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## Community Collaborations with Saving Lives, Inspiring Youth: A Community-Based Cross-Age Peer Mentoring Program

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# COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS WITH SAVING LIVES, INSPIRING YOUTH: A COMMUNITY-BASED CROSS-AGE PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

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Scholar-community collaborations offer an opportunity to conduct translational research that is both useful and respectful to the population of study (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson & Allen, 2001). When projects involve an intervention targeted towards a marginalized community, it is even more important to perform the research with such regard. Community-based interventions are more likely to find sustained success with community members as part of the service and research team. However, tensions between researchers and practitioners may present challenges with this work (e.g., researchers devaluing practitioner insights, practitioners and community members concerned about past histories of mistreatment of research subjects), particularly in marginalized communities experiencing systemic oppression. This case study aims to recognize community collaborator challenges, contributing factors, and solutions from Saving Lives, Inspiring Youth (SLIY), a community-based participatory cross-age peer mentoring program based in the south and west sides of Chicago. Specifically, we present challenges navigating a partnership with our community collaborators at a SLIY mentoring site on the west side of Chicago in 2017.

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## BACKGROUND ON THE COLLABORATION PROJECT

The SLIY mentoring program was part of a 4-year longitudinal project examining the effectiveness of community-based cross-age peer mentoring (continued relationships between a younger mentee and older youth from the same community) to reduce negative outcomes related to violence exposure among high-risk Black American and Latinx youth. The overarching aim of the study was to identify the risk and protective factors related to youth exposed to high levels of community violence while working to increase positive youth development and resilience outcomes. Research staff from Loyola University Chicago's Risk & Resilience Lab and the Empowering Counseling Program (directed by Dr. Maryse Richards and Dr. Katherine Tyson-McCrea, respectively) helped direct, coordinate, and evaluate mentoring programming at each site. The program utilized community partnerships with neighborhood schools and community agencies to recruit high school mentors and elementary school mentees, host after-school mentoring programming, and supervise mentoring relationships (Richards et al., 2017). High school mentors were trained by SLIY staff prior to being matched with their mentee(s).

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## DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES FACED

Although broadly fruitful and meaningful to our youth participants, one SLIY site in particular encountered a number of obstacles throughout its course given the contexts of high poverty and high community violence in which programming took place. SLIY operated a mentoring

program on Chicago's West side at Hickamore Elementary (school name changed to protect the confidentiality of all participants) between 2017 and 2018. The mentoring program at Hickamore consisted of teenage mentors from a neighboring high school traveling to the mentoring site to mentor their elementary student mentees. In comparison to other SLIY mentoring sites, Hickamore experienced a large amount of structural violence due to long-standing social inequalities evident in the city of Chicago. Structural violence describes the harming of people through unjust economic, political, and social institutions unable to meet persons' basic needs for food, clothing, health care, education, inclusion, and safety (Koher & Alcock, 1976). This was evidenced through the fact that 43.1 percent of households in Hickamore's community lived below the federal poverty line (which itself is not adequate for subsistence in Chicago) (City of Chicago Public Health Statistics, 2013). Additionally, the spike in Chicago's homicide rate during the summer of 2016 ranged between 50-75 per 100,000 in Hickamore's community, which is over ten times the national rate (4.9 per 100,000; Diebel, Norda, & Kretchmer, 2018). This phenomenon existed with concurrent increased media attention negatively targeting urban young people, thus creating a city-wide perception of black and brown adolescents as pathological and dangerous (Gallagher & Shapiro, 2017).

For the first three months of programming at Hickamore, SLIY staff found it was difficult to establish buy-in from our community collaborators (a teacher and the assistant principal) at Hickamore, due to the effects of the structural violence. They indicated a mistrust of research due to the reputation of exploitation research has in many low-income communities of color. Also, our community collaborators expressed hesitation about allowing high school students on campus afterschool because of their fear that the Black youth might cause more chaos and even violence in the school, particularly given the surge of violence in the city. The community collaborators reduced the weekly mentoring sessions by 25%, due to a scarcity of resources (i.e., classroom availability, funding for security guards after school). This push back was acknowledged by our high school mentors, many sharing that they felt as though they were not welcome at the mentoring site. As such, SLIY staff were presented with a dilemma: how to establish and maintain successful mentoring relationships between mentors and mentees with the limited support by our community collaborators in a context of high structural violence.

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## **SLIY STAFF RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE**

SLIY's approach to remediate the community collaboration challenge was threefold. First, it was necessary for SLIY staff at Hickamore to consider the context in which our programming took place and how it impacted the community collaborators. SLIY staff recognized that community collaborators were highly stressed and experienced compassion fatigue and symptoms of secondary stress trauma. Specifically, community collaborators often had to cope with the chronic violence exposure while working with youth who were direct victims of such exposure (i.e., drastically reducing their concern or capacity to be empathetic to those impacted by traumatic events or experiences; Adams, Boscarino & Figley, 2006). Moreover, it became clear that as the public awareness of community violence increased, so did the distrust of black and brown teens, resulting in negative perceptions of SLIY high school mentors.

Second, while understanding the socio-ecological context surrounding the mentoring program was important, it was imperative for SLIY staff to also acknowledge and build on community strengths. SLIY staff sought to include participatory methods to center the youths' voices and built a program framework that relied heavily on the youth and community partnership. SLIY staff provided continuous trauma and leadership training to mentors, which allowed mentors to approach our community collaborators as youth leaders who have love and care for their mentees. The mentors formulated a plan to address the perception that they were not to be trusted within the mentoring site and facilitated discussions with school staff that demonstrated their commitment and compassion. With the support and training from SLIY staff, youth mentors were empowered to be leaders by a participatory framework, which allowed them to highlight their own strengths and address the effects of structural violence.

Finally, SLIY staff recognized that the mentoring site was severely under resourced and facilitated an open dialogue in which both parties were able to express their concerns and needs. For example, a SLIY staff member coordinated consistent meetings with the assistant principal to address concerns and collaborate on decisions. By forming empathic relationships with community collaborators within a highly stressed environment, SLIY staff flexibly balanced program needs with ecological challenges. This was exemplified by a negotiation between SLIY staff and community collaborators in which the daily programming time was increased by 25%, ensuring that the mentor and mentee needs were better addressed. Involving youth mentors in the direct design and implementation of the program, as well as using community collaborators and school staff as support liaisons and experts allowed SLIY to overcome and eradicate many of the aforementioned barriers.

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## REFLECTION RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS

Critically considering community context while utilizing a participatory approach allowed SLIY staff to help build trust between community collaborators, mentors, and staff. SLIY staff at Hickamore were able to establish a partnership with community collaborators to not only assuage research stigma but amplify youth mentor voices in the process. By increasing transparency between community collaborators and youth mentors, SIY staff were able to ensure mentor decision-making capabilities were actualized, while empowering and securing a seat at the table for the high school mentors. By the second semester of the mentoring program, SLIY programming at Hickamore was met with increased approval by community collaborators. Mentors continued to develop leadership capacities and skills, and many of them later became youth co-researchers and co-presenters at conference presentations. In conclusion, it remains imperative to utilize a strengths-based approach to meet community collaborators' fears and resistance with understanding, compassion, and willingness to compromise. Doing so can foster dialogue among participants, staff, and community collaborators so they can discover each other's' strengths and the benefits of productive teamwork.

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of Justice. For additional information about this project, please feel free to contact Cynthia Onyeka at [oonyeka@luc.edu](mailto:oonyeka@luc.edu).

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