piece of machinery, software or pharmaceutical in order to copy it. A reverse engineer faced with a working tool—without knowing how and why it works—takes it apart for analysis. This allows for building a system with a similar working mechanism using locally available materials. Inspired by this model, we reverse engineer Confident Futures techniques to reveal their working mechanisms and to explore the possibilities of transferring and adapting them across sites and situations. Our aim is thus to discover what makes specific techniques work—that is, render them productive in relation to local goals, adapted to local circumstances, and attractive to those who use them. We address this goal through collaborative ethnography (Hardon and Moyer, 2014; Lassiter, 2005). Our methodology resonates with what Bennett and colleagues refer to as “seeds of a good Anthropocene”—a novel bottom-up learning approach to governing societal crises that invites us to rethink the future building on “experiences drawn from a diversity of practices, worldviews, values, and regions that could accelerate the adoption of pathways to transformative change” (Bennett et al., 2016: 441). More specifically, our project engaged academically-trained ethnographers and community researchers in joint analysis to take stock of the intervention techniques of these youth organizations, reflecting on their mechanisms of action. We also contrast the techniques used across the youth programs (in online sessions), identifying conditions that enable positive achievements.

A core finding is that the mechanisms of well-being are foundationally relational. They depend upon “connectivity,” the dense connections that develop between partner organizations and the communities and participants they serve. For those who run community projects, many of which have emerged from, are rooted in, and focus on strengthening longstanding relationships in specific neighborhoods, this is self-evident. However, this finding often runs counter to top-down public health programming focusing on the individual and mechanisms of individual well-being. In this study, the programs rely upon relationality to build communal resilience, while navigating the distinctive sociopolitical cultural and economic contexts in which these communities exist. Varying patterns of opportunity and inequality are highlighted through the comparison of the nine youth-serving

Table 1
Partner organizations Confident Futures.

Organizations	Programs & Activities
	New York City
Lower Eastside Girls Club (LESGC)	LESGC run programs that serve largely Latinx and African American girls and young women throughout New York's five boroughs, providing a full-service arts, science and civic engagement Center for Community. See: https://www.girlsclub.org/
Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco)	WHEDco is a community development organization in a low income predominantly Latinx and African American neighborhood with a mission “to give the South Bronx access to all the resources that create thriving neighborhoods: from high-quality early education and after school programs, to fresh, healthy food, cultural programming, and economic opportunity.” See: https://whedco.org
Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy	Ifetayo offers African-centered, multi-disciplinary arts & cultural education, and wrap-around supports for families of African descent. As a leading Brooklyn-based institution, Ifetayo empowers youth and families of African descent to achieve high levels of education, professional and artistic excellence. See: https://ifetayo.org
Perfect City/The Catcalling Project	Perfect City is an art and advocacy working group in a low-income predominantly Latinx and African American section of NYC's Lower East Side. The Catcalling Project researches the relationship between catcalling and gentrification using mapping exercises about belonging and avoidance. See: https://perfectcity.org/
Rambler	Amsterdam Rambler is a creative studio and social enterprise empowering socially marginalized young people to design their life through fashion. A place in Amsterdam for creative expression, skill development and personal exploration. See: https://ramblerstudios.com/
IZI Solutions	IZI Solutions is an Amsterdam-based social innovation agency fighting against racial and social inequality in and works towards a righteous and equal society in which the diversity of every individual is respected and appreciated. See: https://www.izi-solutions.com/
E lance Academy	E lance is a coaching-academy for girls and young women from 10 to 32 years old. Through various peer-support programs, E lance trains them to become strong, ambitious women and role models for the next generation. See: https://www.elanceacademy.nl/
Ara Cora	Ara Cora was founded in 2008 to strengthen personal development and the social position of largely Muslim, Moroccan and Turkish neighborhoods in Amsterdam New West. The core of Ara Cora's approach is to reach young people through sports (in particular soccer) and other games, and further engage through group gatherings and individual guidance. See: https://aracora.nl/
GirlsConnect	GirlsConnect provides soccer trainings for girls aged 10 to 13 and 14 to 27, many of whom are Muslim and children of Moroccan and Turkish migrants. For the older age group GirlsConnect offers a tailor-made training program addressing concerns such as sexuality, identity, self-confidence, and social media. This program is now called El Mazouni Coaching & Sportbegeleiding.

organizations across the two main sites.

The contrast between initiatives in New York City and Amsterdam further facilitates analysis of the active mechanisms underlying success or failure in each, because the two cities have distinct social policies, employment possibilities and requirements, population and migration histories, geographical lay-out, educational systems, green spaces, mechanisms of segregation, and exclusion, and more. In New York City, support for grassroots initiatives mainly comes from non-governmental organizations, private sector donations or internships, with some targeted government funding once an initiative has gained momentum from non-governmental sources. In Amsterdam, the city government increasingly facilitates and supports novel youth-led initiatives. These contrasts between the two cities have become ever-more apparent following the COVID-19 outbreak.

1.1. The context of COVID-19 in New York City and Amsterdam

Although the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Washington State in January 2020, by March, April and May, New York City became the epicenter of the pandemic first nationally and then an international epicenter, as well (accounting for 5% of all global cases in late March). There were large differences amongst neighborhoods in infection rate and prevalence. Low-income Black and/or Latinx neighborhoods that have been historically marginalized were most affected (Kantamneni, 2020; Laurencin and McClinton, 2020), with the South Bronx reporting the highest infection rates (Mays and Newman, 2020). This was due to high housing density with multi-generation co-residency in these neighborhoods, and the large percentage of residents working in low-wage essential jobs in health care, sanitation, and food services, relying on public transportation to get to work. These residents had extremely limited access to coronavirus testing, care and protective gear (Ross et al., 2020).

The state and city governments in New York responded by instituting strict lockdown procedures: officials closed schools, restaurants and bars, gyms and community centers, strongly recommending face masks and social distancing. This left young people without access to their

classrooms, recreational or youth development programs, leaving essential workers exposed to coronavirus, too often bringing it home to other family members despite their best efforts to self-quarantine. Meanwhile Republican-party controlled US Federal agencies denied Democratic-party controlled New York State COVID-19 testing and treatment equipment, and refused emergency subsidies, leading to widespread shortages of tests and medical care in New York (Skyes, 2020). Many New York City residents, especially those in low-income Black and/or Latinx neighborhoods, had little access to medical services or protective equipment, and many had shortages of food and basic supplies (see Fig. 1).

The social welfare system in New York City prior to COVID-19 was already disinvested and minimal compared to most European countries; widespread community distrust of government agencies and their messaging regarding the novel coronavirus, and this further contraction of government support left non-profit community organizations as the first line of outreach and defense in many low-income Black and/or Latinx neighborhoods (Reed, 2020; Rodriguez, 2020). Organizations built upon their pre-existing relationships of trust with the communities they served, using their prior experience with nimble responses to local needs, providing reliable coronavirus information and meeting the basic needs of community members.

In Amsterdam, the public health, social and political context of COVID-19 was very different to that of New York City. During the initial six months of COVID-19's impact on Amsterdam, the provision of food and other basic supplies was largely met by ongoing social welfare support, and rapidly orchestrated government COVID-aid packages for people who lost income due to the pandemic, with some support from non-profit charitable organizations. Unlike New York, community-based organizations in Amsterdam focused on providing psychosocial support.

Amsterdam had been considerably less impacted by COVID-19 in the first wave that worsened significantly with the arrival of a second wave. From March 2020 to early July, Amsterdam followed national guidelines for an 'intelligent lockdown,' including the closure of schools, restaurants, bars and gyms; working from home for all citizens except essential workers; and a 1.5-m social distancing rule (except for in the



Fig. 1. Line outside Lower East Side Girls Club, New York City.

home or outdoors for a maximum of 3 persons from the same household). Although the main message was “*Blijf Thuis!*” (“Stay Home!”), citizens were permitted to be outdoors and to do their shopping—keeping to the 1.5-m distancing rule. As in New York, this resulted in extra hygiene and safety measures in shops, including disinfecting sprays and hand gels upon entry, and specific opening hours for senior citizens.

As in New York City, the impacts of COVID-19 were disproportionately felt by low-income families in Amsterdam. The highest burden of COVID-19 has been in more peripheral city districts ‘outside the ring’ (*buiten de ring*), in neighborhoods with lower economic and health status and non-Western migration backgrounds, including Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese (Coyer et al., 2021). Similarly due to high housing density—with smaller houses and larger multigenerational households—and reduced opportunity to work from home and a greater reliance on public transportation, there was a greater risk of exposure and infection.

Deepening inequalities due to the COVID-19 crisis occurred, especially between people who did and did not have digital access and skills needed to maintain social contact at a physical distance (de Vries and Pols, 2020). Addressing some of these growing inequalities in the city, the Amsterdam Municipality made available thousands of laptops and WIFI connections for families in need and engaged major concerns regarding disrupted access to education for disadvantaged youth in deprived urban neighborhoods (Couzy, 2020).

The COVID-19 outbreak called forth strengthened collaboration between the Amsterdam Municipality and youth initiatives, and creative collaboration between youth groups, local police, and other institutions to quickly and effectively provide young people with new services, or existing services in new ways. For example, the project manager at Ara Cora made this collaboration visible between the youth workers, local police, community members and youth themselves in awareness-raising videos of (then) new COVID-19 regulations (see Fig. 2). These videos promote health literacy enabling (young) people to understand the crises and regulations like physical distancing (Singu et al., 2020). COVID-19 highlighted the central importance of youth initiatives in engaging those marginalized outside of the school system and in specific locales. Government and public health professionals have had the most difficulty in reaching this group with prevention messages, and they are likely to have high levels of frustration and resentment towards COVID-19 measures, as shown by the anti-curfew riots in Amsterdam in January 2021. Ongoing collaboration is thus vital and should include contact between more informal and formal organizations (de Vries and Pols, 2020).

2. Methods

2.1. Ethnographic research

This study was designed as a bi-national comparison in order to 1) identify common mechanisms by which community organizations promote youth well-being across political-economic and socio-culturally distinct sites, and 2) to enable the study team to *reverse engineer* successful mechanisms from one site such that the active elements can be translated and adapted to another. As mentioned above, collaborative research in Amsterdam and New York City compared a site with a relatively strong welfare state and government investment in youth programming and a site at which youth-serving organizations often rely on private donations. The two cities also have distinct cultural traditions and specific local social inequalities. Principal investigators for the project brought longstanding experience in working with, and studying, community-based organizations focused on redressing social inequalities in Amsterdam and New York City; they developed the study design collaboratively and recruited lead ethnographers and participating youth-serving organizations in each city with strong track records of work on social inequalities through grassroots interventions.

The nine youth initiatives with whom we partnered as research sites (see Table 1) have all garnered the attention of local departments of education, health or migration, as well as the attention of local media outlets and funders; They have successfully implemented innovative techniques for engaging and promoting emotional health, civic participation, and educational or vocational attainment for neighborhood youth over a decade or more. Ethical approval for our collaborative research project was granted from the AISSR Ethics Advisory Board in Amsterdam and NYU Institutional Review Board in New York City, as well as informed verbal consent from all research participants during the ethnography research.

At each site, we used the methods of ethnography, exploring significant patterns of behavior in social contexts and seeking to interpret them according to insiders’ perspectives, describing cultural milieus from the perspectives of the people for whom it is a way of life (Davis, 2000: 326). In this project, the ethnographic method enabled researchers to critically and collaboratively examine the initiatives’ practices promoting positive mental health and well-being, uncovering through *reverse engineering* their working mechanisms, asking “*how and why does this work here?*” Our methods are designed to learn from the adolescents, youths and adults involved in the selected initiatives by means of semi-structured interviews, small group discussions, and participating in and/or observing quotidian program activities. We recognize that the initiatives may not achieve their intended goals. Yet our methods allow us to track whatever they do achieve.

We introduced and practiced these ethnographic methods during our first in-person exchange and kick-off meeting in New York, May 2019. Amsterdam and New York community organizers and researchers met, sharing site visits to see their work in action. These field visits led to brainstorming sessions tracing the connections and comparisons between sites. This collaborative process was captured on film by our research team (see Fig. 3), informing the ethnographic protocols and ‘methods guide’ developed by the team of principal investigators and ethnographers. Community researchers — selected from within the youth-serving organizations and often themselves young alumni of the programmes — each developed their own ethnographic case studies guided by the ‘methods guide’ and the ethnographers through formal and informal training sessions. We stress that this research was an iterative process: team meetings, working paper exchanges, a monthly newsletter, and face-to-face exchange site visits all reinforced and amplified our ability to learn, analyze and apply across sites (see Fig. 4).

2.2. Adapting to a new research situation due to COVID-19

The ethnographic method is classically a bottom-up approach that is inductive rather than deductive. Hypotheses are always provisional, reshaped as we collect data that explores or challenges assumptions behind the research project. It is thus inherently flexible and able to adjust to changing circumstances, documenting the emergence of new situations (Gobo, 2008; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Reeves et al., 2008). This was precisely the case during the COVID-19 outbreak, which called for rapid methodological and analytical shifts. It meant switching all of our ethnographic fieldwork online and via phone calls. Though physically more distant, these approaches online also enabled us to stay up-to-date and to participate in activities more directly. This included joining zoom sessions or online classes, listening to recordings, following the organization’s Instagram stories, and exchanging monthly newsletters.

Due to COVID-19 our second in-person all-team meeting in Amsterdam was cancelled. Inspired by the COVID-transforming work of our project’s community initiatives and their ability to stay socially connected with program participants despite physical distance, teams in both cities began Zooming in May 2020, discussing the challenges and opportunities of doing ethnographic research in these rapidly evolving contexts. We followed up with monthly virtual meetings and newsletters, keeping up-to-date with each other’s research developments,



Fig. 2. Still from youth awareness raising video in Dutch ("We can do this together").



Fig. 3. Still from NYC kick-off meeting after movie: <https://vimeo.com/381913933> (Credit: Juul op den Kamp).

sharing updates from and between the initiatives, and sustaining data collection in this new evolving landscape.

Confident Futures has had the privilege of being able to capture this present moment. Unlike many of the barriers faced by scientific researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sevelius et al., 2020), we have been able to follow the global shift to online working platforms, analyzing exchanges of information, strategies and lessons learned amongst our partner organizations, communities, and individuals. We observed how these actors negotiated space for youth to meet off-line during lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic enhanced our

understandings of the working mechanisms already identified: connectivity, creativity, and safe space.

2.3. Working mechanisms

2.3.1. Connectivity

Prior to the global pandemic, Confident Futures had identified "connectivity" as a key working mechanism. Through ongoing fieldwork, we noted that dense connections across organizations, communities and participants enabled successful engagement with young



Fig. 4. Tracing connection in virtual space.

people, providing them with resources towards communal resilience. We emphasize communal resilience as opposed to individual resilience, noting the importance of building on the social capital present within communities. According to [Nguyen-Gillham et al. \(2008\)](#)

Social capital in the form of a cohesive network of clan, family, friends, caring adults as well as support through schools and neighborhood clubs provide sustenance. At the same time, faith, education and a commitment to justice strengthen resolve and endurance ([Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008: 297](#)).

By emphasizing communal resilience, we seek to reorient the focus off the individual toward collective responses, deemphasizing the role of individualism re-placing the locus of change in response to social inequality ([Mendenhall and Kim, 2021](#); [Park et al., 2018](#)). We note how community organizations drew on the strengths and resources already present in the community while advocating for local and national level support from government officials.

During the youth participants' time together in their respective organizations, they have created games, played sports and designed collectively. Through these connections they also co-created support communities, deepened trust between staff, participants and families, allowing the possibility for safe spaces to emerge. These forms of communal resilience are in line with previous studies showing the importance of family and friends in responding to crisis ([Arafat and Boothby, 2003](#); [Benard, 1991](#); [Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008](#)). By tapping into available community resources – established linkages to families, youth, and community organizers - partner organizations were able to respond and readjust as connection was lost during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

During the global pandemic, partner organizations closed their physical spaces, developing new ways of connecting with participants, as distancing measures were implemented. There are differences of scope and impact that COVID-19 continues to have on communities in Amsterdam and New York City, yet all these organizations have identified connection to their participants and communities as essential to their continued support of young people. In some cases, where meeting in-person was possible, they co-created new games, sports and other activities. These experiences heightened trust, allowing the possibility for safe spaces to emerge.

In other cases, physical restrictions augmented the use of technology to run online programming, develop newsletters, supporting their

communities through different kinds of programs. For example, the Lower East Side Girls Club (LESGC), serving a primarily low-income Black and/or Latinx neighborhood in Manhattan, not only rapidly moved member-supporting classes and meetings online, they also conducted a survey of all the girls' families identifying who needed specific emergency resources as New York State's then-governor Andrew Cuomo made national headlines with his frequently televised briefings placing the city and state "on pause" with strict lockdown measures. LESGC was able to identify and address gaps because of their previously established close connections and relationships to the girls, their parents and the community, and thus sprang into immediate action, something city agencies took weeks or even months to do.

Food boxes including both Club-grown vegetables and canned goods were immediately planned and delivered on weekends. Club staff knew that many girls received family food boxes from their schools, Monday through Friday, but LESGC had weekend supplemental nutrition ready to go within a week of the shut-down. Each food box included masks (sewn by LESGC members) and household cleaning supplies. Likewise, staffers loaned out other welcome items: computers, iPads, sewing machines, and donated art supplies to families with younger children. Online classes in yoga, meditation, and home-computer skills were quickly mounted and publicized, with ensuing high enrollments. In a neighborhood too often isolated by urban transportation grids and health infrastructure, where low-income essential workers take public transport and inhabit crowded housing, many families relied on the LESGC for sustenance during the crisis when their locale became part of the pandemic's epicenter.

In another example, WHEDco was able to provide families with financial help, offering supermarket gift cards, vouchers and guidance through zoom/video calls, while also delivering groceries to hundreds of families every Wednesday (see [Fig. 5](#)). During July, they organized an all-ages book giveaway, gifting free books. Similarly, in Amsterdam, Elance Academy coordinated zoom meetups and calls (see [Fig. 6](#)) with parents, introducing the coaches working with their daughters. During these conversations, staffers also learned how the girls were doing at home.

While partners found ways to reconnect during a global pandemic, they also described the challenges of cancelled physical connections. Many examples highlighted their reconstructions, yet also disconnections. Many found that their own health was directly negatively impacted by the pandemic: relatives sickened and died; household members required



Fig. 5. WHEDco hybrid connections (credit: Argenis Apolinario).

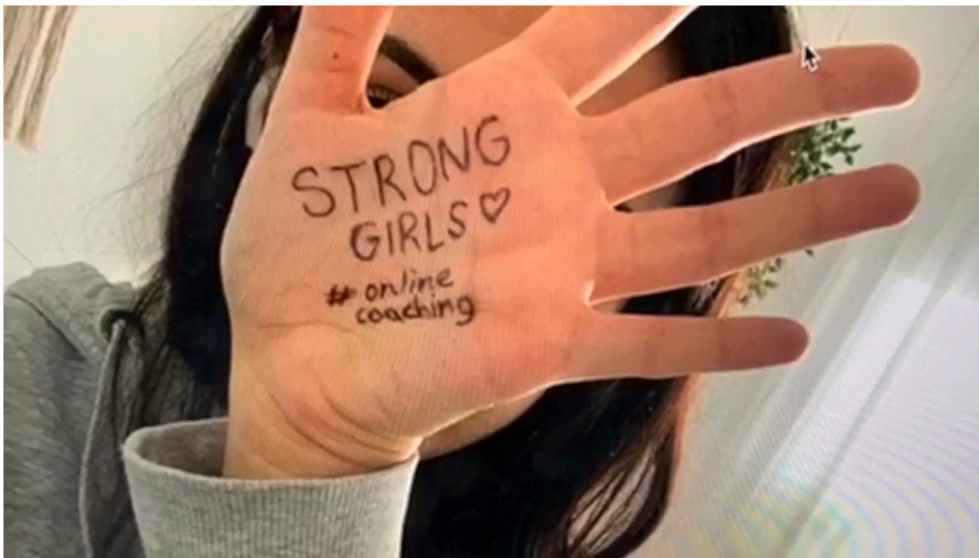


Fig. 6. Still from Elance Academy online coaching video.

nursing through long COVID recoveries (Ghosh et al., 2020). Additionally, the recent deaths of Black people at the hands of the police in the US sparked a global uprising against systemic racism and anti-Blackness. Many of our partners addressed both challenges, both disproportionately debilitating and decimating Black and brown communities (Laurencin and McClinton, 2020; Reed, 2020; Rodriguez, 2020).

Many community members also had limited access to online learning, disrupting their ability to connect. The loss of physically safe spaces once provided by partner organizations also removed a safety net on which young people could rely (Ghosh et al., 2020). For WHEDco this shut down their Just Ask Me peer-reproductive health program because in-home digital meetings were within earshot of adults. Instead, WHEDCo provided an after-school program via zoom offering support with homework, fitness, karaoke, mindfulness and meditation, filmmaking, virtual games, counseling and more. They were able to

reconnect in these ways, while acknowledging the loss of a space for young people to discuss a subject that was often difficult to raise at home, and the impact of suspending these programs on young people's sexuality.

2.3.2. Reconnecting in the "new normal"

When lockdown eased, the organizations remained committed to physical connections for youth, while meeting social distancing challenges to prevent viral transmission. Here, a difference between Amsterdam and New York became apparent. Easing lockdown in the Netherlands exempted youth below the age of 18 from the physical distancing rules (among each other; they must physically distance from teachers and mentors), allowing the organizations to start up young people's football (soccer) again.

A LESGC community researcher in New York told us, "it's difficult to

completely implement these new guidelines because the girls simply want to interact and hang out more.” LESGC is finding alternatives that will allow less restriction while also making it the safest place possible. Although cleanliness has been key in creating a safe space, the staff equally prioritizes mental health by infusing each class with some form of meditation and open conversation.

The LESGC researcher notes how the girls were having difficulty adjusting to this “new normal”. The first week after lockdown was hardest; many had not seen each other for months and only wanted to hug and be close. During lunch, she intruded on two girls who kept hugging, with reminders of distancing. One responded that she missed being with her friend too much. At other times, girls have opened up about their quarantine challenges. Many had difficulty with online schooling: one girl in the podcast class mentioned she had to take remedial summer classes because she couldn’t keep up with the many remote spring school assignments. Others sympathized, sharing similar stories: nobody wanted to attend summer school, viewed as punishment despite trying to do their best, yet failing by City Department of Education metrics. The community researcher believes that home quarantine has made the girls truly appreciate attending the Club, joining supportive staff and friends.

This “new normal” reconnection phase at the Girls Club resonates with that at Rambler, a fashion design studio in Amsterdam for high-risk youth – those with housing instability or disconnected from their families or from school. Rambler reopened their doors with a kick-off session for members to slowly resume their work. “It’s really nice to be back in normal spirit,” said one of the young Ramblers following the session, “I’ve really missed normal life and it feels really good ... but then with these new protocols?” New COVID-19 regulations enforced limited studio capacity and a new spatial organization, since most Ramblers are 18-plus and must comply with adult physical distancing rules. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Ramblers would sit around one large table; now each has their own work table to ensure 1.5-m distance. “Corona proofing” of the studio used tape that marked movement direction within the studio space (i.e., past hand sanitizers upon entry) and designating chairs where people could not sit. In Fig. 7, we see the making and marking of a safe space in times of COVID-19 at Rambler.

For several Ramblers, the studio reopening bestowed a sense of normalcy that was both exciting and relaxed. For others, it was “*om weer bezig te zijn*” (“to be busy again”) in the studio that enabled them to retreat from the challenges faced at home, focusing on their creative talents. We will continue to observe and analyze this careful tinkering of these different relationships with health and/in space. But in all sites we saw that COVID-19’s challenges to existing patterns of connectivity and physical proximity shaped projects to reconfigure or re-establish their foundations of relationality. Adapted programs’ successes did not rely on providing individualized learning or services, but continued to center the importance of group affiliation and interactions. These efforts reconnected young people to their relational potentials.

2.3.3. Safe space

The second working mechanism, ‘safe space’, emerged very early on in our pre-pandemic research as a key feature of all community youth initiatives. It includes creating environments, situations, meetings, activities and discussions so that young people feel supported, can express themselves freely, share and address their challenges and learn new coping skills that recognize their talents. Safe spaces typically prioritize the mental and social well-being of participants through interconnectedness, creating opportunities to share emotions, thoughts, beliefs, skills, and relaxed experiences (Boostrom, 1998; Hancock and Gillen, 2007). These places are not necessarily geographically anchored (Gembus, 2018), but describe experiential and psychosocial spaces (Stengel and Weems, 2010).

Across many of the youth initiatives, gender-specific safe spaces are common, including girls-only and boys-only programs. In Amsterdam, GirlsConnect has long organized soccer training for girls, many of whom



Fig. 7. Keeping 1.5m distance, Rambler studios, Amsterdam.

are Muslim and from immigrant families, aged 10 to 13 and 14 to 24. These training sessions take place indoors after-school hours in enclosed private spaces of school gyms. This setting enables relaxed intimacy and comfort; indeed, many of the girls train without their usual outdoor headscarves. This space provides a positive feel for the girls: one of the younger participants explained that it was fun, less competitive, and more inclusive. According to Sellman (2015), spaces created to be more genuinely inclusive also more fully involve vulnerable young people in defining the venue and agenda (64).

Generally, girls-only safe spaces nurture discussions of gender-specific issues that might not otherwise emerge (Lewis et al., 2015). In the case of GirlsConnect, the organization takes these topics from the girls soccer training into thematic meetings (*themabijeenkomsten*) that shape their tailor-made coaching and group training programs. Girls 14 to 27 participate in an intimate group discussion of themes like sexuality, Identity, violence, self-confidence, resilience, and social media.

2.3.4. Building trust & familiarity

Like the two young women running the organization, most of the GirlsConnect participants are Moroccan-Dutch. This creates a sense of familiarity and recognition between the founders and the girls; one of the founders stresses that this is essential for the girls to feel safe and to share openly during sessions. “You create depth by sharing your own vulnerability and daring to share and to be open and honest,” she said, listing “*herkenning*” (recognition) and “*begrip*” (understanding) as important techniques and processes in creating a safe space. “I am a person that, if I don’t feel safe, then I’ll just quit,” explained an older GirlsConnect participant, “but [the founders] have really created the safety, and maintained it from the start, because everything that was discussed there also stayed there.” The safe space consciously created by the founders fosters respectful communication and practices. They model being open

and vulnerable while creating opportunities for others through respect and confidentiality.

Like GirlsConnect, IZI Solutions values safe space in principle and action. As an innovation bureau driving change for social and racial equity for Amsterdam youth and ethnic-cultural and/or religious communities (including North African, Sub-Saharan African, Middle-Eastern and Caribbean), IZI deploys diverse techniques to create experiential recognition and social cohesion. Safe spaces are tailored to care for both individuals and community needs. IZI's co-founder is another example of a strong facilitator creating safety in practice. She cares for her participants and ensures safety by creating a place where their experiences are re-centered. IZI invites participants who have shared backgrounds. For example, they developed a young-women-only leadership training program centered on the experience of being a Black woman in the Netherlands.

Setting intentions and ground rules enhances trust and mutual respect among participants, including facilitators and staff. For example, in New York City, Perfect City's Cat Calling Project of Black and/or Latinx youth from Manhattan's low-income Lower East Side uses "guiding principles:" a list of norms that open all public events and meetings. Among others, this includes "*Emotional Amnesty – that means no one judges you for what you say.*" These principles are intended to open up inclusive safe space. Ifetayo, a Brooklyn NY pan-African arts youth organization supported such rules with its spatial organization, including arranging chairs in a circle during Ifetayo's "Mbongi" (collective decision making) sessions to highlight unity and an enclosed circle of trust (see Fig. 8). The space within the circle has specific social expectations; it is a strong symbol of non-hierarchy, where everyone can see and be seen by all others (Brown and Lallo, 2020: 371).

"*The younger generation has spoken!*" said Ifetayo's community engagement liaison, after one of the youngest members in the circle interrupted an older member during their rather lengthy introduction. The community engagement liaison was better known as "the heart and soul" of the organization. Instead of 'correcting' the young girl for her interjection, she facilitated the transition and enthusiastically encouraged the young girl to take her space to express herself. Ifetayo's vision

promulgates a vision of society where every child of African descent is valued and thrives. The *mbongi* circle was an intentionally safe space where all community members, young and old, were equally welcome to explore and share without fear.

2.3.5. Re-defining safety

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and need for social distancing presented coaches, mentors, and facilitators with many challenges: they had to find new ways of creating safe spaces. Trusted leadership was essential during these times. While GirlsConnect tried to stay connected with the girls during the COVID-19 pandemic—using Zoom, WhatsApp, and phone calls—it proved to be a real challenge to their work. Depending on family situation, GirlsConnect participants often lacked the privacy within their own homes and were unwilling to have open conversations, particularly around sensitive issues. Despite the ever-stronger need for safe spaces for many to share openly and comfortably during such stressful and uncertain times, GirlsConnect leaders could not replicate online the space they had co-created in person. This same challenge had driven WHEDco in the Bronx to stop running the JAM peer-reproductive health program for which a private physical space was key.

During the gradual easing of COVID-19 regulations in Amsterdam Mid-May 2020, outdoor sports were temporarily permitted, and GirlsConnect resumed their soccer training in a new outdoor space (see Fig. 9). The enclosed private space of the indoor soccer hall had thus become re-defined as unsafe, when viewed exclusively as the promotion and protection of physical health. However, this move outside complicated the creation of safe space, as facilitators constantly contended with external distractions to the unisex girls' focus, interrupted by the presence of by-passers, including boys. Despite these challenges GirlsConnect continued to redefine safe space for the girls in their program and luckily not long after were again able to offer indoor activities.

The COVID-19 outbreak thus meant a re-valuing and re-defining of safe spaces. Initiatives had to place greater emphasis on the materiality of spaces, now viewed increasingly through the lens of physical health. Whereas previously safe spaces enabled a sense of social and mental



Fig. 8. "Mbongi," Ifetayo, Brooklyn.

meaning-making, while creating and maintaining solidarity. The social trust that Perfect City has earned allows activists to understand the (often-invisible) needs of community members (Carrera et al., 2019).

A community researcher at Perfect City/Cat Calling Project shared: “When we strive for equitable and functioning spaces, we understand that safety does not look the same for everyone.” Hence, it is critical to imagine what participants in these spaces can do to change “the current systems in place.” Flexible capacity to adapt in the face of adversity is an underscoring theme in community work. Our community researchers have demonstrated how their ideas come with a call to action and a relentless willingness to implement and “do the work” it implies under the challenging conditions of COVID-19. They push back against the prevailing view that young people who live in structurally vulnerable communities suffer from a “learned helplessness.” Instead, community organizations are often structurally optimistic, hopeful, persistent, and therefore persevere in constantly challenging negativity, using their own lived experiences with adversity as opportunities for change.

2.3.6. Creativity

Innovation is the practical application of creativity, the third working mechanism discussed here. Under Covid stress, creativity has been key in forging a road forward for already-overworked and underfunded community organizations. Innovative ideas are insufficient; they must be implemented to have real impact. The youth-serving organizations that we are studying are all extraordinarily action-oriented. In their work, ideas are inextricable from effort and the courage to bring new opportunities to fruition. These partner groups operated “outside of the box,” rapidly activating concrete projects despite financial constraints and other difficulties endemic to their organizations.

While the pandemic has been quite limiting, it has also enabled new possibilities for collaborative projects, particularly online. For example, after seven years of conversation, a NYC Rambler partnership began between Amsterdam and the Big Apple. No longer limited by time/space constraints, a studio-to-studio exchange was finally realized and launched in summer 2020. In collaboration with Henry Street Settlement in New York, Rambler ran a 5-week program from their studio in

Amsterdam, providing fashion design and storytelling coaching sessions four days/week via zoom.

Henry Street has offered this New York City-funded workforce development summer program to “disconnected youth” (their term) as part of the municipal summer youth employment program begun in 1963. Henry Street Settlement wanted to continue providing youth with income earning opportunities and the associated benefits that come with working. Executive Vice President of Partnerships and Innovation at Henry Street Settlement, shared that while the organizing was ambitious, they only had a few weeks to put it together after receiving last-minute municipal funding. This “forced remote programming” actually made fostered trans-Atlantic collaboration, as Rambler-Amsterdam taught members of Rambler-New York concepts of design, and how to find their “own creative story.” The program’s first cohort consisted of ten students. Weiss noted that the experience was, “empowering for all involved.” Henry Street staff are optimistic that the ground has been laid for longer-term partnerships and collaborative future endeavors (see Fig. 11).

While this venture’s virtual form emerged as a response to COVID-19, it also demonstrated how creativity can be part of professional development. Fashion design can be monetized. This cross-cultural exchange exposes youth who might not have the opportunity to connect with Rambler’s vision and programming, and who may well use their new skills to search for creative employment where none formerly seemed possible. This intercontinental collaboration also constitutes an important example of what we see as an exercise in reverse engineering, aiming to consciously evaluate and improve the use of techniques locally, making them potentially transferable to other sites. This enables participants to feel forward motion beyond the distressful pandemic, equipped with a potential “plan of action” (Entress et al., 2020).

With “normal life” radically changing via extended lockdown in both New York City and Amsterdam, it became painfully clear that many young people would be exposed to many stressors associated with being socially distant (and isolated). In order to prevent or reduce these potential traumas as health risk factors later in life, many of the participating organizations took action to offer creative outlets for youth



Fig. 11. NYC Ramblers meet Amsterdam designer at Rambler Studios.

participants remotely.

Another example is Perfect City's Catcalling Project work with women at a Lower East Side shelter for families escaping domestic violence. They invite participants "to map their surroundings, focusing on what they avoid and how they get from place to place" (Aaron Landsman, personal communication, 2020). It was clear that COVID-19 created new safety barriers in how shelter residents navigated the city. The mapping projects helped them "render artistically the city that would protect them better, who they include in their network of support, and what they want to see in place to strengthen their ties to each other and their support networks" (Aaron Landsman, personal communication, 2020). COVID restrictions exacerbated feelings of risk and challenged their ability to map a way out of isolation. For this reason, Perfect City's Cat Calling project immediately sought to provide them tools (art supplies) to continue mapping at home, ensuring that they continued to activate their imaginations in order to feel grounded and safe(r.)

Additionally, understanding the stresses of this type of organizing, Perfect City (the Cat Calling Project) created a Summer Book Club to maintain important conversations about social and political concerns with a broader community. The objective was for all participants to refuel and reflect in the context of community. The Book Club also enabled them to check in with each other, providing a (virtual) space to ensure that they were not overwhelmed by the work and the current state of the world. Likewise, Amsterdam-based Ara Cora launched a new platform, a vodcast (video podcast), aimed at young people (but also interesting for older participants), creating a place where young people could express themselves. This type of communication cultivates healthy relationships and allows for connecting in a time when disconnection and misunderstandings pervade so much of the everyday lives of young people. This platform also allows them to build trust in their own capacity to successfully navigate interpersonal challenges as a community (Paarlberg et al., 2020). The conversation that happens on these platforms center on topics and current events that the press does not cover, but that impact young people.

However, going online also came with certain challenges that required the organizations to reimagine what connectivity and safe

spaces look and feel like in the absence of face-to-face contact. One LESGC researcher noted, "Creating a safe space before COVID-19 was easy but after it got a lot more complicated. Not only does the girls club create a safe space physically but we also create one mentally." Coping with the conflicts and constraints associated with providing remote programming is challenging. However, as NYC-Rambler demonstrated, these constrained possibilities can also be powerful catalysts for creativity (see Fig. 12).

2.3.7. The creativity of the hustle

Those living in the margins of society cannot count on having their interests represented or advanced by mainstream social structures and systems. To navigate this situation they must employ creativity on a regular basis. In this sense, creativity is a core life mechanism for those who are poor, immigrants, women, people of color, or in other ways structurally vulnerable and forced to be creative in confronting day-to-day problems. We have observed that this creativity is essential to many of the community organizations and is a core component that ensures the effectiveness of their responses rather than simply being a novelty.

The LESGC and Perfect City/Cat Calling Project immediately declared that it was not enough to provide healthy food; they also identified unmet mental health needs that required attention. They made available art supplies and reading material to nurture and soothe the inevitable anxiety of living through an epidemic. Their keen understanding of what makes collective resiliency possible was foregrounded on their knowledge of the pre-existing conditions and circumstances within the marginalized communities they serve. These insights and experiences further stimulated the organization's creative potential for problem-solving. Hence, our research highlights this manifestation and correlation of rich data in the midst of "compounded" challenges (Sevelius et al., 2020).

Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy also responded creatively, leaning into their strengths. Ifetayo's community researcher explains that the organization, "utilized their core principles to navigate a global pandemic within the era of Black Lives Matter, and Anti-Blackness in the social worlds

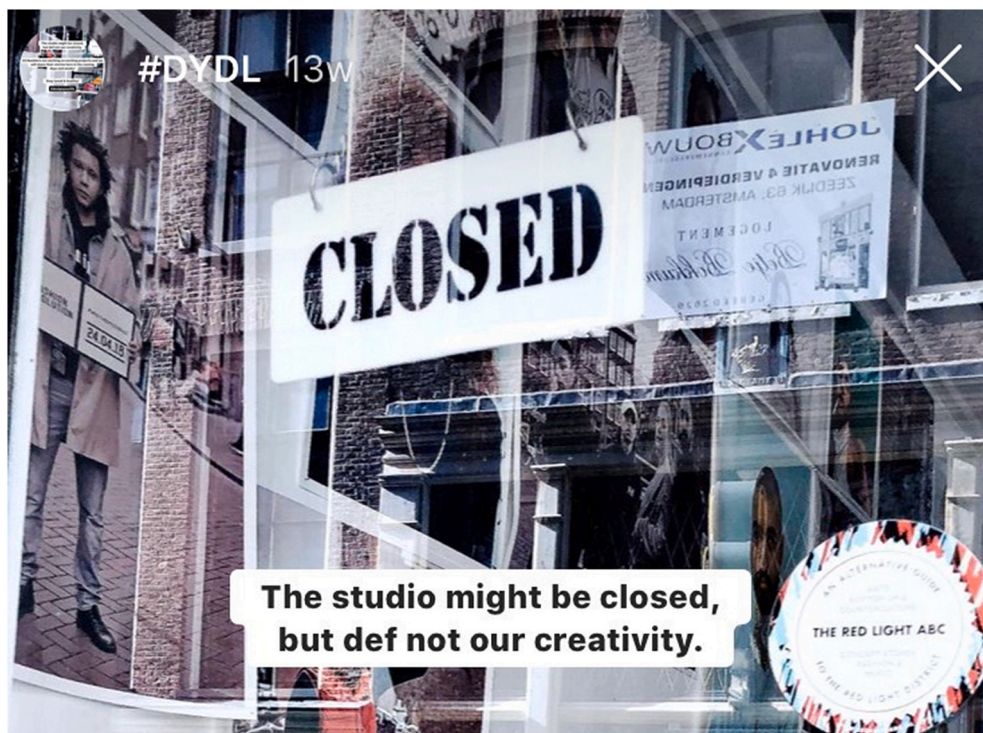


Fig. 12. Rambler Studios on Instagram.

of youth who already are faced with critical engagements,” therefore needing to stay, “physically distant but socially connected.” Youth of African descent are often disconnected from many systems or experience discrimination by them. Hence, to mitigate this circumstance, Ifetayo remained visibly present.

This was also the case for IZI Solutions in Amsterdam; despite the limitations to in-person meetings they found creative ways to continue their anti-racism activities, working in overdrive, especially with their initiative “Control Alt Delete”, committed to ending racial profiling. They received many complaints during the lockdown by young people with a non-European migrant background about negative experiences with the police. In recognizing the hard work of all their members at this particularly stressful time, IZI dropped off care packages and thanked their program participants. This technique enabled them to affirm their organization’s values of recognition and appreciation and the importance of their individual and collective actions, especially in regards to Black Lives Matters.

Rambler-Amsterdam prepared design kits for young members to take home, keeping them ‘creating’ and ‘designing’ their daily lives in lockdown (see Fig. 13). Ramblers were encouraged to share and stay connected through social media with the hashtag #designyourdailylife (#DYDL), not knowing if/when they would be together again in the studio, but ensuring that they were not working alone but, instead,



Fig. 13. Still from Rambler preparing home design kits, Amsterdam.

together apart.

3. Conclusion

Rather than shutting down due to COVID-related challenges, the grassroots organizations in our study helped young people stabilize their lives in low-income, vulnerable, disrupted and marginalized communities during lockdown in ways that reveal the foundations of their working mechanisms. These mechanisms were key to adapting their responses to local community needs, enhancing collective resilience capability, while fostering collaborative efforts across government and NGO sectors and with distinct community stakeholders (Paarlberg et al., 2020). Our research team’s, pre-pandemic bonds enabled us to document the flexible responses of those organizations in the face of COVID-19, collecting rich data despite the difficulty of conducting research at the time (Sevelius et al., 2020).

Detailed above are three of many mechanisms that emerged from our fieldwork: fostering connectivity, maintaining safe spaces, and facilitating creativity. With respect to connectivity, the rapid adoption of online technologies stood out, leading to the identification of urgent needs such as food supplies over weekends and financial aid, and to digital challenges, including lack of spaces to speak privately, and paucity of devices and WIFI-coverage to allow for easy access to online events. Here a stark difference emerged between the initiatives in Amsterdam, which were able to access support for digital access from the local government, and New York where such support mostly needed to be negotiated through private funders. Ultimately NYC Public Schools did get donations of devices from corporate sponsors such as Apple and IBM, as well as donations of free WIFI access from telecommunications companies, seeking to serve 300,000 students in need (Feiner, 2020). But such New York City initiatives were slow and erratic, whereas our community groups jumped into provisioning these connectivity materials with speed and creativity.

Overall, our Confident Futures study was (accidentally) positioned to document the results of a natural experiment involving how grassroots, community-based youth organizations respond to large scale disasters. By applying reverse engineering methods, our findings indicate that such organizations are uniquely positioned to serve as a flexible and generative line of first defense, given their inherent knowledge of the relevant social networks, gatekeepers and influencers in their communities. These organizations have long built high levels of trust among their constituency in the face of uncertainty, and they have a well-established role in brokering relationships with government agencies such as police, health and social service providers, schools and funders. Above all, their commitment to youth well-being and their willingness to try new approaches enabled remarkable flexibility in the face of these unprecedented challenges. We also highlight the relevance of collaboration across all sectors to activate and mobilize community responses yielding sustainable and flexible responses (Entress et al., 2020).

One obvious structural influence on the organizations responses was the level of government support and provision of welfare, with diverse situations in Amsterdam and New York leading to community organizations’ different responses during the pandemic. In Amsterdam, community initiatives were able to build on already well-developed partnerships with the city government to maximize community engagement in government funded relief efforts. With the welfare state providing most of the material support, youth serving organizations were more rapidly able to focus on providing psychosocial support. In New York City, a political landscape in which the social safety net is thinner and government agencies are less directly partnered with community organizations, the youth-serving local groups themselves found and disseminated resources for basic survival needs and community education. In both instances, despite the differences in the roles of the community organizations, their importance as first responders is clear, due to their embeddedness and relationality to the communities they serve and in ways that government departments or external

organizations will find hard to replicate.

The policy-relevant message is clear: long-term investments to strengthen community-based youth organizations are actually investments in disaster preparedness, as these organizations are crucial first responders and change agents in the face of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In analyzing their responses to pandemic-related social crises, city/state governments should recognize the work of community organizations, learning that social support and collective care cannot occur without the pre-existing structures that are well-embedded and trusted within communities. In consulting with community organizations, governments may discover some of the gaps existing within their own structures, recognizing the need to invest in community organizations to fill them. Furthermore, a comparison between community and state responses in two different countries reveals areas for additional development.

Furthermore, creative arts, exercise and sports involve embodied practices and narratives of heritage and imagined futures that position youth to thrive over time, with a focus on stability during periods of urban disruptions in neighborhood housing, education and employment preparation, and civic empowerment participation. In the process, we have learned that the flexible and creative responses of these groups all protected the positive mental health resources available to young people, as well. "Hiding in plain sight", groups such as the ones with whom we are partnering are indeed providing tutelage for "Confident Futures"; they offer precious resources for urban youth and their allies in enhancing alternatives for the coming years.

Author contributions

All authors discussed the results, contributed analysis tools, and performed writing – original draft preparation, reviewing and editing.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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