

SOUTH PHILADELPHIA LATINE IM/MIGRANT YOUTH WELL-BEING & COMMUNITY CARE STRATEGIES



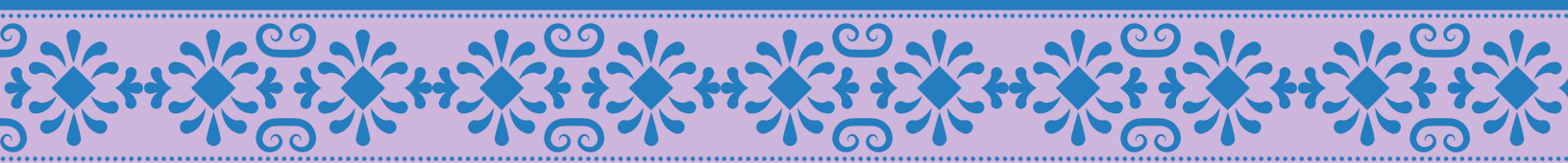
January 2025 Report



Nationalities
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FOREWORD

When considering solutions to broad and daunting challenges faced by society, we must remember and center the resilience of the most marginalized. They are a source of inspiration and hope for a better future. We must turn to their wisdom and practices of care that have sustained communities despite enduring centuries of violence and oppression ignited through settler-colonialism and its resulting systems and structures of control.

Mental health has been declared a public health crisis. In the last three years, Dr. Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General, has issued advisories related to [Protecting Youth Mental Health \(2021\)](#), on the [Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community \(2023\)](#), and on [Parental Mental Health and Well-Being \(2024\)](#). These advisories outline concrete recommendations that diverse stakeholders and community members can enact to reduce the impacts and prevalence of mental health challenges. Importantly, the advisories call on the necessity of cultural shifts and to collaborate in true partnership with community members, particularly low-income, racial, ethnic, and sexual and gender minorities.

Environments plagued by toxic im/migration stress directly impact mental health ([Rodriguez et al., 2023](#)). Legal vulnerabilities and discrimination are experienced as long-term stressors by individuals in undocumented or mixed-status households. These stressors include lower self-rated health and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

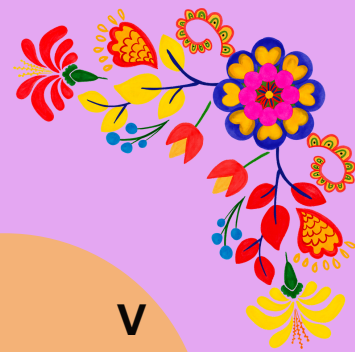
Dominant narratives related to mass deportation often increase instances of physical and mental violence toward im/migrant communities and contribute to a sense of fear and hopelessness among individuals, mixed status families, and entire neighborhoods. Now more than ever, im/migrant communities will rely on their trusted networks for safety and support. Organizations that serve this population should continue to practice community care and promote healing through advocacy/activism, education, mutual aid, cultural celebration, community-building, and empowerment. All of these strategies mediate and lessen the harms of toxic im/migration stress.

This report highlights Mexican and Central American im/migrant families' experiences seeking and receiving resources in Philadelphia. It is a testament to the difficulties in accessing adequate mental health care; but more importantly, it honors how community members care for one another and directly resist violent and ungrounded dehumanizing narratives. As the stories and lived experiences outlined in this report show, healing happens in community.

Funders must recognize the value of community care, too often made invisible or ignored. They must put into practice their commitments to racial and economic justice by listening to communities and funding existing and effective practices that sustain community well-being.

We hope that after reading this report, you see that the well-being of Latine im/migrant youth is sustained through community organizations and that they are creatives, freedom dreamers, and have the same goals and aspirations as many of their peers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report spotlights the ways in which community-based organizations—including JUNTOS, Puentes de Salud, and Mighty Writers (MW) El Futuro—have filled gaps in the public health and education ecosystem, prevented and mediated the impacts of mental health challenges among Latine im/migrant youth, and driven positive youth development. We center the experiences of Latine im/migrant families; offer recommendations for improving services and programming; and lay out a call-to-action for community organizations, funders, mental health providers, and researchers to listen to young people and incorporate their recommendations into practice.

Throughout this report, we use the word “Latine” because it is inclusive to non-binary people of Latin American heritage that originated in Spanish-speaking countries. It honors Spanish pronunciation more than terms like “Latinx”. We use the term “im/migrant” with a slash to capture the complexity and diversity of population movement, acknowledging factors such as settlement intentions, legal status, mobility, and political borders.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Our approach centers the voices of Latine youth highlighting their experiences accessing public mental health resources and uplifting the impacts from their participation in community-based programming as evidence-based data.

Over the last twenty years, the Latine population in Philadelphia has doubled from 130,000 to 252,400 and 40% of this increase came from im/migrants ([The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2024](#)). Latine children of im/migrants (second generation) and new arrivals (first generation) struggle to obtain quality education, adequate health care, and encounter cultural and language barriers ([Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014](#)). Young im/migrants, particularly English language learners, make up 23% of the 117,956 students enrolled in the School District of Philadelphia ([Graham 2024](#)). These youth experience high rates of mental health challenges exacerbated by migration related experiences and barriers to care. Philadelphia has 61 im/migrant serving community organizations that are working to build social support networks, host cultural programming, and support im/migrant communities in accessing basic needs ([The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2024](#)).

We partnered with South Philadelphia youth to understand what program and care models are effective (see section 2). We engaged 38 unique South Philadelphia Mexican and Central American im/migrant youth and children of im/migrants (ages 13-22) through semi-structured, trauma-informed interviews and through a seven session mental health circle program. We also interviewed therapists, nonprofit staff, and im/migrant parents (see appendix). We uplift the following community-led programs (see section 5):

- JUNTOS, Fuerza and JUNTOS Podemos
- MW EL Futuro, After-School Writing Academy
- Puentes de Salud, Lanzando Líderes

Program and organization selection was based on their reputation as trust-worthy and their robust approaches to youth engagement including: leadership development, youth activism/advocacy, art and culture, education, and social justice.



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With an emphasis on bringing forward young people's voices and experiences, this study highlights the intricate barriers impacting their well-being (section 3). Some include:

- Navigating multicultural identities, discrimination due to LGBTQIA+ identity (section 4)
- Inadequate and underfunded public services, including language and cultural injustice

Central to our research findings is that healing happens in community. Participation in programming at JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud positively impacted the lives of youth in several ways including personal growth, increased capacity for emotional processing and to hold critical conversations, and increased cultural connection that supported positive identity formation. Using a Healing Justice (Page and Woodland, 2023) framework, we demonstrate how community care practices are embedded in the structure of these community organizations (see section 1) and promote positive development. Youth want more spaces like their community organizations, so we must listen and expand these programs.

Our recommendations (section 6) emphasize the importance of cultural transformations. We advocate for a multi-system approach to foster collaboration and support tailored to the specific needs of Latine im/migrant youth.

Im/migrant serving community organizations should...

- Honor the contributions of youth by adapting your organizational structure around youth feedback, leadership, and engagement.
- Develop intentional programming addressing the importance of mental health in Latine households to reduce negative stereotypes, stigma, and mislabeling.
- Address the mental health needs of LGBTQIA+ im/migrant youth.
- Expand peer-support models to directly address im/migrant youth mental health and to build a network of youth community health workers.

Funders should...

- Value im/migrant stories, testimonies, and lived experiences as evidence-based data.
- Support youth-led programming through multi-year and flexible grants.
- Commit to sustained investments for community-based programming that addresses youth well-being.

Mental health service providers should...

- Actively disrupt paradigms of standardized mental health care by practicing authenticity, transparency, and co-creation of treatment plans.
- Cultivate a therapeutic space where LGBTQIA+ Latine im/migrant youth feel safe in taking the risk to be themselves.
- Practice advocacy by decolonizing your mind, your practice, and embarking on your own freedom journey.
- Keep an open mind by centering kindness and by recognizing and adapting to the diverse identities and backgrounds of youth.

Researchers should...

- Utilize a humility-centered approach and commit to 'Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo' (Only the community saves the community).
- Implement a qualitative focus and challenge conventional standards in the methodology, presentation, and use of research findings.



1. REIMAGINING LATINE IM/MIGRANT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

"I think organizations have stood out and gone above and beyond to help our community be where we are today. I mean, for Philadelphia to know that we are part of it, we are here. We are here supporting them every way we can, giving life to the city, being part of it, just like the city has offered itself to us. Like those spaces, those events, well, they have allowed us to participate and be a part of it. Well, not only being a part of it, but the future generations are already part of it, rooted in it."

**-Lucy, Mexican im/migrant parent,
and Mighty Writers El Futuro
community member**

COMMUNITY CARE AND HEALING JUSTICE

“...let’s not parachute into communities that are not ours with models and tools without considering and acknowledging that folks already have their own. This can do more harm than good, continuing to disconnect communities from their traditions and practices.”

- Cara Page and Erica Woodland in

Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety

This research on community care in South Philadelphia situates well-being within two bodies of theory: Healing Justice Lineages (Page and Woodland, 2023) and Supporting Latinx Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014). Healing Justice (HJ) was envisioned by the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective to build communal healing traditions that are both a political strategy and way to intervene and respond to collective trauma and violence in communities. The definition of HJ is dynamic and evolves with the emergence of community care strategies. It involves community-led responses and mechanisms to interrupt, transform, and intervene on the individual/collective trauma that is uncovered as movements challenge social, structural, and institutional conditions (Page and Middleton, 155, 2023). It addresses current and historical trauma by remembering integrative and holistic care models rooted in ancestral traditions of resiliency and survival. It is a cultural strategy that builds community power by reimagining and creating transformative and holistic models of care (Page and Woodland, 167, 2023). These practices and healing traditions vary in method, but incorporate the following principles (Page and Middleton, 155, 2023):

- Collective trauma is transformed collectively.
- There is no single model of care.
- Healing strategies are rooted in place and ancestral technologies.

A HJ framework invites us to challenge and interrupt Western and colonial ideologies of health, healing, and well-being within our social movements, culture, and practice. By doing so, we have the power to transform systems of oppression by valuing and incorporating cultural and spiritual traditions rooted in place as forms of care work. Youth programming at JUNTOS, MW EL Futuro, and Puentes de Salud engages Latine youth by integrating Healing Justice mechanisms into all dimensions of their organization. Their community-led work centers on empowerment, social justice, community building, mutual aid, and art and cultural exploration, and exemplifies how community care as a HJ modality can transform the lives of Latine im/migrant youth.



Components of Latine Youth Programming that Promote Positive Youth Development

Community care emphasizes collective responsibility. It operates outside of formal institutions and relies on grassroots efforts, local organizations, and community leaders. Im/migrant serving organizations cultivate safe spaces for strong social connections and they recognize, organize, and act within the specific community and place. Community care practices in South Philadelphia align with and extend a research synthesis of 114 sources focused on Latine participation in positive youth development programs (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014). South Philadelphia im/migrant serving organizations center community care into their conceptual youth program framework, core program elements, organization/program infrastructure, and community relationships. In section 5, we highlight the explicit ways community organizations integrate Healing Justice into their programming to engage Latine youth and transform generational trauma into collective power and resistance. JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud integrate community care as Healing Justice praxis and their models effectively engage youth in accordance to these five key dimensions of practice for Latine youth engagement and positive youth development (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014):

- 1. Integrate extended understandings of positive youth development that reflect research on the diversity of Latine and im/migrant youth populations.**
- 2. Support positive ethnic identity development.**
- 3. Contend with physiological and social effects of discrimination.**
- 4. Respond to the ramifications of economic poverty.**
- 5. Act upon the diversity of local and regional Latine experience.**



Note. Adapted from National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2002)

The graphic was retrieved from (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2014).

A Need for Cultural Transformations: Towards Valuing Im/migrant Stories as Evidence-Based Data

Community-based organizations integrate HJ to fill existing gaps in public systems, yet their contributions and impacts on the well-being of youth are underrepresented in research. By elevating the healing work of community organizations and upscaling their programs, funders and researchers play an important role in supporting the well-being of im/migrant youth.

Current mental and behavioral health systems rely on youth development models that do not adequately address structural and cultural challenges faced by Latine youth (Rodriguez and Morrobel, 2004). A heavy emphasis on “evidence-based practices” often discredits the impact of organizations’ community care work. Some reasons why these programs and models are not acknowledged as evidence-based include: 1) many community-based programs and interventions lack the financial resources to set up rigorous, controlled research that would prove effectiveness within Western measures, 2) evaluating culturally appropriate programs is more difficult and requires more resources than evaluating discrete treatments and outcomes for particular diagnoses, 3) the favored scientific perspective that characterizes much of mainstream psychology often intentionally excludes cultural perspectives on mental health and instead relies on medicalized approaches to mental health challenges (Foxen, 45, 2016).

We must acknowledge that healing is possible where there is community and positive social connections, where youth are uplifted as leaders, and are treated with respect. Healing is possible in places where youth play active roles in deciding the trajectory and work of an organization and where youth are empowered to be agents of change in their community. To practice cultural humility and acknowledge the power of culture in shaping the meaning, symptoms, and experiences of mental and physical illness, our priority, time, and resources cannot be limited to Western clinical care and colonial ideologies of healing.

When culture-centered services and programming do not have the “evidence-based” credential, it is harder for these programs to be taken seriously by mainstream psychological arenas and by funders and policymakers alike. Therefore, it is extremely important for researchers, practitioners, and funders to disrupt what constitutes “evidence-based” data by honoring stories, testimonies, and youth-lived experiences. We must commit to HJ praxis in our own work. This research uplifts youth’s self-reported health impacts from their participation in community-based programming as evidence for program scaling. We cannot solely rely on statistics and other psychological measures of outcomes. We must also value the voices and resiliency of Latine im/migrant communities. The next section highlights our youth-led participatory research methods that disrupt traditional models and commit to reciprocal engagements with im/migrant communities.



2. YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY AND TRAUMA-INFORMED RESEARCH METHODS

Upon entering the JUNTOS office, you are welcomed by a sign that reads, ‘Solo el pueblo salva el pueblo,’ which translates to ‘Only the community saves the community.’ This phrase encapsulates the goals of participatory action research that commits to engaging community members throughout all stages of the research development process and implementation. To understand what program and care models are effective, it is essential to listen to community members by embedding yourself and building relationships. This section explores our participatory research model including youth co-researchers, community events, trauma-informed interviews, data analysis feedback meetings, and our mental health circle program. These approaches ensure a commitment to the needs of the South Philadelphia Latine im/migrant community and generate actionable findings. It was particularly important to center participatory methods given the systematic silencing of youth voices and the need to take their lived experiences more seriously. By partnering with young people, we are committed to honoring their voices and contributing to broader cultural shifts that value im/migrant lived experiences and stories as evidence-based data.

For participatory research approaches to work, it is important to establish partnerships with flexible funding sources like Eidos LGBTQ+ Health Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Health Partnership. As different ideas emerged to involve community members, such as for data collection and analysis, we depended on these flexible funding sources to ensure we could compensate youth and other community members for their time. Especially given the pervasive and often-hidden challenges LGBTQIA+ youth experience, community organizations should seek out academic-community partnerships and community-based research opportunities like the one we created with Penn Eidos.



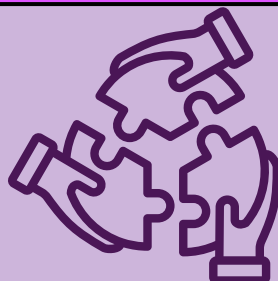


YOUTH CO-RESEARCHER MODEL

Entering community spaces as a researcher can be uncomfortable, but can also lead to growth and to authentic relationships when we lean in those moments of discomfort as a source of learning. We sought advice from Guadalupe Mendez at JUNTOS and Daniela Morales at MW El Futuro to develop a compensated youth co-researcher model. This facilitated community trust and buy-in, and ensured our research structure and related activities were led by Latine im/migrant youth or children of im/migrants from Philadelphia and the surrounding area.

Our youth co-research model was inspired by *Decolonizing Ethnography* (Bejarano et al., 2019) and funded by the Philadelphia Health Partnership. It encompassed the following:

Component	Description
Position Duration	1-1.5-year position
Compensation	\$6,000 paid through quarterly stipends
Transportation and Snacks	\$500 for transportation to project-related events and snack funds for check-in meetings
Time Commitment	Expectation of 4-5 weekly hours dedicated to project-related work
Meetings	Weekly or biweekly collaborative check-in and planning meetings
Professional Development Funds	\$2,525 allocated by the Stoneleigh Foundation to present at the <u>National Latinx Psychological Association</u> conference in 2024
Research Ethics Training	Modified <u>PittCTSI Community Partners Research Ethics Training</u>
Interviewing Workshop	“Designing Research with Intention: Culturally Responsive, Trauma-Informed, and Humanizing Strategies to Engage Youth” workshop sponsored by <u>Community Science</u>
Research Responsibilities	Participated in research design, data collection, mental health circle facilitation, qualitative analysis, and report production



OTHER APPROACHES

Community Events

We held two catered community events at Mighty Writers El Futuro and JUNTOS. We connected with a total of fifteen parents, eleven youth, and four nonprofit staff. During these events, we sought feedback about our research design, recruited participants and received informed consent, and addressed questions or concerns.



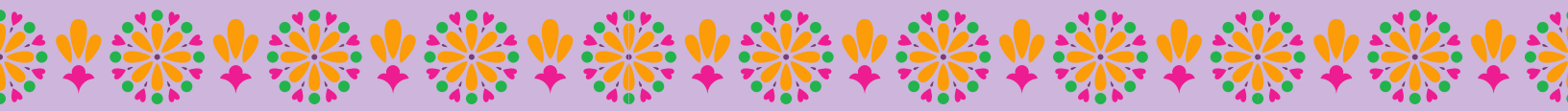
Trauma-Informed Interviews

Co-researchers self-disclosed their backgrounds and connection to the project. We conducted 36 interviews that took place at community organizations or the most convenient place for the interviewee, including Zoom. Snacks, water, fidgets, tissues, and coloring supplies were available. We regularly checked-in to assess well-being. We connected youth to mental health resources as needed and provided a resource document. Im/migrant parents and youth received a \$40 gift card for their participation.



Data Analysis Feedback Meetings

Following our deductive and in vivo inductive approach to interview coding, we met with six youth, two parents, and two nonprofit staff members across two analysis feedback sessions at Puentes de Salud and MW El Futuro. We provided an overview of qualitative analysis, the context of the interviews, and the initial themes from our coding. For our activity, we separated de-identified interview quotes into the themes developed as co-researchers and discussed their meaning. We provided a written narrative based on our initial analysis to contextualize the quotes and our approach. In groups, participants read the interview quotes, discussed what they thought youth were telling us, and described them using a key word or phrase. Participants used guiding questions to provide feedback and suggestions for the themes we developed. At the end of the feedback session, we held a group discussion where groups summarized their feedback and reported what they had learned. We provided dinner and a \$40 gift card to those who participated in the analysis feedback meetings. Their feedback was incorporated into the recommendations presented in Section 6 of this report.



MENTAL HEALTH CIRCLES

As part of our participatory approach, we sought reciprocal relationships with youth by providing mental health education and exploration that respected youth agency and interests through co-creation. We facilitated co-created curricula with the goal of holding safe spaces to discuss mental health in their communities using fun games, art, community agreements, and a talking item. We aimed to foster mutual respect, active listening, and to normalize conversations about emotions and mental health.

Structure

On two separate occasions, we met with two youth leaders from MW El Futuro and two youth leaders from JUNTOS who provided suggestions on our initial program plan and provided feedback at its conclusion. Each youth leader was compensated with two, \$25 gift cards. Together, we developed and facilitated a three to four session mental health circle program. For the first session, we partnered with the organization Minding Your Mind for a presentation centered on mental health de-stigmatization through storytelling. Subsequently, we explored themes such as migration and mental health and freedom dreaming and world-making.

We provided catered dinner during each session and engaged a total of 25 youth. They were compensated with a \$15 gift card after each session they attended. As co-researchers, we received informed consent from parents and informed assent from youth to collect data in the form of participant observation reflections. Building connection through shared experiences, cultural relevance, and comfort can allow for exploring mental health in young people's specific context.

Youth Feedback: More Intentional Mental Health Discussions

"Mighty should have days for mental health circles, maybe once a week or three times a month."

-Juliana, MW El Futuro Mental Health Circle Youth Leader

We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the youth leaders. Both at MW El Futuro and JUNTOS, youth desire to have regular mental health circle sessions as part of their programming. Other feedback includes:



- Holding regular sessions to remind youth that they can safely share in their community space without being judged or bullied.
- Delving into specific topics, such as self-harm and social disconnection during future sessions.
- Using storytelling to share their mental health experiences.
- Mental health circles were emotionally impactful, engaging, and provided a comfortable environment to discuss mental health.

3. SOUTH PHILADELPHIA LATINE IM/MIGRANT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Our research engagements with youth revealed the forces shaping their mental well-being. This section explores personal and familial barriers, public mental health service barriers, the impacts of family separation and reunification, and cultural stigmas, including barriers to holding conversations at home and shifting narratives about Latine im/migrant parents. 30% of youth comments centered around the impacts of cultural stigmas that parents carry with them, emphasizing the need for targeted discussions on mental health that engage entire families. The following are barriers and challenges most frequently discussed by youth:

- Struggles with their multicultural identity and misalignments with their cultural background
- Pressure to excel academically, in their careers, and in life to repay their parents for their sacrifices
- Navigating inadequate and underfunded public services
- Migration induced family separation and isolation from parents
- Discrimination due to migratory status, LGBTQIA+ identity, ethnicity, and inability to connect with their home countries culture
- Documentation status and/or their parent's status
- Language and cultural injustice when accessing therapy

"I definitely understand that struggle of having certain interests and passions and just kind of having your [legal] status get in the way. I haven't been able to fix my papers. About two-when was it? No, it's gotta be four years. That's crazy. Kind of when the pandemic was going on, me and my sister, my parents had gotten some money together so we could apply for DACA. But unfortunately, that same year, it closed down. So, my status has -- there's not been really any movement. So that is very discouraging."

**Linda, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
previous JUNTOS Podemos Ambassador**



PERSONAL AND FAMILIAL BARRIERS

NAVIGATING BICULTURAL IDENTITIES

Im/migrant youth navigate bicultural identities, often feeling isolated and uncertain about where they belong. This struggle contributes to a sense of disconnection from both their parents' culture and mainstream U.S. culture, leaving them in a state of in-betweenness. As young people develop their identities, they experience conflicting ideas of what they can and cannot be based on the context they find themselves in.

"Just growing up feeling like 'no soy de aqui ni de alla.' Nobody understands me. My parents at home, they didn't really get the culture, especially here. My parents have done really well to adapt. But it definitely has been difficult for me to know who I am and have a set identity."

**Linda, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
previous JUNTOS Podemos Ambassador**



PRESSURES TO ACHIEVE AND REPAY IM/MIGRANT PARENTS

"I think that is a common thing where at least the older generation of immigrants and Latino parents kinda see their childhood as, like, 'a model childhood' or, 'oh, back in the day things were different.' I feel like obedience is mentioned a lot, or just this idea of hard work ethic. But I think it also creates a lot of pressure for young children of immigrants or immigrants themselves to kinda prove that their sacrifices were worth it. I feel like that also impacts mental well-being and one's own self-perception."

**Laura, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
previous JUNTOS Fuerza youth participant**

Youth discussed feeling pressure to achieve academically and pursue a career that will provide them with the financial stability to support their parents in the future. Given everything they or their parents left behind when they migrated to the U.S., youth feel pressured to maintain a certain image and fulfill their parents' expectations. Youth internalize this pressure and often justify it by framing it as a way to repay their parents for all the sacrifices they made to ensure they had a better life. When they are unable to meet academic or career expectations, due to a multitude of socioeconomic, structural, and institutional barriers, they often experience disappointment and shame that taints their own self-image and impacts their mental well-being.



PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE BARRIERS

OVERCROWDED AND UNDERFUNDED

The public mental health system in Philadelphia is failing Latine im/migrant youth. The experiences shared by youth in relation to public mental health services highlight several critical issues that need to be addressed to make these services more effective and accessible. One common frustration is the overcrowding and underfunding of public health departments. Youth expressed feeling insignificant and lost within these systems, where the volume of folks seeking services negatively impacts the quality of care. This results in a lack of personal attention, and youth feel like “ants” in a sea of others. This overcrowding exacerbates the difficulties faced by im/migrant youth in getting the support they need.

“Whenever I hear about public departments or public health department places that help with things -- those places are shit. They are overcrowded. They're underfunded. And I feel like a fucking ant in there. Like, I'm anybody in there.”

**-Rocio, Mexican im/migrant youth,
Mighty Writers El Futuro**

LACK OF CULTURAL HUMILITY

Another significant barrier with public services arises from the lack of cultural humility among mental health professionals. During her interview, Josephina described the disconnect with a therapist who didn't understand the complex dynamics in im/migrant families. Oftentimes, roles between parents and children blur. The therapist's advice seemed ineffective because it didn't take into account the unique cultural context, such as the child taking on leadership responsibilities or acting as a mediator between parents and mental health professionals. This gap in understanding leads to frustration and additional stress for young im/migrants or children of im/migrants who feel the need to translate or advocate for their parents' perspectives.

“I had a very leadership role in the sense that maybe she [the therapist] didn't understand that it was different than taking on a client that very much had a child role of like, 'listen, do as they say.'... I think it's helpful now that it's just me and her, because before it was more like she would give instructions to my parents and then she was like, 'that'll work out.' Then I'm like in the background, 'no, that's not gonna work out. I have to make it work out. How do I make it work out?' So it was a little bit of an additional stressor because even when my parents would talk, I'm like, okay, 'I have to explain what they said because she's [the therapist] not gonna understand it the way that they meant it, or she's gonna see it as negative.”

**-Josephina, child of Mexican Im/migrant parents,
JUNTOS**

FINANCIAL BURDEN AND ONE SIZE FITS ALL APPROACH

The financial burden of therapy also poses a significant barrier. Many im/migrant youth expressed that only those who can afford therapy are able to receive adequate mental health care. This creates a sense of inequity and deep sadness, particularly when seeking help feels out of reach. Public services are often inaccessible, either due to insurance barriers or ineligibility and long wait times, further marginalizing those who need support the most.

One consistent theme is that the public mental health system does not seem to offer personalized care that fits the specific needs of im/migrant youth. Instead of providing individualized strategies and deeper engagement, the system often resorts to generic solutions, such as providing lists of other agencies or simply offering a “one-size-fits-all” approach to therapy. This leads to feelings of disillusionment, as im/migrant youth struggle to see the value in continuing a process that doesn't seem to address their unique challenges.

“Pretty hard because when I call them and I never hear back. It's crazy. But obviously there's so many people to treat and it's like where we are. So it's kind of been a little difficult... [knowing if] they take my insurance or not, or anything. Everything's kind of difficult about it.”

**Isabella, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
Mighty Writers El Futuro**

“Only people that can afford it can get therapy. And that alone makes me very sad.”

**-Rocio, Mexican im/migrant youth,
Mighty Writers El Futuro**

“Definitely that sense of having to do more... that sense of isolation because your parents do work so much... I think that sometimes creates a sense of poor mental health... Having to do more to make your parents proud and to kind of exceed their expectations because you know they're giving you and your siblings a better quality of life. But then... because your parents are working so much it feels lonely, you know? And so, I'd say that those are the main two [challenges] that immigrant children face, but some people [service providers] might not be able to understand.”

**-Valeria, child of a Mexican im/migrant father,
JUNTOS**



FAMILY SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION

Elena is an alumni of Lanzando Líderes at Puentes de Salud. She described the mental health impacts of family reunification and language barriers that left her feeling depressed, isolated, and alone. At the age of nine, she reunited with her parents in Philadelphia, who had sent her to live in Mexico with her grandparents when she was only four months old. She only spoke Náhuatl and felt extremely isolated since she did not know her parents and could not communicate with them. Over time, she started to develop hatred towards her parents for sending her to Mexico and then abruptly bringing her back to Philadelphia. Language barriers isolated her from society and this was compounded by experiences of bullying and discrimination in school, which failed to incorporate language support into her education. Her depression worsened as she entered middle school, which is the first time she received mental health services.

Language barriers and a lack of relatability are central to the negative experiences with therapy shared by Elena and other youth. Elena felt like she was continuously having to over explain her life circumstances to her therapist. Even when they matched her with a therapist of a similar ethnic background (a Latina therapist), this effort fell short because the therapist still didn't fully grasp her specific struggles with family reunification and social isolation. She felt misunderstood and over-explaining her circumstance was draining and unproductive. This frustration grows when standard responses such as "you got this" are offered without practical guidance, leaving youth without tangible support.

"When I arrived here, I didn't like my parents at all... I felt like they just abandoned me to go with my aunts--- I was always hearing them from the phone. But again, I didn't understand... I didn't know who they were at the time, even though my family in Mexico was telling me, 'These are your parents.' But I couldn't understand them... When I arrived here, I just felt closer with my little sister because she was little--- I was like, 'listen, you're my bestie 'cause we both can't understand people, so we gotta stick together.'"

**Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
Puentes de Salud**

The experiences we heard suggest that public mental health services for Latine im/migrant youth are often insufficient and disconnected from their needs. There is a clear call for more culturally humble, accessible, and personalized care that recognizes the complex realities of im/migrant lives. Youth want a more responsive and supportive system that goes beyond simple lists of phone numbers or surface-level solutions. Im/migrant youth deserve to be seen and treated as full human-beings and to feel like their concerns are being heard.

CULTURAL STIGMAS

MENTAL HEALTH IN LATINE HOUSEHOLDS

Strong Latine cultural stigmas and taboos surrounding mental health further create barriers for youth to express their emotions while navigating their complex multicultural and multilingual identities. These stigmas result from their im/migrant parents' upbringing in their home countries and their (re)production has devastating consequences for the mental well-being of Latine im/migrant youth and children of im/migrants. The young people we interviewed described the impacts of these stigmas on their ability to express their emotions and have open, vulnerable conversations with their parents. Importantly, they acknowledged their parent's generational and cultural upbringing as the root cause. They also redirect our attention towards structural socioeconomic inequalities that force im/migrant parents to work multiple jobs, leaving no time and space for conversations about emotions and well-being.

There is a longing among youth for critical discussions about harmful cultural practices in order to advocate for more supportive environments and break the cycles of mislabeling mental health challenges. They recognize the need to challenge norms that hinder emotional expression and perpetuate mental health challenges. This desire for change underscores the potential for growth and healing if families can engage in honest dialogues.

"I think it just has to do with their work schedule and how they were raised. We gotta give them credit about their lack, because when they grew up they were in the *pueblo*. They had to do the chores. They woke up to the chores... before they got to go to sleep, they had to do chores to where it was, like, chores all day, every day. I think from one side, you gotta give them credit about where the lack comes from because it's not really their fault either."

**-Rodrigo, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
Mighty Writers El Futuro**

"It was called WOAR... I went there because I had a lot of trauma happen. I stopped going there in seventh grade because in my mind, I thought that this wasn't really helping anymore... There's no point in me going if it's something that my parents don't really get... They never took mental health really seriously... Because they didn't believe [in] like, depression or anything... When they hear the word depression, they think of laziness. So I was like, 'okay, I'm gonna stop going there because I'm getting tired of my my parents saying stuff to me about it.' They're always telling me, '*ponte las pilas*. Stop with that crap.' And I'm like, 'dude, it's real. Like, listen, but you don't.'"

**-Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
Puentes de Salud**



"I feel like a lot of immigrant youth, their parents, like, especially the men, they're very macho. I feel like a lot of the moms choose to believe that its [mental health challenges] because of the phone. I know my mom's like that. Or they choose to ignore it, and say that you're not really feeling like that and you're just being angry or you're just a teenager, maybe that's why. I feel they don't really choose to help or do anything, but some, it's not all of them. Some do choose to help, but, like, a lot of old school parents choose to not acknowledge it because I feel like they can't really comprehend the thought of their kid, like, being hurt, and them not being able to understand it. So, they choose to believe it's not real."

-Ariana, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, Puentes de Salud



"So, when I was first diagnosed with depression, my mom, her reaction to it was not the best. It was more so her blaming me, calling me selfish. So, when it was discovered I wanted to kill myself, it was on the way home from it. She was telling me how I need to be grateful and how I had all these things, school, clothes, food, a home, family. And that she was like, 'I went through so much worse than you. Why are you even depressed? You're so selfish. I didn't wanna kill myself, so why should you?' You know, and my dad, he couldn't even know about it because, in his eyes, he thought I was just crazy."

-Sofia, LGBTQIA+ child of Mexican im/migrant parents, Puentes de Salud



SHIFTING NARRATIVES: HOW COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS FILL SYSTEMIC GAPS

Contrary to mainstream narratives around Latine im/migrant parents and mental health, interviews with eight Mexican and Central American parents from South Philadelphia highlight their deep understanding of the importance of mental health support in their families. Their experiences highlight cultural challenges, language barriers, systemic failures, and family dynamics that shapes their access to mental health care and social support systems.

Despite these challenges, im/migrant parents show remarkable resilience, often turning to community networks to access mental health resources. These community-based support systems, including church groups and local organizations such as NSC, MW El Futuro, JUNTOS, and Puentes de Salud, offer emotional support and practical assistance in navigating the healthcare system. Bruno, an im/migrant father from Puebla, Mexico, shared how engaging in community activities, such as gardening and street clean-ups, allowed him and others to connect with people who understood their struggles. These activities foster a sense of belonging and emotional relief, especially when traditional systems feel unwelcoming or inaccessible.

Additionally, many im/migrant parents are breaking away from traditional cultural beliefs about emotional strength and self-reliance to seek help for their children's mental health needs. This shift reflects a growing understanding of the importance of mental health and therapy for their children, even if they themselves may not fully embrace it. Olivia, an im/migrant mother from El Salvador living in Southwest Philadelphia, illustrated this proactive approach by seeking therapy for her daughter, despite logistical and language barriers. This growing willingness to seek support, coupled with the valuable assistance provided by community organizations, highlights the evolving attitudes within im/migrant families toward mental health care.

Ultimately, the needs of im/migrant families in terms of mental health care extend beyond just access to formal services. Emotional and psychological support, resilience, and strong community networks are essential components of a comprehensive Healing Justice approach to mental health. By addressing language barriers, cultural differences, and systemic obstacles that im/migrant families face, mental health care can be made more inclusive and supportive, ensuring that im/migrant parents and their children receive the care they need to thrive. The next section focuses on the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ Latine im/migrant youth, whose experiences and needs are often made invisible or left undisclosed due to safety concerns. We highlight the impacts of cultural stigmas and the healing power of support networks for queer im/migrant youth.



4. LGBTQIA+ IM/MIGRANT YOUTH EXPERIENCES

Latine im/migrant youth do not represent a monolithic community or experience. There was immense diversity among the youth we engaged with, including gender and sexual identity, language, migration generation, and nationality. This section highlights our findings from interviews with seven LGBTQIA+ youth and the complex intersectionality of being im/migrants or children of im/migrants, Latine, and LGBTQIA+. These youth navigate the challenges of maintaining familial relationships and cultural ties while asserting their queer identity. We explore their mental health challenges, family dynamics and coming out experiences, the importance of support systems, and hope cultivated through community organizations.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Youth feel like they must choose between queerness or being part of the Latine community. This creates tension between their authentic selves and their cultural upbringing, further complicating their healing process. It remains fraught with anxiety, rejection, and the emotional toll of living authentically in spaces where that is not always welcomed. They described experiencing depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts resulting from their im/migrant families' struggles to accept their queer identities. They described how their parents' protection often manifests as control. Parents may view being queer or dealing with mental health challenges as a "choice" or something that can be "fixed" or avoided. A lack of education on topics like mental health and gender and sexuality causes friction in the parent-child relationship and clashes with the youth's desire for autonomy and recognition of their authentic selves. There is hope for change, both personally and in broader cultural and societal shifts that would facilitate the process of navigating their LGBTQIA+, Latine, and im/migrant identities.

Other forces impacting LGBTQIA+ im/migrant youth mental health include:

- Unsafe school environments, bullying, and discrimination due to their queer and Latine identity
- Religion and traditional values add layers of shame and fear about their identities
- Internalized stigma, shame, and guilt, especially when their parents do not acknowledge or accept their queerness
- Pressures for perfectionism or high success to gain family acceptance



"My queerness was very visible since I was very young... I was questioned about my sexuality...I'm technically different from what they want me to be, I have to be perfect in every other area in order for them to be okay with me... I have other skills, other abilities, other things that I can do... that you [family members] will be like, 'okay, you're gay. I don't like it, but I respect it. We can still have a relationship'...I guess [having that] emotional leverage that, 'yes, I identify as somebody who maybe is not aligned with your values, with your morals, with how you grew up, but I feel comfortable with myself, and now I have this leverage.'"

-Elio, queer Honduran im/migrant youth



"No, that's so funny though. 'Cause they would've ran into the same issues in Mexico, which is the crazy part. Like shit, I would've been gay staying in Mexico too. Don't play."

Linda, queer Mexican im/migrant youth, previous JUNTOS Podemos Ambassador

"I never told my therapist that I was bisexual because I was always ashamed of it too. 'Cause like, children were brutal back then... But in high school, I was very open about it. So when I was receiving small talks with my counselor... I stopped talking to her because... my friend, she went to the counselor to talk. She was like, 'I'm gonna break down,' because she's also bisexual. She was openly talking about her sexuality with this counselor. And she [the counselor] basically started saying stuff like, 'Oh, but God created women and men.' And started throwing a lot of like insults towards her about how wrong it is for her to like girls."

-Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, Puentes de Salud



FAMILY DYNAMICS AND COMING OUT EXPERIENCES

Coming out to family is a pivotal moment, but one filled with anxiety, fear, and potential rejection. Youth reflected on the emotionally challenging process of coming out and varied levels of family acceptance. Alexis recalled being called derogatory names by their parents after coming out, but they also described the process as part of their journey of self-acceptance. Despite the challenges, there is a sense of hope that their parents may eventually accept them as they continue to learn and grow.

Alexis is a queer youth born and raised in Philadelphia. Their parents are im/migrants from Puebla, Mexico and they attended family therapy shortly after Alexis came out. The goal was for their parents to have a better understanding of queerness and to accept Alexis for who they are. Yet, Alexis felt anxiety before, during, and after family therapy. They didn't know how their family was going to react to what was said during the session and how they would behave at home after therapy. Rather than being a source of comfort, therapy perpetuated intense feelings of fear.

"I feel like it was the fear I had on how they would react after therapy. I feel like I had the fear of, 'oh my God, I'm not gonna be able to live on through this. Like I'm gonna have to live on my own without them' and all that. That's how I saw it... I'm gonna have to disappear from them in order to live the life I want to live."

-Alexis, queer child of Mexican im/migrant parents, MW El Futuro



Alexis stopped receiving therapy, and although they experienced some relief, such as increased communication with their parents, there is an urgent need for specialized attention to LGBTQIA+ im/migrant youth mental health. Oftentimes, services are ineffective since queerness remains highly stigmatized among Latine im/migrant families, resulting in few or no discussions of LGBTQIA+ identities. To address the unique challenges associated with im/migrant and queer identities and for mental health services to be more effective, it is essential to build community awareness, respect, and acceptance towards LGBTQIA+ folks. Without this imperative intervention, im/migrant youth will continue to experience intense emotional challenges and fears with living as their authentic selves.

IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS

LGBTQIA+ youth described the importance of support systems through community organizations, such as JUNTOS, MW EL Futuro, and Puentes de Salud. When im/migrant parents hold onto harmful perspectives about queer identities, youth internalize these harmful views and associate their queerness as hurtful to their parents. This negatively impacts their sense of self and ability to express their Latine, im/migrant, and LGBTQIA+ identities. Youth find value in seeking out communities where they feel understood without judgment. Community organizations are a source of support for queer youth, particularly as safe spaces where peers and mentors normalize self-expression and identity exploration.

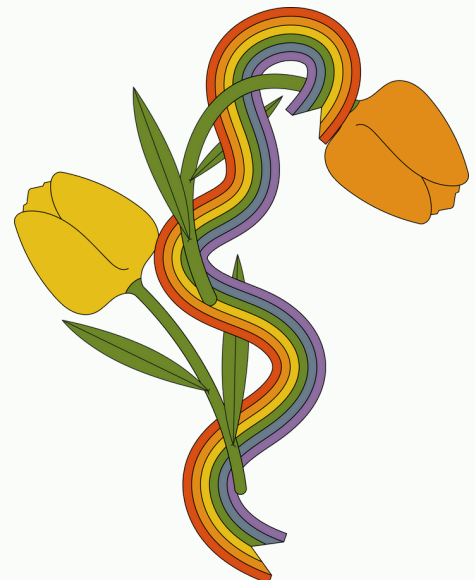
Many youth, such as Alexis, described how gaining support from friends, teachers, or mentors, such as Daniela Morales at MW El Futuro helped them feel more comfortable coming out and expressing their true selves. Youth feel empowered when they are surrounded by individuals who understand their experiences and offer acceptance. LGBTQIA+ Latine im/migrant youth find solace in being able to express their cultural background and their gender and sexual identities. This sense of community, both in terms of personal relationships and community environments, is crucial for emotional resilience.

"When I came to Mighty... I was still a little awkward person, still trying to discover myself. After I met Ms. Dani, I felt like she was able to help me out, like being that type of support where she's like, 'you're not alone' and all that... I feel like she was able to see who I am, tell me 'even though you experienced that, it's okay, you were able to grow as a person' ... After that I've continued to come and it makes me feel like a place of warmth... Things happen [in the] outside world, but I'm still here, and it feels like a comfortable place."

**-Alexis, queer child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
MW El Futuro**

"Honestly, I feel safe with it [being bisexual]. I can ultimately say it and I wouldn't think I'm gonna get harmed. I think I'm safe when I stay here [at MW El Futuro]... So, I like the community."

**-Isabella, LGBTQIA+ child of Mexican
im/migrant parents,
MW El Futuro**



HOPE AND MOVING FORWARD: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

LGBTQIA+ youth value the support systems cultivated at community organizations and ask program leaders to provide intentional education to parents and youth about LGBTQIA+ identities. This would help to reduce youth fears and anxieties associated with navigating their gender and sexuality identities and can help facilitate a shift in Latine cultural narratives about LGBTQIA+ folks.

LGBTQIA+ youth desire more spaces like their community organizations where people can be understood and exist without fear of judgment and can freely express their Latine identity and their queerness. They long for inclusivity and acceptance in all aspects of life, home, school, and larger societal structures. Queer youth call for a more empathetic approach in educational settings, mental health care, and family dynamics. The following section outlines the effective youth program models at JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud, which integrate community care and Healing Justice to have a transformative impact on the lives of youth.

"We don't grow up thinking that this [queerness] is okay. Just throwing in a lot of things that help us kind of love even if it's not a part of ourselves, love and understand other people. So, a lot of queer PE [Political Education], I think would be an amazing idea-- A lot of healing because, you know, people who are [queer] deserve that sort of healing -- and that could be like I said, healing of the inner child."

- Maria Mendez, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, JUNTOS Podemos Coordinator, Orgullo (Pride) Coordinador, and Youth Organizer



"I just feel like, they [community organizations] should really talk about being part of the LGBTQ community. Because I just feel like it's all about Hispanic migration and stuff, but not really about our community. I guess being more outspoken about it."

Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, Puentes de Salud



5. COMMUNITY CARE AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: THREE EFFECTIVE MODELS

"I think for all of us to be free, we have to- there's no other way except returning to our Indigenous roots and our Indigenous ancestors. There's literally no other way because we're not gonna liberate ourselves using the white man's tools."

-Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, JUNTOS

This section dives deep into effective Latine im/migrant youth after-school program models and their impacts on youth. Youth detailed feeling more confident, respected, and that they belong. They gained skills in their capacity to process their emotions, hold critical conversations, and incorporate learned healing strategies into their lives. This resulted in two important changes: increased social connections and deepened relationships with their peers. Youth also noticed a grounded sense of self and a positive connection to their cultural identity.

Youth stories and self-report outcomes demonstrate how community organizations engage (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014) them through programming anchored in community care and Healing Justice (Page and Woodland, 2023). We uplift the community care practices at JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud.

JUNTOS

Mission Statement:

- JUNTOS is a community-led, Latine, immigrant organization in South Philadelphia fighting for our human rights as workers, parents, youth, and immigrants. We believe that every human being has the right to a quality education and the freedom to live with dignity regardless of immigration status.
- JUNTOS combines leadership development, community organizing, and focused collaborations with other community-based and advocacy organizations to build the power of our community members so they may be active agents of change and work against their own oppression.



Overview

As a community of youth, organizers, artists, workers, and storytellers, JUNTOS' intergenerational approach and practices of community care effectively fill gaps in existing social service systems, particularly in public mental health services. The self-reported improvements in well-being among youth participating with JUNTOS underscore how community care is a form of healing that is often made invisible. This type of care and strategies must be acknowledged and respected.

To access their services, including youth programs, im/migrant justice, and community care services, please scan the QR code below.



JUNTOS

FUERZA AND JUNIOR ORGANIZER MODELS

Since fall 2011, Fuerza has cultivated leaders in South Philadelphia, addressing a multitude of structural and systemic injustices related to education, labor, and im/migration from a youth perspective. Fuerza is structured through close collaborations between Ambassadors, Junior Organizers, and Youth Coordinators, Maria and Guadalupe Mendez.

"They need a bridge and so that's kind of what I consider myself is like a bridge between their parents and them. Because their parents are from a different generation. So I think it's important that they have an advocate, or that they have someone that can listen to what their needs are."

-Guadalupe Mendez, JUNTOS Director of Youth Organizing

The Fuerza ambassador leadership model began during the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides youth with a compensated position. It equips youth with the tools and skills to be active agents of change in their communities and beyond. Ambassadors help to plan Fuerza programming and they design and carry out a community service project. Guadalupe tells us that when community organizations and mentors truly listen to youth, there is sustained engagement and commitment.

The Junior Organizer (JO) position is made by youth for youth. Previous Fuerza ambassadors and summer interns, Maria and Camila (pseudonym), created a proposal, presented it to all staff, and developed their own youth leadership position. JOs work closely with Guadalupe and Maria to involve youth voices and perspectives in all aspects of JUNTOS as an organization. They facilitate Fuerza gatherings, lead campaigns, and address inequities faced by youth in South Philadelphia.

"At JUNTOS and specifically with Fuerza, shows that youth want these types of positions and have these skills and creativity to design their own position, and how they imagine being able to support the work of a larger cause outside of just what they're personally invested or interested in supporting."

-Guadalupe Mendez, JUNTOS Director of Youth Organizing

Through Fuerza, youth engage with different topics that they may have questions about, but are unable to address with their parents, such as mental health. Importantly, Fuerza is a space where youth can develop pride in their identities as Latine youth in Philadelphia and connect with others of similar backgrounds. Fuerza addresses the mental health challenges of navigating bicultural identities and increases youth's sense of belonging. JUNTOS interweaves Philadelphian culture with their Latine backgrounds to empower youth to use their identities as a source of strength to advocate for their communities.

EMPOWERMENT AS A COMMUNITY CARE PRACTICE

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (2021) emphasizes the importance of engaging youth in community service to combat isolation and foster mental well-being. Organizations like JUNTOS exemplify this approach, focusing on youth leadership, activism, and empowerment as tools for both personal growth and social change. Through involvement in community projects like the Sanctuary Schools Campaign, protests, community clean-ups, and art-making, youth gain a sense of ownership and agency. This active participation helps them build hope and self-belief, making them feel capable of effecting positive change in their communities. Such experiences provide a strong foundation for mental health, particularly within im/migrant communities. Interviews with JUNTOS youth reveal how activism intersects with mental health, offering them a sense of purpose and connection. Many youth, like Linda, have found healing through activism, using their voices to advocate for themselves and others in spaces where they are often silenced.

Linda shared her lived experiences of feeling misunderstood at home, in school, and while receiving mental health services. She observed a lack of resources and inadequately trained staff. She uses her story to redirect our attention to the systemic and structural shortcomings shaping public mental health, calling us to reimagine and build something different.

Linda continues to receive therapy and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. COVID-19 exacerbated her mental health challenges; she felt disconnected from her Mexican identity and alone as an undocumented queer person. Her loneliness was transformed into a sense of community and empowerment when she encountered JUNTOS a little more than a year ago. Linda's journey highlights the impact of JUNTOS' youth-led initiatives, which provide a sense of agency and support that she lacked in other areas of her life.

JUNTOS integrates Healing Justice to cultivate a space where youth like Linda can feel heard and supported, offering a model of community care that emphasizes leadership, mentorship, and collective action. Through this approach, youth not only engage in meaningful social change but also experience the healing power of advocacy, which bolsters their mental well-being. Linda's involvement with JUNTOS has been a source of strength, helping her transition from feeling powerless to becoming an active agent in shaping her community and well-being.

"It gives me a purpose. It makes me feel not helpless. It makes me feel like I can do things with my own hands, not feel like I'm just watching from the sidelines."

-Linda, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, previous JUNTOS Podemos Ambassador



JUNTOS

HEALING BY FOSTERING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

For youth like Linda, JUNTOS becomes more than just an organization; it is a source of purpose and healing. Linda's personal story underscores how traditional mental health services, often underfunded and ill-equipped to address the unique needs of im/migrant youth, can leave them feeling isolated and misunderstood. JUNTOS fills this gap by offering a space for community-driven care and social action that reshape experiences of hopelessness to a sense of purpose and agency. JUNTOS exemplifies the power of community-led solutions and the crucial role of grassroots, youth-led activism in fostering mental health and well-being. Youth want JUNTOS to expand and reach more youth, highlighting the need for sustained resourcing to continue to address gaps in public health systems.

"Running into JUNTOS and seeing so many people that have similar backgrounds as me, but yet again are so different, like, agree with me, and for us to sit at the same table and break bread, it definitely changed the way I feel. It made me feel like, 'okay, my voice matters, people think like me, there are actually people like me lending out a hand.'"

-Linda, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, previous JUNTOS Podemos Ambassador

"I don't know if they don't do more outreach because they don't have the means for it or like, funding... Because what they do with the youth now is always very generous... I think that Juntos could have a bigger Fuerza if they did more outreach... The community is strong, but I think that the community could be stronger if we encouraged other people to join us."

-Valeria, child of a Mexican im/migrant father, previous Fuerza Ambassador

"JUNTOS is such a unique place that allows for a space to become a home outside of your original home--You can speak Spanish if you want. You have posters that have people that look like you, people you know, issues that are close to home or hit really close to home. People that understand you. I think it provides a safe space where someone can be like, 'I'm going through this. No one understands it. People at my school don't even care. What would you do?'... A support system. A space [that is] a support system."

-Josephina, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, previous Fuerza participant



JUNTOS

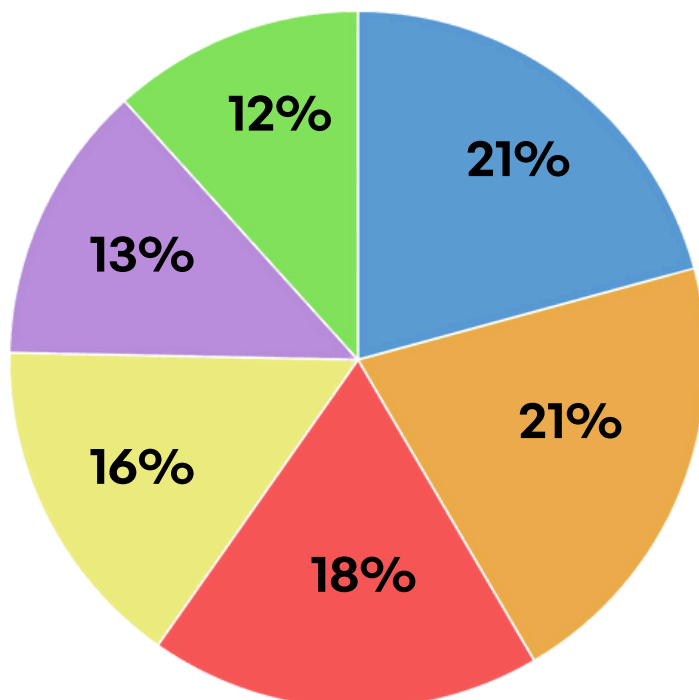
IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATING IN FUERZA AND JUNTOS PODEMOS

Interviews with seven youth, previously or currently involved in Fuerza or JUNTOS Podemos, reveal the impact these programs have had on their lives as young people in Philadelphia. They self-reported mental health improvements, access to support networks, and other observed positive changes in their lives.

All interviewed youth described JUNTOS as a community organization where they belong, are heard, and genuinely cared for. The Fuerza Ambassadorship and Junior Organizers models validate and respect the voices of youth when making decisions about campaigns and the design of programming. A sense of belonging is cultivated through representative staff who mirror the youth they serve, while the artwork adorning the walls empowers youth to act against the social inequities experienced by themselves and their families. The staff and artwork also serve as a constant reminder that JUNTOS will support their families, especially when youth are not physically present to fulfill this role. It helps to alleviate this familial pressure, while simultaneously empowering youth to be involved in their communities. The chart below shows the distribution of the key themes identified by youth and demonstrates JUNTOS' commitment to their mission and ability to support youth holistically.

JUNTOS integrates community care to positively impact the lives of youth across the following dimensions:

- 1) Belonging, feeling heard and cared for
- 2) Increased capacity for emotional processing and to hold critical conversations
- 3) Feeling respected and empowered
- 4) Increased social connections and deepened relationships with peers
- 5) Increased cultural connection that supports positive identity formation/sense of self
- 6) Personal growth, increased self-confidence



This graphic illustrates the percentage of the 77 comments from our interviews that reference key outcomes (listed above and color coded) identified by youth when asked about the impact of JUNTOS programming on their lives.

YOUTH QUOTES ON THE IMPACTS OF JUNTOS

"When I wasn't there, they [JUNTOS] were there for my parents. It's a space where I'm like, 'okay, this is how I can be there for other students, for the next generation.' My involvement started off being there for support. You're there as someone that actually needs JUNTOS services, and you kind of grow up knowing like if something happens, you have JUNTOS, or you have someone at least that can attempt to support you."

-Josephina, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, previous Fuerza participant

"I just started understanding more of why JUNTOS is there. I started understanding how they help people... I just learned more about it, and I learned more about those I can help. More than what I knew before."

-Lupita, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, previous Fuerza youth participant

"People are able to feel good and safe and comfortable and improve their mental well-being solely through community and solely through that social connection that is built through community... feeling like, 'this is a space where I belong and a space that is made for people like me and like my family.'"

-Maria Mendez, JUNTOS Podemos Coordinator/ Youth Organizer

"What keeps me wanting to be involved is I see the work they do for the community firsthand and how it positively affects the community... When we do the trash clean up, it's literally in my neighborhood... Or when they're working on the newcomers program for students with the school board... I see the work that they do firsthand and see how it is making a difference and it does uplift the community, and if I didn't see that happening, I think it would be a different story, and I would be less likely to continue going to the program."

-Valeria, child of a Mexican im/migrant father, previous Fuerza Ambassador



MIGHTY WRITERS **EL FUTURO**

Mission Statement

Think clearly and write with clarity is our battle cry, our tagline, our mantra. It's served as our mission statement since our launch in 2009. Not everyone — as is so strikingly apparent of late — thinks clearly. And even fewer people express themselves with clarity. But for those who nail both clarity of thought and expression, a lifetime of Mightiness is available for the taking. We're believers in the power of writing. But when COVID-19 began to strangle our Mighty communities, our mission suddenly needed amending... We began by distributing lunches to families. then we began distributing boxes of groceries and hot meals. Books, too, of course, and Tootsie Pops, a pretty sweet combo, FYI. As for teaching kids to write, we wouldn't dare let slip our once-and-forever mission... Our Mighty world, like yours, was upended by COVID. Our best bet is always to make sure MW kids stay safe while we work on new ways to serve the families and children who so graciously allow us into their communities.

Overview

In 2023, Mighty Writers (MW) celebrated its 15 year anniversary and served 4,697 youth across nine locations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. According to their 2023 impact report 100% of high school students participating in MW graduated and 70% agreed that MW improved their confidence and self-esteem. MW El Futuro is located in the center of the 9th St. Market in South Philadelphia and is one of two locations dedicated to serving Latine families. At MW El Futuro, students are involved in the afterschool academy and participate in family write nights and bilingual programming that supports and uplifts Latine culture. MW El Futuro is a safe haven for Latine im/migrant youth in Philadelphia to remain connected to their culture and feel proud of who they are. Through the after school academy and family programming, MW El Futuro helps families to adapt to the U.S. education system and builds strong social networks among youth and their families.



**To access their services,
including writing programs
and food distribution,
please scan the QR code.**



"It's very important to keep talking about it [their culture], because it's their identity, it's their roots. They are growing up in this place, in this culture, which is very good, they are multicultural and that will give them a lot of opportunities, not just in the professional field, but in the personal and social field. Their personalities will get stronger by knowing they have different talents, different knowledge thanks to their double culture. So, besides supporting them in their homework, besides supporting them in reading, besides promoting a good education with good teachers, the volunteers come here and fall in love with the place because they say 'I love speaking Spanish' or 'I love learning Spanish with the kids and practicing it.' And that creates a team. The kids teach up, we teach them and we all work together, but without leaving their heritage behind. Maybe they were born here, but where do their parents come from? We want them to visualize it, focus on it and capitalize on it as a strong point in their life. And not just now, but also for the future."

- Claudia Peregrina, MW El Futuro Director

"It was fun, because you came here [MW El Futuro] and there were people who were first generation just like you. It's like Spanish and English and it's just the mixture... at home, you speak Spanish. In school, you speak English. Here, you speak both. And it's just like both worlds collide, and it just feels cool because you feel comfortable. And at the same time, they help you with that, they help you with becoming stronger on both sides and also academically. I really like that."

- Fernando, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, MW El Futuro

AFTER SCHOOL WRITING ACADEMY MODEL

Colorful artwork and an array of Latin American flags that hang above a bookshelf full of bilingual and cultural books welcome you as you enter MW El Futuro. Volunteers meet bright and energetic students ranging from first grade to senior year in high school. At El Futuro, youth are encouraged to express their creativity and cultural identities without fear.

The structure of the After School Writing Academy fosters social connections between youth through captivating daily writing prompts, tutoring support, and extended essay prompts that help students to develop their voice and write with clarity. MW El Futuro normalizes self-expression through writing and art-making, providing a safe space for youth to feel proud of their multicultural identities and find creative ways to express themselves. Every day, the high school group shares their daily writing prompt which fosters dialogue and connection across shared identities. This is particularly important for newcomer im/migrant youth to feel like they belong. A sense of community is further reinforced through fun activities that are planned and organized by the youth themselves and take place after regular after-school academy programming. These include playing basketball and volleyball, writing plays, and holding cooking competitions. MW El Futuro respects youth voices and promotes their leadership development by honoring their interests and ensuring the activities are structured and led by youth themselves.

"At the beginning, I think it helped a lot that we put the activities they wanted to do on a board, and each of them got to give their opinion. We started doing that in the first summer camp. That helps a lot because we validate what they want to do, the things they like. We don't impose what to do, we don't say 'Okay, this is what you're going to do and it's the only option.' ... If you don't want to talk, that's okay, and if you are having a bad day, that's okay. I mean, we don't force them to do things they don't want to do. I think that has helped."

**- MW El Futuro Literacy
Manager for Elementary
School students**

"I want to make the space fun and comfortable for them every day. A big part of that is just the freedom for them to sit and chat... I know they also need some time where I'm away and they're able to talk more freely than maybe if I'm around, right? So, giving them space, time away from me, and then time back with me where I'm able to ask them about their day."

**- Daniela Morales, previous
MW EL Futuro Literacy
Manager and Teen Group
Coordinator**

CREATIVITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION AS A COMMUNITY CARE PRACTICE

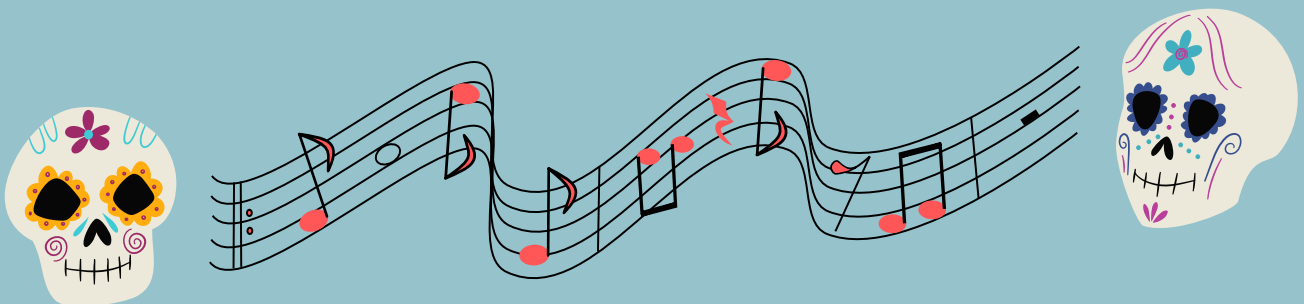
"I came to Mighty Writers... There was a freedom and in school, you know, there was never that freedom...it's like you can never really let your creativity be... I was able to write about whatever I wanted. And in music that was the same thing... What I really like to do is express my heritage so in a lot of my music, it's always going to be of Mexico, you know, we come from here... Also express about, like my life situations and how sometimes I felt stuck and music has just let me do that... Just express myself."

**- Fernando, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
MW El Futuro**

The focus on social connections, writing, and cultural exploration at MW El Futuro equips youth with the skills to ground their sense of self and to express their lived experiences. MW El Futuro normalizes creativity and self-expression as an emotional outlet for youth to manage acculturation stress, bicultural identity, and other experiences of trauma using writing as a healthy coping mechanism. Youth involved with MW El Futuro, such as Fernando, find value in the creative freedom that is fostered through writing.

At the time of his interview, Fernando was a senior in high school and he described his experiences growing up in a low-income, single parent household. He regularly felt isolated since his young im/migrant mother worked multiple jobs, and he garnered a lot of anger and frustration towards his absent father, also an im/migrant from Puebla, Mexico. He described experiences with discrimination faced by himself and his mother given their Latine identities. Fernando received therapy services thanks to his mother's efforts, but felt like it was not helping. In retrospect, he acknowledged that therapy supported his ability to forgive his father, but he understands creative expression through music as his most effective emotional outlet.

As a musician, he described the transformative power of creativity in shaping his mental well-being and allowing him to feel more connected to his cultural roots. Prior to becoming involved with MW El Futuro, Fernando did not like writing and correlated it to restrictive experiences at school where it was used for graded assignments. His perspective on writing changed and deepened his passion for writing lyrics. MW El Futuro normalizes creative self-expression for youth like Fernando, who uses music to uplift his heritage, develop his sense of self, and be open about his life struggles.



HEALING BY FOSTERING A SENSE OF SELF

The impacts of MW El Futuro are long lasting for youth. For example, although Fernando is now longer involved, he is empowered to continue using creativity as an emotional outlet and to uplift his community. Inspired by his cultural heritage and the resilience of his South Philadelphia Latine im/migrant community, particularly the 9th St. Market, he creates music that counters negative narratives about his community and challenges systems of oppression, such as colonialism. He reconnects with his ancestors and feels proud of his identity. His mental well-being is reinforced because he can communicate his life struggles, challenge stereotypes about his family and community, and contribute to deepened understandings of im/migrant experiences. This fosters feelings of positive self-awareness and self-worth.

By normalizing bilingual programming, cultural exploration, community building, and creative expression at MW El Futuro, youth like Fernando are able to strengthen their sense of self and learn how to release emotions associated with their lived experiences and past traumas.

"I've been to Mexico three times and it's beautiful. It's magical. So, I think about that, and I think about the people here. I think about what the people have done to establish 9th Street, to establish South Philadelphia. Just create this part of Philadelphia, and also like what every Latino has done overall, because us as Latinos we just like, we really pop out, and I really like that. When I'm writing, there was one lyric that I wrote, '*Los Españoles intentaron tirar los Aztecas, pero los Latinos nunca mueren.*' So, it's like what I know about me as a Latino and just what I know about my people. That's what I try to convey and that's what gives me power and it really uplifts me."

**- Fernando, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
MW El Futuro**

"I can definitely say I'm more open-minded now, because of the different opinions I'm [around] at Mighty, you know. And then my friends at school told me I talk more now, ever since I started [at Mighty]-- they don't know I come to Mighty but, they been telling me I talk more."

**Rodrigo, child of Mexican
im/migrant parents,
MW EL Futuro**

"Seventh grade, I think that's where my confidence kind of started going up because I came to Mighty. I think Mighty did a lot for my confidence. Like it actually boosted it up a lot. 'Cause in sixth grade I was still mad shy... I was mid shy because [other MW El Futuro youth] was outgoing. I noticed that in sixth grade she would always talk to the teachers, like she would joke with them. I was even scared to like look at them. And now, I can actually go like, 'hey, what's up teach.'"

**Juliana, child of Mexican
im/migrant parents,
MW El Futuro**

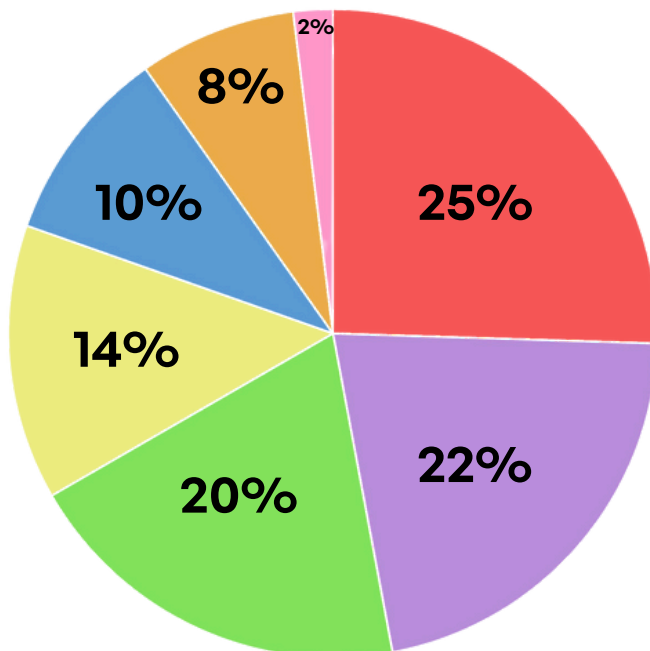
IMPACTS OF ENGAGING WITH MW EL FUTURO

We interviewed six youth involved with programming at MW El Futuro to understand how they were impacted. The top self-reported impact was feeling like their voices were respected and feeling empowered. Youth play a significant role in deciding what programming looks like, which motivates their long-term participation and engagement. It also supports the development of their sense of self and increases their confidence.

MW El Futuro facilitates strong social connections between youth which results in increased self-confidence. These social connections are fostered through programming emphasizing Latine culture that engages the entire family unit. Ernesto, an im/migrant father from Puebla, Mexico, whose children attend MW El Futuro, emphasized how the program provides a safe space for them to connect with their roots and feel proud of their identity. Youth navigate challenges associated with their multicultural identity by practicing both the new U.S. culture (as newcomers) and by remaining rooted in their traditions like Día de Muertos, Día del Niño, and posadas navideñas. MW El Futuro integrates Healing Justice to nurture curiosity about their parents' homeland and culture, while providing the academic support youth need to thrive. Youth foster deeper connections to their heritage that strengthens their sense of self. The chart below shows the distribution of the key themes identified by youth and demonstrates MW El Futuro's commitment to their mission and ability to support youth holistically.

MW El Futuro integrates community care to positively impact the lives of youth across the following dimensions:

- 1) Feeling respected and empowered
- 2) Increased cultural connection that supports positive identity formation/sense of self
- 3) Personal growth, increased self-confidence
- 4) Increased social connections and deepened relationships with peers
- 5) Belonging, feeling heard and cared for
- 6) Increased capacity for emotional processing and to hold critical conversations
- 7) Incorporation of learned healing practices into their lives to support their mental well-being



This graphic illustrates the percentage of the 51 comments from our interviews that reference key outcomes (listed above and color coded) identified by youth when asked about the impact of MW El Futuro programming on their lives.

PUENTES DE SALUD

Mission Statement

The mission of Puentes de Salud is two-fold: First, to partner with Philadelphia's rapidly growing Latinx im/migrant community to build long-term prosperity by addressing immediate education, health and social service needs. Second, to create a responsible learning environment for future generations of advocates, educators, and healthcare providers to examine Social Justice and Structural Violence, and to explore their impacts on the Social Determinants of Health within a marginalized community.

Puentes de Salud believes that a comprehensive strategy to promote wellness in any community must work towards diminishing the effects of Structural Violence and supporting Social Justice efforts, specifically access to healthcare, economic opportunity, and education. Because most of the underlying causes of inequality are social and structural in nature, our actions must be too. For this reason, we offer integrated services to support full mental, emotional, and physical well-being from the individual to the community. Our goal is to provide the social, economic, and health resources necessary for individual and community empowerment.



Overview

Puentes de Salud resulted from a history of new im/migration trends in the early 2000s. During that time, there was a boom in the Philadelphia restaurant industry and in im/migrant labor. Dr. Larson and Dr. Ludmir observed an increase of undocumented community members going to the emergency department to access medical care. They held town hall meetings to understand community needs and begin the process of establishing a health and wellness center. Puentes de Salud is able to operate because of its large and dedicated volunteer base and exemplifies the power in collaborative community work. Today, Puentes has two divisions including: Health (Clinic and Wellness) and Education (Art and Culture).

Puentes de Salud addresses the complex challenges and needs of the Spanish-speaking undocumented im/migrant community. It is a place of hope and empowerment for im/migrant community members to receive services that they deserve and are unable to access through public health systems.

To access their services including medical, wellness, education, and arts and culture, please scan the QR code.



LANZANDO LÍDERES (LL) PROGRAM MODEL

This program is available to Latine high school students and provides a bilingual space where youth can access academic support, mentoring, and leadership development. The program is currently led by the Adolescent Education Supervisor, Maria Arreaga, and an Education Intern who changes depending on availability, with Lucia Navarro currently filling this role. Students work with individual volunteer mentors and participate in interactive workshops that are structured by students themselves. Some topics include socioemotional life skills, health and well-being, and social justice. The Promotoras (community health workers) frequently hold workshops with LL students and discuss a range of topics related to health, well-being, and cultural exploration, including food and nutrition.

Programming is usually broken up into the following:

- **Tutoring Support and Snacks:** Students work with mentors on any support they need.
- **Transition Activity:** Typically an engaging game focused on building connections among youth and fostering collaboration, such as building a bridge with unconventional materials.
- **Workshop and Activity:** The Education Intern facilitates the group activity and touches topics such as im/migration, gender equity/justice, budgeting and public speaking, wellness/self-care, among other topics based on student interests.
- **Reflection Time:** Provides students with the space to debrief after the main workshop activity. This is essential particularly when youth discuss heavy topics such as im/migration and well-being.

Consent-Based Approach

Lanzando Líderes uses a consent-based approach to structure programming. Students who do not want to participate or don't feel interested in any specific session are not forced to participate. This is a trauma-informed approach to youth programming because it acknowledges different lived experiences with migration, school, and socioeconomic status, that shape their ability to engage with the content.

The program model uplifts young people's agency and respects their decision as to how their day will look like. The program follows the public school semester calendar and during their first session, students are invited to react to the different themes planned for the rest of the programming. In this way, LL participants themselves dictate what their programming will look like and therefore are more likely to continue to engage throughout the entire semester.



BUILDING CONNECTIONS AS A COMMUNITY CARE PRACTICE

In his advisory, [Surgeon General Vivek Murthy \(2021\)](#) recommends youth find ways to invest in healthy relationships including afterschool and mentorship programs. Dr. Murphy emphasizes how social connections are a source of well-being and mediate the impacts of stress. He reinforces this claim with his [2023 advisory discussing the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#). Particularly within Latine culture, community connection is a large source of healing and promotes feeling seen and understood. Lanzando Líderes exemplifies the power in mentorship programs that facilitate social connection among youth and promote their well-being through cultural exploration, leadership development, and youth agency.

Sofia is an alumni of Lanzando Líderes and shared the value of social connections and relationships cultivated at Puentes. As a bisexual child of Mexican im/migrant parents, Sofia described their long history with severe depression, suicidal ideation, and anxiety. Although they accessed both inpatient and outpatient mental health services, it was not until recently that they found an individual therapist that adequately supports their well-being. Previous experiences with mental health services were not culturally appropriate and left Sofia feeling hopeless and like they were any other patient. Their parent's strong cultural stigmas around mental health compounded Sofia's mental health challenges.

Sofia joined Lanzando Líderes during their freshman year in high school, a time when they were severely depressed. Entering high school shortly after the start of the pandemic left Sofia with few social connections and homework was a prominent source of stress. Puentes quickly became a safe haven for Sofia to receive the homework support they needed, therefore reducing academic stress, but importantly, it facilitated their ability to build relationships with other Latine youth in Philadelphia.

During their interview, Sofia discussed the death of their grandfather in Spring 2024. This happened the same day of a scheduled LL program. Sofia's therapist questioned their decision to attend programming, but they decided to go since they would find solace among the connections they had built. This underlines the significance of community, social connection, and mentorship, particularly during challenging times such as grief or stress.

"I was with Ariana. I was with [youth name]. I had all the mentors. I was like, 'I'm gonna be good.' And I was. I was having such a good time... There was times where I was just so depressed, but I was like, 'I'm gonna keep going, because I love being here so much.' And so that helped me out like mentally because it gave me something that I can do and something I can smile [about], even when I couldn't smile during other moments."

**- Sofia, LGBTQIA+ child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
Puentes de Salud**



HEALING BY FOSTERING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Sofia was involved in LL throughout their high school career. It helped them to regain confidence, seek support, and develop healthy relationships. They now teach sex education to youth of all ages and are a first year college student with goals of becoming a community-based trauma counselor. Their history of mental health challenges and the support garnered through their built community at Puentes empowers them to be a strong advocate for mental health, especially within im/migrant families. Through Lanzando Líderes programming, Puentes de Salud fills existing gaps of public mental health services by providing a network of supportive peers, mentors, Promotoras, and program leaders. Healthy relationships are cultivated primarily by the model's commitment to honoring youth voices and interests while structuring its programming. Youth like Sofia find comfort and healing by participating in Lanzando Líderes and being able to connect with other youth of similar backgrounds that reinforce their cultural identity.

"So, for me, because my plan is to be a therapist myself, and I just wanna provide that kind of comfort to other people, to young people most definitely when I get older. Especially being a person of color, LGBTQ, I'm hoping I'm able to advocate for people- like when I was younger, I wasn't being advocated for. I had to advocate for myself. So, I think that's the major reason why, because I just wanna help people. I just wanna give that person a voice."

**- Sofia, LGBTQIA+ child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
Puentes de Salud**

"It got me to socialize with people like, talking about the ongoing problems around society itself, or the world order. Like, I just got to share my thoughts and ideas towards other people like [youth name], people around my age. And it really did help with improving my mental health as well. 'Cause I got to interact with people, finding people who are funny, like, you guys. And so of course, it really did help."

**- Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
Puentes de Salud**

"The people in it [Lanzando Líderes] and the fun activities."

**- Ariana, child of Mexican im/migrant parents,
Puentes de Salud**



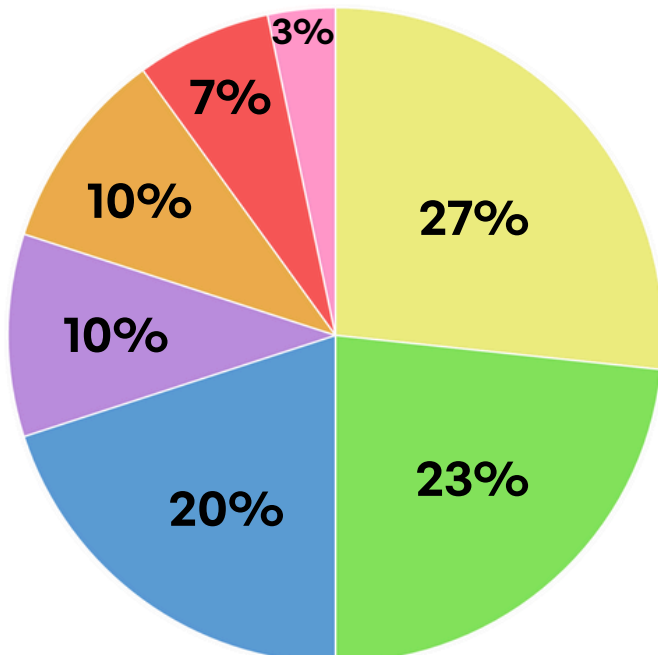
IMPACTS OF LANZANDO LÍDERES

We interviewed three youth who were previously or currently involved in Lanzando Líderes. They self-reported mental health improvements, increased access to support networks, and other observed positive changes in their lives as a result of their participation in Puentes programming and community. The top self-reported impact related to increased social connections and deepened relationships with peers. Puentes provides a safe space for Latine high school students to connect with one another and to caring mentors. This decreases feelings of loneliness and isolation and reassures youth that they belong.

Through their Education division, Puentes de Salud integrates Healing Justice to uplift communal healing practices and remind youth of their roots. Lanzando Líderes provides an effective model for engaging Latine im/migrant youth and children of im/migrants. Their focus on academic support coupled with activities emphasizing youth creativity, identity, culture, and self-care underscore the healing power of community connection. Additionally, their trauma-informed, youth-led approach that structures their programming highlights the importance of respecting the voices of young people. Lanzando Líderes exemplifies Puentes’ mission grounded within social determinants of health and social justice. The chart below shows the distribution of the key themes identified by youth and demonstrates Puentes’ commitment to their mission and ability to support youth holistically.

Puentes de Salud integrates community care to to positively impact the lives of youth across the following dimensions:

- 1) Increased social connections and deepened relationships with peers
- 2) Personal growth, increased self-confidence
- 3) Belonging, feeling heard and cared for
- 4) Increased cultural connection that supports positive identity formation/sense of self
- 5) Increased capacity for emotional processing and to hold critical conversations
- 6) Feeling respected and empowered
- 7) Incorporation of learned healing practices into their lives to support their mental well-being



This graphic illustrates the percentage of the 30 comments from our interviews that reference key outcomes (listed above and color coded) identified by youth when asked about the impact of Puentes de Salud programming on their lives.

YOUTH QUOTES ON THE IMPACTS OF LANZANDO LÍDERES

"The murals [at Puentes], I feel like they kind of remind me of my grandparents, because they would be cooking... and I also see some people there that kinda look like them. So, like, it reminds me of people that I know back in Mexico."

- Ariana, child of Mexican im/migrant parents

"I just got to know, myself even better. I just like learned so much about me... I'd also get a better understanding of my parents. Because I usually try to understand, 'why are they like this?' But again, we both know that a lot of Mexican people don't take mental health seriously."

- Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth

"I definitely would say it helped me grow as a person, because throughout I kind of became less shy. And so, I had to talk to more people... Third year, that's when it finally became in person, which I was so nervous about it because it was my first time seeing everyone in person. But I ended up loving it. I would just be so excited on Thursdays... The one thing I struggled most was doing my homework and keeping on track with everything that I kind of just sometimes would get shy and just kind of stayed away from new people. So, during my final year this year, I kind of was like, 'you know what, I'm gonna just go for it. Just talk to people. Just get to know everyone before I leave.' And I definitely would say it helped me grow so much more with my confidence, with keeping up with homework. They did a lot of nutrition, which that helped a lot. Then self-care mental health, and just everything. Like just with knowledge."

- Sofia, LGBTQIA+ child of Mexican im/migrant parents

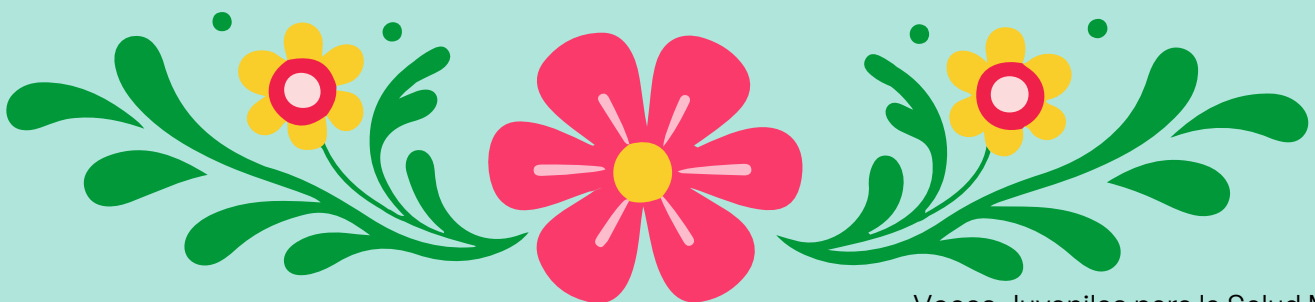


6. BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The strategies below highlight effective community care practices at JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud that positively impact youth. Now, more than ever, is the time for funders to ensure the well-being of Latine im/migrant youth by scaling these effective community-led organizations and program models. Mental health providers, educators, and community organizations serving youth in Philadelphia can incorporate and adapt the community care practices highlighted in this report to their specific context and needs. The following best practices underscore the healing power of community care in South Philadelphia that supports youth well-being.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING LATINE IM/MIGRANT YOUTH WELL-BEING

- **Empower youth** through activism, education, art-making and creative self-expression, and by supporting their process of developing pride in their identities.
- **Provide leadership opportunities**, including organization staff positions, in advisory boards, and to help lead peer support programming.
- **Cultivate strong mentorship and support systems** by hiring staff that reflect the diverse identities of Latine im/migrant youth.
- **Help youth to see themselves as leaders** of collective action and community empowerment.
- **Emphasize bilingual and multicultural programming** to reduce feelings of disconnection and alienation.
- **Integrate storytelling into your programming** for youth to express their experiences with mental health and share with one another.
- **Provide opportunities for cultural practice, exploration, and critique** of harmful norms.
- **Advocate for harm reduction within cultural and generational practices** through transparent conversations about mental health and LGBTQIA+ identities with entire families.
- **Provide opportunities for field trips**, both locally and regionally, to build cultural awareness and expose im/migrant youth to different possibilities.
- **Commit to action-oriented advocacy by rejecting performative activism.** Ensure youth see the real-world impacts of their leadership and community engagement, which can lead to improved self-esteem and a positive sense of self.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing Latine im/migrant youth mental health requires a multifaceted approach to shift cultural narratives by fostering open dialogue, challenging harmful cultural norms, and providing support for both youth and their parents. Empowering youth to express their emotions and educating parents about mental health can help break the cycles of misunderstanding and stigma that currently exist within Latine im/migrant families. We advocate for a multi-system approach including community organizations, funders, mental health service providers, and researchers to foster collaboration and increase support tailored to the specific needs of Latine im/migrant youth.

IM/MIGRANT SERVING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD...

Honor the contributions of youth by adapting your organizational structure around youth feedback, leadership, and engagement.

Implement regular listening sessions to ask youth what they need and incorporate their feedback into your programming and operations at your organization. Establish youth advisory boards, hire youth staff, work in true partnership to create leadership models like Fuerza, JUNTOS Podemos, and Junior Organizers, and integrate youth into your board of directors. Youth must be compensated for their roles and contributions.

Develop intentional programming addressing the importance of mental health in Latine households to reduce negative stereotypes, stigma, and mislabeling.

During our mental health circles focused on migration and mental health, a recurring theme at MW El Futuro and JUNTOS centered on a desire to engage in open, honest conversations about mental health in their homes and communities. Youth emphasized cultural stigmas and generational gaps in understanding mental health and highlighted the need for targeted programs that engage families. We recommend that facilitators clearly express their skills and emotional capacity to hold space and connect youth to services as requested. Flexibility and adaptability are essential for facilitating meaningful mental health conversations with youth and should center on active listening and cultural humility.

Bringing parents and youth together for intentional discussions about mental health can increase understanding and contribute towards Latine cultural shifts. Mental health education for im/migrant parents should validate their own lived experiences and struggles, and provide tools to improve their parent-child relationship through non-judgmental dialogue. Organizations should lead parent workshops on effective practices to cultivate a safe space for children to share about their emotions at home. Music therapist, Natalia Alvarez-Figueroa MMT, MT-BC, teaches us that psychoeducation and mental health interventions with parents must acknowledge that they did the best that they could with what they had. Natalia recommends framing conversations around well-being and emotions as a desire for youth to build closer relationships with their parents and for those relationships to work.

IM/MIGRANT SERVING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD...

Address the mental health needs of LGBTQIA+ im/migrant youth.

Prioritize programming that acts upon the diversity of Latine im/migrant youth, including gender and sexuality, to foster increased understanding and support within families. Rocio and Elio suggest connecting conversations to parents' culture, such as including prominent queer people that parents and youth could relate to. Actively recruit and engage LGBTQIA+ youth in your program and work towards understanding their unique barriers to accessing mental health services. Increasing queer program staff can increase youth's safety and social network. Develop programming in partnership with queer youth that increases intentional safe spaces for self-expression and reaffirms their Latine, im/migrant, and LGBTQIA+ identities.

Increasing partnerships with organizations such as [La Puerta Abierta](#), [Galaei](#), [The Attic Youth Center](#), and [Children's Crisis Treatment Center](#) can facilitate resource sharing and increase organizational capacity for conversations around mental health and gender and sexual identities.

Expand peer-support models to directly address im/migrant youth mental health and to build a network of youth community health workers.

Many interviewed youth are interested in pursuing careers in the mental and behavioral health fields given their lived experiences and desire to shift Latine cultural stigmas. [The Youth Mental Health Corps](#) is a collaborative initiative that develops youth mental health leaders. Youth gain training, skills, and credentials to start a career in the behavioral health field, while supporting community organizations in their response to the growing youth mental health crisis. This intervention trains youth through either 1) Mental Health First Aid Certification, 2) Peer Support/Recovery Specialist Certification, or 3) Community Health Worker Certification. This program is sponsored through a public-private partnership involving federal and state governments, but Pennsylvania is not listed as a target state.

Im/migrant serving community organizations in Philadelphia are equipped to develop a similar program for youth mental health peer support. Puentes de Salud has successfully integrated a community health worker model through their Promotoras Principales initiative. Similarly, NSC utilizes a Wellness Liaison model where community members are hired as cultural brokers and provide emotional and practical support. These community-led, trauma-informed approaches center cultural humility that can be particularly helpful in addressing the mental health of Latine im/migrant youth. NSC currently has one youth wellness liaison and the Promotoras model involves only adults. Community organizations already have effective adult peer support models and should expand them to reach youth populations in a way that addresses their specific needs and culture.

Collaborate and partner with interested youth to develop a similar program as the Youth Mental Health Corps. Seek training opportunities with [Mental Health Partnerships](#), which now includes Spanish Certified Peer Support (CPS) Specialist training. Youth-led peer support models could help build a network of community health workers that contribute towards the transformation of Latine cultural stigmas about mental health.

FUNDERS SHOULD...

Value im/migrant stories, testimonies, and lived experiences as evidence-based data.

Funders centered around social justice and eliminating health disparities must honor the voices of community members. Funders should listen to what is effective for im/migrant communities and expand existing programs. They should dedicate resources to compensate storytellers and increase the capacity of community organizations to collect testimonies about the impacts of their services. By funding community-led, qualitative participatory action research, funders can contribute towards shifting narratives about evidence-based programs and therefore value the healing and care that happens in communities.

Support youth-led programming through multi-year and flexible grants.

Funders should commit to youth-led programming, which requires multi-year, flexible support. Effective youth-led programming requires taking the time to build trust and mutually respectful relationships. The trust-building process requires additional resources to ensure youth feel that their voice is respected and valued. Funding should be sufficiently flexible to support resources needed for collaboration, compensation, planning, and building trust with youth.

Commit to sustained investments for community-based programming that addresses youth well-being.

Young people tell us that public mental health services are insufficient for their specific experiences and needs. They refocus our attention on the importance of mental health promotion through community organizations, especially for first and 1.5 generation im/migrant youth. They face additional stressors and barriers to accessing clinical mental health services due to a lack of cultural humility, legal status, transportation, and language. Funders should prioritize investing in im/migrant youth programming such as the models presented in this report that address a multitude of social and structural barriers affecting youth's healthy development.



MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS SHOULD...

Actively disrupt paradigms of standardized mental health care by practicing authenticity, transparency, and co-creation of treatment plans.

In her interview, music therapist, Natalia Alvarez-Figueroa, MMT, MT-BC emphasized taking a human-centered approach to behavioral health and challenging the counterproductive idea that therapists are blank slate experts. Providers should challenge hierarchical approaches to therapy by entering the space with authenticity and being intentional about how much they share about themselves to build trust. Natalia also emphasized the importance of co-creating treatment plans with patients. Shift power dynamics in therapeutic sessions by ensuring patients hold responsibility, power, and control in deciding what works for them and in setting their goals and objectives.

Cultivate a therapeutic space where LGBTQIA+ Latine im/migrant youth feel safe in taking the risk to be themselves.

Both Natalia and Chesy Tronchoni Bello, LPC, MT-BC emphasized the importance of self-disclosure when working with clients that provide hints about their queer identities, but may not be fully comfortable to share. Conversations related to family dynamics are essential and it is importance to label and name the harm family rejection creates. When therapists also identify as queer, self-disclosure was described by Natalia as an ethical obligation. In doing so, providers can cultivate a space where the pain associated with family dynamics can be shared between patients and service providers.

Kyra Sjarif, LPC, ATR-BC, CCTP, an art therapist and counselor, emphasized the importance of cultural humility when serving LGBTQIA+ clients. When considering family dynamics, service providers should balance client needs with the needs of the family, and the loyalties youth can hold to their parents. Rather than imposing harsh Western boundaries where family members are cut off, Kyra emphasized the importance of curiosity about cultural nuances. It may not be an option for Latine im/migrant youth to cut off their family completely. Instead, providers should balance honoring youth's cultural heritage and what is important to them, while figuring out what limits the young person needs to continue to be in a relationship with their family.



MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS SHOULD...

Practice advocacy by decolonizing your mind, your practice, and embarking on your own freedom journey.

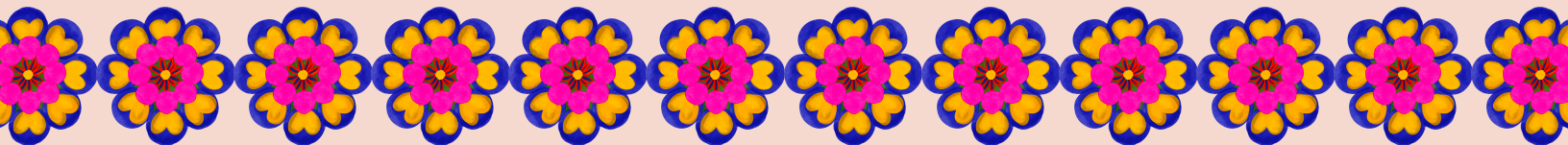
Direct service providers are uniquely positioned to disrupt and challenge standardized guidelines and those who historically have had the power to create them. In her interview, Natalia emphasized the importance of intentional, open, direct, and out loud disruption. Call out systemic and structural injustice that are the root causes of mental health challenges during therapeutic sessions. Be transparent and authentic about the socioeconomic conditions that continuously put our communities at risk.

White aspiring ally therapists should embark on their own freedom journey of unlearning what they were trained in. Kyra adds the necessity for white therapists to be curious about the relationship that a patient may have to their cultural and gender identity, which shapes the therapeutic experience. Invite candid conversations about what it is like for the patient to have a white therapist. Natalia adds the importance of leaning into your discomfort, taking accountability, and practicing self-compassion. It is important to recognize that you can cause harm and to remain committed to a journey of growth.

Keep an open mind by centering kindness and by recognizing and adapting to the diverse identities and backgrounds of youth.

Interviews with youth reveal the necessity for cultural and practical shifts in therapeutic services for im/migrant communities. Youth want service providers to recognize that their trauma experiences are not monolithic and are not only tied to migration. Therapists should cultivate a space for im/migrant youth to discuss their connections to their home countries, recognizing how conversations about what they miss can reveal hidden manifestations of trauma and opportunities for healing. Approach these conversations with cultural humility and allow youth to share their experiences at their own pace, demonstrating respect and ensuring they feel heard and valued in the therapeutic setting.

As is shown in this report, im/migrant youth have felt like any other patient when receiving services and described them as lacking genuine care for their well-being. Youth recommend that providers approach each session with openness, allowing for deeper conversations and fostering a trusting therapeutic relationship. Using compassionate nonjudgmental language and demeanor can ensure youth feel valued and reduce their feelings of being a burden.



RESEARCHERS SHOULD...

Utilize a humility-centered approach and commit to ‘Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo’ (Only the community saves the community).

For research to authentically center lived experience, it is imperative to use participatory approaches to ensure the project is structured based on the real needs and experiences of the community of focus. If these approaches are not included in the initial funding proposal, researchers should proactively seek academic-community partnerships to authentically collaborate with community members and provide compensation.

Acknowledge that communities have the knowledge and skills for their own liberation. Approach research with humility and honor community knowledge. Deeply reflect on your own positionality and adapt to the needs of the community.

Implement a qualitative focus and challenge conventional standards in the methodology, presentation, and use of research findings.

Support cultural shifts about evidence-based data by prioritizing research for community advocacy that centers systemic and structural inequities over publications. Implement youth-led, qualitative participatory action research, to ensure findings about program models/interventions are authentic to the lived experiences of youth. Challenge conventional standards in the presentation of research by partnering with local artists, community leaders, and youth to create visually engaging findings and increase accessibility. For example, incorporate [visual ethnography](#) into your methodology and increase research dissemination through community events.



7. YOUTH FREEDOM DREAMING

QUOTES

We asked Latine im/migrant youth and children of im/migrants to describe their freedom dreams inspired by *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* by Robin D.G. Kelley.

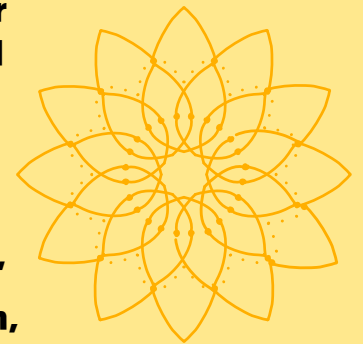
"I'm speaking from like, the immigrant point of view... Where more people were heard, where more people were understood, where, you know, the people that were in power were people like us. Because obviously these big corporate politicians don't care about us... So I feel like more people that look like me, more people of color, more people that are in different positions of power. More people that are from a community are making decisions for that community."

**-Rocio, Mexican im/migrant youth,
MW EL Futuro**



"I dream about a world where there's better conditions for everyone. I dream for a world that has equal education for students, that has jobs that don't cause backbreaking health effects, just kind of like things that people should have as humans, like, conditions that people shouldn't be facing."

**-Linda, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth,
JUNTOS**



"Definitely one where, everything is normalized, like sex education, mental health, where you're just free to do whatever you want. I know if I wasn't going to the mental health [field], I definitely would've done beauty school or art. But that's a bit harder because I know my parents, they were like 'An art major's not really gonna get you far, you know?' So, definitely where you aren't judged for what you do or who you are. You're just accepted, and there's no judgment. It's just carefree. You get to do what you love without worrying about another person criticizing you."

**-Sofia, child of Mexican im/migrants,
Puentes de Salud**

"dreams without borders. Because I would love for my family from Mexico to be able to -- I would love for my grandpa to meet my dad. Like every Hispanic child, every children of immigrants wants this for their parents. Their parents being able to meet their grandparents." -Elena, LGBTQIA+ Mexican im/migrant youth, Puentes de Salud



"Mainly having my parents understand me as who I am that's my top priority. Even though it might take time, I feel like there could be little ways to have them encounter, like, 'oh, I am a queer person', but have them get to that certain place where we can be united as a whole family."
-Alexis, queer child of Mexican im/migrant parents, MW El Futuro



"So in an ideal world, we would all have mental support, and we would know what's going on. My parents would, they'd be like, 'okay, I feel like I don't belong here [the U.S.] and this is why I act this way and this is why I'm mad and why I don't do this.'"
-Josephina, child of Mexican im/migrant parents, JUNTOS

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study highlights the ways systems and institutions create barriers for Latine im/migrant youth to receive adequate mental health services. We uplift the healing power of youth programming for Latine im/migrant youth and children of im/migrants that is centered around community care. Some areas for future research have emerged from these findings.

MORE DIVERSE REPRESENTATION IN SAMPLING

The majority of participants, including youth, parents, and nonprofit staff, identified as Mexican. Although this research project sought to engage youth from Mexico and Central America, the South Philadelphia Latine im/migrant community has predominantly been composed of folks from Puebla, Mexico. Increases in im/migrant arrivals from Central and South America necessitates further research on their specific needs and experiences. Additionally, there is a need for future community-led participatory research focused solely on the experiences of Indigenous youth and LGBTQIA+ im/migrant youth.

Additionally, 63% of youth that we interviewed identified as second generation im/migrants. First and 1.5 generation im/migrant youth are exposed to traumatic experiences during pre-migration, on their migratory journey and detention, and post migration. They often experience assault, physical and sexual abuse, and physical injuries (Franco, 554, 2018). They also face heightened barriers while accessing resources due to legal status, language, acculturation, poverty, and transportation. Future research on im/migrant youth mental well-being should recruit primarily first or 1.5 generation youth.

MORE PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENTS AND COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH

This study utilized several important participatory approaches, such as our co-researcher model and compensated community members. Future studies must commit to community-led research to ensure findings on Latine im/migrant youth well-being are actionable and that the community remains the primary beneficiary. For example, future research could use photovoice. This effective participatory approach respects the voices and experiences of young people while reaffirming their agency. Through empowerment, photovoice provides the opportunity for youth to identify, represent, and enact change in their communities.

Conversations with Dr. Elizabeth Salerno Valdez, PhD, MPH from the Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health underscore the importance of investigating the impact of participatory action research on youth well-being. Future participatory studies alongside Latine im/migrant youth should evaluate how participating in participatory research supports well-being across different indicators such as civic engagement, confidence, social connections, etc.



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APPENDIX- RESEARCH METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

The research team conducted 36 semi-structured, trauma-informed interviews, in Spanish or English. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and the setting prioritized the interviewee's safety and comfort, including virtual options. We conducted these interviews from February- July 2024 and began by interviewing therapists and nonprofit staff. We interviewed the following stakeholders:

19 youth (ages 16-22)

- 7 first or 1.5 generation im/migrants
- 12 second generation im/migrants
- 6 held nonprofit staff positions at the time of their interview
- 7 self-identified as LGBTQIA+

8 im/migrant parents

- 6 from Mexico
- 2 from Central America

4 therapists

- Previous or current experience serving im/migrant communities

4 nonprofit staff

- From JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and NSC

1 community visual artist

We also collected data during our mental health circle program. We collected participant observation reflections across seven sessions at JUNTOS and MW El Futuro. We engaged a total of 25 youth (ages 13-22), including 19 participants who were not interviewed. We received parent's informed consent and youth assent.

In total, we engaged 38 unique South Philadelphia Latine im/migrant youth or children of im/migrants. The nationality and/or cultural background of these youth includes:

- 33 from Mexico
- 2 from Honduras
- 1 from Guatemala
- 2 from El Salvador

ANALYSIS

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using [Daily Transcription](#). Interviews conducted in Spanish were translated to English during transcription. All transcripts were de-identified and we used pseudonyms for all youth and parent interviews. Nonprofit staff and therapists could consent to allow us to use their name and professional title. The research team used both a deductive and in vivo inductive approach to interview coding, followed by categorizing, and thematic analysis. Eduardo developed a coding scheme based on the questions and key issues for the project, such as barriers to mental health care and the impacts of programming in the lives of youth. We used Microsoft Word and Excel to facilitate data organization, coding, and categorizing. After an initial thematic analysis, the research team led two feedback meetings with community members and implemented their suggestions. We used Excel pivot tables to quantify the number of comments referencing key outcomes that were identified by youth when asked about the impacts of JUNTOS, MW El Futuro, and Puentes de Salud programming on their lives.

This study was deemed exempt from IRB review by the City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health Institutional Review Board under exemption category 45 CFR 46.