Understanding the Development of East Oakland Youth at the Nexus of Place, Race, and Wellbeing

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the relationship between place and youth development, focusing on the challenges faced by youth of color living in low-income urban areas. It highlights the uneven distribution and limited access to essential resources and opportunities such as housing, healthcare, education, and employment, which contribute to developmental and health inequities among marginalized youth. I respond to three key challenges in the place-based literature: the poor conceptualization of place, lack of youth voice, and the need to problematize definitions of wellbeing in partnership with those most intimately impacted by social issues. In doing so I apply mixed methods through interviews, focus groups, and participatory GIS with East Oakland youth of color. In paper 1, I define East Oakland based on the definitions of youth who live there. I develop a holistic understanding of the location, locale, and sense of place that defines this geographic subset of the City of Oakland. In paper 2, I compare how youth of color experience school and youth-serving organizations in ways that bolster and hinder their subjective psychological wellbeing. In paper 3, I problematize the EPOCH conceptualization of wellbeing through focus groups with East Oakland youth. I find that assessing youth development based on psychological wellbeing is not sufficient to capture the challenges experienced by marginalized youth. This dissertation highlights the significance of adopting person-centered approaches to research. It challenges the perception of urban youth of color as passive actors and underscores their expertise, strength, and skills. By recognizing and empowering marginalized youth, societal stereotypes and oppressive practices can be challenged, enabling youth to play active roles as both recipients and providers of services and support in their own development.

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Background and Introduction

A rich and burgeoning scholarship has established that growing up in socioeconomically challenged urban areas is associated with a range of negative life outcomes for youth (Bohan, 2018; Coulton et al., 2016; Cummins et al., 2007; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). This field of research posits that specific compositional characteristics of disadvantaged areas including high rates of poverty, high rates of residential mobility, high unemployment, majority racial and ethnic minority resident composition, and high crime (Bowen et al., 2002; Pemberton & Humphris, 2016) lead to poor health, economic, criminal justice, and education outcomes for low-income urban youth of color (Bohan, 2018; Ellen et al., 2001; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Minh et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 2015; Pebley & Sastry, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002). Youth who grow up in socially and economically depressed urban places experience greater health disparities such as early mortality, and high rates of heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and cancer when compared to youth residing in wealthier communities (Bohan, 2018; Campo et al., 2015; Chaix et al., 2008; Ellen et al., 2001). Additionally, youth who live in concentrated poverty experience increased rates of mental health issues (i.e. anxiety and depression), violent behavior, reduced achievement in education, and increased rates of teenage pregnancy (Bohan, 2018; Campo et al., 2015; Harding, 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Minh et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 2015; Pebley & Sastry, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002; Warner & Settersen Jr., 2017).

From a broad perspective, socioeconomic disadvantage in U.S. cities remains an issue of concern. In 2019 the poverty rate in U.S. metropolitan areas was 11.9%[1] (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). Low-income disproportionally impacts marginalized populations, including young people and racial and ethnic minority groups. In 2021 an estimated 15.3 percent of youth under the age of 18 were living in poverty across the U.S. Highlighting the racial and ethnic disparities associated with poverty (Benson, 2022) data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) indicates that economic disadvantage disproportionately impacts Indigenous persons (24 percent) African American (20 percent) and Latinx individuals (17 percent) when compared to their Caucasian counterparts (8 percent) (Congressional Research Services, 2022). Furthering the issue, recent research suggests that the effects of living in poor urban areas result in negative outcomes more severe than those observed when living in poverty alone (Cutrona et al., 2008; Evans & English, 2017; Wilson, 1996).

For example, taking a global perspective, disparities in health outcomes exist for persons of color even in wealthy countries (such as members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) where universal healthcare is available (Van Doorslaer et al., 2006). Though federally funded programs were implemented to provide access to all members of their populations, low-income individuals were still less likely than their wealthier counterparts to visit a doctor. From this perspective, it is more clearly understood that poverty alone cannot explain the disparate life outcomes observed between individuals living in high poverty urban neighborhoods and wealthier areas. Thus, the combined impacts of poverty, housing instability, high rates of crime, low socioeconomic status, and other measures of life hardships are important to consider when thinking carefully about policies and interventions targeting the outcomes of marginalized youth populations.

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[1] Poverty being defined as a family earning less than the income thresholds set forth by the U.S. Census Bureau. As of 2019, the poverty threshold for a family of four was $25,750 (US Census Bureau, 2023).

An early focus of place-based research was to establish whether residential context indeed influences life outcomes (McBride Murry et al., 2011; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). However, since the late 1990s, increasing attention has been paid to better understanding not *if*, but *how* living in a socioeconomically challenged urban environment impacts residents' overall quality of life (Cummins et al., 2007; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002; Van Ham et al., 2012). In response, researchers from a range of disciplines including sociology, epidemiology, economics, public health, geography and city planning have identified a core set of "mechanisms", or pathways through which place negatively impact individuals (Galster, 2010; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Van Ham et al., 2012; Wodtke et al., 2016). Broadly, the mechanisms of place can be described as: environmental, institutional, social and cultural (Galster, 2010; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Small & Gose, 2020).

How Places Impact Youth – A Discussion of Mechanisms

A major critique of the diverse body of place-based research focuses on how current conceptualizations of place are severely limited by failing to capture *how* a given locale fully impacts individuals, or the processes through which neighborhoods impact youth well-being (Cummins et al., 2007; Harding et al., 2010). This chapter provides a review of the main categories of mechanisms within the place-based literature.

Environmental Mechanism General agreement has emerged throughout the literature that places are both composed of, and impact, residents through an environmental mechanism, distinct from the geographic boundaries discussed above. (Bernard et al., 2007; Coulton et al., 2016; Diez-Roux, 2001b; Galster, 2010). Drawing from the field of public health, Diez-Roux (2001) defines this as the physical environment and identifies environmental mechanisms as pathways through which life outcomes are impacted. More specifically, places impact residents through features such as air, water, and sound (Bernard et al., 2007; Macintyre et al., 2002). The impacts of this mechanism on adolescent psychological and physical health outcomes has been well-documented. For example, a recent longitudinal study assessed the impact of air pollutants on urban dwelling youth. Using a multilevel fixed effects model (n=682) the authors observed an increase in delinquent behavior (e.g. stealing, vandalism, fire setting, and substance use) among individuals who lived in areas with high levels of particulate matter while controlling for variables that would likely be correlated with the outcome: including gender, race/ethnicity, neighborhood quality, urbanicity, and parental stress. This effect was enhanced when additional socio-psychological stressors such as maternal depression and high parental stress were also present (Younan et al., 2018).

Noise pollution has also been observed as having a negative impact on adolescent development and is associated with racially segregated spaces. Specifically, areas with greater numbers of low-income people of color experience higher rates of noise pollution (Casey et al., 2017) Specifically, that individuals living in high noise areas have higher rates of behavioral and psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, and aggressive behaviors (Lim et al., 2018). Moreover, the negative impact of neighborhood noise on these developmental issues has been reported to be more salient among low-income populations (Lim et al., 2018).

Additional physical environmental components of place, include the built environment (e.g. parks, building and transportation infrastructure), which has been identified as impacting youth well-being (Chawla et al., 2014). For example, Coulton et al., (2016) suggest that living in distressed housing located in high poverty areas was associated with significantly reduced educational attainment among urban youth. Recent research has suggested that the presence of such community facilities has positive impacts on adolescent behavior. Younan et al., (2018) reported that young urban people who were exposed to green spaces within their neighborhood over the course of 1-3 years displayed lower rates of aggressive behaviors when controlling for other socioeconomic characteristics. Chawla et al., (2014) observed through ethnography and interviews, that youth who had access to recreationally focused green spaces displayed reduced levels of stress and used these aspects of the built environment to develop social networks. (2018) reported that the presence of green spaces and parks reduced adolescent depression.

Social and Cultural Mechanisms In addition to identifying spatial boundaries and environmental characteristics, researchers have started to define place through the social interaction between residents of a particular area (Macintyre et al., 2002). Cummins et al., (2007) encourages researchers to consider more than simply demographic and homogenous aspects of the urban social fabric of places. Thus, a growing number of empirical studies have sought to understand how various aspects of the social dimension of place are associated with life disparities otherwise known as social mechanisms. For example, Chaskin (1997) explores the concept of place as being primarily residential spaces wherein people share a common lived experience. The author goes on to note that the social interactions within a common space are an important defining feature, rather than the geographic boundaries alone. Additionally, Macintyre, Ellaway, and Cummins (2002) suggest that important social components of neighborhood including shared identities and relationships play a significant role in the observed life outcomes of residents.

Empirical support for the impact of social mechanisms is diverse. One of the more widely accepted social mechanisms of neighborhood are the ties between individuals (Almgren et al., 2009; Dawkins, 2006; Galster, 2010). Research suggests that the social ties of a given neighborhood can either push youth towards engaging in particular behaviors or conversely motivate them to not engage in them (Dawkins, 2006). For example, in a recent study, high school seniors (n = 6,853) were surveyed to better understand the relationship between social ties (such as having both parents still married or support with schoolwork) on self-reported health. It was observed that youth who had increasingly strong and positive ties with their parents and peers, also reported better overall physical and mental health than those who lacked this type of social connection (Almgren et al., 2009).

Conceptualizing the mechanism of culture includes the "sub-culture" theory which argues that in neighborhoods experiencing concentrated disadvantage, residents engage in behavior that is viewed as "deviant" by higher-earning individuals, due to the surrounding culture placing importance on different types of life outcomes (Harding & Hepburn, 2014). Harding and Hepburn (2014) note that the culture of specific neighborhoods is perpetuated and shaped by structural forces such as poverty. For example, in areas of high poverty, there is also likely to be low employment. As such, a culture develops around alternative ways to make money, options which are likely to be different from mainstream perspectives (Harding, 2007). Importantly, these alternative behaviors and sets of beliefs emerge as a result of structural barriers within their surrounding environment, such as lack of available jobs and poverty.

Institutional Mechanism The availability and utilization of social services, more generally defined as the institutional mechanism of place, have been shown to directly impact resident life outcomes, and can be understood as integrating aspects of both contextual, compositional, and relational categories of causal processes. (Cummins et al., 2007; Mendenhall et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2007; Small & McDermott, 2007). For example, Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan (2006) found that African American women who lived in neighborhoods with moderate to high levels of resources including access to schools, high levels of income, and low levels of crime were more likely to be employed and less likely to be on welfare than women living in areas with few resources. Living in a neighborhood with high numbers of organizations (i.e. health clinics, substance abuse treatment centers, crisis intervention services, afterschool programs, reproductive health centers, playgrounds, etc.) has been associated with reduced juvenile aggression (Molnar et al., 2008). Research also suggests that the presence of recreation facilities, retail, and employment opportunities within a neighborhood is associated with lower levels of violent crime among youth (Peterson et al., 2000).

The spatial mismatch of socioeconomically challenged neighborhood institutions and resident need was most notably put forth by Wilson in his theory of social isolation. This theory argues that residents of these areas are cut-off spatially from accessing important institutions and resources that were necessary to move out of poverty. Specifically, access to employment locations have increasingly moved into the suburbs, aways from the inner-city where low-income minority populations reside. The specific type of employment opportunities that are sparsely available included entry level positions that could afford low-income individuals foothold for moving up the socio-economic ladder (Gobillon et al., 2007). Lack of access to reliable transportation due in part to the high cost of owning a personal vehicle, as well as the formation of the U.S. highway system, has created an environment in which higher earning, typically white residents are able to travel into the suburbs for employment. Conversely, lower income African American families have been increasingly distanced from career development and job options, leading to increased rates of unemployment in socioeconomically oppressed neighborhoods (Gobillon et al., 2007). The evidence to support spatial mismatch theory is diverse. For example, Park (2004) calculated an accessibility score index based on neighborhood and observed that neighborhoods a statistically significant relationship between areas with low accessibility score and unemployment. As accessibility decreased, unemployment increased.

Accessibility to social services also varies across socioeconomic and spatial boundaries with low-income places experiencing higher rates of gaps in service provision than wealthier areas. A recent study assessed the distribution of mental health services across low- and high-income communities in the United States. It was noted that high income areas were more likely to have a diverse array of mental health services, while low income areas were more likely to only have inpatient facilities (Cummings et al., 2017). Additionally, Pearce et al. (2007) note that across four groups of social services including recreational facilities, shopping, education, and healthcare clinics, socioeconomically deprived areas experienced greater travel times between locations. Recent research has also assessed how changes in the U.S. social welfare system have increased inequity across the social service landscape, particularly for low-income individuals (Allard, 2009).

In his book *"Out of Reach: Place, Policy, and the New American Welfare State"*, Allard (2009) notes that when federal aid is restricted, increased service provision necessary to support low-income individuals often falls to local institutions, examples include nonprofit organizations

and locally funded city agencies. These organizations face challenges in maintaining financial viability, and as such may be located in areas outside of those where the most immediate need exists. Moreover, urban population shifts also make the matching of social service providers with the target community at times a challenging task (Allard, 2009). Such findings suggest that critical services may not be locally available for residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, thus forcing them to move into other geographic areas to receive care, and in turn increasing the costs of accessing needed services. From this perspective, neighborhood effects can and do, in part, arise from poor social service availability across low-income U.S. urban neighborhoods.

Though the presence and accessibility of community resources is important for resident outcomes, so too is the utilization of these services by neighborhood residents, a process that is impacted by a variety of different factors (Kirby & Kaneda, 2005). For example, individuals residing in low-income areas may not engage services due to a lack of insurance, an inability to schedule appointments that work within their schedules, or out of fear of stigmatization (Allard, 2009; Andersen et al., 2002; Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Pearce et al., 2007). An international study assessed perceived barriers of mental health service utilization and the findings corroborated the statement above. Specifically, costs of services, attitudinal beliefs (i.e. hoping to change the problem on one's own, believing services wouldn't help, etc.), fear of institutionalization or legal repercussions, uncertainty of where to properly access services, and challenges in scheduling were the most often cited reasons for not engaging in social service offerings (Sareen et al., 2007). Research such as this suggests the need for better understanding how and why residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods access social services, identifying how internal processes, thoughts, and perceptions may impact resident engagement.

The institutional mechanism of place also considers the power held by both residents and institutions of a given neighborhood. As noted by Cummins et al., (2007), a relational perspective considers the social power present across the services and infrastructure of a particular neighborhood. To understand how, why, and where residents access local services it is necessary to also consider the influence of power and politics. Individual actors, such as those holding positions of influence in government or leadership positions in large organizations have the power to shape, to some degree, where social service programs are located (Allard, 2009). Additionally, once residents are organized as a united front, they hold the power to shift policies which dictate what institutional resources are present in their neighborhoods.

The institutions present in a neighborhood have been found to have an impact on the wellbeing of youth (Anderson et al., 2018; Dill & Ozer, 2019; Ginwright, 2007; King et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2005; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; Small, 2006; Small & Gose, 2020). Local institutions provide important resources for marginalized youth including increased access to social support (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Ginwright, 2007), academic tutoring (Kirk & Day, 2011), employment opportunities (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2018), provision of safe housing (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015), mental health services and referrals to other local service providers (Small, 2006). The provision of these resources has been found to have an overall positive impact on the wellbeing of marginalized young people. For example, increased access to employment opportunities has been found to reduce violent behavior, increased academic achievement, stronger social skills, and increased community engagement (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2017). Tutoring through neighborhood institutions strengthens youth's academic achievement and more positive perceptions of self, and future college and career attainment (Philp & Gill, 2020). Participating in after-school programs through neighborhood

institutions has also been found to strengthen marginalized youth social capital by connection youth to adults that provide critical socioemotional support (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Dworkin et al., 2003) while the provision of mental health services has been found have reduce substance use and positively impact self-esteem (Fish et al., 2019; McLaughlin, 2000).

Methods in the Place-based Literature

Qualitative versus Quantitative Several authors note that quantitative methods often serve as the primary evaluative framework when attempting to capture the impact of place on life outcomes (Cummins et al., 2007; Leung et al., 2018; Macintyre et al., 2002; Small & Adler, 2019). Typically this work attempts to isolate single outcome and exposure variables, while statistically controlling for the effects of other covariates (Leung et al., 2018; Macintyre et al., 2002; Ohmer et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2017). However, such heavily quantitative methods may fail to capture the interaction and effects of multiple exposures on physical and mental health, or more generally youth wellbeing (Small & Adler, 2019; Thompson et al., 2017; Van Ham et al., 2012). From an applied perspective, this type of methodological challenge is concerning as the true effects of place disparities may be masked by artificially removing the effects of other important exposures. Additionally, the nuances of social interactions and cognitive processes are challenging to capture through quantitative data. In light of these concerns, a recent push across the place-based literature has centered on increasing the use of qualitative methods (Cummins et al., 2007; Leung et al., 2018).

Qualitative methods, in particular, can help researchers more deeply theorize about why and how places impact adolescent well-being, information which will undergird the formation of future interventions and policies. Additionally, as noted by Cummins et al., (2007) qualitative investigations can help researchers understand and identify *how* particular characteristics of specific places are associated with outcomes. For example, Diez-Roux (2001) notes that defining place through resident perceptions rather than geographic boundaries is particularly appropriate when investigating social interactions and relationships. Doing so can help illuminate influential social networks that otherwise would be missed through quantitative data collection methods. Thus, the integration of a growing body of qualitative research may in time, support the development of increasingly accurate causal models (Small & Feldman, 2012).

Participatory Research In addition to a shift towards more fully integrating qualitative methods, a call for increased participation of residents has also begun to emerge in place-centered research (Blumenthal, 2014; Leung et al., 2018). Historically, research has been driven and shaped by the use of positivist approaches, methods which rarely integrate the lived experiences of local residents. By omitting the narratives of the individuals most deeply impacted by a particular issue, developing relevant and culturally appropriate interventions is often challenging (Wang, 1999). Participation in research serves to empower and uplift the voices, interests, and needs of disenfranchised communities, those who have been pushed to the margins of mainstream society, and who's experiences and voices are often removed from policy and research development agendas (Blumenthal, 2014; Northridge & Freeman, 2011).

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to research which draws upon the engagement of those most impacted by the social "problem" understudy throughout the entire research process. The goals of CBPR include bringing about sustainable change within a community, strengthening a community's skills in addressing social issues, and developing novel

knowledge and solutions to complex social issues. In CBPR - residents, organizational representatives, government officials, and academics among others all play important roles, bringing various forms of expertise to the research team. Consequently, one participant's perspective is not valued above others.

CBPR is defined as a collaborative process, one which identifies the community as a valuable knowledge holder, possessing many strengths on which to build interventions from. CBPR is a dynamic and flexible process, rather than following a strict linear model. Research questions are not set by the researcher, but explored, formulated, and changed based on collaborative decision making with community members. In doing so, the "problem" understudy is identified and agreed upon by all members of the CBPR team. Interpretation of the resulting data is done collaboratively, as is the dissemination of the findings and the formulation and implementation of any resulting interventions, programs, and/or policies. Lastly, the focus of research may shift throughout the process, given new insights provided by any member of the research team. CBPR increases the value of research to the community by providing a shared power in the research process in addition to supporting sustainable social change.

A growing body of literature has defined the core principles of CBPR (Collins et al., 2018; Delafield et al., 2016; Israel et al., 1998; O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002). These include:

1. Recognizing community as a unit of identity
2. Building solutions to social issues on already present community strengths, assets, and resources
3. Collaboration and partnership are present in all phases of research
4. The integration of both knowledge and action will benefit all members of the research team
5. Co-learning and empowerment processes should seek to reduce social inequity
6. CBPR is cyclical rather than linear
7. Health and social issues are addressed from appositive and ecological perspective
8. All information gained from the research process should be shared with all project partners.

The value of CBPR to both increasing knowledge and generating solutions to social issues has been well documented. Importantly, CBPR presents as a sustainable method for conducting research which ultimately leads to long-lasting change. What makes CBPR sustainable? A review of the vast literature on this research approach, suggests that CBPR is sustainable across the following dimensions: the sustainability of project partnerships, the sustainability of the CBPR project outcome (i.e. reduction in an identified public health issue, as well as the sustainability of the knowledge and skills gained through CBPR engagement (Israel et al., 2006).

Sustaining partnerships Fundamental to the CBPR process is the principle of sustainability which is maintained through ongoing partnership even when the original research project has concluded (Israel et al., 2006; Mosavel et al., 2019). Israel et al. (2006) suggest that by collaboratively developing project goals and equitably sharing power can seek to enhance partnership sustainability from the onset of a CBPR project. Additionally, the authors note that continuing to expand and add members to the project team, being flexible and willing to change project goals if needed, and ensuring there is a clear benefit to the target community are all strategies that strengthen the sustainability of CBPR partnerships.

Sustaining knowledge and skills Regarding the sustainability of knowledge and skills gained through CBPR projects, a review of the literature suggests that in similar fashion to the continuing partnerships, developing collaborative principles is critically important, but aligning this concept with critical self-reflection (Wallerstein and Duran, 2010). By creating a space in which all members share their knowledge and expertise while also reflecting, helps partners identify their unique strengths and areas of targeted development. Additionally, CBPR brings together organizational resources in ways that were not available before, thereby creating access to skill development in novel ways for all participating members.

Sustaining funding and project outcomes More specifically, in addition to continued collaboration Bogart and Uyeda (2009) note that CBPR can result in research that would not have been feasible without community buy-in. As such, CBPR leads to programs which are finely tailored to specific local needs and supported for a longer period when compared to traditional approaches to intervention development, testing, and implementation. Turning the findings of a CBPR project into policy that is implemented, serves as a reliable method for ensuring that project outcomes are sustained. However, doing so typically requires a new staff-base and in turn, funding. While acquiring funding can be an on-going process, Israel et al. (2006) suggest that the partnering organizations rely on institutional partners to manage funding identification and obtainment, while the organizations implement the program or policy. In turn, all strengths of the partnering groups are utilized ensuring the sustainability of funding and project outcomes.

A recent study utilizing participatory approaches found that there were substantial gaps regarding residents needs and how policies targeting increased public health were being implemented. Specifically, age restrictions limited the use of public parks and reduced overall resident utilization, particularly among youth who relied on the space for recreation and play. Youth who were under the age of 16 were not allowed to access the park unless accompanied by an adult (Thompson et al., 2017). Moreover, the authors found that though a new bike path had been built to encourage physical exercise, the location near a busy highway led to residents feeling unsafe, and ultimately avoiding the area. These findings were only uncovered through engaging the local community. Secondary data analysis alone would not have revealed the interaction between the social and built environmental aspects of place, which were impacting the efficacy of a health intervention.

In a different approach, Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013) developed creative ways to share the findings of CBPR project with the local community. Resident and stakeholder engagement ensured that the study questions were important and related to current local issues. Sharing these findings with local media increased the impact of the study at a local level, thereby creating support for policy and programmatic changes that would help sustain the implementation of study recommendations.

Strengthening Science A review of the literature suggests that in opposition to deeply held positivist beliefs, CBPR in fact strengthens the process of scientific inquiry in research. Generally, CBPR has been observed as strengthening the overall rigor of a study. External validity is enhanced, The following memo will categorize the ways in which CBPR makes science better across the following domains: expanding the impact of research through partnership, strengthening ethics, and increasing the applied value of research

Rejecting assumptions that research is value neutral As noted by Wallerstein et al., 2018, one standard pillar of traditional positivist research is the assumption that research, when conducted using the scientific method is inherently value neutral. Thus, proponents of traditional methods argue that the outcome of a given study is in fact "true". However, all research, when conducted by individuals or people is in some way biased. The research questions formed by an investigator for example, reveal biases in how they view the world and what topics are to be considered important for investigation. In place-based work, this becomes even more troublesome, as researchers from outside a community identify what a particular community's main problems are, and what needs to be fixed for the community thrive. Alternatively, CBPR rejects the claim that researchers study things in the world objectively. Rather, the opinions and beliefs of all participants are valued equally, and integrated into the research question formulation, data collection process, and analysis phase.

Increasing external validity By utilizing and valuing a multi-dimensional array of perspectives, while finding aligned and cohesive meaning and agreement across all phases of research, CBPR increases the external validity of a given research project (Bogart and Uyeda, 2009). Rather than relying on a single perspective to drive research, commonality is found among a range of individuals, suggesting that the results will algin with the realities and logics of a larger group of people than traditional positivist methods. As such, CBPR strengthens the external validity of research, due to the diverse array of individuals who are engaged with a particular project across all stages and by rejecting the notion of "unbiased" methods.

Expanding the impact of research through partnership Using 2 case examples, Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013) note how CBPR enhances science. One case expanded the relevance of the study by developing creative ways to report back the sampling results to all interested parties, in essence increasing the reach of the research. The reach of the study was expanded through one of the partnering community-based organizations, by sharing the study findings with their stakeholders. From this perspective, CBPR can strengthen and deepen the ways findings from research are disseminated. In this case specifically, the team presented to the local planning commission and received media attention. Lastly, this case study expanded the reach of the study by using the developed networks and partnerships to present information to increasingly large audiences, including the United Nations, importantly including venues that were outside the scope of traditional academic outlets.

Strengthening ethics in research CBPR when implemented with fidelity, increases the ethics of research and empowers oppressed communities. Morello-Frosch, Brown and Brody (2015) identify three specific principles from the Belmont report, a guiding code of conduct in research ethics, to support the argument that CBPR in fact increases ethical practice in scientific investigation. These are: respect for persons, beneficence (maximizing benefits and reducing risk), and justice. CBPR ensures that respect for participants is maintained far beyond what traditional positivist studies utilize, by ensuring they engage voluntarily but also have power and say in how the research is conducted. This stands in stark contrast to traditional methods, in which the researcher determines how the investigation or evaluation will be implemented. CBPR alternatively respects participant interests and needs by allowing them to determine how their data will be analyzed and shared, in turn protecting them from unwanted narratives being shared with unwanted audiences.

Increasing the applied value of research Providing opportunity for low-income individuals to take an active role in shaping programs and interventions that have a direct impact on their lives is an empowering process. Additionally, participative methods can lead to collective community building across socioeconomic lines. By engaging residents, collective power is established which ignites change whether it be at a scale such as through policy enactment, or at a local level, such as cleaning up a vacant lot. Regardless of how, participatory methods help build connectedness and organization across the various institutional networks that shape places, communities, and youth development (Corburn, 2005). Participatory methods engage partnerships that are multidimensional, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of a specific place and the associated social processes, decision making, and emotions of residents to emerge (Akom et al., 2016; Salimi et al., 2012). Thus, the use of such approaches may help to better operationalize the mechanisms of place, leading to a reduction in negative developmental outcomes for urban youth of color. Taking an increasingly participatory approach in the investigation of the association between wellbeing and place also aligns with the relational perspective posited by Cummins et al., (2007). More concretely, that various contextual aspects of place can be identified and described in diverse ways, pulling from multiple perspectives. From a methodological standpoint, participatory practices, when paired with qualitative inquiry, may illuminate the "black boxes" of places, or latent yet influential processes that are missed when using positivist quantitative methods alone.

It should be noted that I do not argue for the elimination of all traditional positivist and quantitative methods in the study of place and youth wellbeing. Rather, as supported in the literature, increasingly multidisciplinary understanding how place mechanisms interact across different dimensions and domains should be developed (Small & Adler, 2019; Thompson et al., 2017). Doing so will enable scholars to better understand how these important but hidden mechanisms embedded in place including resident perceptions, cultural norms, and power dynamics may shape decisions regarding intervention design and implementation strategies (Kent & Thompson, 2014; Van Ham et al., 2012). Integrating holistic investigatory designs into the mainstream agenda of place-based researchers aligns with the complexity of place and associated mechanistic processes (Thompson et al., 2017). Increasing both the breadth and nuance of investigation into place and development will allow researchers to better design programs and evaluations which address the many aspects of place that impact youth life outcomes.

Dissertation Overview

In conducting this dissertation I drew on participatory approaches. As described by Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013) participatory research occurs on a continuum, moving from little to no power-sharing between researchers and participant (what the authors define as "helicopter science") to full and equitable power sharing in full-engaged community-based participatory research. This dissertation fell close to the middle of this spectrum. The figure below is drawn from Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013), with the red circle indicating the range of community engagement that was drawn from in this study.

Figure 1. Range of participation research – reprinted from Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013)

Context influences study design and research questions

Participation in dissemination of results

Partners in research, protocol design, fundraising, data ownership

"Helicopter Science"

Level of Community Engagement

CBPR

No influence on research design

Opinions actively solicited through pre & post data collection

Leverages study results & partnerships to promote social change

From Study Participant…

…to Research Partner

Prior to starting this dissertation, I knew I wanted to unpack the role of local institutions in relation to youth wellbeing. However, I was unsure as to what type of institutions I should focus on. Thus, I decided to use local knowledge and lived experience to guide my research focus. I decided to focus on East Oakland for my study context, as my research would be focused on youth residing in places experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. In 2020 I conducted a pilot study during which I asked East Oakland youth broadly, what neighborhood institutions had positive impacts in their lives. This project led to the identification of schools and youth-serving organizations as being key institutions that youth experiencing concentrated disadvantage engaged for a variety of reasons relating to development. Conducting the pilot strengthened my relationships with East Oakland youth-serving organizations and the Oakland Unified School District, as I sought input into the design and focus of my nascent research. The findings from this pilot informed my recruitment strategies for my larger dissertation project and the integration of participatory approaches to analysis. In sum, youth voice informed and shaped the research questions of my dissertation, directed one subset of my analysis relating to wellbeing, and provided expert knowledge in member check interviews to strengthen the validity of my overall findings. From the onset of this project, youth serving organization staff provided invaluable input on my research design, recruitment strategies, incentive amounts, feedback on my interview and focus group guides, and insight into how the findings of this work could support their organizations. Below a brief description of each youth serving organization is provided:

1. *East Oakland Youth Development Center (EOYDC):* As described by the organization, East Oakland Youth Development lies in the heart of East Oakland, in one of the highest stress police catchment areas of the greater Oakland geography. The mission of the East Oakland Youth Development Center is to provide low-income, ethnic and racially diverse youth aged 5 – 24 opportunities to strengthen their employment and educational development. In doing so the organization provides strong mentorship to participants

through multiple programs focused on art, wellness, career development, and education. In 2021 the organization provided job training to 150 youth totaling more than $300,000 in compensation with an annual operating budget over $3 million.

Figure 1. Image from EOYDC Programming

2. *Lao Family Community Development:* Lao Family is a multi-site organization, with locations in Oakland, San Pablo, and Sacramento. The mission of the organization is to provide low-income and refugee populations support in achieving self-sufficiency. To achieve this mission, Lao Family Community Development focuses on employment preparation, family support services, and real estate capacity building. The largest programming area is employment preparation and includes specialized programing for out-of-school youth. As of 2021, the organization operated with an annual budget exceeding 10 million dollars.

Figure 2. Image from Lao Family Community Development Programming

3. *Rising Sun Center for Opportunity:* Rising Sun, a social enterprise with offices in Oakland and Stockton, is focused on strengthening career pathways for women, people of

color, and formerly incarcerated individuals. The mission of the organization is to increase access to jobs that build economic equity and contribute to climate resilience. Rising Sun Center for Opportunity offers apprenticeship opportunities for women seeking to enter union construction trades. Additionally, the organization engages low-income youth aged 15-24 by providing paid work training and experience as energy conservation specialists. In 2021, 19 youth participated in the Climate Careers program. As of 2021, the organization had an annual operating budget of approximately $3 million dollars.

Figure 3. Image from Rising Sun Center for Opportunity Programming

4. *Unity Council:* The mission of the Unity Council is to provide holistic support to assist individuals and families by addressing economic, social, and neighborhood challenges. The organization serves approximately 12,000 individuals each year, with a focus on the Latinx population in Oakland. To achieve their mission, Unity Council provides over 11 programs offering children and family services, workforce development, Latinx youth development, and business improvement. The organization provides in-school mentoring programs for Latinx youth with the goal of strengthening health outcomes and positive life outcomes. This offering has to date, served over 250 youth and is an is an expansion of the nationally recognized Latino Men and Boys program. As of 2020, the Unity Council operated with a budget exceeding $15 million dollars annually.

Figure 4. Picture of the Emblem for the Latino Men and Boys Program at the Unity Council

Throughout the recruitment and data collection process, I regularly connected with school and youth serving organization staff who provided input on my approach and progress. The findings from my dissertation will be shared in brief reports for the use of the four participating youth-serving organizations. I have also offered them full access to the de-identified study data, should it support their programming in any way. Lastly, I have offered co-authorship to all of the participants as I take the next steps in turning my dissertation findings into publishable works. Requirements for authorship include that the participants review the manuscripts prior to journal submission and provide feedback on any changes they would like to see included. All participants will be asked prior to journal submission if they would like to serve as a co-author on the paper.

This dissertation answered the following research questions:

1) What is the location of East Oakland?
2) What is the locale of East Oakland?
3) What is the sense of place of East Oakland?
4) Within the context of relational systems theory, how do youth perceive the influence of schools and youth-serving organizations on their subjective well-being?
    4a) How do the relational dynamics within these systems contribute to positive or negative experiences for youth?
5)Within the context of relational systems theory, what is the impact of neoliberal ideologies on the experiences of youth within schools and youth-serving organizations?
    5a) How do these ideologies influence the relational interactions within these systems and impact the wellbeing of youth?
6) How do marginalized urban youth define wellbeing?
7) How do marginalized youth’s definitions of wellbeing compare to the EPOCH measure?

In doing so, this dissertation addressed several concerns emerging from the participatory, youth well-being and place-based literatures: 1) grappling with how to conceptualize place in ways that expand beyond geography along, 2) investigating the role of local institutions in the development of youth of color, and 3) problematizing ubiquitously applied measures of well-being that do not account for the complex needs of marginalized youth residing in urban spaces. Stated differently,

the findings in this dissertation occur at the nexus of place, race and wellbeing, and illuminates the ways these three factors contribute to the lived experience of marginalized youth development.

I first begin with a descriptive analysis of East Oakland. Using Agnew's (1987) definition of place as location, locale, and sense of place I engage mixed methods using semi-structured interviews and participatory mapping to define this unique area of the broader Oakland context. To my knowledge, no empirical work on the geography of East Oakland has attempted to differentiate East Oakland from the rest of the city, though it is commonly understood as a "place" that stands in stark contrast to rest of the Bay area. Second, I focus on the institutional mechanism of place. Through exploratory qualitative methods I assess how urban youth of color experience youth serving organization and school contexts in relation to subjective wellbeing. In doing so, I identify both positive and negative experiences across the micro, mezzo, and macro level systems that cumulatively influence youth wellbeing. Third, I problematize subjective psychological wellbeing as being a construct that is increasingly being applied as a measure of youth health. In doing so, I engage multi-modal, community-engaged qualitative methods through interviews and focus groups to understand how marginalized youth of color define well-being. In collaboration with youth participants, we also interrogate the EPOCH measure of wellbeing, a common conceptualization of this facet of youth development that is being increasingly integrated into large scale, longitudinal assessments of urban youth health.

Paper 1: What is East Oakland? A mixed methods approach to conceptualizing "place" with youth

Introduction

Ask locals of the Bay Area, CA about East Oakland and you will certainly learn one thing. East Oakland is notorious. World famous music artists such as Too $hort, E-40, and the Hieroglyphics cite East Oakland in their lyrics, proudly representing this well-recognized area of the broader City of Oakland context. Thus, as I embarked on my dissertation journey, one which centered on understanding how youth in East Oakland interact with neighborhood institutions, I never thought answering the question: What is East Oakland?, would become one of the major contributions.

As I began formulating my data collection strategy I decided to first determine the geographic boundaries of East Oakland, as this information would greatly inform my recruitment strategy and eligibility requirements. If I identified where East Oakland was I could then recruit in ways that ensured my sample would to the greatest extent possible, reflect the East Oakland youth population. I started an online search for city-designated shape files that provided a geographic understanding of where East Oakland was located, a process which proved to be less than fruitful. I was unable to locate any municipal information on what the geographic boundaries are for East Oakland. Taking a different approach I decided to search for demographic statistics for East Oakland to perhaps learn what geographic boundaries those who had come before me had decided constituted this subset of the greater Oakland context. It made sense to me that some sort of physical definition would be needed to aggregate people and their characteristics. After reviewing multiple resources including blogs, empirical papers published on research conducted in East Oakland, and newspaper and magazine articles, I realized that there was no agreement on where the boundaries of East Oakland stood. This was substantiated by a 2018 news article that appeared in my online search. The article titled: "Hey Area: Where is East Oakland? It's More Than Geography", written by Darden an East Oakland native, uplifts the narrative that little agreement exists on where many of the boundaries of East Oakland are located. There is general consensus that the southernmost border is where San Leandro begins, but there is debate as to where the northern boundaries lie. Furthermore, Darden notes that there is no City designation for East Oakland, even when grappling with decisions for where to target community development grants.

I was surprised to learn that there was no government defined boundary for East Oakland. Searching through City of Oakland Planning Commission publicly available files I hoped to find some geospatial definition of East Oakland, perhaps a map of "East Oakland" neighborhoods. However, my search yielded nothing. I then accessed the University of California, D-Lab data repository to find what seemed to be my most promising lead, a shape file titled "East Oakland." Upon closer inspection, it seemed that this boundary had been created by the University of Southern California and the California Endowment in partnership with East Oakland residents during a 2012 project focused on local organizing. At first this seemed sufficient for my needs, but upon closer inspection I realized there was no information about the methods used to generate this boundary. I engaged my dissertation community partners I was asked repeatedly, how are you defining East Oakland? Acknowledging my status as an outsider to the East Oakland community as well as the limited reliability of a single shape file found in the virtual

basement of a data repository, I decided to rely on local knowledge, and develop a youth-defined description of East Oakland.

This paper presents the findings from a mixed methods analysis that responds to the following research questions: 1) What is the youth-defined location of East Oakland? 2) What is the youth defined locale of East Oakland? and 3) What is the youth defined sense of place of East Oakland? Participatory geographic information system (PGIS) mapping was implemented with a subset of the study sample to develop a geographic definition of East Oakland, while data drawn from semi-structured interviews provide a contextualized, qualitative depiction of this unique and vibrant area of the larger Oakland context. The findings from this paper fill a gap in both the empirical and general knowledge of place in several ways. First, youth comprised the study sample, an often overlooked population in participatory mapping projects. Second, this is the first study to empirically develop a resident-driven definition of East Oakland. The findings of this study will prove useful to city planners, service providers, and researchers interested in understanding how geography and people cumulatively interact, giving rise to unique "places".

Literature Review

Defining and conceptualizing place: Place is an intrinsic aspect of life, a concept which is portrayed across a vast interdisciplinary literature. Places impact and shape life experiences, and are defined differently for different people, based on their interests and lived experiences. For example, scholarship spanning public health, social work, education, sociology and city planning has well established that where one lives has notable implications on development including heath, education, and (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Coulton et al., 2016; Diez Roux, 2004; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). However, places are also shaped by the people who live there, and policies instituted by governments. Gordon (2022) identified the ways violent and targeted policing practices further solidify the racial segregation of neighborhoods in urban areas, practices which were guided through governmental policy. Additionally, the allocation of economic resources across places plays a key role in how places are shaped and characterized. Smith (1986) describes the suburbanization of business and production facilities as representing the shifting of social and economic capital across the geographic context; a process that led to the reorganization and recharacterization of services operating in urban centers. Place is a complex construct, as such determinations for how to best define "place" remain an unclear and contested area of empirical inquiry (Agnew, 1987, Cummins, 2007, Nicotera, 2008, Pratt et al., 2020). Definitions of what constitute "place" range from concrete to abstract.

Geographic approaches: Commonly, "place" is measured geographically, and defined as being a discrete geographic space with clear boundaries (Bernard et al., 2007; Cozier, 2017; Cummins et al., 2007; Petteway et al., 2019; Schaefer-McDaniel et al., 2010). Often researchers rely on neatly packaged census measures to geographically bound the "place" of interest (Bernard et al., 2007; Coulton, 2012; Diez-Roux, 2001a; Foster & Hipp, 2011; Schaefer-McDaniel et al., 2010). In turn, individuals are aggregated within these geographic spaces and outcomes of interest are calculated (Foster & Hipp, 2011). Though a cost effective method for assessing place-based associations, relying on geography alone to conceptualize place is not without critique.

Defining a specific "place" based solely on geography is problematic from the standpoint

of understanding the impact of place on social processes (Sampson et al., 2002). For example, by rigidly limiting the geographic area of place, researchers and planners fail to capture the movement of residents in and out of different spatial areas throughout their daily travels. In describing urban neighborhoods, a common spatial unit in the social sciences literature, Coulton (2012) supports this argument by stating:

> *Conceptually, neighborhoods are not merely territory, but social constructions named and bounded differently by numerous and diverse individuals. Individuals have agency regarding neighborhoods and, when they move through their surroundings, they carve their own activity space that does not necessarily map onto arbitrary geographic boundaries. Neighborhood boundaries are not static but often dynamic and contested, and social interaction shapes the meaning of places for individuals and groups. Residents can embrace some of the surrounding space and disavow other parts of it, making it more or less relevant to their everyday lives.*

Alternatively, several authors have suggested using increasingly flexible approaches to geographically representing place. For example, Cummins et al., (2007) argues that place can be thought of as a network of nodes, rather than single geographic areas, and that definitions of spatial boundaries should be considered as malleable rather than rigid and fixed. One approach taken to address this critique of traditional methods used to define places, comes from the field of criminology in which Hipp and Boessen (2013) suggest that residents are part of many intersecting geographies considering they often travel outside of their primary neighborhood for employment or accessing other critical resources. Thus, the authors suggest that "fuzzy", overlapping boundary definitions would generate a more accurate measure of neighborhood. The authors construct what they term "egohoods", whereby each city block is placed in the center of a circle. The overlapping areas of each of these circles, depict the "fuzzy" boundaries of any given neighborhood. This approach illuminates the important social ties that are maintained at the block level, with related blocks located within the same zone but at a farther distance from the center of an egohood, representing weaker social relationships. At a conceptual level, this definition of place aligns with one component of Cummins et al., (2007) "relational" view of place, which argues that places are defined through social relationships and networks rather than physical space alone.

Adding to the debate on how to best conceptualize place, scholars have suggested that people living within close geographic proximity to one another may not hold the same perceptions of a place (Coulton, 2012; Nicotera, 2008). Identity and position within the surrounding social hierarchy including age, race, class, gender, and religious beliefs shape how an individual assesses, understands, and defines a particular place (Burton et al., 1997; Campbell et al., 2009; Coulton, 2012; Krysan, 2002; Sampson et al., 1997). Thus, a diverse literature has suggested that resident knowledge of places, may produce more valid and reliable definitions of boundaries than do census measures (Coulton et al., 2001). Emerging from the participatory mapping literature has been an increased focus on how residents perceive and define their neighborhoods (Denwood et al., 2022). It is important to note that though participatory mapping techniques integrate diverse perspectives on how to define a place, they are still geographically bounded and do not consider the social connectedness or the relationship aspects of spaces.

Social approaches: Complicating the conceptualization of place, in addition to identifying spatial boundaries researchers also define place through the people and residents of a particular area (Macintyre et al., 2002). The idea of place being more than geography alone is perhaps best uplifted in one of the most prominent and widely accepted definitions of place put forth by John Agnew (1987) in his now classic text *Place and Politics*.

Agnew (1987) argues that place should be considered across multiple dimensions defined as: *location*, *locale* and *sense of place*. Location is understood as the specific point in space that a place exists (i.e. latitude and longitude coordinates). Locale includes components of the social and built environment and is described as the material location in which people engage necessary activities throughout their lives. Cresswell (2014) articulates further, that locale is “the material setting for social relations – the actual shape of the place within which people conduct their lives...” Sense of place becomes even more abstract, and considers the meaning, value, and characteristics people assign to a location and locale (Agnew, 1987; Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Cresswell, 2004). Sense of place describes the emotional attachment that is expressed by people, which can also translate to a loss of place when cultures and norms of a given place change (Cresswell, 2004).

Agnew’s (1987) conceptualization of place has had tremendous impacts on how scholars grapple with the dilemma of defining place. For example, Chaskin (1997) explores place as being primarily residential spaces wherein people share a common lived experience. The author notes that the social interactions of place are an important defining feature, rather than the geographic boundaries alone. Cozier (2017) further defines place as including compositional characteristics of the resident population including race, income, sexual orientation, and gender; while Cummins et al., (2007) encourages place-based scholarship to consider more than simply demographic and homogenous aspects of the social fabric of places. For example, Macintyre, Ellaway, and Cummins (2002) suggest that other important social components of place including shared identities, culture, and social norms play a significant role in the observed health outcomes of local residents.

Aside from developing novel spatial and statistical analyses, researchers have begun to implement surveys and in-depth interviews to develop a deeper understanding of how residents interact with and perceive the surrounding environment (Engstrom et al., 2013; Hipp & Boessen, 2013; Nicotera, 2008; Sampson et al., 2002). A small number of studies have begun to conceptualize place through novel mixed methods approaches (Nicotera, 2008; Pratt et al., 2020). The value of combing both qualitative and quantitative approaches aligns with the empirical desire to conceptualize place geographically and socially. Advancements in geographical information systems provide place-based scholars increasingly diverse tools to geographically assess place, while qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and ethnography provides a unique lens through which the social realities of places can be observed. As noted by Leventhal Brooks-Gunn (year), there is an existing gap in the place-based literature regarding mixed methods analyses.

Participatory GIS: Geographical information systems (GIS) analyze spatial data to identify the organization and patterning of a wide-range of topics including health provision or lack of services. Over the past few decades the use of geographical information systems (GIS) has grown substantially with an increased focus on integrating participation from residents of the places being studied (Denwood et al., 2022; Fagerholm et al., 2021; McLafferty, 2003).

Participatory GIS is an approach to using GIS tools and information in partnership with individuals and groups who hold expert local knowledge of a particular place (Denwood et al., 2022; Dunn, 2007; Fagerholm et al., 2021). Projects which engage PGIS are guided by specific issues or challenges experienced in a place, and uplift the power of community perspective in creation of the project data (Dunn, 2007). As stated by Dunn (2007):

> *PGIS involves local communities in the creation of information to be fed into the GIS and subsequently used in spatial decision- making which affects them.*

In doing so, PGIS is a spatial analyses method which seeks to not only produce novel geographic insights, but also empowers the community from which data are drawn. Resident perspectives and lived experiences are uplifted and valued throughout the development and construction of data, which in-turn drive policy analyses and decisions (Elwood, 2006).

Youth Perceptions and Place: Youth experience and understand places in different ways than do their adult counterparts (Pratt et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been observed that the perceptions youth hold of their environment, have salient impacts on developmental outcomes such as mental health (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). As such, it is critical for place-based scholars to assess the conceptualization of place from the perspectives of youth. However, nearly all approaches to measuring and defining places are focused on adult participants, though much place-based research investigating the impact of place is centered on adolescent and child development (Denwood et al., 2022; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In a review of participatory mapping papers and Denwood et al., (2002) found that youth and children were several of the least commonly engaged resident population subgroups. Thus, there exists a gap in the current literature to assess how youth interact, define, and perceive "place", particularly regarding the use of mixed methods (Pratt et al., 2020).

Methods

This descriptive mixed methods study used data drawn from semi-structured interviews with 29 youth and maps created by 17 of these individuals, to develop a multifaceted definition of East Oakland, CA. The analysis of these multiple forms of data illustrates how both geospatial and qualitative data can be used to define "place" in relational ways.

Recruitment Sites

Youth participants were recruited through a purposive sample from 4 East Oakland youth-serving organizations. Each organization focused on serving low-income youth, provided year-round and summer employment programming, and targeted specific racial/ethnic groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. East Oakland Youth-serving Orgs and Race/ethnicity Focus

Name of Organization	*Race/Ethnicity Focus*
East Oakland Youth Development Center	Black/African American
Lao Family Community Development	Asian
Rising Sun	Mixed
Unity Council	Latinx

Relationship Building with Sites
During the planning of this study, I met regularly with staff at each organization who provided invaluable insight regarding the study design, recruitment plan, incentive amounts, and the applicability of study findings to their organizations. Eligibility constraints required that youth spoke English as well as have access to a Wi-Fi and a device that could connect to Zoom.[2] Additionally, eligible youth needed to be between the ages of 14-20 and living in one of 6 East Oakland zip codes identified by the youth-serving organizations. Each youth received a $35 gift card for completing an interview. Recruitment began in June 2022 after the start of the youth-serving organizations summer programs and continued through the start of Oakland United School District 2022-2023 academic year.

Interview Guide
An interview guide was developed and approved by the University of California, Berkeley Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). Feedback from the youth-serving organization partners and overarching research questions shaped the topics and patterning of questions. The interview guide questions focused on the participant's descriptions of their East Oakland neighborhood, their perceptions of wellbeing, and their perceptions of how school and youth-serving organization engagement impacted their lives either positively or negatively. The youth that participated in the mapping were asked prior to the rest of the interview to identify on a Google map the boundaries of East Oakland.

Recruitment
Recruitment occurred in multiple ways. From mid-June through August I pitched the project at 7 orientation sessions for new summer job program participants, attended a career fair at one organization and setup a booth providing information on the project to youth and other youth organizations that had interest in participating, presented at 4 professional development sessions in schools and youth organizations, and my recruitment materials were also published on one youth organization's social media sites. Eligible youth were also referred to me directly by program staff. Prior to participation consent, assessment, and parent/guardian permission was obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity.

Of the 29 youth who were interviewed, 17 participated in the mapping component. The 12 others indicated that they did not want to complete this aspect of the project, citing reasons such as being "bad with geography" and "not knowing how to read maps". Participation was voluntary, and youth were allowed to refrain from participating in any aspect of the project.

Data Collection
Both the mapping and interviews took place virtually through Zoom due to the health restrictions of COVID-19. During each mapping session, I would open a map of Oakland on Google My Maps. Participants would then tell me where to draw the boundaries of East Oakland. If youth were unsure of where to place a boundary I would probe by asking youth to identify landmarks. Each map was downloaded as a .csv file. The .csv files were then uploaded and merged into a single data frame using Python.

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[2] All of the 4 participating youth-serving organizations stated that if youth were eligible and wanted to participate but experienced barriers to access, they would be able to provide the space and technology for them to engage the project onsite.

Quantitative Mapping Analysis

A spatial average was calculated using the collected geospatial data to generate a youth-driven definition of East Oakland. Doing so provided an approach to defining East Oakland that weighted each participants perspective equally, thereby democratizing the analyses process within the sample. Once all shapefiles had been mapped using a uniformly applied standardized coordinate system the data were rasterized. Rasterization is the process of transforming geospatial vector data to raster types (Díaz-Varela et al., 2010). The purpose of this process is that once transformed, computational and algebraic procedures can be conducted within each cell of a raster, including spatial statistics and averaging (Díaz-Varela et al., 2010). For this analysis, the coordinate reference system (CRS) '4326' was used to convert the study data to raster form. This CRS was selected as it is commonly used in the United States and by organizations that provide GIS data (NCEAS, 2013). The unit of measurement for the raster was degree with a resolution of 1 x 1.

Following the rasterization of the shapefiles, a spatial union was then conducted between all layers. Within each cell of the raster the number of layers were counted, and the maximum shape values, minimum shape values, and overall spatial average were calculated. A normal distribution of cell layer density values was then computed. Cells which contained values that fell above or below 2 standard deviations from the overall mean were dropped from the rasterized image. Therefore, the final image only contained cells that represented 95% agreement across all shapefiles based on participant definitions of East Oakland.

To make this resident defined boundary useful for estimating East Oakland demographics, the shape file was then projected over a census block group layer. Block groups are subdivisions of census tracts comprised of blocks, with each census tract containing at minimum once block group. To relation of block groups to census tracts is important to note, as block groups never cross state or county limits, and census tracts typically follow visible and identifiable features such as municipal boundaries (Logan, 2018). Block groups contain populations ranging from 600 to 3,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a). All block groups included in the spatially averaged demarcated area were included to calculate population statistics for East Oakland. Using block groups allowed a more refined geographic representation of East Oakland when compared to using census tracts.

Demographics were calculated using data drawn from both the Decennial 2020 census and the 5-year American Community Survey. The Decennial Census data are collected with more rigor than ACS surveys (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). However, only information for gender/sex and race (not including Hispanic identity) were available at the block group level. Thus, ACS 5 year estimates were used in the calculations for Hispanic identity, poverty, and foreign born. This range of data (5 year) was selected due to the increased statistical reliability of multiyear estimates when compared to single year information (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022)

Qualitative Interview Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis methods were engaged in this study. The purpose of this analytic approach is to identify similar experiences and perspectives across different cases (i.e., participant narratives) regarding the ways East Oakland youth defined this area of the city (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were first transcribed manually from audio files, the transcripts were cleaned for readability and clarity, while also developing analytic memos to record the emerging themes. An initial codebook was developed and further refined to include parent and

child code hierarchies with a focus on East Oakland defined by locale and sense of place. The initial boundaries of the codes relied on the empirical operationalization of local and sense of place as presented by Agnew (1987) which were further described in Butler and Sinclair (2020). The codes were then applied to all transcripts using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. A second researcher reviewed the codebook and completed a round of coding among 17 of the transcripts. Alignment and misalignment between the multiple coders was assessed. The codes were then revised and reapplied to all transcripts. Themes were formulated undergirded by the study research questions and Agnew's (1987) conceptualization of place. The use of two coders sought to reduce bias in the analysis process.

Findings

Demographics The calculated demographics of East Oakland are presented in Table 2 and are contrasted with demographics pulled from Rosen et al., (2022), demographics for the study sample are presented in Table 3, and the demographics of the mapping sample are provided in Table 4.

Table 2. East Oakland Population Demographics vs Rosen et al., (2022)

	Current Study N (%)	Rosen et al., (2022) n (%)
Total population	215,197 (100)	88,528
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	48,864 (23)	28,614 (27)
Asian and Pacific Islander	26,960 (12)	10, 084 (17)
Latinx	93,229 (43)	41,165 (54)
White	25,345 (12)	6,198 (26)
Mixed/Other	22,551 (10)	N/A
Sex by Age		
Male (14-20)	8,429 (4)	N/A
Female (14-20)	8,980 (4)	N/A
Poverty Measures		
Family below poverty	37,833 (18)	n/a (27)
Individual below poverty	35,758 (11)	N/A
Female-headed households	30,483	N/A
Foreign Born	61,823 (29)	N/A

Table 3. Sample Demographics (n = 29)

Age Ranges	n (%)
14-15	7 (24%)
16-17	12 (41%)
18-20	10 (35%)
Race/Ethnicities	
African American/Black	12 (41%)
Asian	6 (21%)
Latinx	8 (28%)
Mixed	3 (10%)
Gender	
Female	13 (45%)
Male	14 (48%)
Nonbinary	2 (7%)
Housing Insecure	1 (3%)

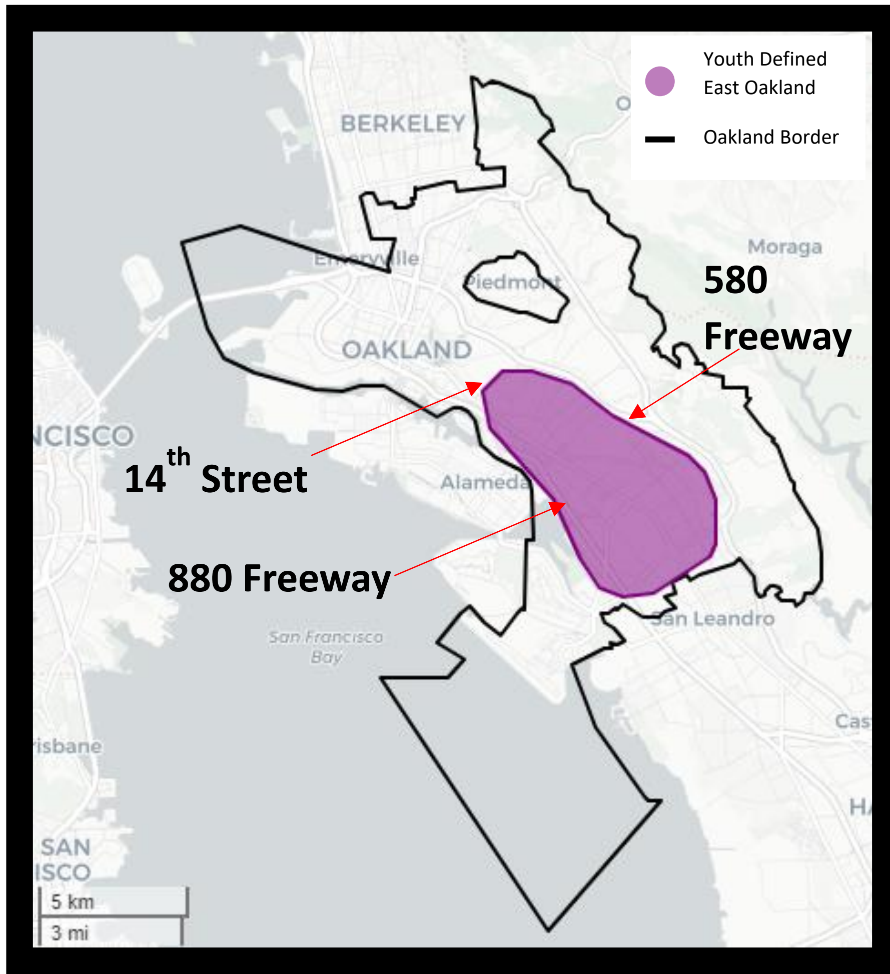
Table 4. Mapping Sample Demographics (n = 17)

Age Ranges	n (%)
14-15	3 (18)
16-17	8 (47)
18-20	6 (35)
Race/Ethnicities	
African American/Black	10 (59)
Asian	3 (17)
Latinx	2 (12)
Mixed	2 (12)
Gender	
Female	11 (65)
Male	6 (35)
Nonbinary	0 (0)
Housing Insecure	1 (6)

The geographic findings of this study are organized by the three components of Agnew's (1987) conceptualization of place: location, locale, and sense of place.

Location The location of place refers to the actual area in space that a place occupies. The findings of this study suggest that East Oakland youth identify East Oakland as being 12.5 square miles in area, bounded by 14th Avenue on the east and 106th St on the west. The southern border follows the 880 freeway and runs along the San Francisco Bay waterfront to the border of San Leandro. On the Northside, East Oakland is bounded by the 580 freeway. An image of the spatially averaged boundary of East Oakland can be seen in Figure 1 below.

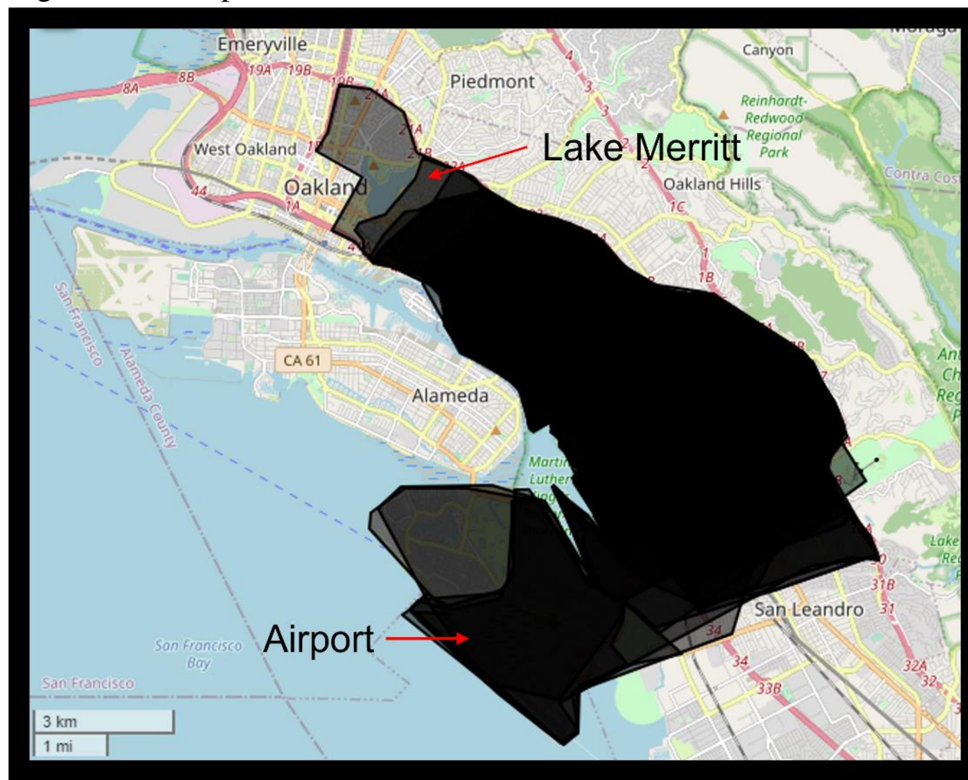
Figure 1. Averaged Youth Defined Boundary of East Oakland



Within East Oakland, there were many youth described their neighborhood as being smaller than this subsection of the greater Oakland context. These smaller areas within East Oakland were often defined by the street numbers, with youth referring to their neighborhood as "the dubs" (referring to streets numbers in the 20's) or "80's."

Though a single geographic location of East Oakland was calculated based on youth resident knowledge, it is important to note that there was variability in the ways participants defined this unique area of the Oakland context as displayed in Figure 2 below. Notable differences in their maps included the inclusion or exclusion of the area surrounding the Oakland airport, as well as Lake Merritt, a well-known landmark in the City of Oakland.

Figure 2. Overlap of Youth Definitions of East Oakland



The ways in which youth included and excluded specific areas were often based on aspects of the locale, or the physical structures of place. For example, H.V. a Black female, identified some boundaries of East Oakland by the density of building structures. During our interview, when asked why she didn't include some of the northeast areas of Oakland in her definition she stated:

> *I don't really consider that [area] East Oakland because it's on the outskirts [of the city] and it's not really surrounding anything and it's just mostly trees and stuff.* – H.V.

Other youth described the boundaries of East Oakland based on the conditions of the buildings. Areas that had more affluent homes and a surplus of resources were often considered outside of East Oakland. When asked why parts of the Oakland Hills were not included in East Oakland, I.C.T., a 17 year old mixed female stated: "Its super affluent and definitely not East Oakland. It's its own rich neighborhood." M.I., an 18 year old Black male shared a similar approach to determining the boundaries of East Oakland. During his interview, while debating whether or not to include a particular school within or outside his borders he said: "After 14th Street I believe that would be a better cut-off. Because once you get towards there, that's where everything starts to get a bit nicer".

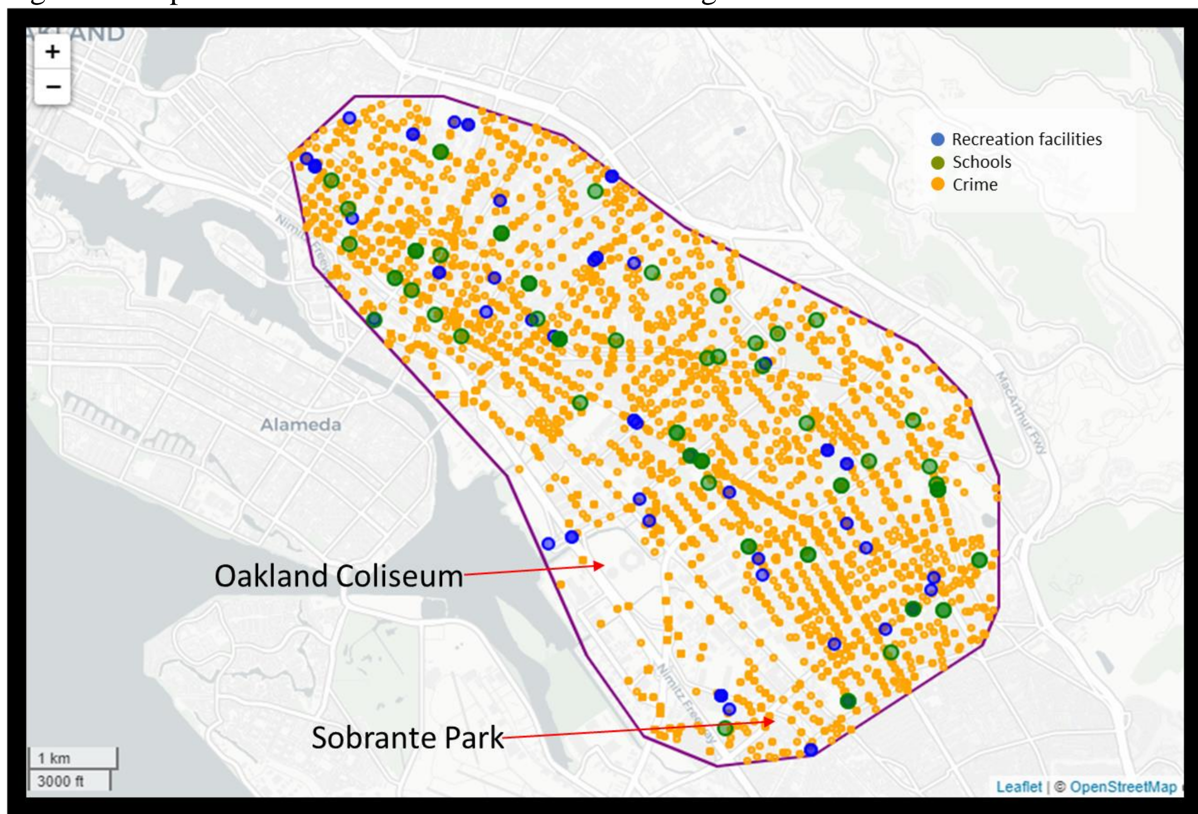
Specific landmarks and municipal boundaries were also used by the youth in their definitions of the location of East Oakland. Most notable was the boundary between the cities of Oakland and San Leandro. During her interview, S.R. a 17 year old Latinx female mused over

where to place the western most border and said “I think it [East Oakland] ends in the 100s because that’s the barrier between Oakland and San Leandro.”

Locale Agnew (1987) and Cresswell (2011) define the locale of a place as the material items that constitute a location, or the actual buildings and infrastructure that comprise a place, the way a place looks. To get a geospatial sense of the youth-defined East Oakland locale, data were pulled from the City of Oakland open data website that depicted crime reports for the past 90 days (as of June 1, 2023), school locations, and recreational facilities. These data are depicted in Figure 3 below.

Crime appeared to be evenly distributed across East Oakland, except for the area around the Oakland Coliseum, home to the Oakland A’s baseball team. The most often reported crime was vehicle theft. Regarding resources, there were 62 recreation facilities, with the most common being parks (50%), followed by recreation centers (16%). Other types of facilities included community gardens, tennis courts and pools. No hospitals were located within the youth defined boundary of East Oakland. Regarding schools, there were 70 in total. Of these 44% were elementary schools, 16% were middle schools, 17% were high schools, and 23% were charter schools.

Figure 3. Map of East Oakland Resources and Challenges



The findings also illuminated the interconnectedness of location and locale. At times, the ways youth defined the geographic boundaries of East Oakland were shaped by physical landmarks. This is illuminated by H.V. as we discussed where East Oakland started and ended. She identifies sports complexes, parks, churches, and public transportation lines as landmarks.

Interviewer: Can you describe for me where are the boundaries of East Oakland?

H.V.: Let me think, well, if you're coming from, I say like, San Leandro and maybe farther, when you get off the freeway - where is that freeway at? I think it's either 580 or 880, you're going to see that Coliseum. To me, I think that's a personal landmark of where Oakland starts. I know that is probably deep East Oakland, it is not deep, deep, but it's there. You have the Oracle Arena, then you have - it's like a regional park, right over there and then you keep going down, it's BART, then, you pass by a church. It's a little community but when you get deeper that's like in the 80s, 60s area.

Qualitatively, youth described different aspects of the East Oakland locale including housing and physical structure conditions. M.L., a 17 year old Black female who would be attending Howard University in the fall discussed the housing and other aspects of the physical resources in her East Oakland neighborhood "I think most of them [houses] are fairly new as in like the last 10-15 years…there's a park, streets are nicely paved. M.L. went on to describe how the locale in her neighborhood was different than the rest of the East Oakland area

I live in my own kind of community, and then, there's like, the actual streets of East Oakland, and the streets are kind of like, they're not taking care of by the city, the people in the community don't take care of them, people just throw trash everywhere. – M.L.

Other youth shared their perspectives on the most common housing structures in East Oakland. S.V. a 17 year old bi-racial female with dreams of traveling abroad to Japan someday stated: "We are in a city where we have like a lot of condos. You have a lot of apartment buildings."

As observed in Milan's quote above, when describing the physical structure and resources of East Oakland, youth also identified areas in need of improvement, including aspects of the physical infrastructure and a lack of healthy food outlets and places to engage in recreational activities. The maintenance of streets was described as a notable characteristic of East Oakland. A.V. a Chinese American female in her first year of college stated: "There's a lot of potholes or just like a lot of problems with that" while S.O. a 20 year old Hispanic male wearing black rimmed glasses mentioned: "Sometimes the streets aren't very clean." Another youth described in detail additional challenges they observed with the transportation infrastructure of East Oakland:

Our streets are messed up… The bus runs in the middle of the street now because AC Transit paid $300 million to the city to be able to do this, and they ruined the streets because now people can barely get around, it takes super long to get anywhere, and they cut all the lanes down, and now there's traffic and all that. – S.D., 17 year old Black male

Lack of access to healthy food was noted by several participants as a reality of the East Oakland locale. Youth described liquor stores as being a common business through which residents were forced to access a limited array of healthy food. M.N. described how liquor stores served the role

of grocery stores in East Oakland, but only offering fresh or healthy foods if someone was "lucky".

> *The amount of liquor stores, of course, they're like grocery stores. Liquor stores don't really sell food that's actually like healthy, like, sometimes they do have assortments of fruits or vegetables, if you're lucky, but even then, it's not like a wide selection…So you're kind of stuck with whatever the liquor store has and the food there is not the healthiest* – M.N., 17 year old Black, female

Other youth viewed neighborhood corner stores as places in which illicit substances were dealt and traded. P.T. stated: "If I go to my local corner store, I could probably get some drugs if I wanted to."

From the youth perspective, there is also a lack of recreational facilities available to use in East Oakland. Several participants described how they would often travel to other areas of the city or region to engage in leisure activities. When asked what types of places were lacking for youth in East Oakland, Ice, a 17 year old Asian female with a passion for cooking and love of animals said: "Just places to chill. There's not really a place to chill." E.H. a Latinx male shared a similar sentiment noting that he would like "more social places" like "parks" and "restaurants" to "hang out with friends." He went on to note that he was only aware of a single park with basketball courts in his area of East Oakland. Narratives such as E.H.'s and Ice's suggest that the built and material environment of East Oakland lacks places for recreation and leisure. P.T. described how he and his friends dealt with a lack of diversity in the East Oakland locale by leaving the area to do things. He stated "I basically take public transportation everywhere and me and my friends will go to Emeryville, or we'll go to Alameda or stuff like that. In Emeryville, they have a Target and a movie theater".

Another feature of the East Oakland locale was art. Youth described how visual art was used to show support of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as a way to commemorate other members of the community.

> *There are a lot of murals. I think right down the street from me, there's one mural. I think someone got run over once, like a block from me. There was like a mural for them. And then, just a lot of art like a pro-Hispanic, pro-minority type of art.* – L.L.

Sense of Place

As presented by Agnew (1987) sense of place refers to the feelings and emotional attachments residents ascribe to a place. Feelings of belonging encapsulate feeling "at home" or "rooted" in a particular location (Dameria et al., 2020). In this study youth expressed feelings of belonging in multiple ways. East Oakland was described as maintaining a unique style and culture through which residents were able to identify those who were from inside or outside of the community.

> *So a lot of people will say you can tell who's from where. People that are from the West and people that are from the East. You could tell where people are from just by how they acted, how they carry themselves, it's just kind of different.* – J.S., Black-Filipino, 20 year old female.

This sentiment was described in deeper detail by another participant, who emanated a sense of pride in being from East Oakland:

> *I feel like East Oakland has its own thing... I feel like we basically do our own thing and nobody else really does what we do. I feel like that's how we're unique. We have our own style, our own music taste, certain people from East Oakland walk a different way. It's just a lot of things.* - P.T., 15 year old Black male

Feelings of belonging were also described as emerging from interactions between residents. At times youth described the relationships between people in East Oakland as extensions of their families, experiences which gave rise to feelings of comfort and inclusiveness. When asked to describe East Oakland one participant stated:

> *I'd say it's home because living in East Oakland, you hear what's on the news and you hear like it's so bad, but that's really where I built my own community. All of my neighbors, we were like family. I used to go over to their house, be invited for parties. It was a really in-touch community within our neighborhood.* – H.V.

Other participants described the connectedness felt specifically between neighbors, and how these relationships provided support within the broader East Oakland context. E.O. a 15 year old Chinese American male described how he came to rely on his neighbors over time.

> *You can get to know neighbors. People like paint a narrative of East Oakland as being bad. But once you get to know your neighbors and your surroundings, and you know start being nice, you guys can depend on each other for things.*- E.O.

In addition to feelings of pride and belonging, protectiveness also emerged as a sense of place for East Oakland youth. Participants shared how East Oakland was often portrayed negatively in the media and by people who lived in other areas of the Bay. Understanding of "outsider" perspectives of East Oakland were also identified as causing negative feelings for East Oakland youth. In describing her perspective and feelings when negative comments were made about living in East Oakland, one youth stated directly:

> *I feel like I get really defensive. Because you can't be talking about my home like that…I think a lot of people just assume it's dangerous and that we can just pick up and leave when a lot of us don't have the funds to do that. Yeah, I get really defensive about the [East Oakland] community. Because even though there's like a lot of problems, there's definitely a lot of programs that are trying to make a difference.* – A.V.

H.V., a Black-Haitian, 17 year old female, shared a similar sentiment during her interview, one which illuminated the frustrations felt by youth as they reflected on how East Oakland was perceived by outsiders to the community. She said:

> *It makes me feel upset but then I also understand that they don't know so that's all they can go by. Sometimes, I just wish that they could just look on the other side. But I just kind of take it because it's like, if you're not from here, you're not going to get probably half of the stuff that goes on, so I understand.* – H.V.

At times the youth also shared that the violence between residents was a defining feature of East Oakland, a reality that for some led to a feeling of unease. As described by S.R., a 14 year old Black female "It's almost like there's always conflict in my area sometimes. It just seems like there's always an accident or shooting or something. It's hard to find peace in my neighborhood because there's always something going on."

East Oakland was also often characterized by racial and ethnic diversity across many of the interviews. This facet of the community was described by participants as being crucial for generating feelings of comfort and belonging. One youth who was completing an undergraduate degree in computer science at a location outside of East Oakland stated:

> *I'm going to college in Irvine like I said, and when I went to Irvine, it wasn't very diverse, it was very much like a suburban, very white racially. And while that wasn't a con at all, it definitely made me feel a little bit less like accepted and sort of out-of-place. Whereas here [East Oakland], when there's every type of person here, you can't really feel out of place.* – L.L.

Emotions of loss were also present for some participants as they shared how the *locality* of East Oakland was changing, due to the effects of gentrification. As the built environment around them changed in ways that served a different socioeconomic strata of society, youth described feelings of nostalgia and grief.

> *It's so unfortunate because I've seen places near my old home get tore down and built into restaurants and other things. And it's like, this is where I grew up, this is where I used to ride my bike down the street, I used to go around the corner, go have fun with my brother, being on a scooter. And it's really sad to see that happening because those are memories getting took away from you because of lack of funds and it's really sad.* – H.V.

S.V. shared similar feelings resulting from the gentrification occurring in her surrounding context. As a life-long resident of East Oakland, S.V. uplifted the small losses to her place of residence that would be lost to history, and only valued or remembered by those who lived there.

> *It's sad, the gentrification living in East Oakland because, like, you see so many different places change…You see the small changes that I feel like no one really will notice if they're not from here or haven't been living here for a long time*. – S.V.

Discussion

The current study used qualitative and participatory geospatial mixed methods to assess how youth define the location, locale and sense of place for East Oakland, CA. Overall the findings suggest that youth describe places in multiple ways that align with Agnew's (1987) conceptualization of place. Specifically, that youth perceive place as having a fixed location in space, that there are unique and defining features that constitute a place, and lastly, that they hold and attach emotional meaning to places based on both individual and collective experiences. These findings suggest that when defining a place, researchers and practitioners should seek to understand not just where a certain locale exists, but also the ways lived experience can shape perceptions and understandings of places.

I find that youth participants' understanding and definition of East Oakland were influenced by their familiarity or lack thereof with specific areas of the region. For example, some participants had never visited the region surrounding the Oakland airport, leading them to intentionally exclude this section when determining the boundaries of East Oakland. This aligns with existing literature which suggests that places are in some part defined by individuals based on their "activity spaces" or the places they regularly frequent in their daily lives (Foster & Hipp, 2011; Hipp & Boessen, 2013)Furthermore, the youth living in East Oakland perceived their immediate environment to be characterized by low-income conditions, and lack of investment from the city as reflected in the quality of housing infrastructure and street conditions. Additionally, participant definitions of East Oakland were at times influenced by negative media narratives that they had been exposed to through news sources. This finding carries particular significance for marginalized communities, as negative narratives associated with socioeconomically challenged areas can have adverse effects on the residents themselves (Butler & Sinclair, 2020).

Previous scholarship has identified how specific factors such as feelings of belonging and inclusiveness as well as marco level factors such as neoliberalism shaped by institutional policies, work in tandem when shaping youth's understanding and attachment to a place (Foote & Azaryahu, 2009; Prince, 2015). As several participants shared in this study, feelings of defensiveness arose during interactions with non-residents who portrayed East Oakland through popularized deficit-based narratives instead of seeking to understand the strengths as well. The emerging youth-driven description of East Oakland in this study uplift areas of both strength and challenges that define this diverse area of the city. Thus, these findings align with previous scholarship that suggests framing place-based investigations in terms of assets and needs can develop counternarratives which serve to empower marginalized communities (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Frith & Richter, 2021). Future scholarship seeking to understand places from the perspective of young people should seek to engage not just youth themselves but also members of their family and peers groups. Given the immense importance social relationships hold in the lives of youth, engaging the most influential people in their lives could provide additional understanding of how and why youth define places in particular ways, that includes historic and current lived experiences (Marshall et al., 2022; Tilley & Taylor, 2018).

These findings underscore the complex interplay between individual perspectives, experiences, social identities, and socioeconomic factors in shaping how places are assessed, understood, and defined. Scholars have previously highlighted that people living in close geographic proximity may hold both convergent and divergent perceptions of a place (Coulton, 2012; Nicotera, 2008). Factors such as age, race, class, gender, and religious beliefs, which determine one's identity and position within the social hierarchy, also influence an individual's assessment and understanding of a particular place (Burton et al., 1997; Campbell et al., 2009; Coulton, 2012; Krysan, 2002; Sampson et al., 1997). Of note, this study only engaged youth of color, some of whom experienced housing insecurity and minoritized gender identities. As such, the impact of marginalized identities on how youth perceive places may have been magnified. Given that youth, particularly marginalized youth are often underrepresented in traditional census-based data, this study fills a gap in the place-based literature by providing insight into the numerous ways youth of color experience and define places.

The youth-driven results of this study are in some ways different than those generated by adults. Other community-generated geographic portraits of East Oakland, portrayed this area of Oakland as being much smaller, and did not include the areas from 14th Street to the streets beginning around the 70's (Marcelli & Pastor, 2012). These difference may be due to a more refined subset of the population being sampled specifically focused on the Black community.

The findings from this study also support the idea that place should be conceptualized in ways beyond simply geography, particularly for researchers (Cummins et al., 2007). For example, the social and cultural aspects of "place" emerged as the more salient and impactful features for participants instead of geographic boundaries. To some degree, this finding was expected as a plethora of research has suggested that social relationships hold great meaning to youth during the phase of adolescence (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2001; Bauder, 2001), and, that places maintain "fuzzy" rather than rigid boundary lines (Foster & Hipp, 2011; Hipp & Boessen, 2013). What was unexpected however, was the breadth and depth of the descriptions youth provided regarding locale and sense of place. When asked to describe a place, youth often did so with language that captured the "sense of place" or locale of East Oakland in myriad ways. Of all the youth interviewed, none provided a geographic definition of East Oakland until prompted. This observation aligns with previous research which suggests that methods which engage youth through qualitative methods may elicit a more holistic understanding of place-based social processes (Makhoul & Nakkash, 2009).

The findings of this study are important for the development of interventions and future research aimed at promoting the well-being of youth. First, by leveraging the strengths and assets present within a community, interventions targeted at youth can effectively address the challenges they face in healthy development due to socioeconomic disparities. This approach not only strengthens their sense of place-based identity but also reinforces the existing social connections among residents. Second, recognizing how individuals' perceptions and definitions of a place are shaped by their lived experiences and identities can inform the design of interventions and programs that empower marginalized communities to mobilize against the negative impacts of institutional policies and practices that undermine both the well-being of the people and the places they inhabit.

These implications have practical value for researchers and practitioners aiming to develop place-based interventions specifically tailored to the needs of youth residing in marginalized areas. By developing a more holistic understanding of the diverse factors that positively or negatively impact young individuals, programs and services can be better designed to address the specific needs of these populations within their unique geographical contexts. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved in place-based interventions and promotes a more inclusive and equitable approach to community development. By embracing the strengths and assets within a community, interventions can empower youth and facilitate their active participation in shaping their own narratives and improving their well-being. The insights gained from this study can guide the development of interventions that foster positive outcomes for marginalized youth by considering the multifaceted influences of their lived experiences and identities within specific places. This research highlights the importance of collaborative and context-sensitive approaches that prioritize the voices and agency of young individuals and their communities in driving positive change.

Limitations

As with any research, this qualitative geospatial project had several limitations. First, due to the small sample size of 29 interviews and 17 PGIS youth participants the richness data and associated findings may be weakened. Given the small sample size, the range of perspectives and experiences that emerged throughout the analysis may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of the broader population within East Oakland. Additionally, the selection of participants through a purposive approach may have resulted in a sample that is in some ways, not representative of the greater youth population in East Oakland. Additionally, certain characteristics of the youth who volunteered for the study could have introduced sampling bias which weakens validity and reliability of the findings. Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participating youth. While the findings may not be generalizable to a larger population, they offer a starting point for understanding the factors that inform how East Oakland youth define and experience place. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and diversifying the participant pool to enhance the external validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the findings in geospatial analyses.

Conclusion

Place is a complex construct. An aspect of life that is inescapable and different for every person. Through place, people's power, access to resources, and identities are shaped. Only through the lived experiences of residents can outsiders truly begin to understand the complex interplay of location, locale, and sense of place in relation observed developmental outcomes. Though unrecognized by governing institutions, East Oakland is a real place, with a definitive and unique identity when compared to the rest of the City. This paper has illuminated the multifaceted influences of lived experiences and identities within specific places and provides valuable guidance for the development of interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being of marginalized youth. By considering the subjective, social, and cultural dimensions of a place, interventions can be shaped to more effectively address the challenges faced by youth, promote positive outcomes, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Paper 2: Youth-serving organizations and schools: A perfect match or unjust partnership?

Introduction

Institutions such as schools and youth-serving organizations play a crucial role in providing essential services for youth residing in socioeconomically challenged areas (Thompson, 2012). However, the traditional model of public education often fails to sufficiently meet the diverse needs of marginalized young people (Akom et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2021; Jackson & Howard, 2014). In response, ancillary programs offered through youth-serving organizations have emerged to fill the gap in resources and opportunities available, particularly for youth of color (Davis et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the curricula and programs offered by these institutions are often shaped by neoliberal ideologies, structural injustice, and hegemonic perspectives which negatively influence the objective and subjective wellbeing of youth facing socioeconomic hardship and societal marginalization.

While research on the role of youth-serving organizations and schools in youth development has grown in recent years, there is still a significant gap in understanding how racially and ethnically diverse youth perceive their engagement with these institutions and how it influences their wellbeing. Existing studies have primarily focused on specific subgroups, such as Black youth (Baldridge et al., 2011), Latinx youth (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019), gender-specific youth (Fong Gomez et al., 2020), or Queer youth (Eisenberg et al., 2020), within separate school or youth-serving organizational contexts. As a result, there is limited research that compares and examines the cumulative impact of both schools and youth-serving organizations on youth wellbeing.

This study aims to bridge this gap by integrating two expansive and evolving fields of research: positive youth development and youth education. Through this integration, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape youth wellbeing across institutions can be developed, providing valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to promoting positive development among youth of color. Additionally, this study seeks to directly compare the experiences of youth across school and youth-serving organization contexts, enabling a more nuanced comprehension of the interconnected social, cultural, and systemic factors that influence youth wellbeing. By adopting relational developmental systems theory as the guiding framework, the study acknowledges the intricate interplay between individuals and their environments, recognizing the influence of diverse social, cultural, and systemic elements. Through this lens, the study aims to uncover the complex web of relationships and dynamics that impact the wellbeing of youth of color within both school and youth-serving organization settings.

This study used participatory approaches and qualitative methods to develop a contextualized understanding of how schools and youth-serving organizations shape the wellbeing of East Oakland youth of color and was guided by the following research questions:

1. Within the context of relational systems theory, how do youth perceive the influence of schools and youth-serving organizations on their subjective well-being?

1a. How do the relational dynamics within these systems contribute to positive or negative experiences for youth?

2. Within the context of relational systems theory, what is the impact of neoliberal ideologies on the experiences of youth within schools and youth-serving organizations?

   2a. How do these ideologies influence the relational interactions within these systems and impact the wellbeing of youth?

The findings of this article with prove useful to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working in education and youth development, and furthermore, could inform policy development which aims to strengthen the education system (formal and informal) in the United States.

Literature Review

Youth wellbeing Over the past few decades, youth wellbeing has become a popularized term, with increasing dollars being committed by both private and governmental sources to strengthen this important area of youth development (Ross et al., 2020). Across the literature, youth wellbeing is defined in diverse ways (Wright & McLeod, 2015), but generally refers to the social, emotional, and economic conditions experienced by youth that allow them to thrive (Erbstein et al., 2013; Eriksen & Seland, 2021). Current definitions for adolescent youth, have focused increasingly on their positive feelings and emotions (Bücker et al., 2018; Maurer et al., 2021; Park, 2004). Thus, for this paper, wellbeing will be defined from a subjective psychological approach.

Systems of oppression and inequality A complex web of structural inequity, hegemonic ideals, and neoliberalism within schools and youth-serving organizations shapes the development of youth wellbeing. Structural inequity refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power that disproportionately affect marginalized groups (Harris & Pamukcu, 2020). Hegemonic ideals are defined by dominant cultural norms and values that reinforce existing power structures. Neoliberalism is an economic ideology that emphasizes market forces, competition, production, and individualism (Houghton, 2019). A characteristic of neoliberal ideology is the goal of creating and implementing policies which spur the development of "productive" citizens (Gilbert, 2016; Houghton, 2019). Neoliberalism exacerbates structural inequality by prioritizing market mechanisms that tend to benefit those already in positions of power and wealth (Gilbert, 2016; Rothe & Collins, 2017).

The relationship between neoliberalism, structural inequity, and hegemony in urban education and youth-development programs is multifaceted. By reducing the role of the state in favor of market-based solutions, neoliberalism deepens existing social and economic disparities by limiting funding to youth development programs, public education, and social services (Hill et al., 2008). This process reifies the power and privilege of dominant groups while limiting access to critical resources necessary for youth of color to flourish. The dominant class's cultural norms, values, and narratives often align with neoliberal ideals such as individualism and the pursuit of personal success (Gilbert, 2016). Such belief systems by definition, justify the unequal distribution of resources and power resulting from neoliberal policies, which in turn maintain the status quo and preserve the interests of the privileged (Hill et al., 2008). Structural inequality, hegemony, and neoliberalism can exacerbate inequities and undermine the collective wellbeing

of youth by emphasizing individual success while ignoring and deepening the socioeconomic challenges experienced by youth of color.

In school and youth-serving organization contexts serving primarily marginalized populations, structural inequity manifests in diverse ways such as unequal access to quality education and organizational resources (Baldridge et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2008; Johnson & Howard, 2008). Within educational and youth-serving organization settings, these macro systems of oppression privilege the use of biased outcome measures that favor members of the dominant class (such as narrow standardized testing) which leads to increased competition among students, and the marginalization of wellbeing in favor of narrow performance indicators (Baldridge, 2019; Hill et al., 2008; Lardier et al., 2020). Under pressures from the state to "produce" students who perform acceptably on state exams, schools have forgotten to build and integrate curriculum into the course offerings that focus on strengthening youth wellbeing (Bird & Markle, 2012). Hegemonic ideals also appear in the "militarization" of schools, defined by the ways in which knowledge and learning are processes shaped by broader societal belief systems (Furumoto, 2005). Examples of the militarization of schools include high-stakes test taking (Au, 2016), rigid bell and class period schedules, as well as harsh disciplinary action (Furumoto, 2005). Additionally, in schools, disparate graduation rates across race and gender have been well-documented (Buchmann et al., 2008; Johnson & Howard, 2008), and reports on the negative impacts of racially biased disciplinary practices abound (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). These inequalities perpetuate social hierarchies and dominant class group values (a key facet of hegemony), and in turn, harm the wellbeing of youth whose identities do not conform to the dominant norms. Overall, structural inequity, hegemonic ideals, and neoliberalism can exacerbate inequities and undermine the collective wellbeing of youth by emphasizing individual success, while ignoring the socioeconomic challenges experienced by youth of color.

As youth seek to strengthen their independent identities, skills with real-world applicability, and power in decisions that directly impact their lives, schools seemingly offer the opposite - environments that lean towards stifling rather than fostering these critical aspects of wellbeing (Ginwright, 2016; Strobel et al., 2008). Aligned with hegemonic and neoliberal ideologies, schools have been criticized for seeking to "produce" youth who display an "acceptable" amount of knowledge on specific subject matter, rather than strengthening autonomy and independence through active student participation (Ayers & Ayers, 2011). Scholarship has depicted the ways in which school staff fail to authentically connect with students of color (a key component of wellbeing), while broader educational policies hold urban students to standards that ignore the multitude of barriers to life and educational success that other, more privileged white students do not often experience (Baldridge et al., 2011; Baldridge, 2019).

Education for Urban Youth of Color The landmark Supreme Court case Brown vs Board of Education Topeka (1954) imparted the ephemeral promise of educational equity to all U.S. youth, regardless of race, income, age, or abilities (García, 2020; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). However, over time this promise has transitioned into little more than a pipedream for urban youth of color, a reality that never came to fruition due to the influence of neoliberalism, hegemony, and structural inequality. Legacies of racism influenced the segregation of many places including where people lived and attended school, and the availability of economic resources necessary to support strong school districts - recent research has found that school poverty in-particular, is a strong correlate of academic achievement gaps between white and

black youth (Reardon, 2016). As a result, urban youth of color often experience reduced access to rich school-based educational environments and more often than not, attend highly segregated, low-performing schools (Ginwright et al., 2006; Monarrez et al., 2019; Reardon, 2016; Wang et al., 2022). For example, Black and Latinx youth residing in urban areas are still much more likely than their white counterparts to experience poverty and to attend poorly funded and low performing schools (García, 2020; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Even after controlling for neighborhood differences in poverty, there exists a negative association in funding for majority Black compared to majority white schools. Academic achievement across measures characterized by hegemonic ideals such as standardized test scores, lags for urban youth of color compared to their white peers (Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Urban schools have been described as educational sites that are challenged in meeting the development needs of youth of color (Ginwright, 2016; Strobel et al., 2008). For example, schools provide a large portion of mental health services for youth but are limited in the breadth and quality of services available in under-resourced schools due to restricted budgets (Eiraldi et al., 2015). This issue to wellbeing is further compounded for youth of color, as research has shown that many of their mental health needs go unmet (Lindsey et al., 2013). Additionally, under-resourced schools experience high teacher turn-over (Ingersoll, 2001), a reality that has been found to negatively impact educational attainment, particularly for students of color making it more difficult for youth to develop long-lasting, supportive relationships with their teachers which are important to strengthening individual and community wellbeing (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Furthermore, under-resourced schools have less funding to offer diverse classes and activities for youth to explore and engage their interests such as art and music (Kelley & Demorest, 2016; Shaw, 2018).

During current times, the challenges of urban public education have been further strained by the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were forced to close and along with them associated school-based services and programs which provided additional health and developmental support in myriad forms, particularly in low-income urban areas (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). In response, the nonprofit sector leveraged a disproportionate burden of meeting increased needs in education, social, and health related services (Shi et al., 2020). Youth-serving organizations emerged as one subgroup of nonprofit organizations tasked with supporting a burgeoning dearth of educational and mental health support for urban youth of color during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shi, et al., 2020).

Youth-serving Organizations and Education Youth-serving organizations are institutions that provide programs, services, and resources specifically designed to support the needs and development of young people (McCarthy et al., 2015). These organizations often aim to promote the wellbeing, education, economic and career outcomes, and health of youth experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (Akom et al., 2008; Baldridge et al., 2017). Across the positive youth development literature, youth-serving organizations have been defined as nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations (Baldridge et al., 2017), sports club (Säfvenbom et al., 2014), and religious institutions (Ginwright, 2007). Youth-serving organizations providing services across community and school-based settings have increasingly been acknowledged as supporting the diverse and complex wellbeing needs of youth, particularly those residing in disadvantaged urban settings (Ginwright et al., 2006; McLaughlin, 2000; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994; Philp & Gill, 2020; Thompson, 2012). For example, youth-serving

organizations provide programs that provide paid summer employment, opportunities which build experience for entering into a career (Ferrari et al., 2008; Modestino, 2018). Additionally, youth-serving organizations offer programs that prepare youth for college readiness (Kirk & Day, 2011), expose them to art activities (Krensky, 2001), provide education on healthy food access (Akom et al., 2016), teach financial literacy (Berzin et al., 2018) as well as experiences which strengthen soft skills such as critical reflection and emotional regulation (Ginwright et al., 2006).

A large body of scholarship has elucidated how youth-serving organizations engage youth of color, positively supporting their learning and education in ways not fulfilled in traditional school settings (Akom et al., 2008; Baldridge et al., 2011; Baldridge, 2018; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994). While policies such as "*No Child Left Behind"* (2001) have shifted the focus of schools from that of holistic educational development to a model privileging generalized assessments of topical knowledge, youth-serving organizations offer programming which uplifts engaged learning in areas of identity development, professional development, and mental health learning (Baldridge et al., 2011; Fong Gomez et al., 2020). At times, youth-serving organizations and schools intentionally collaborate in the development and implementation of programs. For example, Krensky (2001) conducted an ethnographic analysis of a collaborative arts program, through which the youth-organization was able to fill gaps in the school curriculum through the provision of a program focused on using art as a peace-making process with low-income youth.

These stark differences between youth-serving organizational program approaches and those offered in the traditional school settings are unsurprising, given the history of these institutions working in complement and opposition to one another since the latter part of the 19th century. Beginning in the late 1800's, youth-oriented programs offered in nontraditional education settings emerged as a result of reduced child labor and increased investment into education (Halpern, 2002). These trends were particularly notable in urban areas where the majority of factories which employed youth were located. As a growing number of youth enrolled in school instead of working, there became a growing need to find ways to fill their time with meaningful activities during the after school hours. Many youth residing in urban areas experienced deep poverty and challenges such as overcrowding in their home environments (Halpern, 2002). As a result, adults sought ways to engage youth in structured ways that reduced the harm of their day-to-day life realities. Programs that started as informal engagement in churches and corner stores, eventually grew into structured organizations providing a diverse array of activities and opportunities for youth during their out of school time with a focus of reducing or preventing delinquency (Halpern, 2002). During the early 1900's, youth-programs expanded into independently funded organizations, and began to focus resources towards supporting the formation of vocational skills, the exploration of individual identity, and connection to other community resources. While schools maintained and perpetuated rigid schedule and processes similar to those observed in the workforce, youth organizations adhered to models that were more fluid, allowing time for youth to engage in unstructured play and self-exploration of interests (Halpern, 2002).

Notably, youth of color were often excluded from participating in the early adaptations of youth organizations. However, as the socioeconomic fabric of urban neighborhoods changed due

to policies such as redlining, so did the populations served by youth organizations. Overtime, due to growing urban concentrated disadvantage, the complex needs of youth began to outpace those which youth-organizations had the funds to provide. Moreover, financial support for youth-serving organizations was limited as a greater share of dollars were committed to schools and programs targeting early childhood education (Halpern, 2002). Often, youth-serving organizations rely on a mix of government and philanthropic dollars to maintain financial viability (Myers & Goddard, 2015). In response, youth-serving organizations shifted some of their programmatic focus to also include educational support services such as tutoring which then provided opportunities to apply for funding through small programs such as the Neighborhood Youth Corps (Halpern, 2002; Howard, 1965). Some youth-organizations, encumbered by the challenges of neoliberal policies, have shifted to embrace social enterprise models, organizational designs which generate income through the sale of products, while also offering services to marginalized communities at free or reduced costs (Keller, 2010).

Youth-serving organizations still maintain the characteristics that have defined them since their inception: commitment to engaging youth during out of school hours, interest in preventing delinquency and other unwanted developmental outcomes, providing unstructured time for recreation, connection to additional social services, supporting education, and focus on developing vocational skills that will prepare youth for entering the labor market. However, given the more informal approach youth-serving organizations use to deliver curriculum, their grassroots history of development, and less defined goals, they have remained an area of human service provision that exists in the shadow of "formal" education in school-settings (Halpern, 2002). Nonetheless, a rich body of empirical evidence supports the immense importance of these institutions in relation to youth development.

Urban youth of color who engage programs offered through youth-serving organizations have been observed as obtaining higher educational attainment (Leos-Urbel, 2014), have higher levels of self-esteem and optimism (McLaughlin, 2000), and engage in fewer violent behaviors (Heller, 2014) when compared to those who do not. Additionally, youth-serving organizations play a key function in providing important educational resources when school curricula change as a result of federal policy shifts. For example, as conservative changes in political agendas removed sexual health education in many schools, youth-serving organizations stepped-in to fill this education gap (Landry et al., 2011). Additionally, as noted above, as schools closed nation-wide due to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth-serving organizations provided important health and educational services to youth and their families (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Thus, in many ways youth-serving organizations can be understood as working in both complement and opposition to schools, particularly for youth of color.

Conceptual Framework: Relational Developmental Systems Perspective

The relational developmental systems (RDS) perspective offers a comprehensive framework for understanding youth well-being within the complex interplay of structural forces across multiple levels of a youth's surrounding environmental context.

This study is framed within a relational developmental systems (RDS) perspective, the theoretical basis for many development-oriented theories including positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2015). RDS posits that youth development occurs as a result of bi-directional interactions within different levels of their surrounding context (Lerner et al., 2015; Lerner &

Konowitz, 2016; Mueller et al., 2011; Osher et al., 2020). These interactions are described as individual <-> context relations (Mueller et al., 2011). Core to the RDS, is the understanding that individual <-> context relations are mutually influential, thus, youth act upon aspects of their surrounding context, and factors in the surrounding environment act upon the youth (Lerner et al., 2015; Mueller et al., 2011). These interactions occur within the purview of other influential systems. For example, youth engagement with teachers is also influenced by their engagement with parents or caregivers. Moreover, engagement with recreational programming could be influenced by factors within cultural narratives and norms. Often, RDS has been committed to studying adolescence, due to the turbulent, highly engaged, and often changing nature of the physical and social aspects of this developmental phase (Mueller et al., 2011). Adolescence has been defined as the period of life between the ages of 12-21 (Sawyer et al., 2018).

This study seeks to understand the realities of engaging both schools and youth-serving organizations from the perspectives of urban youth of color within the context of relational developmental systems. The use of relational developmental systems theory aligns with the purpose of this study in the following ways: 1) Youth aged 14-20 comprised the sample, 2) RDS assumes that studying people in isolation from context and others fails to fully capture the multitude of systems and interactions which shape development, 3) through mutually influential relationships youth are able to build positive and negative associations which shape behavior. This study seeks to understand how various factors across contexts (i.e. schools and youth-serving organizations) provide both positive and negative interactions for urban youth of color.

Qualitative methods were applied in this study to learn from youth how their engagement across both institutions supports their overall learning and development through interactions with peers, teachers and staff, and cultural influences. This selection of methods was appropriate for the current study, as scholars invested in constructing increasingly nuanced youth development theories based on relational developmental systems perspectives articulate the need to engage individually focused qualitative methods to understand the complex interactions that individuals experience in their surrounding contexts relevant to specific outcomes (Lerner & Konowitz, 2016). To date, scant research has focused on understanding how experiences of engagement across both schools and youth-serving organizations occurs for youth of color. More commonly scholarship has focused on specific racial/ethnic subgroups, or institutions in separate narratives (Baldridge et al., 2011; Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019; Fong Gomez et al., 2020). The purpose of this paper is not to assess differences in racial or ethnic group experiences, but rather, to uplift the similarity of experience among youth of color who collectively navigate educational hardships quite different than many of their white peers.

Study Context

East Oakland is a geographically defined subsection of the larger City of Oakland context and has been noted for high levels of socioeconomic barriers to life flourishing. East Oakland experiences some of the highest rates of economic disadvantage across Alameda County with 32% of the population experiencing poverty(Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021; Marcelli & Pastor, 2012). Youth residing in East Oakland experience many challenges to their development including community violence, lack of citizenship, risk of educational drop-out, and restricted access to diverse services and institutional resources (Cal Endowment/USC report, 2012). Moreover, East Oakland boasts a diverse population, with approximately 50% identifying as

Latinx, approximately 25% identifying as Black, and 20% identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander (UCLA Health Policy, 2012). From 2019-2021, nearly 40% of all Oakland shootings occurred within 4 East Oakland zip codes (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021). The context of East Oakland was well-suited to the needs of this project, given the focus on youth of color, schools, and youth-serving organizations,

Positionality Statement

I identify as a Korean American, heterosexual woman and social worker who supports community-led projects with the goal of reducing the inequity that emerges when living in under-resourced urban spaces. I listen and observes when engaging participants in an effort to understand how they experience and view their world. Prior to this study, I developed relationships with leaders of neighborhood youth-serving organizations, City of Oakland staff, and engaged Oakland youth across several different research projects. Nonetheless, I view myself as an outsider to the lived experiences of East Oakland youth. The goal of my engagement in this study was to leverage my institutional privilege to create a space for the voices of young people who are left out of research and policymaking processes far too often.

Methods

This study engaged participatory approaches and exploratory qualitative methods to assess how urban youth of color perceive their engagement with schools and youth-serving organizations as impacting their wellbeing in similar or dissimilar ways. Youth voices shaped the research topic, questions, and data coding for this study.

*Community Partner Site*s Youth participants were recruited through a purposive sample from 4 East Oakland youth-serving organizations. Each organization focused on serving low-income youth, provided year-round and summer employment programming, and targeted specific racial/ethnic groups (see Table 2).

Table 1. East Oakland Youth-serving Orgs and Race/ethnicity Focus

Name of Organization	*Race/Ethnicity Focus*
East Oakland Youth Development Center	Black/African American
Lao Family Community Development	Asian/Chinese
Rising Sun	Mixed
Unity Council	Latinx/Mexican

Relationship Building with Sites Relationships with these organizations had been previously established through a community-engaged project I had managed several years prior, focused on developing a social capital curriculum for implementation across youth-serving organizations that housed summer jobs programs. In the years since this initial relationship building with these East Oakland institutions, I had also managed the implementation and analysis of summer survey of program participants, required by the City funder, a process which reduced staff capacity challenges for the participating youth-serving organizations.

The research topic for this project were informed by youth voice. I had conducted a pilot project the year prior, the findings of which informed the focus for this paper. During that investigation, East Oakland youth were asked broadly about what institutions in their community

most positively impacted their lives. During the analysis of the pilot data, I found that youth often harbored positive feelings about youth-serving organizations and mixed feelings about their experiences at school. The findings suggested that schools and youth-serving organizations were the most important institutions for East Oakland youth, when analyzed through the lens of subjective psychological wellbeing defined by autonomy and youth decision making, connectedness and relationships with others, competency (the development of skills necessary for future careers) and feeling positive about the future.

During the planning of this study, I met regularly with staff at each organization who provided invaluable insight regarding the study design, recruitment plan, incentive amounts, and the applicability of study findings to their organizations. Eligibility constraints required that youth spoke English as well as have access to a Wi-Fi and a device that could connect to Zoom.[3] Additionally, eligible youth needed to be aged 14-20 and living in one of 6 East Oakland zip codes identified by the youth-serving organizations[4]. Each youth received a $35 gift card for completing an interview and a $30 gift card for participating in a focus group. Recruitment began in June 2022 after the start of the youth-serving organizations summer programs and continued through October.

Interview Guide Development An interview guide was developed and approved by the University of California, Berkeley Institutional Review Board[5]. Feedback from the youth-serving organization partners and overarching research questions shaped the topics and patterning of questions. The interview guide questions focused on the participant's descriptions of their East Oakland neighborhood, their perceptions of wellbeing, and their perceptions of how school and youth-serving organization engagement impacted their lives either positively or negatively. The youth that participated in the mapping were asked prior to the rest of the interview to identify on a Google map the boundaries of East Oakland The interview guide was reviewed by youth-serving organization staff (including East Oakland youth employees) and the provided feedback was integrated into the final tool.

All interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom due to the health risks posed by COVID-19.

Recruitment Through partnership with the youth-serving organizations recruitment occurred in multiple ways.

1. From mid-June through August
    a. pitched the project at 7 orientation sessions for new summer job program participants
    b. attended a career fair at one organization and setup a booth providing information on the project to youth and other youth organizations that had interest in participating
    c. presented at 4 professional development sessions in schools and youth organizations

[3] All of the 4 participating youth-serving organizations stated that if youth were eligible and wanted to participate but experienced barriers to access, they would be able to provide the space and technology for them to engage in the project onsite.
[4] Zip codes for recruitment included: 94606, 94601, 94621, 94603, 94605, 94613
[5] The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

2. Had my recruitment materials also published on one youth organization’s social media site.
3. Eligible youth were also referred to me directly by program staff.

Prior to participation consent, assessment, and parent/guardian permission was obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity.

Analysis Collaborative inductive thematic analysis methods were engaged in this study to find common patterns as well as differences across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The purpose of this approach was to identify similar experiences and perspectives across different participant narratives regarding the ways schools and youth-serving organizations shaped East Oakland youth wellbeing.

The interviews were first transcribed manually from audio files, the transcripts were cleaned for readability and clarity while also developing analytic memos to record the emerging themes. An initial codebook was developed and further refined to include parent and child code hierarchies with a focus on institutional context engagement. The codebook was then applied to all transcripts using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. A second coder then spot-checked the coded data and provided suggested revisions to the codebook. The revised codes were then reapplied to all transcripts. Themes were formulated by both researchers, undergirded by the study research questions and the relational developmental framework. The use of multiple researchers coding and developing themes sought to reduce bias in the analysis process. Quotes from the participant interviews were pulled from the transcripts and summarized in the

Operationalization of Wellbeing For this paper, wellbeing is operationalized using a subjective psychological perspective and is defined by four components: autonomy, connectedness, competency, and optimism (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021). ***Autonomy*** refers to the ability of youth to make their own decisions about how they want to live their life; ***connectedness*** refers to the establishment, nurturing, and growth of positive relationships that foster development, is the presence, maintenance, and development of positive relationships that support youth growth; ***competency*** is the cultivation and enhancement of skills and knowledge that enable youth to progress in their careers, education, as well as interpersonal aspects like spirituality and psychological beliefs. Lastly, ***optimism*** is when youth maintain a positive and hopeful outlook on their future, even when faced with uncertainty or experiencing life challenges (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021).

Findings

Demographics The demographics of the study sample are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample Demographics (n = 29)

Age Ranges	n (%)
14-15	7 (24%)
16-17	12 (41%)
18-20	10 (35%)
Race/Ethnicities	
AA/Black	12 (41%)
Asian	6 (21%)
Latinx	8 (28%)
Mixed	3 (10%)
Gender	
Female	13 (45%)
Male	14 (48%)
Nonbinary	2 (7%)
Housing Insecure	1 (3%)

The findings of this study illuminate the complex ways youth of color experience mutually reinforcing individual <-> context relations in schools and youth-serving organizations in distinct ways. The findings below are organized by environmental system categories which are defined as: micro, mezzo, and macro (Bronfenbrenner, 1986)

Micro system: Youth <-> relationships

At the micro level defined as the interpersonal interactions youth have within contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), youth of color engage and experience relationships in mutually influential ways across school and youth-serving organization contexts that shape their wellbeing. Several youth described the positive influence of working with caring adults on their wellbeing at youth-serving organizations in ways the traditional school settings did not provide. Participants described staff at youth-serving organizations as providing emotional support while teachers primarily maintained roles as educators rather than mentors.

> *With Dominique I was comfortable enough to tell her anything that was going on. I didn't feel like she was ever irritated with me or wanted to focus on other things. She cared for me on a personal level, not like public school teachers in East Oakland.* – P.T., 15 year old Black male, interview

This sentiment was further exemplified by H.B.H., a 15 year old Black female

> *The staff at the youth programs feel more like family. At school, I feel like the relationship is a little different because they're your teachers and you don't really... you wouldn't feel comfortable sharing stuff* – H.B.H.

Engaging in unsupportive relationships with teachers at schools was noted in some cases, as being harmful to youth wellbeing in ways that impacted their engagement with other activities. Lack of ***connection*** with school staff was noted by one participant as being so detrimental that in some cases it could lead to youth disengaging from their education. H.V., a 15 year old Black female understood the structural challenges experienced by the Oakland Unified School District, but also described how these challenges negatively impacted staff and in-turn students.

> *Unfortunately, in the school system, we don't have a lot of funding. The faculty doesn't really get paid very much, so sometimes they don't really care or have concern for us. It kind of reflects to the students in a way to where they don't care either sometimes about their own self. It's really like a lack of communication and a lack of support to where a student could really just be disconnected from school because of that.* – H.V.

Though many youth attended low-income schools, several participants did not. Of this small subgroup, one participant attended high school in a predominately white and middle-class district outside of Oakland. She described how aspects of her wellbeing were impacted through racist interactions with a school staff member. In some ways, her ***connectedness*** was damaged, through negative conversations with a teacher and some peers regarding her race. However, instead of retreating from this engagement as a result of a fractured connection, she engaged her ***capacity*** (knowledge and skills) to set clear boundaries with both her peers and teacher, a process which uplifted her strengths in the face of oppression and racialized violence. She recounted:

> *He [the teacher] was white and I had to talk to him about racism because he was telling me about how, when he taught middle school, he would have them read this book. It's like an autobiography by a Black man and it was about growing up during Jim Crow. I've never heard of this book, but I guess the "n*****" word is used a lot in that book because it's like autobiographical, and he said he would read it out loud. And he said the word. I said, you can't say that word. And then he was like his children were telling him about how that wasn't right. He was like, "I don't see the problem," and I was like "You don't see the problem because you're white* – M.A., 17 year old, mixed race female. interview

She went on to share how her race also became a point of contention with other students, an interaction in which she also engaged by drawing upon her capacity.

> *Some of my classmates were making a joke about George Floyd, and I was like, "You're literally weaponizing racism against us and you're supposed to be an ally to us.*

At times, schools and youth-serving organizations interacted in complementary ways that supported wellbeing. For example, schools were described as being challenging social contexts to navigate, spaces in which the participants felt ***dis-connection*** from their peers. This was compared to the inclusive and integrated environment of youth-serving organizations by S.R.

> *School is fun, but sometimes it's divided. There are a lot of people you don't know so the relationships aren't that close with everybody versus youth organizations where you know everybody literally… It just feels like it's not divided either, everybody is everywhere. You'll see anybody talking to anybody so it's not divided* – S.R.

Z.A., a 15 year-old Black female also described the ways engagement with peers at school was a limiting experience for her, and how conversely, she felt more comfortable and able engaging peers within youth-serving organization contexts. She stated:

> *With school I don't really bond with people…At school everybody has a different personality, and everybody just be little dickheads. So I was just not really in the mix. The center is more welcoming. You can literally walk up to somebody and literally make a conversation.* – Z.A.

Thus, for some youth, school harmed her wellbeing while youth-serving organizations supported it.

Participants also described how the ways they were treated varied across the two institutional contexts. For some, youth-serving organizations provided social engagement in ways that uplifted their ***autonomy*** as they moved towards adulthood. As noted by LL a 17 year old Latinx male who would soon be attending UC Santa Barbra for computer science "One thing that stuck out to me is that a lot of people seem to mention the fact that they get treated like adults. We get like fueled with more responsibility."

Additionally, with the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to engage and form social relations with other youth were limited. As such, engaging programs offered through youth-serving organizations provided an important context for the study participants to strengthen their ***connectedness*** by meeting other people their age as school moved to online format. Participants described how important this component of their wellbeing was during a time when many youth had little if any ability to forge new relationships with peers, especially those who attended different schools.

> *I feel like coming out of that COVID era where like a lot of us students really had to do like school online. It [youth-serving organizations] gave us a real, like, outlet to meet other kids our age and really have that experience and build new relationships that we were kind of, like, not allowed to do so that really, like, helped us a lot, I feel like.* – H.V.

Mezzo system: Youth <-> institutions

With the mezzo system defined as the entities such as schools, workplaces, community organizations, and other groups or settings that that impact an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), participants described how specific aspects of youth-serving organization and schools shaped their wellbeing in several ways. First, deficits in the public school budgets limited their ability to engage in certain activities, limiting their ability to build ***competency***. In response, participants sought out these missing opportunities through youth-serving organizations. This finding was particularly salient for recreational activities such as sports. P.T. a 15 year-old Black male stated:

> *Most elementary schools have a sports team, mine didn't until 5th grade when one of the teachers had to help us start a team. But I definitely feel I discovered sports more through youth organizations, like they had gyms, at my elementary they didn't have a gym…I definitely didn't discover sports through school.* – P.T.

Lack of school resources was also described as a component of the youth <-> institutional engagement participants experienced by H.N., a 17 year-old Chinese male who was actively engaged with a sports club, the Oakland Bulldogs baseball team. In school, H.N. wasn't offered the opportunity to build his ***competency*** with regard to financial literacy; however, by seeking programs that would fill this gap in the school curriculum, H.N. also engaged his ***autonomy***.

> *These [youth] organizations, the reason why I joined them is because my school in general lacks the resources to give us these opportunities. So I would have to look for these opportunities because in school we don't learn about financial literacy or how to read a tax form. So you would need to join a program. For example, my school never had*

> *the best resources to support our sports department. So I looked elsewhere for that.* – H.N.

Other participants in this study shared similar narratives regarding the ways their wellbeing was influenced differently through their engagement with schools and youth-serving organizations. For many, their competency was bolstered in school through the learning of traditional topics such as math and history. However, the existed a gap in developing their competency holistically, by also learning soft skills such as "networking" and "finances" that would be important for strengthening their ***autonomy*** in the "real world." S.I., a 20 year old Black female shared

> *In school they don't teach you about networking. They don't teach you the finances. They don't teach you anything about the real world. You have to go figure it out on your own or join a program like how I did and then learn about it from there.* – S.I.

L.L.'s perspective further illuminated how school engagement only supported particular facets of his ***competence***, specifically those focused on studying habits to achieve good grades with no opportunity to advance other areas of his knowledge or skills. In response, he also engaged youth-serving organizations to fill this gap in the school curriculum. L.L.'s narrative also illuminates how engagement with one form of programming bolstered more holistic ***competence*** development than if only attending school.

> *School-wise, it's just a lot of work, a lot of homework, getting the grades, doing the tests, that type of thing. I guess you could say, there isn't much more to do after the outside of that. There is no next step if you know what I mean. But with a lot of these organizations, there is the next step, there is a new leadership position you can get, and there's another internship you can do*. – L.L.

Overall, youth engaged youth-serving organizations and schools for different reasons. At times, limited resources limited the ability of schools to provide additional activities that would support the ***autonomy*** and ***competence*** of youth. In response, youth actively engaged other programs through youth-serving organizations that would provide opportunities to diversify their competence, a process which also indirectly strengthened their ***autonomy***. Though schools experienced limitations in the breadth of activities available to youth, participants acknowledged that both types of institutions provided important though different opportunities that supported their wellbeing. S.G. an 18 year old Chinese American male described his comparison of schools and youth-serving organizations with regard to programmatic opportunities.

> *I think both [schools and youth-serving organizations] are really important. You need a good education; I think that's really important…But I feel like there's more to just schooling and these youth organizations give you an opportunity that like step out into the real world and get experience that you won't be able to get at school.* – S.G.

Additionally, engagement with youth-serving organizations in some ways strengthened the ***optimism*** of youth of color. This was described loosely throughout the interviews but became clear when I.C.T., a mixed race youth experiencing housing insecurity described a recent incident during which she had been robbed by another youth. She stated:

I wish there were more orgs that were mental health-focused combined with just life lessons because I feel like there's just people out here that don't know what's out there for them. They think that this is the best that they can do. Like the situation with the robbing, I don't know if that young girl will ever know that she could be a CEO. That this is not just a dead end for her. I wish there was stuff on college readiness and financial readiness. – I.C.T.

Macro system: Youth <-> broad ideologies

Within the macro system defined as the broader cultural, social, economic, and political systems that influence and shape the individual and their immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), youth described their experiences at schools and youth-serving organizations as being characterized by dominant value systems which influenced their wellbeing in multiple ways. For example, culture experienced through individual <-> context relations influenced the ***autonomy*** of youth (being able to make decisions choices in life) Often, notable aspects of culture for youth in this study included a focus on race. S.D., a 17 year-old Black male who attended a private school in East Oakland stated:

I go to an all-Black Muslim school and they teach us about respect for ourselves and being the best us that we could be for our peoples. That's where a lot of my values have been instilled from, moral values and things like that. – S.D.

Morals and values guide decision-making processes, aspects of youth ***autonomy.*** In addition, choice and competition were strong neoliberal themes that influenced participant wellbeing in opposing ways. Choice, a defining feature of individual-focused neoliberal ideology, was observed in the ways youth decided to participate in some programs at youth-serving organizations and schools but not others. This process strengthened youth **autonomy** through the experience of making decisions regarding how they wanted to engage this aspect of their lives. Some youth went further to describe how dominant belief systems portrayed as "the country", negatively impacted their autonomy within school contexts but not youth-serving organizations. K.N. a 16 year old Black nonbinary youth stated:

If you compare school to the programs [as youth-serving organizations], they [school] give you your curriculum, you have to go to things, even if they don't help you with your life or anything that you want to do. These are the things that the country has said you need to do in order to graduate in order to get a degree and if you don't, you fail. With the programs, it's like you basically get to pick your curriculum. You get to pick what you want to do. – K.N.

Additionally, competition, another defining feature of neoliberal ideology was placed upon some youth when attempting to enroll in youth-serving organization programs and some schools. Several youth described how youth-serving organizations and schools intentionally selected specific youth for admittance through a competitive application process. When asked if the current public high school he attended required an application for admission, J.D., a 17 year-old Latinx male responded "Yeah, like with all the high schools, we just had to like apply, and then see if they accepted us." Youth-serving organizations also required an application for youth interested in participating. Some organizations selected participants was based loosely along racial/ethnic lines while for others admittance criteria were less transparent. This process limited

the ***autonomy*** of the study participants, as admissions processes created a barrier to program access for some. As shared by I.C.T. "They [a youth-serving organization] didn't restrict the internship to just Asian youth, any youth can apply, but they mainly focus on Asian youth activism or art activism in Oakland." Some programs, specifically those that provided increased access to resources for youth of color, required applications from perspective participants. This process illustrates how structural barriers were maintained through policies and procedures guided by neoliberal ideology. Youth deemed "acceptable" by those in power, were provided the opportunity to strengthen their socioeconomic position, while others were not. In reference to a several programs offered through a youth-serving organizations I.C.T. said:

> *I applied for it because they offered technology scholarships. And Oakland Promise.. if you applied to their scholarship, they can get you up to, I think, 1,200 in the scholarship to go to high school. But I applied for their Black excellence grant, and I got this laptop, and I think $600 because I missed the deadline for the scholarship – I.C.T.*

From this perspective, neoliberal ideologies both restricted and strengthened the opportunities for youth to build their wellbeing in terms of ***autonomy***.

Lastly, the impact of neoliberal belief systems were pervasive throughout all systems in the youth's environment. This study illuminates the subtle ways dominant ideologies impact youth wellbeing, in all of their life contexts. For example, at the micro level racist beliefs, undergirded by hegemonic ideals led to the weakening of ***connection*** for youth of color. Within the mezzo system, disparate access to resources for schools serving a marginalized youth population limited opportunities for the study participants to deepen their ***competence***. Competition and choice were key characteristics of youth-serving organizations and school enrollment, that both limited and bolstered the autonomy of youth of color.

Discussion

The findings from this paper suggest that youth of color engage schools and youth-serving organizations through individual <-> context relations in ways that shape their wellbeing in myriad ways. Within the micro system, mutually influential relations emerged between youth and relationships that strengthened and hindered ***connection*** and ***competence***. Within the mezzo-level bi-directional relations between youth and institutions bolstered ***optimism*** within youth-serving organization contexts only, and ***autonomy*** and ***competence*** in both schools and youth-serving organizations. Within the macro level, the relations between youth and broad ideological systems both strengthened and diminished ***autonomy***.

This study finds alignment with previous scholarship on urban education and youth-serving organizations engagement in several key ways. First, youth-serving organizations provide important services that supplement the academic training that youth of color receive in formal education settings. This finding substantiates the large body of interdisciplinary research that has uplifted the valuable educational role of youth-serving organizations for youth of color residing in disadvantaged urban areas (Akom et al., 2008; Baldridge et al., 2011; Baldridge, 2018; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994). Second, the findings from this paper suggest that in some ways, youth-serving organization contexts are experienced more favorably and better support the development of psychological wellbeing for youth of color. This finding is also substantiated by studies that have depicted the value of

positive mentoring relationships, that are built through youth-serving organizations more often than schools (Dill & Ozer, 2019). Third, participants described the ways in which their engagement with neoliberal ideologies occurred in diverse ways within both school and youth-serving organization contexts. This finding both substantiates and expands prior scholarship that has assessed how marginalized youth wellbeing is impacted by structural inequity spurred by hegemonic ideals (Baldridge et al., 2017; Baldridge, 2020).

By conducting a direct comparison of youth of color experiences across both schools and youth-serving organizations, a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences pertaining to the impact of systems of oppression on wellbeing was observed. This complicates the findings of prior scholarship, which to date, has primarily considered these institutions separately in the lives of youth of color (Fong Gomez et al., 2020; Ozer & Piatt, 2017; Raymond-Flesch et al., 2017; Wyn et al., 2000). Additionally, the findings from this paper also uplift the ways different facets of youth wellbeing are strengthened through exposure to neoliberal ideology. Prior research in this area has focused on describing the ways in which youth adhere to neoliberal discourse, shaping themselves into productive students and workers in lieu of challenging these deeply entrenched systems of oppression (Baldridge, 2020; Houghton, 2019; Lardier et al., 2020). Conversely, I find that youth of color at time bolster their ***autonomy*** and ***competence*** by standing in defiance against interactions that seek to reify socioeconomic disparity and disempower youth maintaining marginalized identities. This finding begins to illuminate possible ways for youth of color to challenge systems of oppression, while also strengthening their wellbeing in myriad ways. As such, negative interactions are viewed from a positive rather than deficit-based lens, a core component of positive youth development that is often lacking when developing interventions for youth of color (Baldridge, 2014; Tuck, 2009). Therefore, future work assessing the impact youth institutional engagement should consider both the positive and negative outcomes of these interactions. Lastly, by drawing from a racially and ethnically diverse sample of youth, the intersectional barriers and opportunities to youth wellbeing can be more broadly defined. Current research has overwhelmingly focused on samples drawn from specific racial and ethnic populations (Baldridge et al., 2011; Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019; Fong Gomez et al., 2020). This is not to say that differences in experience and marginalization do not exist for different racial and ethnic groups.

Based on these findings, practitioners should seek to develop strong partnerships between youth-serving organizations and schools, to develop a more holistic pipeline of services, activities and opportunities that strengthen marginalized youth wellbeing. This is not a new suggestion, as prior research has also identified the complementary nature of schools and youth-serving organizations (Akom et al., 2008; Baldridge, 2018; Baldridge et al., 2011; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994).

A recently implemented policy in California, highlights the ways in which lawmakers and practitioners are increasingly acknowledging the value of both youth-serving organizations and schools in the developmental and educational lives of urban youth of color. The California Community School Partnership program was approved in 2021 and commits up to $200,000 for high poverty schools to partner with local nonprofits providing social services (California Department of Education, 2023). Specifically, the program focuses on building collaborations that strengthen the provision of integrated support services; family and community engagement; collaborative leadership and practices for educators and administrators; and extended learning

time and opportunities to low-income youth who often identify and racial and ethnic minorities (California Department of Education, 2023). Given the nascency of CCSPP, the impact of this program remains to be seen. Importantly, CCSPP does not account for the influence of institutional culture or broader level belief systems which impact youth wellbeing. As such, future work in the area of youth-serving organization and school impacts on youth wellbeing should consider ways to more holistically capture the subtle and negative effects of systemic ideologies enacted on youth through service providing institutions (Baldridge, 2020). Regardless of the breadth of services provided, youth of color still experience challenges by navigating racist and divided culture in their youth-serving organization and school environments. Future work both in scholarship and practice should identify ways institutional culture can be shaped to serve and engage youth of color more equitably.

Limitations

Like all research, this study presents limitations. The small sample size of 29 youth and the focus on the East Oakland context limited the generalizability of the findings beyond this specific setting. However, considering the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, the small sample size was deemed sufficient to gather meaningful insights. To enhance the understanding of how youth of color experience school and youth-serving organizations in relation to their wellbeing, future research should engage a larger, more diverse sample. Additionally, the purposive convenience sampling approach used in this study may have introduced a self-selection bias. It may be that only youth who shared particular characteristics were included, limiting the representation of a broader range of experiences. These limitations may have impacted the reliability and validity of the findings. Furthermore, due to the exploratory design of this study, causal relationships between engagement with schools and youth-serving organizations and well-being could not be established. However, qualitative exploratory approaches offer valuable insights into the mechanisms and processes of interactions in schools and youth-serving organizations that shape youth wellbeing. Nonetheless, the findings from this shed light on potential pathways for future intervention and policy research targeting specific developmental processes for youth of color.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the significance of individual-context relations for the well-being of youth of color in schools and youth-serving organizations. It aligns with prior studies by emphasizing the valuable role of youth-serving organizations in supplementing formal education and promoting the psychological well-being of marginalized youth. Moreover, it underscores the complex interplay of engagement with neoliberal ideologies within these contexts, which both enhance and challenge youth well-being. By comparing experiences across institutions, this study deepens our understanding of how systems of oppression impact well-being and offers avenues for challenging such systems while fostering youth autonomy and competence. The findings suggest the continued need for the establishment of robust partnerships between schools and youth-serving organizations to create a comprehensive service pipeline that enhances the well-being of marginalized youth. Although initiatives like the California Community School Partnership Program reflect the growing recognition of collaborative efforts, future research should consider the influence of institutional culture and systemic ideologies on youth well-

being. Addressing these factors is crucial to shape institutional culture, promote equitable engagement, and address the challenges posed by a racially divided society.

This research contends that youth navigate distinct experiences and engage with schools and youth-serving organizations in unique ways. Through an examination of the intersections of race, structural inequity, hegemonic ideals, neoliberalism, and relational developmental systems within these institutions, our understanding of how these factors shape the well-being of youth of color is deepened. This study uncovers the systemic barriers and power dynamics that impact marginalized youth and emphasizes the importance of transformative practices that challenge inequities, foster inclusivity, and promote holistic well-being. Though efforts to strengthen the relationships between schools and youth-serving organizations have begun, additional work is needed to change cultures of oppression and inequity grounded in neoliberal and racist ideals. Youth of color are observant, strong, articulate members of our socially unjust society; a population which deserves to be provided with many more opportunities and resources than they are currently afforded.

Paper 3: Wellbeing for who?: Revisiting conceptualizations of wellbeing with East Oakland youth

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, discourse on youth wellbeing have proliferated across the realms of policy, practice and research priorities (McLeod & Wright, 2016; Sointu, 2005). In 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH), and a network of youth-serving organizations formed a working group committed to developing frameworks conceptualizing adolescent wellbeing (World Health Organiztion, 2023).Through the Healthy People 2030 initiative, the US Department of Health and Human Services in partnership with the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has identified wellbeing as one of the top priorities in youth health policy and service provision over the coming years (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Additionally, in 2021 California committed $4.4 billion dollars to the "Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative" a cooperative effort between government, education, and community stakeholders to promote wellbeing while ensuring necessary and critical resources are available to meet the evolving needs of youth (California Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Initiatives such as these highlight the importance of wellbeing as a critical facet of youth development. However, debate on what actually constitutes wellbeing is an often-cited challenge of youth development scholarship (Bourke & Geldens, 2007; Butler & Kern, 2016; McLeod & Wright, 2016)

Though interest in the development and maintenance of wellbeing has garnered considerable investment from a range of stakeholders, a universal consensus on the conceptualization of wellbeing remains elusive (Butler & Kern, 2016; McLeod & Wright, 2016; Sointu, 2005). However, subjective psychological measures such as the increasingly popular Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness (EPOCH) model of wellbeing have taken dominant positions across youth development assessments (Sointu, 2005). Engagement describes being absorbed and interested and involved in an activity, so much so that youth may lose track of time. Perseverance requires that youth stick with tasks while pursuing goals despite challenges that they experience. Optimism is maintaining a sense of hope and confidence about the future and viewing negative things as temporary even while experiencing life challenges. Connectedness describes feeling loved, supported and valued by others and happiness is feeling happy and content with life most of the time. The EPOCH model was designed to specifically assess adolescent youth wellbeing and is comprised of engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness (Kern et al., 2016). One of the touted strengths of the model is recent empirical evidence of cross-cultural validity, findings advocates suggest support its value as a developmental assessment tool among diverse youth populations (Choi et al., 2021; Maurer et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2022; Zeng & Kern, 2019).

Though research has begun to privilege the use of subjective psychological measures of wellbeing in the study of healthy development (Rose et al., 2017), current scholarship presents a lack of investigation focused on understanding how well measures such as the EPOCH model are actually aligned with the lived experiences and needs of marginalized youth (Choi et al., 2021). This is problematic from a methodological standpoint, as failure to engage in rigorous construct operationalization can lead to validity and reliability issues, as well as biased estimations of

associations between variables in both descriptive and causal analyses (MacKenzie, 2003; Miller et al., 2009). Considering a robust interdisciplinary literature acknowledges that marginalized young people experience life challenges more complex than their more privileged counterparts (Sapiro & Ward, 2020), one must question if current conceptualizations of wellbeing are appropriate for all youth, or, if the ways in which we define this important component of development should be reassessed for those experiencing socioeconomic hardship. Uplifting the value of problematizing logics, Mckenzie (2003) succinctly notes "Do not sacrifice construct validity at the altar of internal consistency reliability." As of the writing of this paper, scant if any empirical investigation into the construct validity of the EPOCH model or more general subjective psychological measures of wellbeing have been conducted. Thus, critical inquiry regarding the fit of subjective psychological conceptualizations of wellbeing being valid and reliable proxies of development within the context of marginalized youth's lives remain a gap in current scholarship.

Methods for strengthening construct validity abound and include approaches such as rigorous examinations of the literature in the form of metanalyses and systematic reviews, as well as more engaged approaches such as interviews and focus groups with key informants who exist outside the privileged and intellectually incestuous academic ivory tower (Miller et al., 2009). Drawing insight from the perspectives of those who have knowledge of a topic but exist untainted by the rigid logics of research methodology can provide novel and important insight regarding the fit or misalignment of a construct in the presented form (Miller et al., 2009). Thus, engaging individuals who have content knowledge presents an invaluable process in the refinement of measurement.

This paper addresses the challenges of the youth wellbeing literature by interrogating the EPOCH conceptualization of wellbeing through qualitative, exploratory, and youth-engaged methods and is guided by the following research questions: 1) How do marginalized youth define wellbeing? 2) How do marginalized youth's definitions of wellbeing compare to the EPOCH measure? The overarching purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which a commonly applied definition of wellbeing aligns (or is misaligned) with the unique lived experiences and perspectives of marginalized youth in East Oakland in relation to how they define wellbeing.

The Concept of Wellbeing

Generally, wellbeing is defined as experiencing positive feelings and future outlooks while having the ability to function well, having control over one's purpose and decisions in life while also experiencing positive relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Authors has described wellbeing as a state of "feeling good" defined by overall positive perceptions and emotions (Butler & Kern, 2016; Maurer et al., 2021). Numerous scholars have noted that wellbeing is more than simply a lack of negative perceptions and emotions, it is also the presence of positive affect –the expression of emotion (Butler & Kern, 2016). However, there exists many different empirically supported definitions of wellbeing and divergent understandings of what dimensions of functioning it encompasses, discrepancies which have shifted over time (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Diener & Seligman, 2004; McLeod & Wright, 2016; Roth et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2020; Stoll, 2014).

Beginning in the 1700s, the concept of wellbeing was commensurate with economic wealth and composed of objective indicators such as poverty status and income (Diener &

Seligman, 2004; Sointu, 2005). Theorists such as Adam Smith argued the more wealth a person had, the better their needs were met, and in-turn, the more choice in life and engagement in enjoyable activities they would experience. Quite simply, wealth was the measure of wellbeing. However, as noted by Deiner and Seligman (2004):

> *Because goods and services are plentiful and because simple needs are largely satisfied in modern societies, people today have the luxury of refocusing their attention on the ''good life''—a life that is enjoyable, meaningful, engaging, and fulfilling—and using economic and other policies in its service.* (pg. 2)

Stated differently, as society as a whole became wealthier, and a shrinking proportion of the population struggled to meet their basic needs, the definition of well-being predicated on economic measures alone was no longer deemed acceptable.

In response to critiques of the construct being too tied to economic measures, wellbeing emerged reinvented in the early 1980s. As Sointu (2015) states, conceptualizations of wellbeing shifted from the "body politic" to "the body personal", being redefined as a subjective rather than objective measure of quality of life. This shift is also represented in Stoll's (2014) brief historical account of wellbeing research, as she defines this time period as the turn to psychological explorations of wellbeing instead of economic. Another characteristic of this shift in wellbeing conceptualization was a growing focus on individual flourishing resulting from personal responsibility and effort while moving away from the incorporation of more macro level factors such as social position and cultural norms (Sointu, 2005). Since then, an abundance of wellbeing measures have emerged as society has taken increasing interest in the value of understanding wellbeing in relation to bettering the lives of young people across the globe (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021).

In the economic and political science fields wellbeing is currently defined through quality of life assessments which are typically composed of a small number of objectively measured items (Ruggeri et al., 2020). For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OEDC) Wellbeing Framework conceptualizes wellbeing across 4 key areas: material outcomes, physical health outcomes, cognitive and educational outcomes, and social and emotional outcomes (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development, 2023). However, other more commonly applied conceptualizations are heavily focused on the subjective psychological nature of wellbeing, including the PERMA and EPOCH measures which are being increasingly implemented in research globally (Choi et al., 2021; Kern et al., 2015; Maurer et al., 2021)

Introduced in 2011, Seligman posited that five components necessary for wellbeing were positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Butler & Kern, 2016; Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011). Positive emotions refer to one feeling happy and joyful. Engagement is described as being interested in activities. Meaning is defined as believing life has value while accomplishment involves working towards goals and positive feelings of achievement (Kern et al., 2015) This model abbreviated to PERMA, has been applied widely to assessing youth wellbeing in school contexts (Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011).

Emerging from the PERMA model, the EPOCH measure of wellbeing is designed to be more focused on adolescent youth and is comprised of engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness (Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Kern et al.,

2016). The EPOCH conceptualization of wellbeing has been found to be a reliable measure of youth wellbeing in cross-cultural studies including samples in China, Sweden and the U.S.(Choi et al., 2021; Maurer et al., 2021; Zeng & Kern, 2019). Notably, scales such as the PERMA and EPOCH measures are focused primarily on the mental aspects wellbeing and do not account for other dimensions of wellbeing that have been theorized as critical to positive life outcomes such as physical health and resources that meet basic needs (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011).

Marginalized Youth

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical time in a young person's development. This phase of life is particularly important for youth who have experienced social, economic and political discrimination as a result of their race/ethnicity, citizenship status, income, or justice-involvement. Marginalized youth include those who belong to a racial/ethnic or sexual minority group, experience poverty, have a disability, are systems-involved (i.e. carceral or welfare) or experience non-citizenship status (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). These youth experience greater barriers to healthy development than do their more privileged counterparts, as they are systematically prevented from accessing opportunities and resources that are critically important for them to reach their life goals. Youth residing in urban areas face even greater challenges, such as heightened risk for homelessness, violence, poor mental health and experiencing racialized stigma across segregated neighborhoods (Iwasaki et al., 2014).

To address these socioeconomic challenges, a large body of literature has identified urban neighborhood institutions as providing access to services and resources that support the wellbeing of marginalized youth (Anderson et al., 2018; Dill & Ozer, 2019; Ginwright, 2007; King et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2005; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; Small, 2006; Small & Gose, 2020). Neighborhood institutions have been found to provide important resources for marginalized youth including increased access to social support (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Ginwright, 2007), academic tutoring (Kirk & Day, 2011), employment opportunities (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2018), provision of safe housing (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015), mental health services and referrals to other local service providers (Small, 2006). The provision of these resources has been found to have an overall positive impact on the wellbeing of marginalized young people. For example, increased access to employment opportunities has been found to reduce violent behavior, increased academic achievement, stronger social skills, and increased community engagement (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2017). Tutoring through neighborhood institutions strengthens youth's academic achievement and more positive perceptions of self, and future college and career attainment (Philp & Gill, 2020). Participating in after-school programs through neighborhood institutions has also been found to strengthen marginalized youth social capital by connection youth to adults that provide critical socioemotional support (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Dworkin et al., 2003) while the provision of mental health services has been found have reduce substance use and positively impact self-esteem (Fish et al., 2019; McLaughlin, 2000).

Though there exists immense interest from scholars, practitioners, and governing entities in strengthening and developing wellbeing, the logic for shifting the focus of wellbeing measurement to increasingly subjective psychological measures does not hold for marginalized youth. Specifically, the assumption that as basic needs are increasingly met, one will have more time to engage in pleasurable activities. Thus, as the surge in wellbeing research continues to

grow, understanding how this important facet of development is experienced among marginalized groups of young people remains understudied.

Critique of EPOCH

Though the EPOCH model of wellbeing has emerged as a valuable measure for understanding different facets of wellbeing (Diener et al., 2018; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Kern et al., 2016), its use among marginalized youth should be considered carefully. As described above, marginalized youth often experience systemic barriers that prevent development across the domains of the EPOCH model. In the published literature on the development of the EPOCH model, there were notable limitations regarding the inclusion of marginalized youth (Choi et al., 2021). For example, though Kern at al., (2016) did intentionally sample marginalized youth across 4 of their 10 samples, only samples including middle to upper-middle class youth were used to develop and refine the measure (Kern et al., 2016). Additionally, in the cross-cultural validation of the EPOCH model, sparse information is provided regarding the sample characteristics. For example, in the Sweden, youth were only drawn from schools known for educating "highly motivated" students, no additional demographics were included (Maurer et al., 2021).

To date, only one study to my knowledge has addressed this challenge of the EPOCH model. Choi et al., 2021 conducted confirmatory analyses to assess the validity of the EPOCH model among marginalized populations. They found that overall the EPOCH model aligned well with use among marginalized youth, aside from the dimension of engagement. Thus, this paper aims to explore several critiques that arise when applying the EPOCH model to marginalized populations.

Contextual Factors: The EPOCH model does not account for the social, economic, and environmental factors that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. These factors, such as discrimination, inequality, violence, and limited access to resources, can significantly impact wellbeing among marginalized individuals (Choi et al., 2021). It is essential to recognize these contextual factors when applying the EPOCH model to ensure a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing for marginalized populations.

Reliance on Positive Constructs: The EPOCH model primarily focuses on positive aspects of wellbeing such as happiness, optimism, and connectedness. While these constructs are important, it is important to also consider the negative factors that impact wellbeing, such as stress, trauma, and adversity, which marginalized populations experience at higher rates than their more privileged peers. Neglecting these negative dimensions can lead to an incomplete understanding of the challenges and complexities faced by marginalized youth and their healthy development.

Value Systems and Priorities: The EPOCH model also assumes certain values and priorities that may not align with those of marginalized populations. For example, the emphasis on individualistic aspects of wellbeing may not capture the collectivist values and community-oriented perspectives present in some marginalized communities (Choi et al., 2021). Recognizing and incorporating diverse value systems is crucial to ensure the validity of the model for diverse youth.

This paper will address these critiques of the EPOCH model, particularly when working with marginalized populations. In doing so, this study will contribute to the development of a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of wellbeing among marginalized youth through the use of qualitative methods. Through a collaborative analysis, this paper illuminates the unique experiences and challenges faced by marginalized populations with regard to the development of their wellbeing.

Study Context

East Oakland is a geographically defined section of the broader City of Oakland context and has been noted for high levels of socioeconomic barriers to life flourishing. East Oakland experiences some of the highest rates of economic disadvantage across Alameda County with 32% of the population experiencing poverty (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021; Marcelli & Pastor, 2012)Youth residing in East Oakland experience many challenges to their development including justice-involvement, lack of citizenship, risk of educational drop-out, and restricted access to diverse services and institutional resources (Marcelli & Pastor, 2012). Moreover, East Oakland boasts a diverse population, with just over 50% identifying as Latinx, approximately 25% identifying as Black, and just under 20% identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander (UCLA Center for Health Policy, 2012). From 2019-2021, nearly 40% of all shootings Oakland shootings occurred within 4 East Oakland zip codes (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021).

The youth in the current study provided first-had perspectives of the challenges experienced in East Oakland. For example, J.D. a 17 year old Latinx youth participant in the current study stated, "gun violence is definitely a challenge." Additionally many youth recounted the challenges they experienced in accessing resources that were critical to their wellbeing. H.V. a 17 year old Black female described the "lack of jobs in East Oakland" and a notable "lack of afterschool programming." As shared by some of the youth, East Oakland has "some places that are really nice" and "a lot of places that aren't so nice." J.S. a 20 year old mixed race female in the current study described East Oakland as a "beautiful struggle", a place in which a person has to work to "stay on track" to not become involved in the less positive aspects of the community.

Methods

I interviewed 29 East Oakland youth (aged 14-20) and conducted 4 focus groups to explore how marginalized youth conceptualize wellbeing and to assess how their perceptions of wellbeing aligned or were misaligned with the EPOCH measure. All participants in the study sample identified as members of racial and ethnic minorities and having experienced low-income. Table 1 depicts the sample demographics. Two of the participants identified as nonbinary, and one shared that they had and were currently experiencing homelessness. Moreover, all participants in the study resided in East Oakland, an area where exposure to violence and poverty were more common than uncommon occurrences. The demographics of the study sample are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Sample Demographics (n = 29)

Age Ranges	n (%)
14-15	7 (24%)
16-17	12 (41%)
18-20	10 (35%)
Race/Ethnicities	
AA/Black	12 (41%)
Asian	6 (21%)
Latinx	8 (28%)
Mixed	3 (10%)
Gender	
Female	13 (45%)
Male	14 (48%)
Nonbinary	2 (7%)
Housing Insecure	1 (3%)

Youth participants were recruited through a convenience sample from 4 East Oakland youth-serving organizations. Each organization focused on serving low-income youth, provided year-round and summer employment programming, and targeted specific racial/ethnic groups (see Table 2).

Table 2. East Oakland Youth-serving Orgs and Race/ethnicity Focus

Name of Organization	*Race/Ethnicity Focus*
East Oakland Youth Development Center	Black/African American
Lao Family Community Development	Asian/Chinese
Rising Sun	Mixed
Unity Council	Latinx/Mexican

Relationships with these organizations had been previously established through a community-engaged project I had managed several years prior focused on developing a social capital curriculum for implementation across youth-serving organization-housed summer jobs programs. In the years since this initial relationship building with these East Oakland institutions, I had also managed the implementation and analysis of summer survey of program participants, required by the City funder, a process which reduced staff capacity challenges for the participating youth-serving organizations.

During the planning of this study I met regularly with staff at each organization who provided invaluable insight regarding the study design, recruitment strategy, incentive amounts, and the applicability of study findings to their organizations. Eligibility constraints required that youth spoke English as well as have access to a Wi-Fi and a device that could connect to Zoom.[6] Additionally, eligible youth needed to be between the ages of 14-20 and living in one of 6 East Oakland zip codes identified by the youth-serving organizations. Each youth received a $35 gift

[6] All of the 4 participating youth-serving organizations stated that if youth were eligible and wanted to participate but experienced barriers to access, they would be able to provide the space and technology for them to engage the project onsite.

card for completing an interview and a $30 gift card for participating in a focus group. Recruitment began in June 2022 after the start of the youth-serving organizations summer programs and continued through October 20223.

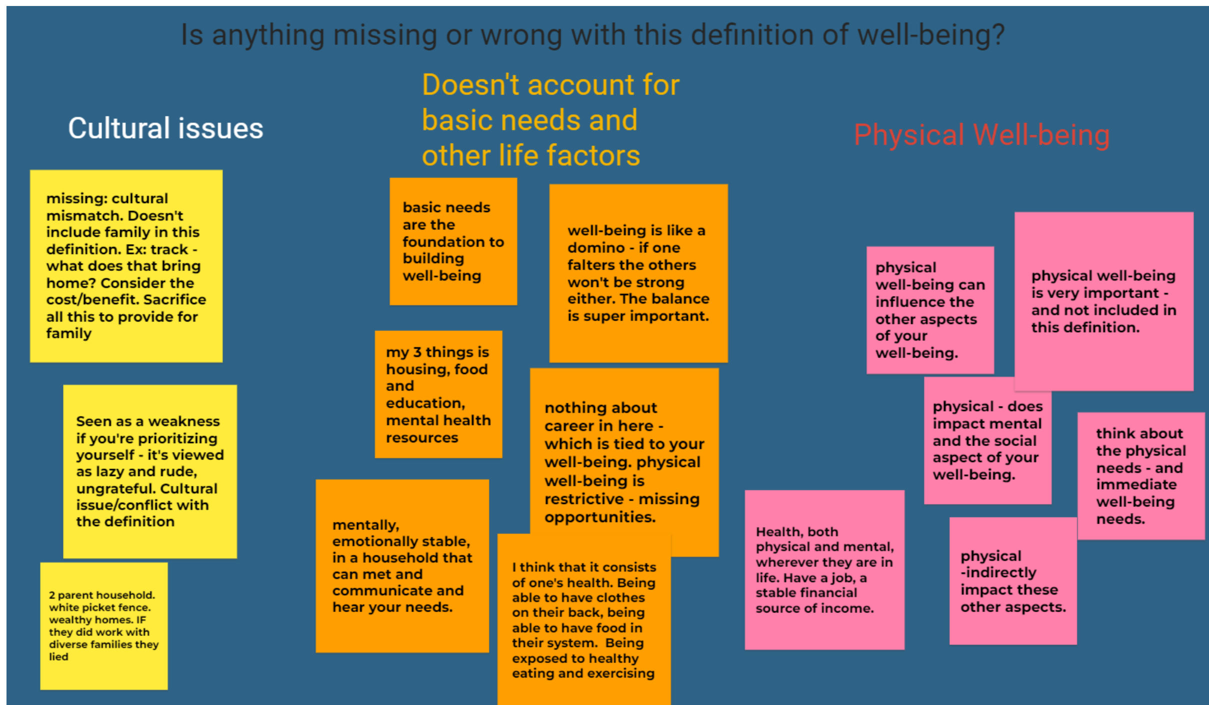
Through partnership with the youth-serving organizations recruitment occurred in multiple ways. From mid-June through August I pitched the project at 7 orientation sessions for new summer job program participants, attended a career fair at one organization and setup a booth providing information on the project to youth and other youth organizations that had interest in participating, presented at 4 professional development sessions in schools and youth organizations, and my recruitment materials were also published on one youth organization's social media sites. Eligible youth were also referred to me directly by program staff. Prior to participation consent, assessment, and parent/guardian permission was obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and ranged from 40 minutes to 3 hours. Focus groups were also held virtually via Zoom and ranged from 60-70 minutes.

Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis methods were engaged in this study. The participants and I identified emerging themes from the interview data in focus groups, collaboratively coding the data. At the start of each focus group, I provided a brief overview of what thematic coding entailed and provided examples. I then shared de-identified quotes from the interviews, which represented responses to questions about how to define well-being. To engage as many different perspectives as possible, quotes were pulled from the round of interviews that had occurred prior to each focus group. For example, prior to focus group 1, 7 interviews had been conducted. Thus, the quotes presented in focus group 1 captured the perspectives of these 7 interviews. Prior to focus group 2, 15 interviews had been conducted. As such, quotes from the additional 8 interviews were added to the collaborative analysis. This process ensured that all interview data were reviewed and coded by a subset of East Oakland youth during the focus group coding process.

After being presented with the quotes from interviews, participants would identify themes across the responses and post them virtually on a Google Jam Board (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Coding Jam Board from Focus Group 1



Once the collaborative coding had been completed, as a group we discussed how to categorize these codes into higher order themes. I would present the EPOCH definition of well-being and describe the various components (engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness). Based on the participants lived experiences and the prior coding exercise that had been completed with the interview data, the participants interrogated this conceptualization of wellbeing, identifying aspects they perceived as aligned or missing from this common measure through engaged discussion. As the conversation progressed, virtual post-its were added to the jam-board by the participants, depicting emerging themes that described their critiques of the EPOCH measure (see figure 1). Member-check interviews were also conducted with the few youth who did not want to participate in a focus group during which we reviewed the jam-boards for both the definition of well-being and EPOCH critique (n = 2). Collecting multiple sources of data and engaging in participant-driven analysis served to validate the study findings.

Findings

All participants in the study sample identified as members of racial and ethnic minorities and having experienced low-income. Table 2 depicts the sample demographics. Two of the participants identified as nonbinary, and one shared that they had and were currently experiencing homelessness. Moreover, all participants in the study resided in East Oakland, an area where exposure to violence and poverty were more common than uncommon occurrences. The stigmatizing effect of these facets of their identities emerged throughout our interviews. East Oakland youth described feeling lost and forgotten, and judged by preconceptions of the community they resided in. In a post-focus group note, ICT, an 18 year old bi-racial female experiencing housing insecurity shared an experience she had that provided insight regarding the ways East Oakland youth were viewed by the rest of the city.

When I finished my culinary classes at Laney Community College in Oakland we had an end of the program ceremony at the Oakland Scottish Rite Center. We got to present our cooking projects, serve food to the general public, and the Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf was there. She is an excuse of a mayor in my opinion as she gave a speech at the event and mentioned every Oakland high school in high esteem except for my high school and a couple others. The fact that our own Oakland mayor doesn't know about my high school and that kids from my high school participate in community centered programs was disheartening.

This reflection illuminates how East Oakland youth at times feel forgotten or overlooked by decision makers in the City of Oakland. Other participants in the study also expressed how they are often an overlooked group within the broader community context, though they maintained skills and engaged in activities that served the surrounding community in positive ways.

Honestly, people don't talk about the youth but I like to keep my conversation around the youth. In the organization that I'll be talking about later, it kinda had me work with youth so, it gave me more opportunity to really talk to them a lot of them are creative, and a lot of them are really helpful in the organization. They really try to help each other and help the community and see what's going on and they're willing to learn. So I think there's a lot of potential in the youth in my neighborhood – J.D., 17 year-old Latinx male

East Oakland Youth's Conceptualizations of Wellbeing

Overall, East Oakland youth define wellbeing in both objective and subjective ways, incorporating aspects of environmental, physical, economic and psychological wellbeing into their conceptualizations. When asked what wellbeing means to them, one participant posted anonymously in a focus group: "My 3 things is housing, food and education, mental health resources". S.G.an 18 year-old Chinese male stated during their interview: "I guess well-being is [being] able to satisfy or feel comfortable, like feeling mentally stable, physically, and financially comfortable". The implications of living in an environment in which violence occurs in unsurprising ways, seemed to emerge for S.V., a 17 year-old biracial female, who noted that feelings of safety were necessary components of her definition of wellbeing.

I kind of think of everything. How is their mental? How is their physical? How is their environment? And just overall your health because yes, you can be happy but do you feel safe in this environment? Are you feeling well in this environment? – S.V.

Additionally, East Oakland youth conceptualize wellbeing in ways that consider their limited access to resources including both economic and social.

I think that it [well-being] consists of one's health. Being able to have clothes on their back, being able to have food in their system, being able to have the supplies that they need to succeed throughout school even just in life in general – J.S.

This framing and definition of wellbeing illustrates the importance of basic resources such as food and housing for youth who experience the limiting effects of socioeconomic challenges. I.C.T. had openly shared her challenges with economic and housing insecurity. When asked to define wellbeing she stated:

Wellbeing, definitely having a secure roof over your head. I feel like that's the bare minimum but you have to claw your way to get basic housing here. It doesn't help that they're just building more new housing near Chinatown, in downtown Oakland. That's not reduced cost or low-income housing. It's like all high-income housing like $3,000 for a studio or a one-bedroom, one bath. It's not sustainable. So that's one thing, housing.

Another thing is just warm meals and food. I specifically remember when my family was staying at the Salvation Army that's in East Oakland. It was nice to have hot meals there but oftentimes, lunch for me was just a can of sardines in tomato sauce. I'm just like, that's not comforting. Wellbeing is just like, I want to rest assured that when I bring my lunch to school, it's going to fill me up and it's not going to be embarrassing to open in front of my classmates when they have hot meals and stuff. So that's another thing, food.

I.C.T.'s response illuminates the ways economic privilege shapes what an individual perceives as wellbeing. Across subject psychological measures, the focus is on aspects of flourishing that require the presence of wealth, and economic security. Marginalized young people experience less flexibility in being able to commit their time to engaging in solely pleasurable or enjoyable activities due to the necessity of meeting basic needs not only for themselves but in some cases their families as well. This is substantiated in the literature, as even in youth-programs serving marginalized youth, there exists a socioeconomic disparity with regard to the activities that youth are provided. Specifically, in those serving primarily low-income youth of color, programs more often focus on educational attainment, whereas across programs that serve higher income, primarily populations, there is more time spent on leisure and enrichment activities (McNamara et al., 2020; Philp & Gill, 2020). As such, the logics which have undergirded the shift in the study of wellbeing from objective to subjective and psychological, do not hold true for youth experiencing socioeconomic marginalization.

Interrogating the EPOCH Measure of Wellbeing

The widely used EPOCH measure reflects a definition of wellbeing that is deeply entrenched with ideals that may not be relevant to youth experiencing the negative effects of structural and systematic oppression in their everyday lives. The participants in this study reflected on the various components of the definition and felt that there were issues not only in what the presented dimensions were, but in the power that the people who had developed this measure had within the purview of research and its impact on youth's lives. Emerging from our discussion included frustrations with how classism and ageism may well have biased the EPOCH measure of wellbeing when considered from marginalized youth's perspectives. This was evident in an exchange between two participants during Focus Group 2:

K.N (16 year-old Black, nonbinary): These are the definitions of wellbeing by people who have already lived their lives and have already experienced life and now have the freedom to do whatever they want, including making up fake definitions about teenage well-being. Because, you also have to take into account, they were teenagers like in the 50s. So it's like, it's an entirely new generation.

S.A (17 year-old Latinx, female): And times were very different, very, very different.

K.N: Back then you could work for six months and then buy a house. It's not the same.

Another youth mentioned how the various components of the EPOCH measure seem grounded in a value system influenced by access to wealth and class privilege. S.A. a 14 year-old Black female discussed her reaction to the various components of the EPOCH measure: "They're [researchers] looking at the upper, like higher class, higher income families that have money, basically, who live a certain lifestyle". K.N. followed-up shortly after:

> *These definitions came from a study, it was probably from a two-parent household where it was like maybe, one or two kids, who basically grew up, with a white picket fence, the American dream. For these types of studies it's like they choose wealthier households, who they know have not faced a struggle before.* – K.N.

Relatedly, East Oakland youth shared how at times the needs of their family needed to be prioritized as financial hardships create different life priorities than those reflected in the EPOCH measure. For some youth, wellbeing included not just their own welfare, but also those they considered family. Marginalized youth who must also contribute to the households resources, must in some instances forego aspects of the EPOCH conceptualizations of wellbeing. This was explained by S.H. a 14 year-old Black female during focus group 4.

> *I think something missing with this definition is also like about different cultures. I think that really does apply to including family and all because when I tried to pursue track at, my high school my mom was like, no, because that's not going to bring anything home. Like, if I'm just doing that out of perseverance or because I am engaged in it, it's not gonna help put food on the table and it's just going to be extra work for my mom. Even if it makes me happy. So there is that theme of like, sometimes you have to sacrifice all this optimism and connectedness and happiness for something that will actually provide for the wellbeing of your family as well.* – S.H.

S.H. went on to provide an example of a time when we wanted to engage in sports. However, this interest did not align with the distinct needs her mother relied on her for, including getting food through local organizations for the family. From this perspective, S.H. clearly illuminates the challenges some marginalized youth experience when finding time and opportunity to engage in activities that make them, as individuals, happy.

> *Personally, I wanted to go to track but my mom was much more approving of me going the Queer Arts Center in downtown and getting meals for our family. Like that was much more to our overall well-being. But also like programs where she knew that me and my sister would get other stipends or get meals. She was much more approving of that because they had physical relevance rather than just up in the air. Like, "Oh, this will make your child engaged and happy but what is there to show for it physically?"* - S.H.

The strictly mental health focus of the EPOCH conceptualization of wellbeing is also problematic from East Oakland youth perspectives. Participants described how physical wellbeing is intimately tied to mental wellbeing, noting that both are important for overall wellbeing to be achieved. The participants described how the mind and body divide made little sense, as they described how wellbeing is composed of many interrelated aspects across all dimensions of an individual. This was captured in an exchange between two participants in focus group 4.

S.G. (18 year-old Chinese male): I think physical well-being is extremely important. Ever since sophomore or freshman year, I've been working out. And this past year, I've dealt with a ton of injuries one, including a fractured back and now I do not allow myself to really exercise or do anything for my physical wellbeing. And that sucks. Just mentally it is terrible. Physical wellbeing can also just lead to you ruining your mental wellbeing as well and other parts of your wellbeing, because I feel like physical wellbeing is like the first thing you see. If you look at a mirror you see…you look at yourself. That can take a toll on your other wellbeing. If your physical well-being isn't kept up.

H.N. chimed in after S.G. had finished, with a direct connection in his life, between physical wellbeing and his optimism, perseverance and engagement. Here we see how intertwined physical and mental wellbeing are, supporting the argument that makes little sense to study one in isolation from the other.

H.N. (17 year-old Vietnamese male): So for physical wellbeing, I think adding onto S.G., it does affect mental and I think also like the social aspect of your wellbeing, because this past year, I recently tore my ACL. So like I've noticed a change in my mental health and me in terms of my social aspect. I feel like it indirectly impacts optimism or like perseverance engagement.

S.G.: I have some add-ons. I think for wellbeing it's kind of like a domino effect. I think if one part of your wellbeing falters, it will indirectly or directly connect with other will parts of your well-being. It's good to have a balance of every aspect I guess, and I think that's really important. Me, personally when I was injured from my physical well-being I was very restricted. I couldn't I think, it was hard to sit even sit regularly and like study for my AP exams which were pretty important or even just like trying to get a summer job or some internship because I have to avoid any physical work or anything.
It kind of restricts you like they're just things you can't really do because your body is not capable of it and that can like you can miss all opportunities on that and this is pretty bad mentally as well.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that the EPOCH model, a popular method of conceptualizing wellbeing may need to be revisited or expanded for marginalized youth. As prior scholarship has noted, the needs of youth experiencing the limiting effects of socioeconomic disadvantage are more complex than more privileged youth (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). Moreover, the logic which undergird the “psychological turn” in wellbeing scholarship, fail to account for the many structural challenges that marginalized youth experience with regard meeting their basic needs. Thus this study builds on the current subjective psychological wellbeing literature by exploring how marginalized youth define wellbeing generally, as well as how they perceive and interpret the EPOCH model.

The youth in this study defined wellbeing as being more diverse than mental wellbeing alone. Notably, a critical component to strengthening subjective psychological wellbeing was physical health. Several youth described that in order for them to maintain a positive, optimistic and motivated mindset, their bodies needed to be healthy too. This finding challenges the limited scope of the subjective psychological wellbeing literature, which suggests that positive psychological wellbeing leads to more positive physical health (Steinmayr et al., 2019).

Additionally, the youth in this study describe having their basic needs met as also being central to how they define wellbeing. This perspective on wellbeing, aligns with holistic definitions and approaches to measurement that incorporate both objective and subjective component (Ross et al., 2020). These increasingly comprehensive measures, assume multiple dimensions of an individual's life circumstances and experiences (including those resulting from their socioeconomic position) impact their ability to thrive (Ross et al., 2020). Given these findings, the EPOCH model may consider moving beyond the confines of mental health, to also include basic measures of objective wellbeing such as having housing, regular access to food, and healthcare.

This study finds some alignment with Choi et al., (2021) which sought to test the validity of the EPOCH model among marginalized youth. Specifically, that the engagement component of the model may not align with the lived experiences and norms for youth experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (Choi et al., 2021). As described by the participants above, engaging in an activity and losing track of time would be perceived in their households as a selfish endeavor, one that would be better replaced by working to bring additional resources into the home. This finding provides evidence that supports the argument by some researchers, that subjective psychological wellbeing is impacted by socioeconomic status (Steinmayr et al., 2019). It may also be, that the wording of the questions should be revised in ways that make the interpretation more consistent across diverse groups of youth (Choi et al., 2021).

This study also expands the current methods used in adolescent research in distinct ways. First, to date, no study to my knowledge has collaboratively interrogated the EPOCH model with a sub-sample drawn from the broader populations such measures claim to assess. Though the EPOCH model has been tested for cross-cultural validity, only one study has focused on marginalized youth as used quantitative methods (Choi et al., 2021). As such, the majority of research promoting the EPOCH model, rely on data drawn from more privileged subgroups of youth, and are unable to assess nuanced differences that may appear due to socioeconomic position (Maurer et al., 2021; Zeng & Kern, 2019). Thus, the findings from this study provides the first exploratory qualitative evidence for the need to assess the EPOCH model construct validity more deeply, by drawing on the expert knowledge of lived experience provided by marginalized youth, given that their access to resources which may spur wellbeing are severely limited.

It should be noted that other measures of subjective psychological adolescent wellbeing have been developed using a more collaborative approach than the EPOCH model. For example, the Multidimensional Wellbeing in Youth Scale was created through a co-creation process, in which youth were asked to define wellbeing and were participants in the formation of the scale itself (Green et al., 2023). This project found that, in addition to feeling close and connected to people, youth also consider having self-confidence, the ability to cope with stress, and feeling respected as being core to their psychological wellbeing (Green et al., 2023). Future research should consider the value of incorporating traditional quantitative methods of construct development (Kern et al., 2016) with qualitative and co-creative approaches (Green et al., 2023) to strengthen the validity of scales of wellbeing.

Second, this study uses multiple youth-driven methods as a way to assess the construct validity of the EPOCH model and presents a novel approach to uplifting marginalized youth voice in ways that centers their expert knowledge of their own lived experiences and put these

perspectives in conversation with the empirical literature. To my knowledge, no other study has engaged focus groups as both a source of data as well as a forum to collaborative develop a codebook with the participants themselves. This process begins to build power for marginalized youth, who are often the “target” of neighborhood research, but rarely engaged as information producers (Akom et al., 2016). As such, youth who experience disadvantage based on their identities, are often the information providers, rather than receiving accolade for their ability to produce knowledge that can inform research in significant and important ways (Akom et al., 2016; Green et al., 2023). Marginalized youth are both resilient and insightful yet remain trapped and stigmatized by research that perpetuates narratives of “wellbeing” borne from privileged and myopic perspectives (Ginwright et al., 2006; Tuck, 2009). Rather than accepting wellbeing as presented, the participants in this study rejected “academic” conceptualizations and instead provided rich justifications for how the EPOCH model should be revised. Creating space for marginalized youth to engage and have say in processes that impact their lives is empowering and seeks to ensure research is actually aligned with their life needs (Akom et al., 2016; Green et al., 2023).

This study's findings highlight the importance for policy makers and practitioners to move beyond simply addressing the psychological aspects of marginalized youth wellbeing and instead focus on reducing the structural barriers that profoundly affect their lives. These barriers, such as limited access to affordable housing and food insecurity, have a significant impact on marginalized youth and their ability to thrive. Despite their engagement with community institutions, many of the youth in this study still struggled to meet their basic needs. Therefore, it is crucial for policy makers and practitioners to diversify the range of resources provided by local institutions, aiming to improve the holistic wellbeing of an increasing number of young individuals. By ensuring youth of color have access to basic needs, their mental health and physical wellbeing can flourish. Without adequate food or shelter, wellbeing in all forms is at risk.

Limitations

As with any research, this project had some limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the study findings. Future research should incorporate a broader array of participants, particularly those residing in areas outside of East Oakland. Furthermore, the project faced limitations in terms of data collection methods. The reliance on self-report measures may have led to response biases and social desirability effects, particularly during focus groups. This in turn could have potentially reduced the accuracy of the data. Another limitation of the study was the lack of longitudinal data. The project also relied on cross-sectional data, which only provides a snapshot of the participants' experiences at a specific point in time. Longitudinal research would be valuable to examine how youth's conceptualizations of wellbeing evolve over time and whether certain factors or experiences have lasting effects. Lastly, given the exploratory design of the project, there was no comparison group. Additional work is required, to understand the differences in youth’s conceptualizations of wellbeing across different socio-economic strata.

Conclusion

This study has uplifted the need for subjective psychological measures of youth wellbeing need to be revisited for marginalized youth. The youth in this study emphasized the

importance of physical health and having their basic needs met as integral components of wellbeing, challenging the limited scope of existing literature. This study also suggests that the engagement component of the EPOCH model may not align with the lived experiences and norms of marginalized youth, who perceive activities that promote personal growth and development as secondary to contributing resources to their households. These findings further support the argument that subjective psychological wellbeing is influenced by socioeconomic status, an aspect of wellbeing that is not captured in psychological measures alone.

Moreover, this study contributes to the literature on youth wellbeing by highlighting the value of incorporating qualitative and co-creative approaches which involve youth in defining wellbeing and developing measurement scales. By combining quantitative methods with qualitative and co-creative approaches, researchers can strengthen the validity of wellbeing scales and ensure that they encompass the diverse perspectives and needs of marginalized youth. Overall, this study underscores the importance of expanding the conceptualization of wellbeing to include not only mental health but also physical health and the fulfillment of basic needs. By revisiting and refining existing models like the EPOCH model, researchers and practitioners can better fulfill the specific needs and aspirations of marginalized youth, thereby promoting a more healthy and inclusive society for all.

Concluding Chapter

As illuminated across interdisciplinary scholarship, not all places are created equal. Youth living in low-income urban areas are stymied in their ability to lead healthy lives, resulting from uneven distribution and access to housing, medical care, political engagement, quality education, and employment opportunities among others (Braveman, 2014; Corburn et al., 2015; Northridge & Freeman, 2011). This restriction of active community participation in turn leads to numerous developmental and health inequities among the U.S. urban poor. Thus, despite considerable investigation into the relationship between place and development, wellbeing disparities remain a social justice concern in the U.S. What is important for all individuals committed to reducing inequities from a place-based perspective to consider is that places are not fixed, static, immoveable and unchangeable spaces. Rather, as argued in paper 1, they are comprised of multiple dimensions and facets, all of which shift based on human decision-making, choice, and macro-cultural systems.

The structural forces which shape and perpetuate the uneven and misaligned distribution of resources and institutions across geographies can be addressed through thoughtful, well-informed policymaking. Efforts to reform the way urban youth of color access and experience education have gained traction over recent years. As can be seen with California's Community School Partnership Program, practitioners and policymakers have finally acknowledged the potential value of supporting intra-institutional collaborations in places where access to resources of any form is severely limited. However, policies embracing a holistic approach to development will need to be implemented not just in education and youth wellbeing but across the many other realms of youth development: healthcare, employment, and housing to name a few. As such, a multitude of challenges and shortcomings in the study of place and youth development will need to be addressed.

This dissertation has sought to address the following challenges in the place-based literature: poor conceptualization of place, lack of youth voice, and lack of integrated assessment. In doing so, the findings presented here suggest that understanding places from both geographic and social perspectives can greatly inform interventions targeting youth development. Notably, research to date has too often focused on singular aspects of place-based mechanisms and has moved too quickly towards the engagement of causal rather than exploratory and descriptive qualitative research. Our academic and professional obsession with identifying "root causes" paired with the well-intentioned drive to eliminate socioeconomic developmental disparity has left us paying limited attention to the foundations of rigorous research. As uplifted in paper 3, at time the development of constructs moves forward without taking time to engage the populations who are most directly impacted by structural oppression. As such, measures such as the EPOCH model emerge that weaken assessments of marginalized youths wellbeing. Though testing causal theories may lead feed the interests of the public and funders, more care should be committed to interrogating the measures and constructs which undergird the validity and reliability of our reported findings.

Additionally, this dissertation has shown the value of using quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods in tandem. To unpack the complex web of processes that function in producing wellbeing outcomes, methods and approaches that allow for the assessment of multiple process will need to be given more privilege in the academic realm. Though the value of mixed methods has been uplifted by many, qualitative work is still considered as secondary to

rigid quantitative methods. Utilizing increasingly qualitative and participatory methods will help build our understanding of diverse mechanistic processes, leading to stronger measurement and better-directed action within the realm of youth development.

Lastly, this dissertation has uplifted the importance of taking person-centered approaches to research. Urban youth of color are so often viewed as passive actors in their surrounding world contexts. However, as can be seen from my presented findings, marginalized youth hold tremendous insight, expertise, strength, and skills that when accepted by dominant society and begin to reverse historic and current methods of oppressive and racialized stereotypes. Thus, youth of color need to be considered as both recipients and providers of services and support within the purview of their development.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Youth-serving Organizations and Well-being Interview Guide[1]

Hi! Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The goal of this project is to learn from you about how your experiences with youth-serving organizations support you, your family and your community. I'm going to ask you some questions about which organizations you have or currently are involved with, and how your engagement with these places strengthens different aspects of you and your life.

First – what would you like for me to call you when I talk and write about this work? It can be any name, just not one that is copyrighted, or one connected to a famous individual.

(After changing participant name to the pseudonym on the Zoom screen, begin recording)

Icebreaker and basic information questions

1. Ok (participant pseudonym) to start, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
    - *How old are you?*
    - *What grade are you going into? Or when did you finish school?*
    - *How do you identify in terms of gender and race/ethnicity?*

2. Do you follow astrology at all?
    - *(if yes) What is your astrology sign?*
        - *Follow-up: Do you feel like you see parts of yourself in your sign?*

3. How would you describe your neighborhood?
    - *How long have you lived there?*
    - *If your friend who wasn't from the Bay asked you about your neighborhood what would you tell them?*
    - *What are challenges in your neighborhood?*
    - *What's awesome about your neighborhood?*

4. *How do you define well-being?*

Youth-serving organization questions

Now we will shift a bit and talk about your participation with youth-serving organizations. A youth-serving organization is a place where you go to participate in programs like a summer job or after-school events. This doesn't include school or churches. I will map the organizations and information you tell me about these places on the StreetWyze app and you can see the map change in real-time.

5. What are the youth organizations have you gone to? They don't have to be in Oakland if you've gone to ones in other places.
6. What types of things do you do at these places?
7. If you were to describe this place in relation to you and your well-being what would

you say?

Well-being questions

The next questions are going to focus on learning from you how your participation with these different places supported you and different aspects of your life.

8. Do you feel happy when you're at these places? (happiness)
    - *(if yes) What is it about being there that makes you feel happy?*
    - *(if no) What is it about being there that makes you feel unhappy?*

9. Do have fun when you're at these places? (happiness)
    - *(if yes) What is fun about being at these places?*
    - *(if no) What is not fun about being at these places?*

10. How has your participation at these places supported your life? (general well-being)

11. How do these youth organizations help you develop your skills and interests? (engagement)

12. How do these places help you make decisions about things in your life? (perseverance)

13. How do these places help you feel hopeful and confident about your future? (optimism)

14. How do these places encourage you to see the positive side of things in life? (optimism)

15. How do these youth organizations help you focus on your work and interests? (engagement)

16. How do these organizations help you pursue and complete your goals even when you're facing challenges in life? (perseverance)

17. How do these youth organizations provide opportunities to make new relationships with people? (connectedness)

18. How do the relationships you have at these places support you? (connectedness)

19. Do you do things through which you provide support for others at these places? (connectedness)
    - *(if yes) can you describe these relationship for me?*
    - *Can you describe activities that you take a leadership role in at these places?*

20. Do you maintain contact with the people you met at these places? (connectedness)

21. What have you learned about yourself at these places? (general well-being)

Multi-level well-being questions

22. How does/has your participation at these places help your family?

23. How does/has your participation at these places help your neighborhood?

Comparison with schools questions

Lots of people say that schools and youth organizations are important places for young people to learn and develop important skills and knowledge.

24. Are the things you do at these places different than what you do at school?
    - *(if yes): Can do you describe for me how they're different?*

25. How do these things support your life differently than what you do at school?

Logistics questions

26. Are you still engaged with these places? (YSO requested question)
    - *(if no) what did you do after the program ended?*
    - *How could these places support you after the programs end?*
    - *What is stopping you from staying engaged?*
    - *What can the YSO do to support and/ or promote your continued engagement?*

27. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to change about the youth organizations to make your experiences there better?

28. How did you get connected to these places?

29. How do/did you travel to get to these places?
    - Do/did you ever have challenges getting to them when you needed to?

30. How often do/did you use or access these places?

31. What types of organizations do you wish there were more of for youth in your neighborhood?

32. Are there any services that you would like to see these places provide you with that you are currently not receiving?

COVID questions (YSO requested)

33. Were there vaccine rules at the YSOs you interact with?
    - (*if yes*) Did these rule prevent you participating in offerings/ partaking in events?

34. Did COVID and concern for your or your family's health stop you from participating and interacting with YSOs?

35. Is the presence of COVID and/ or vaccine rules continuing to have an impact on the way that you engage with YSOs?

Close-out question

36. Are there any other things you want to share about your experience with youth-serving organizations that we haven't already talked about?

Potential probing questions:

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. Can you please give me an example?
3. What do you mean when you say…