

Preface: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis on Youth

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health, declared COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus, a term designating a family of viruses known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases, as a global pandemic. This pandemic has brought to the forefront many of the pre-existing gaps and inequities at every level of governance within the United States, California, and the City and County of San Francisco.

To fulfill the Youth Commission's duty of advising San Francisco policy-makers on the unmet needs of youth, the Executive Committee of the Youth Commission has prepared this Preface to address the most pressing issues facing San Francisco youth as a result of the pandemic, building on the initial work on this matter related to the preparation of [YC File No. 1920-AL-11](#), a Youth Commission resolution passed on June 15, 2020 regarding youth services and programs and the City's response to COVID-19 pandemic.

The Youth Commission would like to thank our community partners, including but not limited to the Chinese Progressive Association, Larkin Street Youth Services, and Coleman Advocates for Youth for providing valuable input on the diversity of youth experience during this difficult time.

Framing

As the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed and the City and State have both imposed measures designed to enforce social distancing and public health, youth have been, and continue to be heavily impacted by measures such as school closures, the implementation of distance learning, access to food and nutrition and wellness centers, and other support systems and mental health services providing by schools and community programs, among others. Both the pandemic and these impacts have been disproportionately felt in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, amplifying pre-existing racial and socio-economic inequities.

Furthermore, youth voices have so far been left out of the City's response to the pandemic: in particular, the City's Economic Recovery Task Force convened by the Mayor and President of the Board of Supervisors lacks any youth members, although there are a few members representing organizations that work with youth. While it is not surprising that the City has once again left youth voices out of the discussion of how to alleviate the negative impacts of the pandemic which has had a disproportionate

impact on youth, it reveals the continued presence of a decision-making culture that omits youth from deliberative politics or requires them to take the initiative themselves to have their voice heard. Indeed, the Youth Commission was not allowed to meet for three months between March and June of 2020.

With all these factors in mind, the Youth Commission has made recommendations to City decision-makers (see the aforementioned resolution), in collaboration with Chinese Progressive Association acting as a liaison between SF United In Crisis, about how to address issues caused by the pandemic in a way that recognizes and uplifts the specifically-youth experience of these challenging times. The Youth Commission acknowledges that the City will need to make cuts in order to maintain a balanced budget: our concern is that these cuts reflect the value of the service that different programs and departments provide to communities most impacted by this pandemic. This budget season is a serious test of the City's values: will the City cut programs that youth and impacted communities rely on, as it did in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 recession, or will the City take a critical eye to programs and departments that do not serve youth or even directly harm their communities, with the goal of building a truly transformative future.

Summary of impacts

a) Education and Transportation

With the transition of distance learning at all levels, many inequities have arisen in our public education system.¹ Many young people are unable to attend class and complete schoolwork due to their jobs, familial responsibilities, lack of space due to multigenerational housing, and lack of technology and reliable internet. Many of the support systems schools provide are not readily available, such as healthy food, mental and physical health resources, and identity-based communities. Also, with more of the population working and learning from home, there has been an increase in domestic violence and child abuse. Research has indicated that abuse is more likely when people are experiencing high levels of stress, which job loss and public health concerns have contributed to.

In terms of transportation equity, MUNI services faced very large route cuts at the beginning of shelter in place, with only a select few "essential" lines running. Over time, more bus lines opened, but it was inaccessible for young people. Especially for those who rely heavily on MUNI to travel to work or complete errands, public transportation was much less accessible. At the same time, following the recommendation of several

¹ See Sparling, N., & Katoni, M. (June 20, 2020). "Distance learning for some kids at SF elementary school came with an extra challenge: No internet connection." *SF Chronicle*. Access [here](#).

Youth Commissioners during a presentation on its budget, the Municipal Transportation Agency (MTA) Board voted to support a proposed fare increase to go into effect, while approving a complete elimination of fares for youth up to age 19, which was to be expanded to Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) in future years. In June, faced with pressure from the Board of Supervisors, MTA instituted a two-year ban on fare increases to lessen the financial burden on MUNI riders. However, the implementation of the elimination of all fares for youth is now called into question.

b) Impacts on Youth in the Workforce and Immigrant Youth and Families

Many of the jobs available to young people are in the food service and retail industry. The shelter-in-place order caused many of those businesses, especially local small businesses, to close, resulting in unemployment for young people. Some continued working as essential workers out of necessity, risking their own health and safety: 13% of grocery workers are ages 16-19 nationally.

Additionally, San Francisco's immigrant population has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Undocumented youth and families in San Francisco are unable to benefit from the majority of government financial assistance, such as the stimulus checks from the CARES Act. Young people have had to step in to help family members who do not speak English fluently to navigate bureaucratic processes like unemployment payments, SNAP (food stamps), and community aid.

c) Youth Civic Engagement

Despite being under shelter-in-place, youth have still found ways to stay civically engaged through social media and other online platforms, especially after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other Black people. One group of high school students, led by 17-year-old Simone Jacques, organized a Black Lives Matter protest in D9 on June 3, 2020 through social media, with over 10,000 protestors showing up, reported as "perhaps the largest Bay Area gathering since the protests have made their presence locally."² Students Tiana Day and Mimi Zoila also organized a protest at the Golden Gate Bridge on June 6 via social media, drawing thousands of protestors.³ Youth unable to protest outside have still been active on social media sharing information about current events, sharing resources, and contacting elected officials to demand action.

Voter suppression of young people has led to low voter turnout among TAY (ages 18-25).

² <https://www.sfgate.com/news/slideshow/Simone-Jacques-Mission-District-protest-203235.php>

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<https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/golden-gate-bridge-protest-was-organized-by-teens-seeking-change/>

Studies show that 90 percent of young people reported an interest in politics and 80 percent wanted to vote, but only 43 percent of people aged 18-29 ended up voting in 2016.⁴ Since 2016, youth turnout has mostly stagnated or declined while turnout for seniors has risen. Low turnout can be accounted for by ageist and racist policies around voting, which have disproportionately disenfranchised young people of color. Polling location closures and relocations near colleges lead to longer wait times, in places without early voting busy schedules can make voting less accessible, strict voter ID laws and registration restrictions make voting difficult to navigate, and voter purges can disenfranchise young people. Furthermore, under COVID-19, there have been health concerns around showing up to polling sites, for example in the March primary elections, which have also led to lower voter turnout. On May 8, 2020, Governor Newsom signed Executive Order N-64-20 ensuring that every California registered voter will receive a mail-in ballot for the November general election.⁵ Young people are generally more liberal, so their turnout could greatly affect the election in November. Barriers to voting must continue to be mitigated in order to gain greater representation of young people and people of color in our democracy.

COVID-19 has also changed how political campaigns are conducted by limiting in person interactions. Lack of canvassing and events like rallies and debates have made it difficult to outreach and engage voters, donors, and volunteers. Campaigns have adapted and turned to online platforms to hold fundraisers and town hall meetings in addition to utilizing social media and phone banking. Because the presidential election will be taking place this year, there are hopes that there will still be a high voter turnout despite obstacles posed by COVID-19.

d) Impacts on Black and Brown Youth and Youth in the Justice System

The Youth Commission wishes to acknowledge the physical, communal, social, mental and personal violence that has historically been inflicted on the Black and Brown communities, not only this year but historically and many years before. The Commission affirms and stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and countless other activists and youth organizers fighting anti-Blackness, white supremacy and all forms of oppression. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, Sean Monterrossa, Erik Salgado, Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau, and many more is an echoing of the injustice and constant fear for of one’s life that Black, Indigenous and other communities of color are facing at the hands of law enforcement

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/stop-blaming-young-voters-not-turning-out-sanders/608137/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/05.08.2020-EO-N-64-20-text.pdf>

and incarceration. The over policing of Black and Brown neighborhoods, the racist killings with no sense of accountability from officers or police departments, and the way in which detention centers, prisons and county jails are prioritized before human life, especially during an international pandemic is exhausting. Many public and medical health professionals have expressed their concerns about how these communities, places and populations are extremely vulnerable, which resulted in the needless and highly prevented deaths of our most vulnerable populations.

Similar to many other incidents in the United States America, when there is hardship, our most marginalized vulnerable population are facing the most alarming harshest effects of the COVID-19 consequences. Black people make up 23% of the COVID-19 deaths, despite only being 13% of the country's entire population. The SF Chronicle reports that as of May 5, 2020, when there were 1,375 cases, 45% of those cases were by Latinx people. Unidos en Salud, UCSF and the San Francisco Department of Health conducted tests around the same and showed that 95% of those who tested positive for COVID-19 in the Mission district, identified as Latinx. This is an unfortunate pattern we see through the city. The districts with the most confirmed cases are Mission/Bernal Heights (D9), Bayview-Hunters Point (D10) and Excelsior/Oceanview (D11). The racial disparities are wildly prevalent in San Francisco, but the City has been able to provide support both locally and nationally. On May 21, 2020 UCSF sent two waves of doctors in order to aid and support the Navajo Nation. As of June 14, 2020, there have been 6,611 confirmed cases in that region. The Navajo Nation is 27,413 square miles and yet only has 13 grocery stores. This information and context is crucial to keep in mind when the Indigenous community in San Francisco is so often underrepresented and undercounted in many forms, particularly in data collecting.

While public officials were implementing policies, the already thin layer of support for low-income & marginalized communities began to take a larger toll. For example, the inability to stay home due to the demanding jobs of essential workers, the inability to practice social distancing due housing situations like an SRO (single room occupancy) have exposed the deeply rooted institutional racism, and the confusing bureaucratic processes that have made it difficult to access healthcare and other general resources are factored into these numbers.

Given the context of what the day to day lives are for marginalized people, the acts of law enforcement are even more horrendous and that more inappropriate. On May 1, 2020, two houseless individuals, inspired by Oakland's Moms 4 Housing, occupied a vacant home in the Castro district to protest the lack of housing for people during a global pandemic. San Francisco police officers were called and stated the protest was an unlawful assembly and attempted to remove them. Videos show officers slamming a

protestor to the ground while wearing “Blue Lives Matter” printed face masks. This symbol has been associated with counterprotesting of BLM, alongside having white supremacy connotations. Despite SFPD being deemed an “essential workforce”, their abuse of power and practicing of brutality on activists who are merely asking for safe housing during a pandemic, is all the more reason the Youth Commission’s Transformative Justice Committee has been advocating and demanding the defunding of the police. Commissioners have seen time and time again that law enforcement and the way they interact with communities of color is inexcusable and highly dangerous.

e) Impacts on Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Related to housing and homelessness, despite legislation enacted to move homeless residents into hotel rooms and other supportive housing options, there are still many San Franciscans experiencing homelessness on the streets, including youth and TAY. In June, the Board of Supervisors voted to approve legislation that would permanently ban evictions for nonpayment of rent during shelter in place and as result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, because only state law can cancel rent, tenants will have to eventually pay back all missed rent payments in full, a challenge for many who have lost their jobs.

Recommendations

- 1) **Increase accessibility for at-distance programming educational assistance.** The Youth Commission urges the Mayor and Board of Supervisors to direct departments serving youth to increase at-distance programming for youth—educational and recreational—for the duration of the Shelter in Place Order, with the object of making such programming accessible to all youth in San Francisco. The Youth Commission also urges the Board of Education of the San Francisco Unified School District and the Board of Trustees of City College of San Francisco to provide educational assistance for students who are at placed at a disadvantage by the Shelter in Place Order, such as those who may not graduate on time, those struggling with online school as a learning medium, and those do not have access to virtual devices and reliable internet.
- 2) **Do not cut programs serving youth.** The Youth Commission urges the Mayor and Board of Supervisors to not cut funding for youth-oriented services and programs in response to an anticipated budget shortfall. The Youth Commission further urges the City to maintain consistency across all services and programs made available to youth for the duration of the Shelter in Place Order as well as when the City is able to transition back to normal operating conditions.
- 3) **Instead, cut programs that do not serve or actively harm underserved youth and their communities (\$77 million+ alone in identified possible cut).** The Youth Commission recommends that the Mayor and Board of Supervisors instead enact immediate cost-saving measures by permanently

closing the Youth Guidance Center (approx. \$18.2 million each fiscal year)⁶ and County Jail Number 4 (approx. \$24.7 each fiscal year)⁷, freezing planned increases in the number of sworn peace officers employed by City departments (possibly up to \$17 million)⁸, halting the purchase of additional law enforcement equipment, eliminating law enforcement personnel and equipment from SFMTA fare enforcement (approx. \$3 million)⁹, homelessness response protocols (approx. \$11.2 million)¹⁰, and schools (approx. \$2 million)¹¹, and otherwise redirecting funds away from departments practicing policing and incarceration (including the San Francisco Police Department, San Francisco Sheriff's Office, Adult Probation Department, and Juvenile Probation Department)¹².

- 4) **Center the needs of Black communities.** The Youth Commission urges the City, SFUSD, and CCSF to center the needs of Black communities, in particular those of Black youth, to not cut programs and funding that serve those communities, and to increase funding for ethnic studies programs and restorative practice programs in schools, especially for communities experiencing disproportionate rates of violence and/or trauma. The Youth Commission also urges the City to increase resources for pandemic response in marginalized communities that have been and are most impacted by COVID-19, notably Black and Indigenous communities.
- 5) **Include youth in recovery discussions.** The Youth Commission requests that one or more representative(s) of the Commission, to be designated by an internal process, be appointed to all committees, advisory bodies, and task forces created to make recommendations and take action directing the City's response to the economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such representative(s) should have all the same powers and duties of other members of such committees, advisory bodies, and task forces. The Youth Commission further urges SFUSD and CCSF to prioritize youth leadership in co-designing and co-shaping fall school reopening plans, and to ensure that schools do not reopen until all communities are safe, and schools are equipped with health and hygiene measures, masks, sanitization, and proper social distancing protocols.
- 6) **Support community response, especially for undocumented families.** The Youth Commission urges the City to provide logistical and financial aid to outside non-profit organizations providing assistance to undocumented workers who do not qualify for federal assistance and their families.
- 7) **Invest immediately in housing not jails.** The Youth Commission urges the City to immediately house all youth experiencing homelessness in a dignified manner and release all remaining incarcerated youth into their communities, making sure that all released youth receive full reentry support and services. The

⁶ [2019 Mayor's Proposed Budget](#) p. 251

⁷ October 17, 2019 [BLA Report](#) on Costs & Operations at County Jail #4 at 850 Bryant Street

⁸ FY 2019-2020 and FY 2020-2021 [Salary Ordinance](#)

⁹ July 8, 2020 [BLA Report](#) on SFPD staffing levels, Muni K-9, Muni Response Team and Muni Task Force

¹⁰ Ibid., HSOC and HOT

¹¹ Ibid., School Resources Officers

¹² For instance, the Mounted Unit which totals over \$2.2 million, Ibid.

Youth Commission also urges the City to work with community based organizations that work with unhoused youth and youth experiencing homelessness, especially service providers, to meet the increased needs both of those youth and of service providers, particularly with respect to mental health services and shelter.

- 8) **Provide resources for youth and families who cannot safely shelter in place at home.** The Youth Commission urges the City to provide increased resources for youth who may not be safe at home, especially victims of domestic abuse and violence, in the form of remote counseling, guidance, and support to move into a safe environment if necessary.