

2021

THE INTERSECTION  
OF RACIAL INJUSTICE  
AND YOUTH HEALTH  
IN CENTRAL IOWA

White Paper presented by  
uVoice Youth Philanthropy Board



# Introduction

uVoice, a youth philanthropy board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts, consists of a group of fifteen students who live in the Des Moines metro area. Bimonthly, these students come together to identify issues facing youth in their community and to combat these identified issues through a grant-making process. uVoice members research community needs, develop a grant application, review responses to their request for proposals, and allocate money to non-profit organizations addressing the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice. Due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's uVoice group adapted their meetings to be held on a virtual platform. Despite the circumstances, the board maintained their resilience and continued to grow their presence in the community.

In previous years, uVoice has focused on topics relating to mental health, stress, suicide prevention, human trafficking, and vaping/addiction. This year, uVoice members chose to focus on a growing and prominent issue: racial injustice.



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# Background

Based on the culmination of many events throughout the past and into the present, uVoice students agreed that their philanthropic efforts needed to be focused on creating a safer space for the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community. The board decided that the most change could be enacted throughout the community by narrowing the topic to racial justice. After multiple discussions about various issues in the community, both the argument about the injustices that plague our country and the lack of initiative within higher authority made racial justice the clear winner. Members of the board did research, shared anecdotes, and discussed how injustices are seen in education, housing, and workplaces, especially among youth. In order to learn more about the topic and how to facilitate conversations about racial justice safely, the board attended a training with Luana Nelson-Brown from the Coalition for Collective Change. To gather more information from the community about the issue, the board sought out prominent BIPOC leaders to create an expert panel, which was followed by a focus group to better educate the board and to hear from the community about how injustices impact BIPOC youth. As a result, the board better understood the intersections between racial injustice and health outcomes.

# Community Needs Findings

This year's community needs assessment took place in the form of a virtual expert panel followed by a small group discussion with members of the community. Participants included 23 students (including uVoice members) while the panel was



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made up of 3 others: Destinee Woodris, a Project Evaluator with a focus on suicide prevention at the Iowa Department of Public Health; Sandrah Nasimiyu, a current student at the University of Iowa; and Chelsi Barraza, a Migrant Health Care Manager at Proteus Inc. Participants represented numerous school districts across Central Iowa and discussed the significance of racial injustice and equity within their communities. Both student focus groups and panelists shared input based on their experiences. Some main takeaways from the community needs assessment included:

Microaggressions experienced in high school continue to impact people of color when they grow up. They can impact their personalities and how they interact in school or work environments.

Many students of color indicated that there weren't any adults or teachers they could talk to when they experienced microaggressions or racism at school. They said it can be difficult to find a counselor or mentor that they can relate their struggles to as a member of a marginalized group.

Students want a physically and emotionally supportive community that brings awareness to issues of racism in curriculum and promotes inclusive education for teachers and students.

Racism affects people in vastly different ways. Each person has a unique experience and story about how racism impacts their day-to-day life in the areas of education, access to healthcare, pay inequity, etc.

Both youth and panelists describe a lack of representation in schools, medicine, and education with regard to BIPOC and their history. Youth feel less comfortable in their communities and schools because of those inequities.

# Discussion

## EDUCATION

One significant issue that came to the forefront during the small group discussion at the Community Needs Assessment was how racial injustices were largely unaddressed and continue to be exacerbated by the education system.

Many students noted that they felt like there were no safe spaces in school where they could openly talk to teachers about their experiences with microaggressions, and the lack of trust deepened racial traumas in school-aged students. In addition, the disparity of cultural education in schools has led to a lack of respect and appreciation of BIPOC heritage and culture within the school system. Students found that there were rarely BIPOC teachers in classes other than foreign language, and even then they were often white teachers who studied that language in school.

Once students leave the school and move into the workforce, they are unaware of racial microaggressions and how to respond to injustice. Curriculum in today's schools cover the tragedies of BIPOC people but rarely cover the history and culture. Many famous events in American history involving BIPOC people include the Columbus' mass murder of the native people, the conquering of indigenous communities to make way for European settlers, and the current socioeconomic impacts of 1950's redlining have all created stereotypes and assumptions about BIPOC people that have carried throughout history. History books taught in schools typically write from the perspective of whiteness and oftentimes do not pay homage to the BIPOC communities that perspective has harmed. By skipping over the history and background of BIPOC culture, education systems leave students without a sense of cultural knowledge and lead to racial injustices. It has become the norm to treat education about BIPOC history as an "extracurricular" or "enrichment" rather than an integral part of the curriculum as is white history and culture.

## HEALTHCARE

From the expert panel discussion, significant points on medical history were made. Specifically, the discussion included how the inaccessibility of mental and physical healthcare for BIPOC students at school both exacerbated and caused racial trauma.

The racial trauma and micro/macro aggressions that every BIPOC student has experienced leave long-lasting effects on one's mental health. These aggressions are so normalized that they become a daily occurrence on social media and in real life (through cultural appropriation, harassment, etc), which can detrimentally affect one's mental health. Further, there are few, if any, resources for students who experience these traumas to talk about what they're dealing with. Often, counselors and teachers don't look like or share the same backgrounds as students of color, and BIPOC students may not trust white adults. Therefore counselors are often unable to heal the students they are meant to help. Traumas and aggressions also stop BIPOC members of the community from reaching out for help and treatment, as they would be further

invalidated by the people meant to help. While school presents its own pressures and stresses, BIPOC students experience another set of traumas and stressors due to the daily aggressions, and usually there is little to no help for the racial traumas.

On a much larger scale, the COVID pandemic has exposed many disparities in the healthcare system; a higher rate of BIPOC people have been infected and vaccination rates have not been proportionate to those of white Americans.

Throughout the discussion, many participants noted that they were uncomfortable with predominantly white healthcare professionals because of past discriminations. The healthcare system in the country is built against people of color; BIPOC individuals often feel unsafe and uncomfortable in the hands of medical professionals because of these previous experiences or stories from trusted friends and family.

Before our community needs assessment in January, the board was fortunate to receive a racial justice discussion training from Luana Nelson Brown, a professional in the field at the Iowa Coalition for Collective Change. Her presentation was a great tool for the board to prepare to facilitate and listen to discussions within the needs assessment and handle any situations that came up within the panel and discussion. Many incredible points were brought up by Brown to facilitate discussions on racial justice. Her perspective focused on how the language we use and the world we live in is white supremacist, and we need to take steps to actively fight that.

Our language is steeped with white supremacy and many words we choose to use are often actively exclusionary to marginalized and BIPOC individuals. For example, "outreach" indicates that there is a center and you need to reach out to marginalized people and bring them into the center. All of the major institutions in our society have racial disparities (criminal justice, judicial, health care, economic, housing, education) meaning BIPOC don't have the platform and power to impact and incite change in the white community.

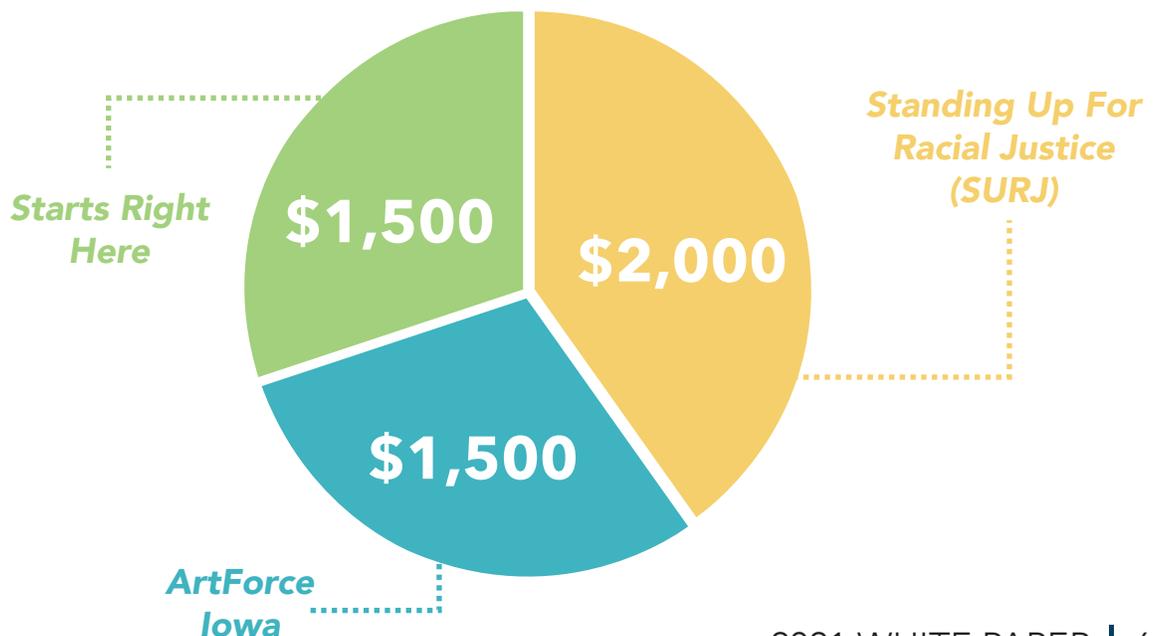
Additionally, many white individuals try to absolve themselves of racism and micro/macroaggressions perpetrated by them or others with common themes that express themselves in the language and phrases used. Ascription of intelligence is a common microaggression where the perpetrator tells a BIPOC individual that they are more intelligent or better than the rest of their race because of existing stereotypes and notions that the BIPOC individual does not fit. Common phrases are, "You are a credit to your race" or "You speak such good English". Color-blindness is a common stance white individuals take to show they are not racist by saying they "don't see color". This position actively hurts BIPOC because it chooses to ignore the racial identity and trauma of the individual by saying their race doesn't matter. Race does matter; it must be seen, but it shouldn't be the focus of prejudice and discrimination. The dominant culture is of white individuals and of white supremacy, and this integrates itself into every facet of our society. Our language and intentions matter, and in order to be anti-racist we must acknowledge and prevent ourselves and others from using these themes to absolve racism.

# Projects Funded

The board published a Request for Proposals to fund a nonprofit focused on combating racial injustices regarding youth in Central Iowa. Example programs that fulfill these requirements may do the following:

- ✓ Provide or assist organizations that support BIPOC with aid and encourage a supportive and anti-racist environment for the community.
- ✓ Create a social media campaign targeted to youth to promote antiracism.
- ✓ Provide resources and/or curriculum regarding one or more of the following:
  - Teaching the importance of diversity and how to celebrate it.
  - Anti-racist education, decolonized history, and support of students of color.
  - Training/programs that educate students and staff on how to create a more positive, culturally inclusive environment.
- ✓ Support programs that aim to increase BIPOC youths' accessibility to resources such as technology, healthcare services, and mental health resources in and/or outside of schools.

**This year, the board decided to divide their \$5,000 between three different organizations:**



# Standing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ)

SURJ is an organization focused on promoting antiracism and justice for BIPOC individuals in the community. The \$2,000 allocated will be used to pay members of a new advisory board with BIPOC youth and adult leaders from across greater Des Moines. The goal will be to gain input on SURJ programs and movements to more efficiently allocate their time and energy.

## Starts Right Here

Starts Right Here is a social justice and music program for young people across underserved communities in the Des Moines area. The mission of this inspirational organization is to educate, equip, and empower through music and dialogue, and is led by local leader Will Keeps. The \$1,500 granted will be used for routine expenses and buying musical instruments for the students in the program.

## ArtForce Iowa

ArtForce Iowa is an organization dedicated to empowering and healing students in adversity through the power of art and storytelling. The \$1,500 will be used to fund Art Force's #KNOWJUSTICE initiative in the organization to help students, especially those in the Hmong community, express their stories in a safe environment and learn about themselves and others. The stories will then be shared out in the community and available for others to read and love.

## Recommendations

SURJ, Starts Right Here, and Art Force Iowa provided the board with many compelling points and resources that supported the board's goals. These organizations are models for what an anti-racist organization can look like by providing a safe space for BIPOC youth. Because of this work, student voices will be uplifted, youth will be provided a safe place if they can't find success in a traditional classroom, and opportunities will be provided for students of color to tell their own stories and learn about their history.

One thing the board noticed as a significant issue in the community was the lack of importance placed on the language used when discussing things related to racial justice. By emphasizing tolerant and inclusive language, youth can be in position to harness their potential. They can then grow instead of feeling marginalized. Language evolves as our times evolve. It's important to stay up-to-date on those changes to ensure that people can maximize benefits from the resources they have.

One of the best ways to encourage this is by setting ground rules at the beginning of activities. This is especially important when hosting a space that will discuss topics related to race and/or racism, but it can be useful even in general classroom or workplace environments. These ground rules should outline what



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expectations participants have. This may include (but is not limited to) discussing the following: what rules participants should follow in the meeting, how people will be expected to interact, how you can ensure that people respect each others' ideas, and how questions will be handled. It would be beneficial to seriously brainstorm what ideals you want to promote in the space you are hosting and tailor expectations to those ideals. For those in schools, these ground rules are most effective if expectations are reviewed before discussions even take place which can even be as early as the first day of school. In other spaces, periodically reviewing expectations may be more effective as this can ensure that all members within a space are aware of what is expected of them.



During the Community Needs Assessment, the board discovered that many youth noticed the lack of a concrete curriculum regarding racial justice in schools. Oftentimes, the discussion of racism is treated as an extracurricular rather than a central point in students' education. This implicitly lessens the importance of racial justice in the minds of many people. To avoid this, anti-racism needs to be taught explicitly and carefully. Because the content can be so sensitive, it is necessary to have qualified individual(s) working to develop curricula that sufficiently addresses

critical race theory and adjacent topics. By requiring students to be exposed to the topics of race, racism, and racial justice, it is employing them with the skills they need to not only help themselves, but to be allies for those around them. As long as this crucial step is ignored, there will forever be room for youth to make their own assessments of situations regarding this topic. Unfortunately, critical race theory is a complex concept to understand; it is very difficult to reach accurate conclusions if one isn't presented with the correct evidence. For this reason, it's imperative that the importance of these issues is taught in schools by a solid curriculum.



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It is important to not only educate the youth in our community, but to combat racism within school leadership and among educators. Educating teachers helps to define where some racism stems from. When the curriculum is being taught by non-BIPOC teachers, it is difficult to create an anti-racist environment for the students who take their inspiration from their educators. Non-BIPOC teachers cannot use their experiences to help create a more inclusive learning environment for BIPOC students. This factor can create misunderstandings in the school environment and fail to teach students about the importance of racism accountability. By using the educational tools that are typically taught to students and educators, we can stop racist acts before they start.