



## Mental Health Access for the Chicago Latinx Community in the time of COVID-19: A community-based photovoice project

### Introduction

As part of a larger study about the experiences of Latinx and Muslim community members during the Trump administration, this project involved a partnership between the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), the Collaborative for Community Wellness (CCW), and Dr. Suhad Tabahi and Dr. Leticia Villarreal Sosa of the Dominican University School of Social Work. Southwest side Latinx community residents took photos that reflected how the local community context in which they live impacts their mental health and informs their experiences accessing mental health services. This brief provides an overview of the research methodology, key findings, and implications for policy action.

### Methodology

An arts-based research practice, **photovoice** facilitates community engagement through photographs and narratives. Participants in this study took photographs that represented their individual perspectives and lived experiences related to mental health in their communities. After the photos were collected, discussion groups were formed for participants to share the stories behind their photos and to identify common themes. As **community-based participatory research (CBPR)**, this project equitably involved community members, students and researchers in all aspects of the research process. All partners in the process contributed expertise and shared in the decision-making. BPNC health promoters, or promotoras, were vital to this work. They assisted with recruitment and also engaged as research participants.



For Micaela<sup>1</sup>, this picture represents “the importance of the community, supporting one another, the importance of medical services for those with illness, their family as well.”

### Key Findings

Data from the photo discussion groups underscored **the dire need for more affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate mental health services in the city of Chicago**. In particular, participants discussed the limited availability of mental health services within their neighborhoods, as well as the even more limited availability of free services for the uninsured and the lack of linguistically accessible services for the Spanish-speaking community. Of the services that do exist, long wait times impede community residents from accessing support in their moment of need, often leading to an increase of symptoms and mental health crises. When individuals who have experienced trauma do not have access to services that promote emotional healing, unaddressed mental health needs result in perpetual cycles of pain, suffering, substance use, and family and community violence. Mental health needs are further accentuated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated stressors.

<sup>1</sup> Please note all research participants' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.



“If we can construct so many enormous buildings to maintain the city, why can we not construct buildings to address our emotional illnesses” - Valentina

Photovoice participants additionally identified that **the city’s lack of investment in mental health services in their neighborhoods** reflects the fact that **the city does not prioritize the needs of low-income communities of color**. The beauty of the city’s center and the tall buildings were discussed in juxtaposition to the lack of services and physical spaces in their neighborhoods where community members can access services with dignity and respect. In turn, the city’s inattention and lack of investment in low-income communities of color has a further negative impact on mental health.

Findings from this photovoice project coincide with preliminary findings from an online community survey on mental health access that the CCW simultaneously conducted. Survey data from **over 300 community residents** across the city indicate that approximately **90% of respondents believe there are not enough mental health resources available in their neighborhoods**. Approximately **90% of respondents additionally reported that they would be likely to access free mental health services if they were offered by the city**. These data convergently point to the need for increased investment in Chicago’s public mental health safety net.

### Implications

With the lack of affordable mental health services even prior to the current pandemic, as well as participants’ concerns about increased mental health issues and trauma during the crisis, there is significant need for more equitable mental health service access for Chicago’s low-income communities of color. The city must invest in its public mental health infrastructure in order to ensure that **free, culturally appropriate mental health services** are accessible to **all Chicagoans in their moment of need**, regardless of immigration status or income. Investment in public mental health services becomes even more critical as individuals and families navigate the impact of the pandemic.

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### About the Collaborative for Community Wellness

The Collaborative for Community Wellness is convened by Brighton Park Neighborhood Council as a collaborative that brings together mental health professionals, community-based organizations, and community residents to address the lack of mental health access and to redefine mental health to match the needs of the community.

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