

YOUTH VOICES ON CONNECTION, BELONGING, AND COMMUNITY

Overview

Social isolation has increased nationwide and was recognized in 2023 by the U.S. Surgeon General as an urgent public health issue and part of a national “epidemic of loneliness and isolation.”¹ By contrast, **social connection** is a powerful protective factor that supports mental and physical health, strengthens resilience, and can even contribute to longer lifespans.

While social isolation affects people of all ages, global studies have shown that teens and young adults have the highest rates of social isolation of any age group.¹ Youth of color living in disinvested communities may additionally face unique barriers to connection. Structural inequities and community disinvestment can increase the risk of isolation. Previously, research and interventions addressing social connection have largely focused on adults, leaving an important question unanswered:

How do youth of color experience social connection, belonging, and support in their everyday lives?

Goals and Objectives

To answer this question, Illinois Public Health Institute (IPHI) partnered with youth of color living in historically disinvested communities in Cook and Peoria counties to better understand the role of social connection in their lives and identify community-driven strategies to foster belonging and well-being. IPHI conducted interviews and story circles, and analyzed Community Advisory Council feedback, secondary statistical data, and existing research to identify patterns and themes across the following questions:



How do youth of color in disinvested Illinois communities experience, define, and build social connection in their daily lives?



What individual, relational, and structural factors shape youths’ sense of belonging, support, and connection?



What common narratives emerge in youth experiences of connection, disconnection, and belonging?

Story Circles



What are story circles and why did IPHI use them?

Story circles are a structured, inclusive approach that brings people together to share personal stories around a common theme. Rooted in indigenous traditions of storytelling, grassroots organizing, and community-building, story circles create opportunities for participants to listen, reflect, and connect with one another through lived experience.

IPHI intentionally chose to explore this topic using story circles to center youth voices, foster empathy, and create opportunities for meaningful connection through shared lived experiences.

FINDINGS TO INFORM ACTION

Key Findings from Data Analysis

Youth experiences and perspectives informed the findings highlighted below and, in turn, the findings guided the development of recommendations designed to address barriers.



How Youth Connect

Youth find connection at school and work, through shared interest groups or youth programs, and through friends or family.



Where Youth Connect

Youth connect in both online and in-person spaces.



When Youth Connect

Youth often form bonds over shared interests such as sports, arts, hobbies, and media.



Why Youth Connect

Youth seek a sense of belonging, absence of judgement, consistency, and a freedom to be themselves.

Youth enjoy both receiving and providing support, including emotional support, acceptance, reaching out, connecting others, and guidance.



Barriers to Youth Connection

Individual and structural barriers can limit youth connection, including anxiety, independence, limited third spaces, transportation, and limited volunteer opportunities.



Drivers of Youth Connection

Adults play a role as mentors, providing support and advice, and encouraging youth to connect with the community.

Common Themes from Story Circles, Interviews & Workshops

Analytic Domain	What to Explore
Meaning of belonging	How youth define connection and belonging
Supportive relationships	Who youth rely on and why
Community assets and spaces	Places and conditions that foster connection
Mutual support and care	How youth help others belong
Isolation and barriers	Exclusion, unmet needs, failed support, structural barriers
Healing and storytelling	Effects of sharing and listening
Youth-informed solutions	What youth want or need more of



Recommendations for Improving Social Connections Among Youth of Color:

- Create free, casual, safe spaces where youth can gather.
- Provide programming centered around shared interests such as media, sports, hobbies, arts, and self-expression.
- Support community wide events and gatherings that offer opportunities for collaboration and community improvement, such as a litter pick up or cultural events
- Improve community infrastructure such as bike lanes, transit, and public spaces like parks.
- Raise awareness of existing youth programs and spaces, particularly for youth of color.
- Encourage youth to participate in community events.
- Work to reduce stigma, prejudice, judgement, and conflict in the community.
- Support youth in building confidence and self-acceptance.