Availability of BIPOC Groups in Chicagoland High Schools: Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This poster examines the availability of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) support groups in Chicagoland high schools prior to and during COVID-19. A survey was administered to predominantly white and diverse high schools to determine the possibility of a correlation between groups offered and racial/ethnic composition of the student body. This poster intends to determine a shift, through survey data, in the numbers of BIPOC groups offered amid a racial and global pandemic.

Introduction

For many young people, schools are considered a primary mental health provider, however, with global school shutdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, many students, particularly students of color, were left without mental health care. This sudden decrease in support is alarming considering BIPOC were disproportionately affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways, including but not limited to financial instability, job loss, higher rates of contracting and becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, and racial injustice. The sociopolitical, racial, and environmental stresses that BIPOC communities experience daily have been magnified during this racial and global health pandemic (Quirk, 2020; Fortuna, Tolou-Shams, Robles-Ramamurthy, Porsche, 2020). With this in mind, this poster is taking a deeper look into how schools are utilizing their resources in terms of group supports to address these global injustices. High school students' perceptions support research that suggests mental health disparities for BIPOC are more significant than their White peers. One article found that students of color can often feel a lack of connection and support with staff as well as their peers and overall school community (Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson, 2016). This finding supports the indication that further isolation from the school community as a result of the pandemic would exacerbate mental health challenges for BIPOC communities. Groups can be highly therapeutic and promote healing, which could greatly benefit member cohesion and understanding. Universality and catharsis, group factors proposed by Yalom, are essential in running an effective group, especially for BIPOC students. A group in which people of color feel comfortable increases their likelihood to disclose personal information and find shared experiences with other members (Yalom, 2005; Kivighan, Drinane, Tao, Owen, and Liu, 2019). This evidence points to the value and importance of providing support groups for students of color within the high school setting to facilitate connections with peers and navigation of their unique identities.

Methods

Survey Recruitment Process
Emails were sent by the researchers to social workers at high schools throughout the Chicagoland area based on the demographics of the student body. This recruitment process allowed for a sample of student bodies from various demographic groups in order to study groups for BIPOC populations. In order to be recruited for this project, the schools had to be in the Chicagoland area and offer group therapy supports to their students.

Sample
17 schools in the Chicagoland area responded to the survey
- 10 predominantly white schools
- 4 with mixed white/BIPOC schools
- 3 predominantly BIPOC schools

Findings

Figure 1: Survey Respondent Demographics

Predominantly BIPOC 18.0%
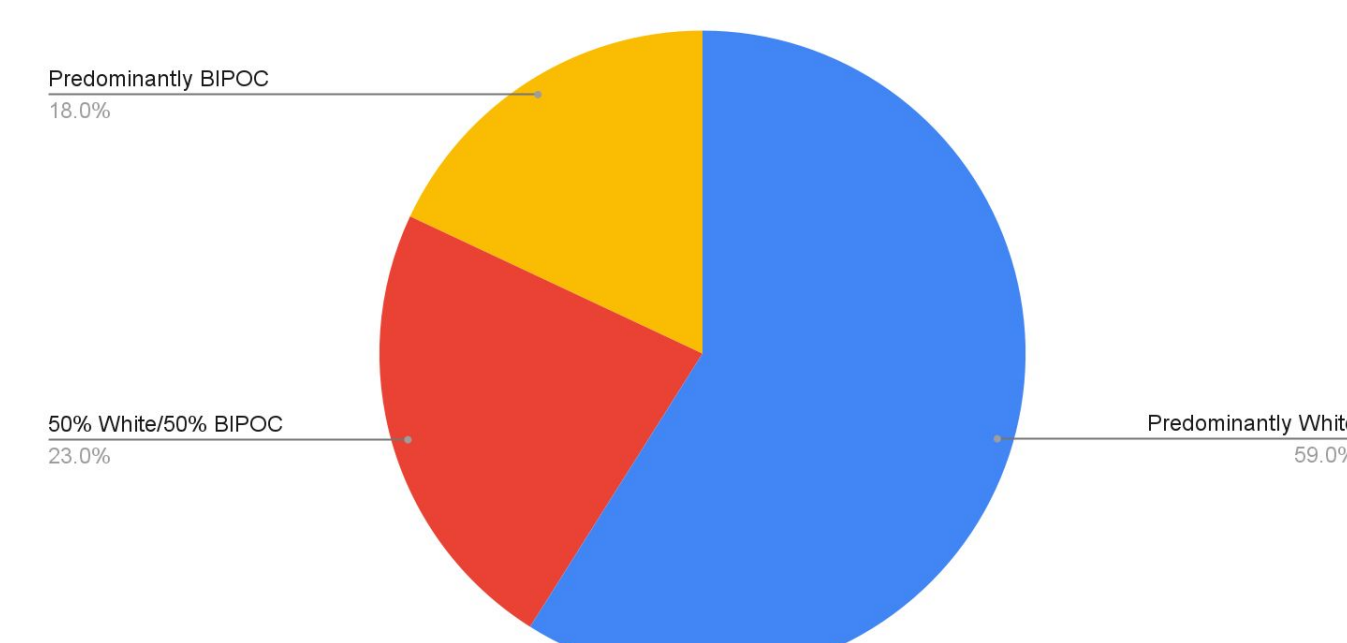50% White/50% BIPOC 23.0%
Predominantly White 59.0%

Figure 1 demonstrates the demographics of the schools that responded to the survey.

Figure 2: Impact of Pandemic on Group Attendance for All Students

No Change/Other 35.3%
Less Students Attending 53.0%
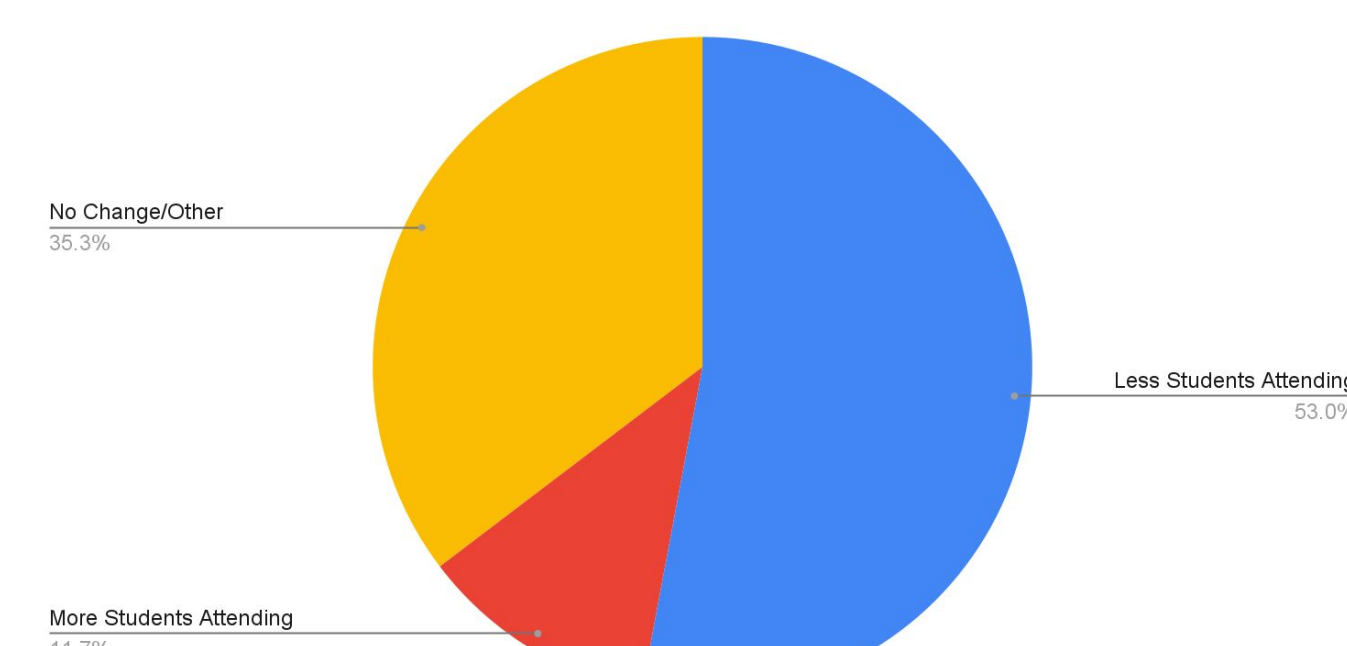More Students Attending 11.7%

Figure 2 shows changes in attendance for all students to support/therapy groups as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 3: Impact of Pandemic on Group Attendance for BIPOC Students

No Change/Other 50.0%
Less Students Attending 50.0%
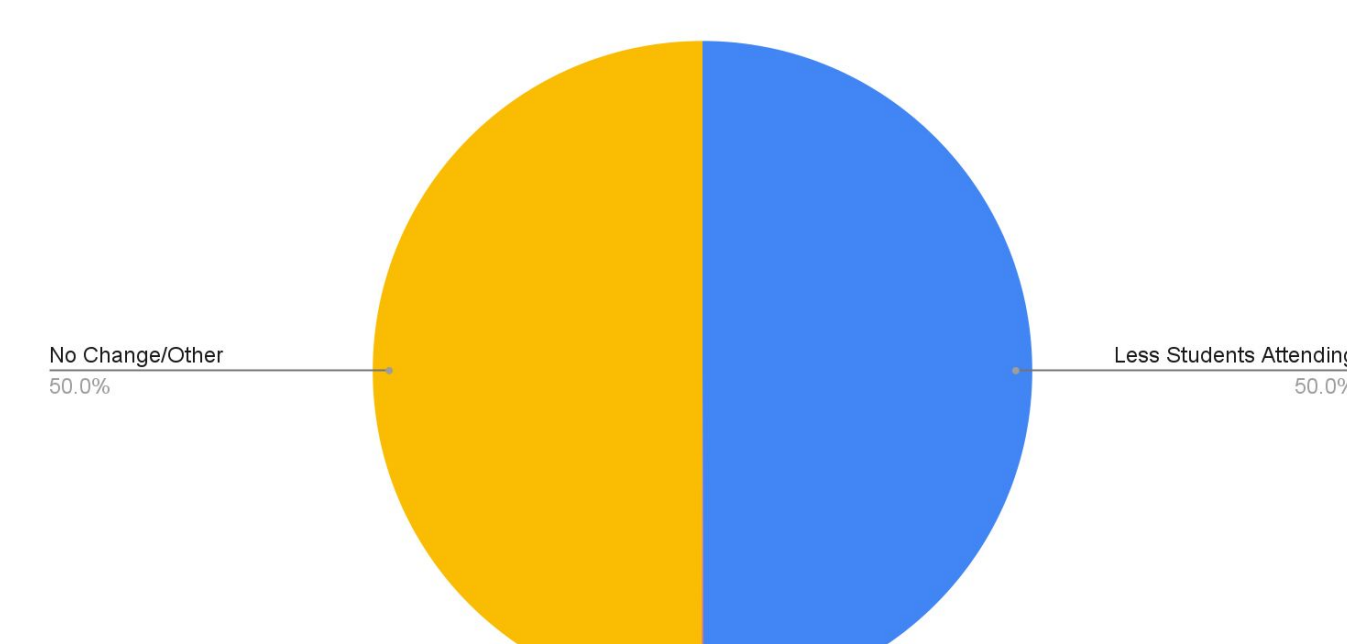More Students Attending 0.1%

Figure 3 shows changes in attendance for BIPOC students to support/therapy groups as a result of the pandemic.

Predominantly White

Groups	Prior All	Prior BIPOC	Post All	Post BIPOC
Anxiety Group	6	1	4	0
Social Skills	3	0	2	0
LGBTQ+	4	1	1	0
Race Group	2	2	1	2
Organization Group/Study Skills	4	0	3	0
Family/Grief	3	1	3	1
Depression	1	0	0	0
New Students/ Transfers	2	1	1	0

The table above demonstrates the group therapy/supports that were the most common for schools with predominantly White demographics.

Mixed Schools

Groups	Prior All	Prior BIPOC	Post All	Post BIPOC
Anxiety Group	3	2	1	1
LGBTQ+	1	1	1	1
Race Group	0	3	0	2
Organization Group/Study Skills	3	1	1	1
Grief/Loss	3	1	2	1
Depression	0	0	0	0
Mindfulness/ Neuromeditation	3	2	2	1
Substance Abuse	2	1	1	1

The table above demonstrates the group therapy/supports that were the most common for schools with mixed and predominantly BIPOC demographics.

The survey results show that only half of predominantly White schools offer groups specifically for their BIPOC students. The results also demonstrate almost all the mixed and predominantly BIPOC schools offer groups specifically for their BIPOC students. All responding schools, regardless of demographics, offer groups that are accessible to the entire student body.

Due to the pandemic, several schools stopped offering groups entirely for the time being. Because of this, many of the groups offered prior to the pandemic were not offered during the pandemic, regardless of school demographics.

One of the survey questions inquired the reasoning behind NOT offering support groups specifically for BIPOC students. Several of the respondents explained that the groups they offer are meant to support all students, without making a distinction for BIPOC students. One of the predominantly BIPOC schools said there was not a group in place because of a lack of response from students.

The survey respondents were asked what supports are offered to BIPOC students, aside from therapy/support groups. Some of these responses included: clubs that celebrate ethnic and/or racial identities, student associations focusing on leadership, embracing culture, and empowering young people, hiring Directors of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and connecting students to outside resources as needed. Additionally, multiple schools mentioned that they heavily utilize individual counseling rather than group support.

Implications for Social Workers

This research is imperative to the field of social work, particularly school social work, because it draws attention to the gaps in supports available, especially for BIPOC students. Research shows that therapy/support groups that acknowledge barriers associated with holding a particular ethnic or racial identity can be helpful for young people.

Based off the survey responses, it is worth inquiring more about the availability of resources. The authors questioned whether a lack of resources, such as funds or administrative support, were obstacles in getting group therapy/supports in place for BIPOC students.

This research study gathered information pertaining to the types of group supports offered at high schools of various demographics. Further research could be conducted on this topic through surveying students and inquiring about their identified need for therapy/support groups for BIPOC students. This elevates their voices and invites them into the conversation.

Limitations

Only 17 schools completed the survey in its entirety, therefore, these findings cannot be generalizable.

The survey required a large number of write-in responses rather than multiple choice options. The amount of write-in responses could possibly have deterred respondents from completing the survey in its entirety. In Qualtrics, it can be seen that an additional 15 schools had initiated the survey and did not complete it.

Finally, it is important to discuss how this project only surveyed schools in the Chicagoland area. Other parts of Illinois or the country could result in different findings or different kinds of supports offered to BIPOC students.

Conclusion

Overall, the pandemic affected the way that all groups are offered, the engagement from students, and the overall running of groups. According to the survey data, it appears that a majority of schools in the Chicagoland area are not offering therapy/support groups specifically for their BIPOC students. This trend appeared regardless of the schools' overall demographic make-up. However, many schools mentioned that they are compensating for these gaps through individual counseling. BIPOC student clubs and associations are also referenced as meaningful, valuable spaces for these populations.