



COVID-19 Crisis Intervention for Black Girls Impacted by the Foster Care and Juvenile Legal Systems

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Black Women's
Justice Institute**

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Executive Summary

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, youth in foster care and youth impacted by the juvenile legal system faced a number of risks and vulnerabilities, including physical and mental health challenges, housing instability, poorer educational outcomes, and more. Studies confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these vulnerabilities and increased racial and ethnic disparities among these youth; however, few of those studies explore the effects of gender. This study seeks to address that, exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Black girls and gender-expansive youth impacted by the foster care and the juvenile legal systems and the organizations that serve them.

Several key themes emerged about the needs of system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth during the pandemic. Among them was that the pandemic intensified already-existing needs related to housing, income, education, food, and mental health. Organizations responded to meet those needs and better serve youth in many ways, including the following:

- **Providing crisis responses** focused on mental health and emotional wellness, safe housing, financial assistance, technology access, and food. The pandemic did not create these; rather, it intensified these persistent threats to system-impacted Black girls' wellbeing.
- **Increasing access to technology** and the internet to maintain connection with family and friends and for students to participate in school: The pandemic exposed a digital divide, running along racial, ethnic, and class lines in the United States—having far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for the education and wellbeing of Black youth, already at high risk of disconnecting from school. This digital divide was a major challenge for system-impacted Black girls.
- **Offering remote services** by redesigning foster care services and programming for court-involved youth. Even as stay-at-home orders relaxed, remote services remained a part of programming, especially for youth impacted by the juvenile legal system, which for some young people and families continues to facilitate more program engagement.
- **Developing advocacy networks** to discuss critical issues facing organizations and the youth they served. Given the unprecedented circumstances, organizational networks created space for providers to share what they were experiencing, learn about different strategies to support the safety and wellbeing of youth and staff, and offer support, including vital information about COVID-19 to members of the community.

Throughout the pandemic, service providers were a lifeline for Black girls and gender-expansive youth impacted by the foster care and juvenile legal systems. Despite challenges, providers continued to advocate for their clients, communities, and each other to ensure system-impacted Black girls' needs were met during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus emerged in December 2019, resulting in the most devastating global pandemic in more than 100 years. Since March 2020, more than 1.1 million people have died from COVID-19 in the U.S.¹ As the virus spread across the globe, the crowded, often unsanitary conditions of places of confinement, such as in prisons, jails, and youth detention, enabled the COVID-19 virus to spread quickly, jeopardizing the health, welfare, and lives of incarcerated people, as well as staff and the surrounding communities. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has crudely estimated that 1.5 incarcerated people per 1000 died from COVID-19 between February 2020 and February 2021.²

The impact of COVID-19 on people held in places of confinement impacted both adults and youth. However, the prevalence and impact of COVID-19 on system-impacted youth specifically³ is not as well understood. The availability of data on the impact of COVID-19 on youth who are placed in detention or other types of out-of-home placement, such as congregate group homes for youth in foster care, is limited and has been difficult to access.⁴ In March 2021, the Sentencing Project reported that there were 3,936 known COVID-19 cases in youth detention throughout the country, with the highest concentrations in California, Texas, and Florida.⁵ To reduce risk of exposure to COVID-19, youth detention centers released incarcerated youth en masse, allowing them to return home to their families and communities. The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that decarcerating youth during the pandemic resulted in a sharp decline in the youth detention population starting as early as April 2020, continuing until June 2020.⁶ However, it also found that racial and ethnic disparities in youth detention worsened during the pandemic, especially between white and Black youth.⁷ According to their data from 30% of juvenile detention centers in the United States, white youth were released from detention at a faster rate than Black and Latinx youth.⁸ However, the overall decline in youth detention was only temporary. As of June 2022, the number of youth in detention rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, and Black youth were 8 times more likely to be detained compared to white youth—an even higher detention risk than what Black youth faced before the pandemic.⁹

There has been even less data analysis and research about system-impacted youth in the community. Not all system-impacted youth are placed in detention; most remain in the community, sentenced to probation or diversion programs. And system-impacted youth already faced a number of risks and challenges before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Compared to girls in the general population, girls in foster care are more likely to change schools more frequently, experience poorer educational performance



and outcomes, experience forced sex, and experience pregnancy by age 19.¹⁰ Black youth account for 23% of youth in foster care, yet comprise only 13% of the general population.¹¹

- For girls impacted by the juvenile-legal system, research shows that arrests and court involvement disrupt students' educational trajectories, causing academic delays and students to leave school altogether.¹² Court-involved youth also tend to score high on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) assessment, which assesses the kind and magnitude of a person's experiences of trauma before the age of 17.¹³ Higher scores are associated with poor outcomes across several life domains, including health, wellbeing, and employment.

Taking a look at the experiences of court-involved youth through the eyes of service providers, the Youth Justice Research Lab found that the pandemic exacerbated existing “structural vulnerabilities” that already put system-impacted youth in New York City, especially youth of color, at risk for poor outcomes in several ways, including physical and mental health, housing, and social connection.¹⁴ Similar to other reports, the study confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic increased racial and ethnic disparities for youth impacted by the foster care and juvenile justice systems.

However, that study and others do not explore the effects of gender on the needs and experiences of system-impacted youth during the pandemic. Despite strong evidence confirming that Black girls are disproportionately represented within the juvenile legal system and that their pathways and needs differ from those of other youth, Black girls and gender-expansive youth are rarely centered in analyses examining the experiences of youth impacted by foster care and the juvenile court system. This study intends to fill that gap by exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic affected system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth and the organizations that serve them.

Research Methods

From November 2021 to March 2022, the National Black Women's Justice Institute conducted a mixed-methods study investigating the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black girls and gender-expansive youth who were impacted by the foster care and juvenile legal systems. Our goal was to understand the needs of system-impacted Black girls during the pandemic, how they compared to their needs and experiences before the pandemic, and how organizations supported Black girls and helped them meet their needs during such an unprecedented public health crisis. We also sought to understand how the pandemic affected service provision by exam-

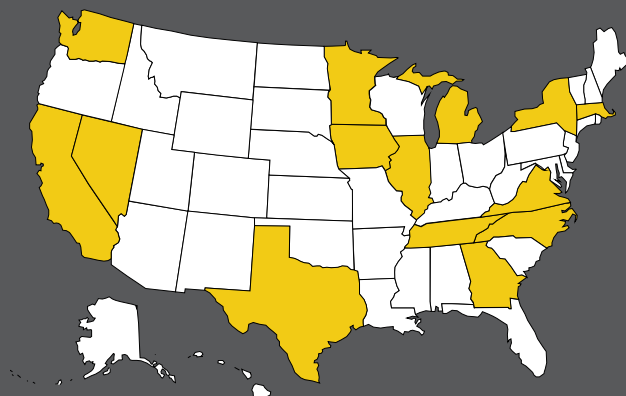
Profile of Organizations Surveyed

Services provided	Number of orgs providing services
Youth development	21
Youth/juvenile justice programs	14
Case management	14
Education assistance	11
Employment assistance	9
Social worker	8
Housing assistance	7
Foster care provider	2
Out-of-home placement (foster care)	2
Out-of-home placement (juvenile justice)	2
Medical care	1
Other*	13

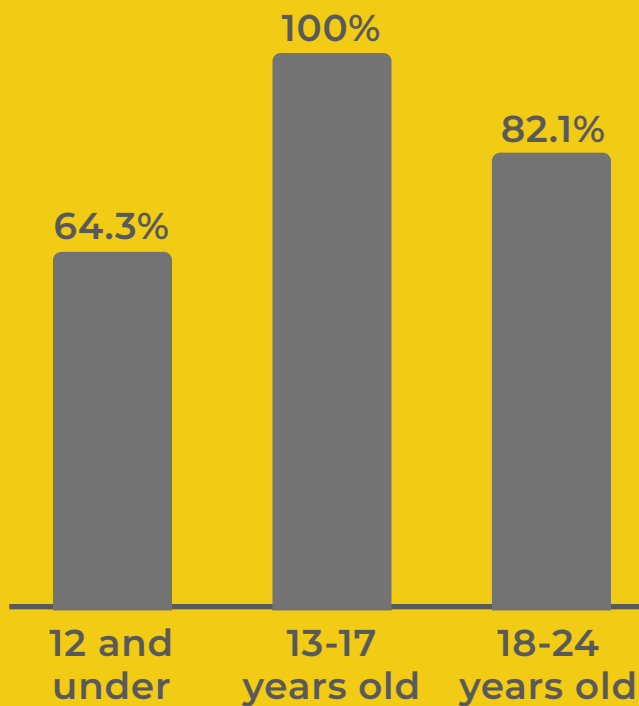
n=29

* Other includes music education, mental health services, policy change, professional development, mentorship, financial management, STEAM management, CSEC prevention

States where surveyed organizations are located



Age range of youth served by surveyed organizations



ining, for example, whether or not organizations closed programs at any point and for how long, as well as how they modified programming in response to young people's needs. In total, we administered 29 surveys and conducted six key informant interviews with service providers from across the country, who shared with us how they provided crisis intervention, transitioned programs and services online, and formed coalitions with other organizations to advance the needs and wellness of Black girls and gender-expansive youth impacted by the foster care and juvenile legal systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

Several key themes emerged about the needs of Black girls and gender-expansive youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and how organizations responded to meet those needs and better serve youth. Organizations serving system-impacted youth significantly expanded the scope of their services to include providing crisis response, increasing access to technology, offering remote services, and developing advocacy networks.

**Service Providers that
Closed Intake**

32%

**Service Providers that
Closed Services**

38%

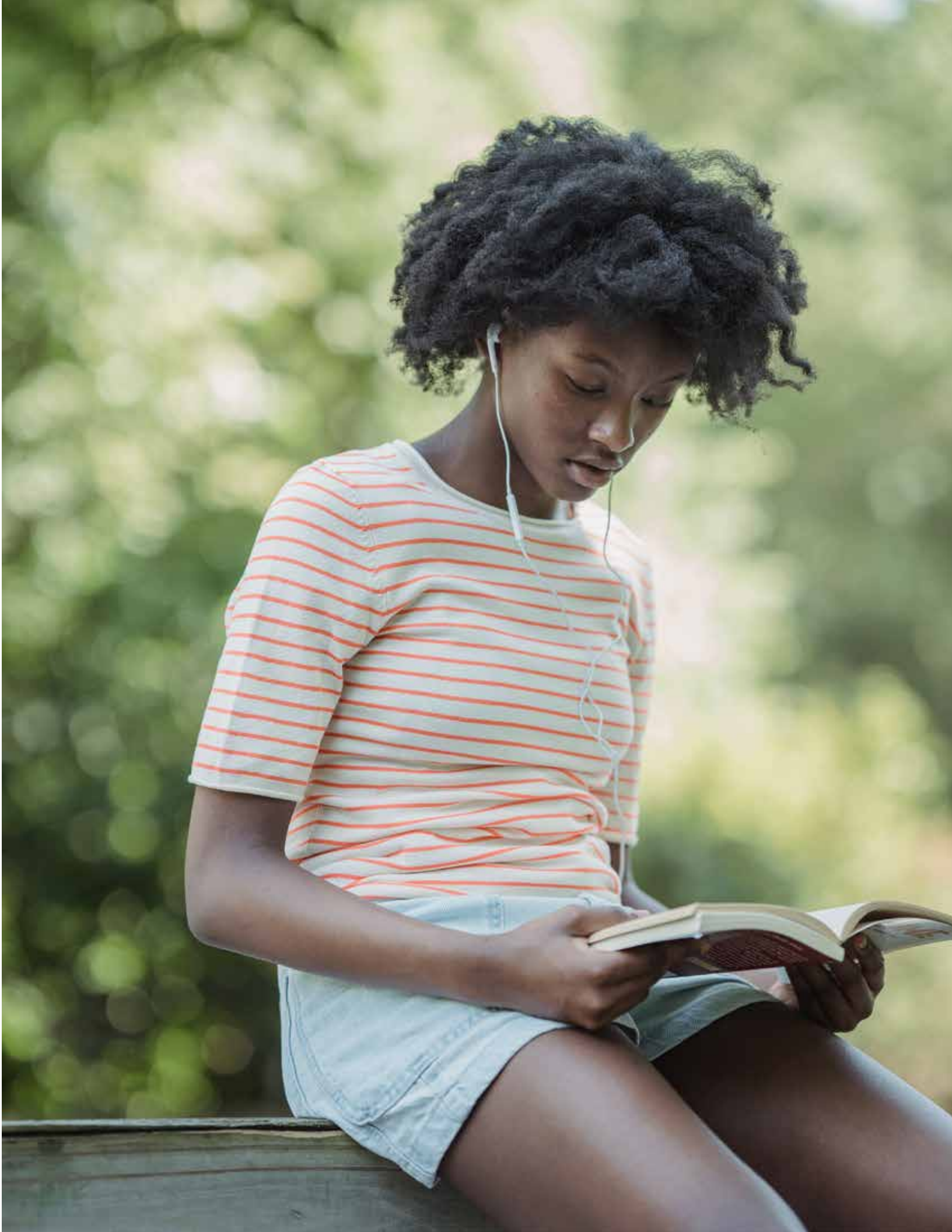
**Average Time Services
Were Closed**

14 weeks

Providing Crisis Response

The greatest needs facing system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth during the pandemic, according to survey respondents, were mental health and emotional wellness (34%), safe housing (24%), financial assistance (21%), technology access (17%), and food (14%).¹⁵ The pandemic did not create these problems for youth; rather, it intensified these persistent threats to system-impacted Black girls' wellbeing. Given this, although many programs temporarily closed in-person services at the start of the pandemic when cities and states across the country initiated stay-at-home orders, many immediately switched to crisis response services to continue to support Black girls and gender-expansive youth involved in the juvenile court system and in foster care.

Organizations that typically offered specialized youth development services, such as education assistance or legal system diversion programs,



started providing emergency services and resources to ensure that young people and their families could meet their basic needs. For example, nearly all of the people we interviewed reported that their organizations delivered food and groceries to youth and their families, as well as provided stipends, transportation assistance, baby supplies, and much more. Staff also had socially distanced meet-ups with youth in the community to ensure they were doing well and that their needs were met. Programs that did not typically make home visits began to do so to check on and assist young people and their families. In accordance with social distancing recommendations, staff stood on doorsteps, speaking to youth and family members through window screens and through cracked doors. And when necessary, they helped young people leave unsafe living situations and find safe housing.

Many service providers saw themselves as a lifeline for the system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth they served during the pandemic, especially service providers working with commercially sexually exploited youth. Providers we interviewed explained that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified Black girls' and gender-expansive young people's risk of sexual exploitation, which was high before the pandemic. Before the pandemic, providers often connected with young people in schools through services and programs they ran in schools. However, one person we spoke to said that many of the girls they worked with went underground and were being exploited in hotels and cars, making it even more difficult for service providers to engage them and offer services or assistance. The pandemic compounded the vulnerability and risk for sexually exploited Black girls and gender-expansive youth who were not only at risk of exploitation but also exposure to COVID-19.

Most Reported Needs that Were Intensified by COVID

Needs of Black girls	% of service providers reporting intensified need
Mental health / Emotional wellbeing	34%
Housing	24%
Income	21%
Education / Technology to access education	17%
Community	17%
Food	14%



Black girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care—especially in group homes—were vulnerable and at high risk for exploitation, exposure to COVID-19, and becoming isolated and cut off from loved ones. Sexual exploitation is always a major concern for Black girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care, who are at higher risk of sex trafficking.¹⁶ Sexually exploited youth in foster care are also more likely to leave foster homes without permission, increasing their risk of exploitation and exposure to various forms of violence and harm.¹⁷ One person we interviewed who runs a group home for older youth in foster care said that young people, especially girls, in group homes continued to leave during the pandemic without permission. Some could not bear to be stuck in the house with nowhere to go. Many also left because they feared catching COVID-19 from the other girls in the home. When they left, sometimes they visited with friends, and other times they tried to visit family and loved ones. The person we interviewed explained that leaving home did not always yield the result the youth wanted. Young people who visited family were often turned away due to fears of being exposed to COVID-19, leaving them feeling rejected and intensifying the experience of isolation. Policy also required that young people who left the group home without

permission quarantine, which could occur at the group home, if single rooms were available, or a receiving center for youth needing foster care placement. Although these safety protocols were implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in foster homes, ultimately they increased Black girls' risk of becoming isolated at a time when connection was what they needed and wanted most.

Increasing Access to Technology

Stay-at-home orders during the pandemic forced students nationwide to attend school virtually. Early on during the pandemic, it became clear that access to the internet and technology was a basic need for families so they could maintain connection with family and friends and for students to participate in school. Instead of being in physical classrooms and interacting with their friends and peers in person, youth logged into video conference platforms from a computer or phone. The transition to virtual learning was challenging for youth everywhere, but it was particularly difficult for low-income students of color, especially Black and Latinx students. Data shows that Black and Latinx youth were less likely to have digital devices and reliable internet access, compared to white youth, limiting their ability to participate in remote education and connect socially.¹⁸ The pandemic exposed a digital divide, running along racial, ethnic, and class lines in the United States—having far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for the education and wellbeing of Black youth. This digital divide was a major challenge for system-impacted Black girls.

Major Challenges Facing Service Providers

Major challenge	% of service providers reporting challenge
Transitioning to virtual and hybrid programming	21%
Need to develop new approaches for youth engagement	17%
Providing case management services	10%
Staff who can relate to Black youth	7%

Unfortunately, most public schools and school systems were not equipped, nor did they have the resources, to meet the technology needs of students. Many of the survey participants (and all of the organizations we interviewed) described how lack of access to technology severely limited system-impacted Black girls' and gender-expansive youths' engagement in school and in the services the organizations provided. As one person we interviewed who works with court-involved youth told us, "The digital divide is a real thing for a lot of our young people. A lot of our young people don't have high-speed internet at home or they don't have computers; they don't have data plans...Some young people [were] telling us, 'I can't get onto a Zoom session because I don't have a computer.'" Access to technology was one of the top 5 challenges facing system-impacted Black girls, according to the organizations we surveyed. They also asserted that technology access was not a new problem for system-impacted Black girls; rather, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified its consequences.

"The digital divide is a real thing for a lot of our young people. A lot of our young people don't have high-speed internet at home or they don't have computers; they don't have data plans."

Nonprofits and community-based organizations working with Black girls and gender-expansive youth impacted by the foster care and juvenile legal systems stepped in to fill the gaps to ensure that the young people they served had equitable access to education during the pandemic. They moved swiftly to furnish young people with technology for school and to participate in their programs. All of the people we interviewed described purchasing and distributing laptops, tablets, and other devices to the youth they worked with because many came from families that could afford to purchase these items on their own. In places where schools provided devices to students, organizations also reached out to principals and other school leaders to request devices on behalf of their youth. Recognizing that there was limited supply and that many parents did not fully understand or were not aware of the criteria for "securing devices" or how to access such devices, these organizations made sure that the youth they served were not overlooked and left out. One of the people we interviewed shared, "[There] were so many things when the shift happened that parents weren't aware of and young people weren't aware of, [so] we were in the business of giving them that information... [explaining] this is what you do to get a device." Without this support, the young people they served



would have remained cut off and isolated, unable to access school or connect with their classmates, friends, and the supportive adults and service providers in their lives.

The transition to virtual school and virtual programming was a major challenge for program providers. Before the pandemic, organizations typically worked with youth on site and in person. But once they realized stay-at-home orders would last longer than a few weeks, they pivoted and moved programming online. Most survey respondents (21%) reported that this transition to virtual and hybrid services was a major challenge for their organization. Going virtual was difficult for providers for several reasons, but primarily because many of these organizations did not already have the technology infrastructure in place to support remote programming. In addition to purchasing video conferencing software, such as Zoom Video Communications, and outfitting clients and staff with devices, organizations also had to train staff to use the new devices and software. As one interview participant explained, “These are all things

you don't think about until you're in a pandemic." Although implementing virtual services and programs was difficult, the majority of survey participants and all of the interviewees reported making the transition. At the time of the survey, more than 70% of respondents said their organizations were hybrid (69%) or were fully virtual (4%), and almost a quarter of respondents (24%) reported that they had returned to being fully in person. But not every organization made the transition. One survey participant (3%) shared that at the time of the survey, which was more than one year since the pandemic began, their organization had still not yet reopened client intake or services—neither for in-person nor virtual services.

Offering Remote Services

Once providers had the technology in place, the next step was to adapt and implement virtual programming and services. Because virtual services was a relatively novel approach at the time, staff were redesigning foster care services and programming for court-involved youth while simultaneously learning how to use video conferencing software, according to several people we interviewed. They quickly realized that many of the strategies and approaches they used to engage youth in person did not work virtually. Survey participants reported that engaging youth in remote services was the second greatest challenge (17%) facing organizations supporting system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth, after making the transition to virtual and hybrid services.

“These are all things you don't think about until you're in a pandemic.”

Several factors influenced young people's engagement in remote programming. Some young people did not want to participate in services remotely. After a full day of school on a laptop, they did not want to be on a computer screen after school to participate in youth programming virtually. Reliable internet access also remained an ongoing challenge for youth and their families. One person shared in an interview that consistent internet access was such a problem for their youth that they often conducted services using phone conferencing instead of video conferencing because they knew all of the youth had access to phones.

Poor internet connection and discomfort with technology were issues particularly for youth in foster care and in mandated youth diversion programs. At the height of the

COVID-19 pandemic, mandatory in-person visits shifted online. Instead of case managers going to young people's homes or youth and families coming into the office, visits occurred via video conference, which were rife with problems, such as difficulty logging in, frozen computer screens, and patchy audio. These issues made often-fraught interactions even more challenging for system-impacted Black girls and their families. One person we interviewed who works with youth in foster care shared that families were frustrated about participating in foster care case management services virtually, saying "[A] lot of our families were unhappy with services for a period of time... They were vocal about not being able to access virtual mean[s] or zoom [and] all of the other ways we were asking them to communicate with our staff. [Many] of them just used their phones and did not have computers to access WiFi. So, that was challenging as well." Anecdotally, one interview respondent who provided case management services to court-involved youth believed shifting to remote services, and the ensuing challenges, delayed young people from meeting important program milestones and requirements, consequently, in his opinion, extending young people's and their families' participation in youth diversion.

"[There] were so many things when the shift happened that parents weren't aware of and young people weren't aware of, [so] we were in the business of giving them that information... [explaining] this is what you do to get a device."

Additional caregiving and household responsibilities were another barrier to program participation for system-impacted Black girls and gender-responsive youth. Several of the people we interviewed observed that many of the girls they worked with got jobs during the pandemic and started caring for younger siblings and other family members because their parents and guardians either lost their jobs or were essential workers. It was not uncommon for young people to participate in virtual programming while at work, something that never happened before the pandemic. One provider described making accommodations for working and caregiving youth, explaining that in their program, "[If] you are a parenting person and you're in the program, your child is allowed as well, [or if there were] young people who had to cook at the time that we were running our group, it's like, it's okay to cook dinner. [There was] a lot of letting things be." Providers recognized that keeping young people engaged and connected to

their programs required more creativity, tolerance, lenience, and acceptance, given the challenges and struggles that system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth experienced during the pandemic.

Although the move to remote services was difficult, many of the survey respondents and interview participants said that remote services remained a part of their programming even as stay-at-home orders relaxed. Additionally, for some young people and families, remote services facilitated program engagement. For example, parents who had difficulty participating in case management services before the pandemic because meetings were typically scheduled during working hours could attend sessions remotely after work. In-person interactions with system-impacted young people are still preferred, but now system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth can participate in vital services and can connect to their peers and supportive adults remotely when necessary.

Developing Advocacy Networks

Organizations supporting system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth did not weather the pandemic in isolation. On the contrary, they connected and deepened relationships with other organizations in the field. Some lobbied for philanthropic and community investment so that organizations could provide crisis response to system-impacted Black girls and their families. Other organizations joined provider networks and started meeting together to discuss critical issues facing their organiza-

Major Challenges Facing Service Providers

Resources	% of service providers needing these resources
Funding	57%
Resources to support staff: Professional development, therapeutic, networks/partnerships	35%
Technology	24%
Programming/curricula designed for Black girls	14%

tions and the youth they served. Given the unusual and unprecedented circumstances, organizational networks created space for providers to share what they were experiencing, learn about different strategies that other organizations were using to support the safety and wellbeing of youth and staff, and offer support. One of the people we interviewed shared that their organization formed an advocacy community of more than 100 service providers. Another person reported that their organization joined an advocacy network to combat COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation to ensure that their clients and members of other marginalized communities in the area had equitable access to health care. In their community, COVID-19 testing and related services were mostly available in predominantly white areas. Like many communities across the nation, healthcare access fell along racial and class lines, which meant that the young people they served and their families were at greatest risk for poor health outcomes. To promote health equity, network members canvassed local communities with information about COVID-19 to debunk myths and increase access to health services. Although this was beyond the scope of the services they provided, these organizations took on the responsibility because of the risks facing the children and families they served.

Conclusion

Black girls and gender-expansive youth impacted by foster care and the juvenile legal system were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially girls in group residential facilities. Already vulnerable, system-impacted Black girls' risk for school disengagement, isolation, and sexual exploitation was exacerbated by the pandemic. Many system-impacted Black girls also took on more financial and caregiving responsibilities within their homes. During this time, service providers were a lifeline for system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth, providing emergency services and crisis intervention when people were asked to maintain social distance to prevent the spread of the virus. Service providers made sure that Black girls impacted by foster care and the juvenile legal system had access to food, transportation, safe housing, and social connection, and they provided financial assistance if needed. Without the assistance of service providers, many system-impacted Black girls would not have had access to the technology necessary for them to participate in school or programs. Service providers did everything they could to ensure system-impacted Black girls' access to much-needed services and support was not interrupted during the pandemic. Responding to the moment, providers adapted in-person services so they could move programs and services online when possible. Despite challenges with youth engagement and staff fatigue, providers continued to advocate for their clients, communities, and each other to ensure system-impacted Black girls' needs were met during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- **Government and philanthropy must ensure organizations serving Black girls impacted by the foster care and juvenile legal systems have the financial resources necessary to be responsive and meet the needs of the young people they serve.** This includes providing crisis response grants and, more importantly, adequate funding that enables organizations to strengthen and improve their operations and infrastructure *now* so they can easily adapt and respond during *future* public health crises. Organizations also require funding to support staff wellbeing to ensure there is a thriving workforce to support system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth.
- **School systems must be mandated to supply every student with the technology to participate in online learning, including provision of laptops, tablets, and hotspots.** Failing to equip students with these resources intensifies system-impacted Black girls' and gender-expansive young people's risk of being pushed out of school, as access to technology is considered a basic need for youth and families.
- **Organizations that serve system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth need funding to establish and support communities of practices and advocacy coalitions.** Supporting the creation of organizational networks builds power among organizations that they can leverage to increase visibility and garner resources for system-impacted Black girls and gender-expansive youth, especially during times of crisis.

Endnotes

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About NBWJI

At the National Black Women’s Justice Institute, we research, elevate, and educate the public about innovative, community-led solutions to address the criminalization of Black women and girls.

We aim to dismantle the racist and patriarchal U.S. criminal-legal system and build, in its place, pathways to opportunity and healing.

We envision a society that respects, values, and honors the humanity of Black women and girls, takes accountability for the harm it has inflicted, and recognizes that **real justice is healing**.



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