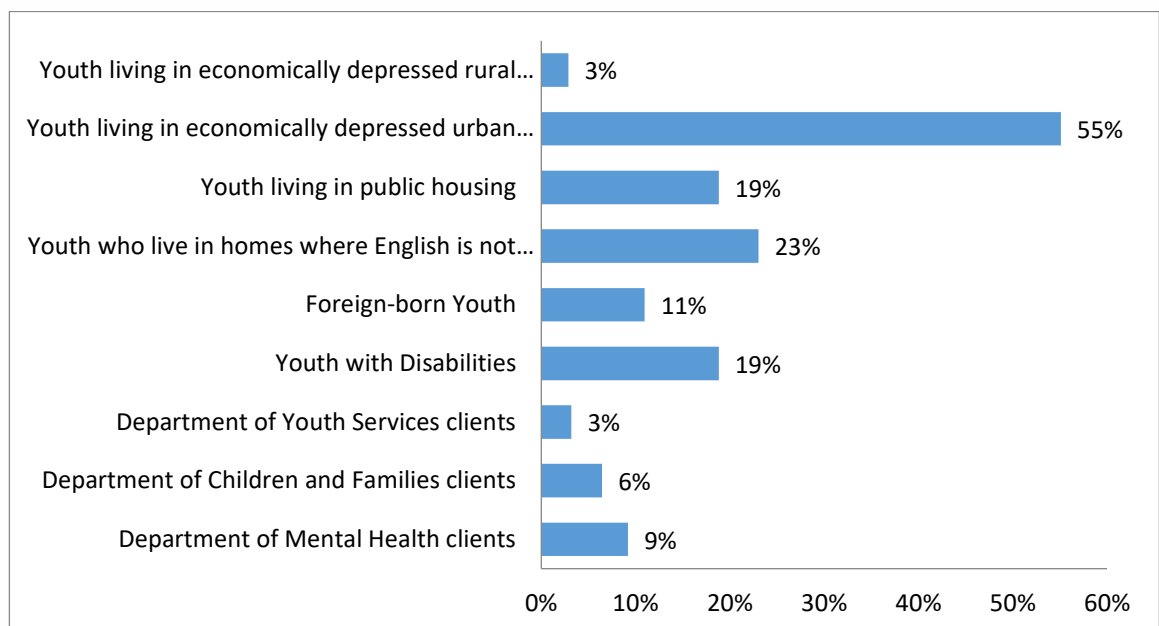


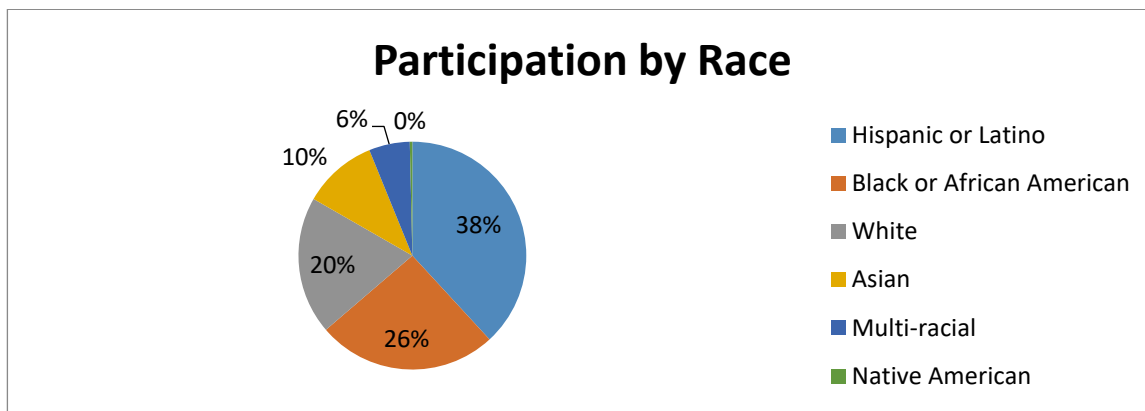
Creative Youth Development During COVID-19

*The pandemic highlighted that the fundamental value of what we do lies in connection. Teaching music is our vehicle and offering our program families support and a sense of belonging is at the core of what we really do –
Musica Franklin, Greenfield, MA.*

Demographics

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Massachusetts 74 Creative Youth Development organizations were forced to pivot, without preparation or training, to remote programming. These organizations faced a unique set of challenges in working with communities that were disproportionately affected by the virus and with young people who already face significant and systemic challenges in their lives. The youth involved in these 74 supported CYD programs during the current funding cycle included:





This report details the pivots that were made by Creative Youth Development programs and organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, provides an overview of the needs of the field going forward, and outlines some of the steps funders may take to partner with these organizations as they move forward their essential work in communities throughout Massachusetts.

Programming Changes in CYD Programs During COVID-19

As part of the Final Reporting for FY20 [YouthReach](#) and [SerHacer](#) funding, 74 Creative Youth Development organizations were asked to describe how their organization pivoted to address the needs of young people. Their responses illustrate the complexity of CYD work in providing high quality experiences in the arts, sciences, and humanities while simultaneously meeting the basic needs of working with youth, families, and communities who are systemically disadvantaged.

Among the responses, four areas of programming changes emerged from the responses. Each are detailed below with quotes directly from the reports.

1.) A focus on connection – Over and over in final reports the word ‘connection’ came up as a first response to the pandemic, reinforcing the value of positive relationships, mentoring and community support inherent in CYD programs.

At the onset of COVID-19, we knew our youth most needed connection, consistency and a sense of normality.

Strengthened connections with parents, siblings and home life was a huge “silver lining” to an otherwise incredibly difficult time.

One of the ways that we have maintained our strong sense of community has been through our Friday night Zoom Parties. In these virtual gatherings, we make time for students to share how they are doing, which strengthens our relationships with students even more than we could in the context of normal classes and rehearsals.

Art therapists remained in contact with 100% of youth via text, video calls, and phone with a particular focus on those who were likely to be struggling with anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges.

2.) Pivot to online learning – Like most industries, nonprofit out of school time programs pivoted almost immediately to establishing connection and opportunity online. Nearly all of the programs responding to the survey cited an immediate shift to online programming during the month of March. A tension existed between continuing with existing programming and/or developing new resources for work that shared the same values.

From March to June, every student received two virtual private lessons per week with assignments to complete in preparation for their lessons.

After quick action and long hours put in by our committed staff, we were able to maintain our original schedules and immediately offer online enrichment classes for our students. To better meet the individualized needs of our students

We closed our doors on March 13th but stayed committed to offering a safe space for students to learn, grow, and express themselves. To do so, we have:

- *Continued to run all core programming, pivoting some programs to fit more appropriately in a virtual world.*
- *We have created a communication tree that maps over 500 direct connections and ensures each member of our community is being contacted by someone they know and trust.*
- *We have surveyed our families to understand their needs, and are acting as a critical resource, connecting them with a wide range of services to provide everything from food, to shelter, mental health supports, internet access, and educational services.*
- *We are part of a neighborhood-wide network of organizations who are sharing information and resources, and our infrastructure is a vital part of the success of this effort.*
- *For the summer semester, we will host a weekly community video call, and weekly open mic as a way to stay connected.*

3.) Focusing on basic needs – Many CYD program serve as holistic supports for young people and community, focusing on issues going far beyond being an art program. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the true breadth of the role these programs play in their communities.

Concerned first about food insecurity, we developed a plan to begin distributing "Grab and Go" meals to young people the very next day after their COVID-19 shut down their schools and onsite programs at our Boys & Girls Club.

We also delivered two rounds of care packages with art materials, books, masks, grocery gift cards, etc... Going door to door with the packages was essential in staying connected with families, especially those without technology/internet, which has been our greatest challenge so far.

Some of the youth were experiencing food and housing insecurities and were guided by staff with resources and delivery of food pantry donations. Some of the youth were anxious about virtual meetings and so staff accommodated their needs with curbside check-ins and tech support.

Our staff have been working a dual role with youth, providing them with high-quality youth programming and acting as a support system for their mental health. They have also been calling our youth twice a week outside of program to check-in and ensure they have access to the infrastructure needed to thrive academically and personally. This includes ensuring that our youth have a computer and internet access, connecting them with mental health supports and locations to receive food and other essential items, and providing cash allocations.

Challenges Ahead

As we move into the fall of 2020 CYD organizations face unique challenges beyond the systemic obstacles that they face each year in funding, youth development, and programming. Schools are reopening in different formats that are stretching the resources of districts, staff and faculty. Traditional collaborations between schools and out of school time programs are uniquely difficult, complicating the recruitment and engagement of young people. At the same time, organizations are having to make choices about in-person, hybrid and remote programming around transportation, family needs, and issues of equity in technology.

When asked to identify specific challenges in the year ahead, the responses include two seemingly distinct areas. They illustrate the breadth of challenges, systemically and programmatically, that CYD programs face every day.

1.) Technology – Looking ahead, the challenge that was reported most often for the upcoming year was the need for technology and support to continue to equitably engage youth. The technology needs were divided into three areas:

a. Hardware/Software

Technology needs include cameras, video cameras, tripods, and laptops with Adobe Software capabilities. Additional technology would allow...teens to film, design, and edit their projects.

b. Training

Over the next 6-12 months, we would benefit from more support around implementing virtual concerts and events, how other institutions are planning and executing virtual internships, and platforms/tools that other CYD organizations are utilizing to maximize virtual engagement within the arts.

We would love training and support in bringing a traditionally hands-on teaching method of Cambodian performing arts to an online platform.

Resources to help build technological capacity from within would be helpful – for example, advice/PD on platforms/web services that can help produce more engaging online experiences with young people BY young people. So accessible, user-friendly, and inexpensive but high-quality.

c. Inequity

The young people...rely on our on-site computer lab for word processing and internet access. With schools and our site both closed during the pandemic, young people without home computers were at a significant disadvantage. By far, the most important resource we could connect them to is home computers with internet access. No matter what happens in the next 6-12 months, equipping every young person with these tools to navigate this new future should be the primary concern of every organization and institution pledged to serve them.

One of the biggest challenges with remote programming, especially for arts programming, is that all our youth need their own supplies. They can't work in groups or share a set of paints. It limits what kind of programming we can offer.

2.) Health and Social Supports – Mental health supports for youth during the pandemic was also highlighted by many programs, alongside a need for basic social supports to address food and housing insecurity.

The most important resources moving forward are those that relate to the immediate needs of our students. This includes mental health resources, housing support, food, and employment opportunities for our families.

... classes have been in high demand since the pandemic started. Local young people were already facing high levels of isolation, anxiety and depression – and COVID-19 has only increased their levels of uncertainty and stress. Moving forward, a partnership with area mental health practitioners to advise our teachers and help with

curriculum development will greatly assist us in meeting the needs of our young people.

Our organization sees two major risks to our students in the year ahead: Their families' financial security, and mental health challenges due to isolation, family illness, and uncertainty. While all staff are working hard to keep students engaged and support those who are feeling the weight of the current world, our Mutual Support Network is doing what we can to offer security and stability to our families – for many of whom the mass-layoffs have been devastating. We know that the health and stability of our young people is directly tied to the health and safety of their loved ones, which is why we will continue to seek resources that enable them to thrive.

We would like to partner with organizations that meet the social-emotional needs the pandemic has surfaced: young people are dealing with the stressors of isolation, uncertainty, trauma, and loss. Coping resources are needed.

One concerning aspect of the changes caused by this pandemic is the inability to connect young people to mental health resources. Our community has experienced a lack of mental health clinicians to provide services for young people since well before this current crisis, and the inability to meet with mental health professionals face-to-face has only exacerbated this problem.

3.) Systemic Racism – Many Creative Youth Development programs have, at their core, focused on dismantling systemic racism for more than 30 years. With a greater national awareness of the pandemic of racism in the United States that occurred after the George Floyd murder, CYD programs cited the need to continue to provide support and activism in local communities.

As we deepen our own understanding of the systemic inequalities facing our youth, we have identified the need to develop specific ways to support and empower young people in navigating and challenging systemic racism.

We recently held a town hall with an applied psychologist to hold space for students to process the impact that the pandemic and racial injustice have had on them.

Supporting CYD in FY21

As a field working to address systemic inequity through culture, Creative Youth Development programs and organizations face significant challenges on a daily basis. Looking ahead to the next year, the field is faced with bridging an even deeper divide. While pivoting to online learning, maintaining and deepening connection with youth, and working to ensure the basic needs of youth and families

are met still are priorities. The next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Creative Youth Development is defined by a struggle to secure hardware and training for virtual work, the need for significant resources to support mental health, and an amplified focus on addressing systemic racism in communities throughout the country.

Funders of Creative Youth Development must also pivot in some of the same ways these organizations have – to maintain and further develop authentic connection with grantees, to understand and invest in creating liberating spaces online, and to ensure that the basic needs of organizations are met. Moving forward, the funding community must remain proximate to organizations and develop resources and partnerships that can be deployed broadly across the field to support Creative Youth Development work in a virtual space, recognize and address the need for mental health services, and continue to support the dismantling of systemic racism through the arts, sciences and humanities. This corresponds to our other surveys and data gathering from this summer. Our work going forward will focus on the following topics identified in that research:

1. Reopening and Cross-Sector Collaboration
2. Media and Virtual Technology Engagement
3. Equity and Social Justice
4. Youth Voice
5. Trauma and Mental Health
6. Collective Action and Advocacy