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“Getting rid of systemic racism:” youth of color critical reflections and identified strategies during the twin pandemics

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Black, Latine, and Asian American young people living in the U.S. experienced the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, along with racial traumas and stresses stemming from racial violence and public debates on how to (or not) address racism. Using critical consciousness and social justice youth development frameworks, this study sought to emphasize youth of color responses to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism and youth-identified strategies for combating inequities experienced by these youth in Louisville, Kentucky. Between April 2021 to January 2022, youth of color (ages 12–24) were purposively recruited to engage in listening sessions. We conducted nine listening sessions on Zoom and face-to-face with 18 youth of color. Youth highlighted the saliency of racism and that they lacked safe spaces to share experiences, gain support, and collectively address and manage compounding issues. They described feeling dismissed by adults and excluded or removed from spaces where they could engage in collective care as a community. Youth suggested increased access to and existence of youth-centered spaces that prioritize youth voice and safety within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and experiences with racism in Louisville. While past research often focuses on youth critical consciousness within afterschool programs or community organizations, our study explores the roles of COVID-19 and racism as dual pandemics and catalyzing events for youth in their building critical consciousness. Through their reflections and their suggested strategies, youth in this study engaged in critical reflection about racism during COVID-19 and moved between critical consciousness awareness at the self and community levels. Future research should explore mechanisms to identify youth strategies for collectivity both inside and outside formally organized programs.

KEYWORDS

critical consciousness, social justice youth development, racism, listening sessions, community youth programs, dual pandemics

Introduction

COVID-19 and racial uprisings in recent years illuminated the effects of racial traumas, oppression, and inequities, as well as mental-health struggles, affecting communities of color (hereafter referred to as youth of color,¹ which include Black, Latine, Indigenous, and Asian American youth) in the U. S. (Devakumar et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 37% of U. S. high school students reported regular mental-health struggles (Schaeffer, 2022). During 2020 to 2022, youth and young adults were not only exposed to COVID-19-related health risks and mental-health struggles, but also unprecedented disruptions, relocations, intersectional vulnerabilities and stresses, and racial disparities in structural conditions, including economic and educational hardships, job displacement, and police brutality (Conrad et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2023; Samji et al., 2022; Schudde et al., 2022). U. S. Black and Latine high school students experienced unique and acute struggles, including a higher prevalence of attempting suicide compared to White students in 2023 (Verlenden et al., 2024). Black, multiracial, indigenous, and Hispanic or Latine Kentucky 10th-graders had higher proportions of feelings of hopelessness, attempted suicide, race- and culture-related fears, and race-related stresses than their White peers in 2021 (Sanders et al., 2022).

COVID-19 and racism were prominent features of public discussions, forums, and research during 2020 to 2022; however, previous public discourse and social science research tended to focus on youth's COVID-19-related struggles instead of their agentic responses to *both* pandemics of COVID-19 and racism (Conrad et al., 2021; Hoyt et al., 2021; Naff et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2022; Velez and Herteen, 2023). Some recent research demonstrates that Black and Latine youth/young adults² were acutely aware of stark racial and intersectional inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain times (Carey et al., 2025; Quiles et al., 2023; Schudde et al., 2022). Youth have emerging capacity to initiate and lead efforts toward social change and are often inspired by historical and current moments; even so, their voices can be silenced through conditions of oppression and through deficit-based frameworks relegating their perspectives to the margins (Baldrige, 2019; Briggs, 2024; Ginwright, 2010).

During 2020 to 2022, Black, Latine, and Asian American young people in the U. S. were exposed to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism involving racial inequities, traumas, and violence toward Asian and Black Americans, along with racial protests and public and political debates on how to (or not) address racism and racial violence (Addo, 2020; Devakumar et al., 2020; Faison, 2023). Young people in Louisville, Kentucky (KY), where we conducted our study, experienced uncertainty and upheaval due to changes to in-person education and youth-focused support systems. Between 2020 and

2022, Louisville's public-school students experienced suspended and then unpredictable in-person educational instruction, creating compounding stresses and uncertainties in conjunction with isolation, quarantining, and health-related risks and traumas. In March 2020, Kentucky state officials enacted restricted hours and closings for community programs, schools, and non-essential offices to prevent the spreading of COVID-19. During that same month, Breonna Taylor, a Black woman living in West Louisville, was killed by Louisville Metro Police Department. Taylor's murder spurred city-wide organizing, protests, and demonstrations, which highlighted the cumulative nature of racial oppression, segregation, and disinvestment and existing tensions between local communities of color and the police in Louisville.

This study occurred as part of a larger project to explore the perspectives of youth of color navigating racial and social inequities, as well as their suggestions for social change, in Louisville, KY. Our study involved listening sessions, both with individuals and small groups, with Louisville youth of color during 2021 to 2022 when the COVID-19 pandemic and racism were in the national and local media and public spotlights. During that time, Louisville youth of color were exposed to daily injustices and inequities, as well as collective action protests and movement-building, potentially shaping their critical consciousness – the process of understanding and responding to patterned social inequities and systemic oppression (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 2000; Watts et al., 2011). We employed critical consciousness and Social Justice Youth Development as sensitizing concepts throughout the research process to intentionally foster youth voice and critical reflections and explore the following research questions: (1) How do youth of color discuss and respond to lived experiences with racism, racial inequities, and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville, KY during uncertain times?; (2) What are their suggested strategies for mitigating racial inequities and COVID-19 struggles affecting youth of color?; (3) How do these strategies reflect the process of critical consciousness?

Theoretical frameworks

Focusing on one specific theory limits a researcher's perspective to the orientation of the theory being utilized. Applying multiple theoretical perspectives allows for directions to explore and flexibility in examining the complexities of youth of color experiences during the dual pandemics. We used critical consciousness and Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) to develop the pertinent research questions, research design, and study goals. We discuss the specific implementation of SJYD within our methodological practices in the Data and Methods section, including its application to our data collection, research recruitment, and roles as researchers.

Critical consciousness

In mainstream institutions and public discourse, young people of color are often treated as lacking in agency or as facing the brunt of racial inequities in institutions like education, criminal justice, and health care without attention to their responses and critical reflections and actions to facilitate change. Ginwright and Cammarota argue that mainstream youth-development frameworks tend to “obscure our understanding of

1 Our use of the term “youth of color” places emphasis on the shared experiences and reflections of racially minoritized youth who faced racialized hate crimes, violence, inequities, and traumas during COVID-19. We also recognize that the use of this term diminishes the complexity of racialized experiences among different racialized minority groups.

2 Below, we use the broader term “youth” to encompass young people aged 12 to 24, although this study specifically included youth aged 12 to 21.

urban youth of color more than they explain, because they assume that youth themselves should be changed, rather than the oppressive environments in which they live” (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002, p. 85). Ginwright and James (2002) further argue that youth problems result primarily from social and economic patterns in urban communities steeped in “racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic practices” (p. 85).

Growing research demonstrates how youth of color build awareness and capacity for enacting social change outside of conventional and adult-centered forms of civic engagement like volunteering or voting (Ginwright, 2010; Welton and Harris, 2022). Youth of color engage in various forms of activism, protests, social media campaigns, social-justice research, and other activities, actively contributing to and leading racial justice and social change (see, for example, Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Cammarota, 2016; Welton and Harris, 2022). Indeed, adolescence and young adulthood are critical times for developing awareness of the social world and agency within it and contemporary youth actively participate in and shape public dialogue and policy-change efforts (Diemer et al., 2016; Erikson, 1968; Ginwright, 2010; Welton and Harris, 2022).

For urban youth of color who confront daily injustices and inequities, lived experiences and observations can bring about critical awareness of systemic, social conditions and the changeability of day-to-day life, fostering an articulation of collective plights and efficacy through critical consciousness (CC). Freire (2000) defines critical consciousness as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Others theorize that CC involves critical awareness of systemic, social conditions and movement toward social change, including moving beyond deterministic views presenting social conditions as un-patterned and irreversible or “naturally occurring” realities (Carey et al., 2025; Diemer et al., 2016). CC as a concept offers insights into understanding youth civic awareness and development through multiple stages of critical reflection and action (Bloomer and Brown, 2024). Watts et al. (2011) argue that critical reflections on social conditions in systemic terms are necessary for youth collective action and civic engagement to change existing conditions. Diemer et al. (2016) further expounded Freire’s conceptualization of reflection and action within CC development, identifying three interdependent and reciprocal components of CC: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. *Critical reflection* involves a systemic understanding of social inequalities and the surrounding conditions; *critical motivation* “perceived capacity and commitment to address perceived injustices”; and *critical action* is “engaging individually or collectively to change perceived injustices” (Diemer et al., 2016, p. 216). Thus, youth engagement in critical reflection and other critical consciousness processes involves understanding and responding to patterned social inequalities, as well as shared or collective plights (Diemer et al., 2016). Throughout this paper, we use the term praxis to articulate the process of engaging in critical reflection and collective action as youth respond to social inequities.

Social justice youth development

While urban Black and Latine youth are often framed as academically and civically “disengaged” or as “at-risk” based on assumptions about their problematic behaviors (e.g., presumed gang activity and substance use) in mainstream institutions (Baldridge, 2019;

Halpern, 2003; Noguera, 2003), practitioners and scholars have pushed back against deficit-based frameworks using the SJYD framework. Bloomer and Brown (2024) define SJYD as an approach to youth development focused on the adoption of practices by individuals, organizations, communities, and systems seeking to close gaps created by inequities in access and opportunities for youth by: (1) acknowledging and celebrating differences in identities and experiences of youth, (2) working toward youth identified, created, and led initiatives, (3) acknowledging the role of systemic oppression and intentionally and actively working to reduce and eliminate disparities for all youth, and (4) implementing methods that promote radical healing for impacted youth (see also Ginwright, 2010). SJYD places specific importance on CC development for youth, as the cyclical process of seeking praxis undergirds youth capacity and motivation to engage in social change efforts. Additionally, the praxis cycle provides opportunities for youth to progress through the three levels of awareness, similar to socioecological levels: self, community/social, and global (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Cammarota, 2016; Diemer et al., 2016).

Literature review

Youth of color, racism and COVID-19, and critical consciousness

Recent research on youth of color and CC examines the roles of educational or youth programs in youth critical consciousness, suggesting that youth activate their CC within the context of social-justice-oriented youth programs and spaces (Casanova, 2024; Farinde-Wu et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2020; Ngo et al., 2017). Importantly, sustained exposure to peer discussions and reflections in afterschool programs can support youth of color critical consciousness and empowerment when they have opportunities and support to critically address and challenge oppression (Casanova, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2020). Research also points to critical reflection, motivation, and action during or in response to informal and everyday interactions, such as experiences of discrimination, or catalyzing political or social events (Kennedy et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2020). We build on this research and investigate how youth of color might engage in critical consciousness while experiencing stressful, traumatic, and uncertain moments during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial violence and inequities spotlighted in the public.

A few recent studies show that, compared to White young adults, young adults of color, including Black and Latine youth, share a heightened awareness of systemic racism within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial uprising years (Quiles et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic provided a generative context for young people to become aware of systemic inequities and to feel motivated to build and engage in supportive communities and movements, including online spaces on social media (Carey et al., 2025; Wilf et al., 2023). For young people of color, experiences with racial discrimination and inequities can influence how they are attuned to systemic inequities and better able to verbalize them. Carey et al. (2025) finds that the COVID-19 pandemic and public racial violence during 2020 and 2021 brought systemic racism to the forefront of the minds of Black adolescent boys, affecting how they came to understand the racialized nature of societal and school inequities. None of these boys participated in street-level protests; however, both the COVID-19 pandemic and

encounters with Black Lives Matter protests through social media and news outlets inspired these Black boys' critical reflections of their racialized social conditions (Carey et al., 2025). Such reflections translated to growths in their critical consciousness development and, for some of the Black boys, movement toward critical actions and capacity-building to push back against systemic racism.

Racism and COVID-19 in the Louisville, Kentucky context

Our study explores the roles of catalyzing events and everyday experiences shaping how youth of color engage in critical consciousness within a city context marked by visible racial activism and inequities. We also examine their shared strategies for addressing inequities affecting youth in a city where youth voices are often overlooked, helping us to understand how youth shared strategies connect to youth critical reflections of inequities. Our study provides insights on how youth of color move to and through critical reflections of systemic inequities and problems, while navigating the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism brought into the spotlight in Louisville – the site of the murder of Breonna Taylor during March 2020 and ongoing struggles with racial violence and segregation. Thousands of protesters, including young activists, protested for racial justice on the streets of downtown Louisville and built a long-term movement for social change in the public spotlight (Doll and McCrary, 2025). Simultaneously, throughout 2020 to 2022, numerous reports and public media brought attention to racial inequities in COVID-19 morbidities and mortalities, violence, housing, health, and economic vulnerabilities, and other outcomes disproportionately experienced by people of color at the national and local levels (Addo, 2020; Clark, 2021; Doll and McCrary, 2025; Heberle et al., 2021). Local and national media and public testimonies and reports demonstrated concrete examples of racialized oppression and disparate impacts, which are institutional decisions and systemic processes that “have the consequence of producing or reinforcing racial disadvantage” often through hidden, indirect, and cumulative effects of seemingly race-neutral policies and practices (Pager and Shepherd, 2008, p. 182). Histories of racial segregation and inequities in Louisville have shaped the local context for youth of color to report on their experiences with structural racism through community-engaged research projects highlighting the impacts of racism on their communities (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Hjelm et al., 2025). For the past 20 years, Louisville youth programs have experienced defunding and challenges to programmatic access due to lack of resources and support from the local city government, particularly in neighborhoods located in West and South Louisville with larger Black and Latine populations (Greater Louisville Project, 2023; McLaren, 2020). Such challenges in the youth-sector became prominent between 2020 and 2022 as Louisville youth of color and youth workers serving them, especially those in West and South Louisville, experienced extreme educational and youth-program disruptions and challenges exacerbated by funding and resource constraints (Bloomer et al., 2021). COVID-19-related school and youth program disruptions perhaps made more visible the impacts of historical inequities and disinvestments affecting youth in Louisville.

Thus, during 2020 to 2022, youth of color in Louisville were exposed to catalyzing moments, unprecedented disruptions, and public spotlights on inequities and oppression within the context of a city marked by racial activism, violence, inequities, and disinvestment. Given the catalyzing events of COVID-19 and racism and the saliency of youth of color challenges within the Louisville context, our study examines critical reflections and shared strategies among youth of color for developing collective care and possibilities for youth-directed spaces and actions in Louisville. This study offers insights on how youth of color may express agency and develop critical consciousness when offered the opportunity to share reflections and suggested strategies within a context where youth of color have exposure to multiple catalyzing events simultaneously.

Data and methods

Throughout 2021–2022, we worked with Louisville Metro's Office of Youth Development (OYD) at the time to purposively recruit youth/young adults of color, including Black, Latine, and Asian American youth/young adults, between the ages of 12 and 24 who resided in Louisville. Our larger project sought to understand the perspectives of youth of color and youth workers of color on racial and social inequities and potential modes of change in Louisville during the twin pandemics. We distributed IRB-approved recruitment fliers using the OYD email listserv for youth- and young-adult-serving organizations in Louisville and OYD's social media. We had 27 youth and young adults complete a consent form and an online (or paper) demographic survey involving questions on age, pronouns, zip code, highest education level, and gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic identities. All youth were enrolled in K-12 or higher education schooling during the time of our study.

In total, we facilitated 11 (six) individual interviews and (five) group interviews as listening sessions with 27 adolescents and young adults of color aged 12 to 21 (about half were 15- to 17-year-olds and almost all remaining participants were 18- to 20-year-olds). For this article, we removed two in-person (group) listening sessions conducted with interpretation provided by a community partner organization with nine Spanish-speaking youth who were not fluent in English. After completing these two group sessions, we had concerns about power dynamics resulting from organizational staff presence and potential impacts on authentic engagement of youth voice. In all English-speaking sessions, organizational staff were not present; however, staff provided interpretation for Spanish-speaking youth in these two sessions. Therefore, we focus here on 18 (14 girls; 4 boys) English-fluent youth of color who participated in nine sessions: six online (Zoom) individual interviews and three group sessions (one online and two in-person at local community organizations) conducted during April 2021 to January 2022. All identified as Black (14) and/or Latine (3) except for one Asian American youth. A couple of the youth identified as both Black/African American and “Hispanic” or “Mexican” or “Central American.” Over one third of our sample identified as LGBTQ or did not identify their sexuality. The three group sessions involved small groups ranging from two to five youth participants in each session. Our initial intention was for all to be listening sessions in a group format; however, due to scheduling issues and barriers experienced by youth shaping their

scheduled participation, we conducted six online individual interviews using the same guide and list of questions for the group listening sessions. We also used the same structure for the online and in-person sessions, although we added Zoom guidance at the beginning of the online sessions.

Listening sessions, often used in community-engaged projects, offer opportunities for community members to voice their ideas and concerns for the development of programs, policies, and practices and addressing specific issues in their community in a semi-structured environment (Ardoin et al., 2022). In the listening sessions (both with individuals and groups), we asked a series of prompts including questions on challenges faced by young people of color and local youth organizations, how their lives have changed during or been affected by COVID-19, support needs in managing challenges, concerns about and experiences with racial inequities and racism during recent years, and strategies or priorities to address those challenges and barriers. The use of a general guide with questions allowed flexibility for participants to direct the conversation, ask us and one another questions, and discuss and address community issues, programs, and policies as they desired. We offered \$20 e-gift cards to each youth for their participation.

Participants chose or, in cases where youth-chosen pseudonyms were unavailable, were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. All sessions lasted for ~45 to 75 min, were recorded (with consent), and transcribed verbatim. Each of the authors facilitated or co-facilitated at least three sessions (in pairs for the in-person group sessions). For the individual sessions, we paired interviewers of color with youth of color to support trust-building. A team involving four graduate students helped with facilitating remaining listening sessions, transcription, and data cleaning.

Social justice youth development in the research design

In this study, we integrated key components of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) in the research design and goals by situating youth of color in relationship to their specific social, political, and economic conditions (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2006). As noted, SJYD conceptualizes youth in tandem with their social, political, and environmental forces, guiding research practices and offering a framework for direct service with youth and within youth ecosystems (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). Using SJYD in the research design allowed us to engage in data collection and analysis in ways that responded directly to the social marginalization of youth of color (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2006). Our demographic survey and interview questions specifically focused on gaining deeper understandings of their social identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, pronouns, and ethnicity, and lived experiences. Recent research on youth critical consciousness also demonstrates that youth reflections on systemic issues and catalyzing events are useful for youth navigating difficult times. For example, Maker et al.'s (2022) study reveals how critical reflections of inequities during COVID-19 were associated with greater wellbeing or hopefulness among marginalized college students, such as LGBTQ+ students.

Using SJYD in the design of the study, we advertised the purpose of our study to understand youth of color perspectives on COVID-19, racial inequities, and racism (and their intersections), and we designed questions focused on power imbalances producing inequities. As noted, most of our listening sessions were facilitated by interviewers of color to support trust-building and to address power imbalances between researchers and youth. In the beginning of each session, we made it clear that these listening sessions provided opportunities for youth to voice their ideas, concerns, responses, and suggested strategies regarding addressing racial inequities and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville. We also informed youth participants about our intention to use research findings to inform policy and practices and bolster youth voice in the city. Later, we followed through with our goals by working with youth in publishing and sharing widely in Louisville a policy report based on this study's listening sessions (Gast et al., 2023).

Reflexivity

We recognize that our social identities and experiences influence data collection and analysis processes. The first author is an Asian American woman faculty member who, despite being born and raised in the U. S., has been profiled as a “brown” immigrant and, thus, is phenotypically viewed as both Asian American and “brown.” The second author identifies as a White female faculty member with roots in rural and urban Kentucky. The third author identifies as a Black woman faculty member raised in the southern U. S. with both Black American and West African ethnic backgrounds. All have practical expertise in youth- and community-based spaces. Other research team members involved Black and White faculty and graduate students. We all identify as social-justice-oriented scholars seeking to center marginalized voices in academic work and policymaking. In the listening sessions, we sought to develop trust by, first, engaging youth in discussions of shared session norms and concerns and, second, by cultivating informal conversations with youth and between youth. For online sessions, youth also had the option to turn off video and to mute as needed. We also understand that we represent faculty at predominantly White, research universities and that we do not share age and other positionalities with youth participants.

Data analysis

We used Dedoose (2023), a web-based qualitative analysis application, to organize, manage, and store transcripts for this study and act as an analytic tool for transcript analysis. De-identified interview transcripts were loaded into Dedoose for initial and subsequent coding. We coded and analyzed the entire set of listening session transcripts (for both individual and group interviews) together. Transcripts were divided between the three authors for initial line-by-line inductive coding, with each researcher completing their own independent initial codes. We employed inductive line-by-line coding to stay close to the data and the voices of the youth (Charmaz, 2014), while also looking for patterns indicating categorical or conceptual themes from initial analytic engagement (Saldaña, 2025). We drew on our theoretical frameworks as sensitizing concepts, which allow for conceptual references, background ideas, and guidance for

explorative directions, rather than specific, fixed prescriptions, to be applied to empirical instances (Blumer, 1986; van den Hoonaard et al., 2012).

The three authors then met together to compare and discuss initial codes and assess areas of consensus and disagreement. When areas of dissent occurred, researchers engaged in conversations that prioritized the positionality and experience of individual researchers and collective knowledge to adjudicate codes. A codebook was established and applied to the full set of listening session transcripts. The coding process began in March and concluded in June 2022 with frequent (weekly or bi-weekly) meetings to create and then adjust the codebook as needed. Excerpts were discussed as a team to discern potential need for code adjustment, definition modification, or application of new codes. Focused or later-stage codes were applied to all transcripts with data checking and consensus building occurring along the way (Saldaña, 2013). Supplementary data sources included the audio recordings, field notes, and analytical memos, which helped to provide and document additional analytical context and ensure that we accurately captured observed data, researchers' thoughts, and notes concerning the study.

Research findings

The listening session format served as the foundation to explore youth responses, challenges, and suggestions for city change through dialogue promoting critical reflection. Through our inductive analysis, the following three themes emerged in relation to our research questions on how youth of color discussed lived experiences and suggested strategies in response to racism, racial inequities, and COVID-19 in Louisville: (1) youth of color elucidated both individual and collective experiences, indicating their developing awareness of the impacts of systemic problems and inequities; (2) they understood the saliency and systemic nature of racism and racial discrimination and violence; (3) they shared strategies emphasizing collective care and community spaces, reflecting their understandings of the roles of community-initiated action and change. It is important to note that the themes presented below are intertwined and cannot be neatly separated out by research question. Our findings point to the intersecting and catalyzing roles of dual, co-occurring pandemics (COVID-19 and systemic racism) in shaping critical reflections, as part of critical consciousness, among youth of color in Louisville, KY.

Dual pandemics and critical reflections: developing awareness of systemic problems and inequities

When asked about recent challenges faced as young people in Louisville, young residents of color spoke first about COVID-19-related closures, uncertainties, traumas, and stresses, in conjunction with a host of worries and stresses connected to racial inequities. In doing so, they brought up their own and their friends' or peers' COVID-19-related stresses and experiences, including experiences of minoritized and vulnerable youth, indicating an awareness of the collective and racialized nature of these feelings and experiences. Bria, an Asian American youth, summarized in an individual session: "Well,

this past year of COVID, it has more been about my mental health... I've just been really stressed, and I could tell some of my other friends have been really stressed [too]." When asked more specifically about the experiences of COVID-19-related stressors, Bria mentioned both individual stresses and a host of uncertainties and conflicts experienced collectively by herself, her friends, and vulnerable youth:

Just like the safety of others,... social media – it's been a really toxic place... there's so much conflict, so that stresses me out. And then, school especially,... we tried to do in-person..., but something went wrong, and we always had to go back online, and then go back and forth, and then the masks and the six feet a part was also stressful.

Bria used terms like "the safety of others" and "we" to discuss the collective experiences of "toxic" social media and constant shifts between online and in-person education; her repeated use of the pronoun "we" indicates her recognition of shared experiences by youth during COVID-19.

At other points, Bria also recognized how the voices and experiences of youth in Louisville were dismissed by adults and that those dismissals and lack of opportunities for obtaining youth-centered support represented shared struggles among youth:

Just recognize that we are going through mental health and like, we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid. Because I know a bunch of adults, they just brush off teenagers' opinions and feelings. We just want to be recognized as actual people... We have adult responsibilities, but we are also viewed as a child, as a kid still.

To Bria, these mental-health issues and tensions between having "adult responsibilities" and being "viewed as kid[s]" represented the shared status of teenagers, which also translated to a need for recognition of youth collective voice. Later on, Bria also mentioned the need for "more opportunities... where people can voice their opinions ... and everyone could just come together." She wanted to know that "Louisville [as a city] is taking action... [given] everything that's been caught on fire, COVID, and all of the injustice[s]." For Bria, shared youth struggles during COVID-19 and a heightened sense of injustices, including racial injustices as she later discussed racial segregation, stereotypes, and violence, correlated with how she highlighted the need for greater opportunities for youth collective voices to be heard and to collectively "come together" as part of necessary actions in the city.

Alex and Batman, both Black youth in the same listening session, discussed individual stresses and anxieties during COVID-19, but also collective and racialized youth experiences and systemic problems, such as those affecting emerging bilingual youth of color. Alex felt that her wellbeing was negatively impacted because "in quarantine, I was, like, left alone with my own thoughts." Alex went on to discuss how COVID-19 uniquely and negatively impacted her cousins who "do not quite understand English:" "There wasn't like a person there to help them, to translate, so they could understand." Alex connected her cousins' experiences to institutional deficiencies in language resources for emerging bilingual youth of color. She also used the term "we" to describe the collective struggles of students during COVID-19 because of institutional, systemic deficiencies: "Most of the student did not know, like where to go... We were not getting the help we used to get when we were in-person compared to [online education]." Similarly,

Batman explained both personal and shared experiences during COVID-19: “Personally, I would stay awake until like 2 a.m.... alone time.” Batman further described how her friends shared those same struggles: “Seeing like other people experience the same thing. Like, my other friends, because they had the same things [struggles].”

Kella, a Black youth in an individual session, detailed how constant uncertainties and stresses during the past 2 years were exacerbated by pandemic-related closures and limited spaces for mental-health support: “I did not expect this [pandemic] to still be going on, and then, during the COVID times,... that was a really tough time for my mental health. I was going through like some depression and anxiety.” While Kella first connected COVID-19 to her individual depression, she quickly moved to discussing systemic problems related to COVID-19: “Another big one was that it [COVID-19] kind of made me start questioning things, such as the systems in order, even my religion. It just made me more aware of the things going on around me.” Kella directly used words like “systems,” “questioning things,” and “things going on around me” to indicate her developing awareness of systemic and collectively experienced social conditions and problems. While COVID-19-related closures, traumas, and stresses exacerbated youth feelings of individual isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty, youth of color also connected youth shared experiences and struggles in Louisville to the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic disempowerment, including adult marginalization of youth of color and lack of public-school and city resources, especially for emerging bilinguals and youth of color, which we further discuss next.

Racial violence, discrimination, and critical reflections on systemic racism

Louisville youth of color also highlighted the saliency and widespread nature of racism, racial discrimination, police violence, and other racial injustices during 2020 and 2021. They described experiencing and anticipating racism and policing both individually and collectively. Amber, a Black youth in an individual session, described how her and her mother recently went to the ATM at a bank, when a White woman waiting at the ATM saw them and locked her car. Then, the woman looked at them again and went inside her car to wait. To Amber and her mother, it was clear that the White woman viewed them as threats. Amber connected this experience to systemic racism affecting Black people as a group: “I never in my life have I seen anything so clear to me. Like I knew oppression, prejudice, and, you know, some people hate Black people.” Amber further underscored the emotional and physical pain tied to experiences with racism, but also the shared nature of these experiences by those with similar skin color:

It hurts! Because, like all my life I thought people would, you know, view me as a good person if I looked the part, if I dressed the part, if I spoke the part. But I mean, it shows that even then, people still will not trust you due to your skin color. And, I mean, that hurts... It really does. It's like, it's like no matter what you do, like, people just aren't going to trust you.

Here, Amber explains anti-Black racism where Black people are collectively viewed as threats and mistrusted, regardless of their

professional dress (“dress[ing] the part”), because of judgments toward Black “skin color.”

Repeatedly, these youth indicated the pervasiveness and structured nature of racism, which was at the forefront of their minds. Billy, a Latino young adult in a group session, detailed how “racism is like, ingrained within our society... It's just the way our society is set up.” Butterfly, a Black young adult in a group session said, “[Racism] is everywhere we go.” When asked in that same group session about what should be a city top priority, Dee Dee, a Black youth, went straight to discussing racism but also questioned if the city would ever make addressing racism and racial inequities priorities: “What makes you think that they really want to do that [address racial inequities in the city]?” Dee Dee went on to explain that older White adults hold power and are racist, preventing meaningful city changes: “Because..., it's older people,... Caucasian older people. There's still racism in this community. You gonna hear people call Black people porch monkeys and stuff.” Dee Dee reflected on both power inequities in the city and deeply felt personal harm by racism. She offered visceral responses when discussing racism in the city: “It makes my skin crawl.”

George, a Black youth in an individual session, directly said that Black people's experiences with everyday racism have been brought to the forefront during and after COVID-19: “Now, after COVID, [we] are more well-equipped to handle different racism interactions and racism in general.” George further spoke of the systemic nature of racial inequities and discrimination and how, during the Trump administration, people in power ignore or get away with racial discrimination:

America, ... it's sad uh where we are right now as a country uhm because uhm ya know Donald Trump says 'make America great again' – America was never great and we are, we are uhm, I would not say we are in a better place now. We're in a different place... It just takes a different form now. Uhm, people aren't blatantly racist you know on the news, calling people the n-word and stuff. [Changes direction] But uhm they can call someone the n-word and still get uhm and still have uhm you know millions of dollars in their account, still own multi-, like multiple businesses. Uhm, they do not get uhm, they do not get punished for like harassing Black people.

During this discussion about systemic racism, George also pushed the city to engage in conscientious efforts to support and provide safe spaces for youth and communities of color: “Just opening more uhm community buildings in these different predominantly Black communities – predominantly colored communities – opening more buildings that allow access to the youth in these communities to where they can just go... feel safe and be away from all the trash that is America.” George understood that city and institutional resources were necessary to counter ongoing forms of racism and to address the collective struggles of youth and communities of color.

Sara, a Black youth in an individual session, further connected what she called “racial tensions” to the lack of public-school teachers and mentors focused on youth of color. Like other participants, Sara used the pronoun “we” and noted the shared nature of these experiences by youth of color:

Because of, I mean, racial tensions, we do not know if we are going to find someone who is a mentor that has our best interests at heart or understands where we are coming from, because to guide and

mentor a minority student, that mentor is going to have to understand the problems that the student is going to face, because they are not the same problems that our White counterparts will face. I'd say the issues that I face as a young adult in Louisville are definitely rooted in racial tensions.

At another point, Sara clarified that youth-of-color-focused support would be helpful in Louisville, but that systemic changes were also necessary: *"I do not know if it will ever really be enough. I think it's a start. I do not think it's enough. I think enough would be getting rid of the systemic racism that remains in all institutions...especially schools and stuff."* To Sara, the city needed to engage in systemic changes and dismantle systemic racism to preclude the existing necessity of youth-of-color-focused support: *"That would get rid of everything that, that would get rid of the need for support for things like that."*

Louisville youth of color also spoke of anxieties related to police violence, as well as structural analyses of power inequities and policing in the city. We heard statements about personal fears and anxieties, like: *"[police] could kill you for no reason, ... and then you are just dead. You're just another number."* Another Black youth said, *"Every time I see police, I feel scared."* Furthermore, participants observed and deeply felt the collective tolls of policing, racism, racial violence, and power inequities. Pizza, a Black youth in a group session, felt that the city response was inadequate following the murder of Breonna Taylor. He felt like *"the mayor did not really do anything to hold the police officers accountable even though he had the power to do so. Feeling like more could have been done to, like, hold them accountable, structurally."* Kella also expressed that *"the biggest problem right now in Louisville is the police force...they are not held accountable for their actions."* Youth of color noted fears and shared struggles related to police violence and power inequities independent of any prompting in that direction. Furthermore, these responses came after general questions about COVID-19 or racial inequities in Louisville, indicating that youth participants reflected on the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism simultaneously.

Youth suggestions emphasizing collective care and community spaces

Louisville youth of color sought greater opportunities to engage in collective strategies of care while navigating the complexities of the twin pandemics. However, these youth also described lack of safe spaces or being excluded from these opportunities based on accessibility, racial identity, and city disinvestments. All respondents wanted greater access to and the availability of safe, community spaces for young people to obtain mental health and social support, to share voices and concerns with peers, and to engage in collective care and support. Isaiah, a Black youth in a group session, described needing *"a place to go... [to] get more human interaction."* He went on: *"It's been kinda hard these past couple of [years], what, this past year, actually... Maybe something like, where you can like... you know just talk to people."* Billy in the same session agreed that Louisville needed more safe, accessible youth spaces: *"Like [to] go [to] or to like vent emotions or frustrations and stuff... Like somewhere where they can just go and feel safe."* He went on: *"Where people can just like hear your voice and your opinion on topics and things. To be able to talk to someone and then see those, see those changes happening in the*

community." These young people sought greater opportunities to share their struggles and concerns and to support other young people, especially youth of color, and the broader community to engage in individual and collective healing and productive community changes.

During the dual pandemics, youth of color described their experiences with isolation, and longed for the opportunity to engage with peers in a safe context. These youth made calls for organizational outreach and recognition to support youth mental health: Bria desired *"[that] some people or some organization that basically reaches out to,... ideally, everyone, every teen... to just recognize that we are going through mental health, like, we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid."* As mentioned above, youth like Bria felt dismissed by adults and city officials in Louisville and believed that adults did not prioritize youth spaces and possibilities for youth to engage in collective care as a community of young people.

Despite challenges in achieving collective care and supportive interactions in traditional contexts, youth found ways to fill gaps and support one another. Youth described ways in which they had created collective care communities virtually or through curated in-person meetings. Collective care meant collective acts of caring for and sharing with each other to build community, show respect, support each other, and create positive change. Bria relied on her friends who were *"very supportive of each other and basically giving kind of therapy sessions or just ranting about the world and what's going on."* Bria and her friends created these *"therapy sessions"* to support each other's mental health and reflections during COVID-19, but also to collectively share dialogue on systemic issues and problems. Above, we noted how Bria prioritized spaces for youth to *"just come together"* and work through *"COVID and all of the injustices."*

Thus, youth suggestions for action were not limited to personal experiences or individual-level needs. Youth identified unmet needs related to youth community and collective care while also understanding the need for community-wide outreach and support for sustainable community change. Billy, for example, wanted his voice heard and be able to *"talk to someone,"* but also desired to *"see those changes happening in the community."* Youth made calls for collective recognition and outreach, as well as opportunities for youth of color voices to be heard. As Bria noted above, youth voices need to be heard *"to just recognize that... we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid."* In these ways, youth participants demonstrated self and community levels of awareness in relation to their own critical consciousness development. Youth participants repeatedly emphasized that the city did not prioritize or cultivate youth spaces for sharing and obtaining catered support, and that they were ready and motivated to engage in collective care and support. This demonstrated youth of color building momentum but facing challenges toward development of critical motivation through their critical reflections on the dual pandemics.

Discussion

Public discourse and legislation surrounding youth and young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic focused largely on COVID-19-related struggles and health concerns and recovery, often failing to account for cumulative stresses and anxieties affecting youth of color due to social problems and traumas during the dual pandemics

of COVID-19 and racism. Our study examined youth of color responses to lived experiences with racism, racial inequities, and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville, KY during 2020 to 2022, as well as their suggested strategies for mitigating racial inequities during COVID-19 as potential components of the process of critical consciousness.

Louisville youth of color highlighted the saliency and widespread nature of racism, police violence, and other racial injustices during 2020 and 2021, in conjunction with a host of stresses and challenges related to COVID-19-related uncertainties and inequities. In doing so, they reflected on individual and collective experiences and connected those experiences to the impacts of systemic problems, violence, and inequities, indicating their critical reflections or systemic understandings of social inequalities and the surrounding conditions as part of critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2016). These findings connect to our research questions one and three. Additionally, in connection to research question two, youth of color felt that Louisville youth were often excluded and not heard, and they voiced their sense of agency and suggested strategies, which included the need for increased access to and funding of youth-centered spaces and conversations prioritizing youth voice, collective care, and safety within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism in Louisville. We employed Social Justice Youth Development in the research design to center these youth voices and to emphasize youth-identified strategies for combating inequities and marginalization.

We connect findings from our study to two areas of literature: previous studies highlighting the psychological tolls endured by youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and scholarship on the critical consciousness and responses of youth of color (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Carey et al., 2025; Casanova, 2024; Conrad et al., 2021; Hoyt et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022). COVID-related closures in Louisville, our study's city context, diminished access to existing youth spaces that traditionally provided opportunities to collectively discuss, manage, and address these issues and anxieties, and youth of color faced unique, multifaceted challenges during this time (Briggs, 2024; Carey et al., 2025). While past research often focuses on youth critical consciousness during participation in social-justice oriented afterschool programs or community organizations (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Casanova, 2024; Ngo et al., 2017), our study explores the roles of COVID-19 and racism as dual pandemics and catalyzing events for youth in their building critical consciousness. We highlight the voices and perspectives of youth of color with limited access to youth-centered spaces while navigating intersecting and generative moments in Louisville, KY – the site of the murder of Breonna Taylor and racial uprisings – and COVID-19-related closures, after March 2020.

Requests for safety were a salient request for youth of color within the context of the city of Louisville, which saw a spike in homicide deaths between 2019 to 2022, with most homicides occurring in Black neighborhoods experiencing historical disinvestment. As violence surged in the city, total funding for youth-focused departments fell by 38% (Greater Louisville Project, 2023). The reduction in funds resulted in fewer spaces for youth of color to share and act on their growing concerns and anxieties amidst the twin pandemics and increased community violence. Through their reflections and their suggested strategies, youth in this study engaged in critical reflection about racism during COVID-19 and moved

between critical consciousness awareness at the self and community levels. However, youth participants also highlighted the lack of institutionally supported spaces and adult recognition of youth voice to intentionally center youth-focused issues of concern, which perhaps limited how these youth developed critical motivation or plans to interrupt cycles of oppression.

Limitations and future directions

For this study, we engaged Louisville youth of color in dialogue that promoted critical reflection on experiences with the twin pandemics. Outreach for study participation occurred through a Louisville Metro office listserv of youth and young adult organizations and programs, resulting in youth participants with prior experience in or contact with community-based youth/young adult programs. As such, the emphasis on prioritizing those programs and funding may have been greater for these youth as compared to other youth of color within the city. Our study findings also reflect the voices of Louisville youth of color who selected to share their experiences and thoughts in in-person group listening sessions or online sessions, which included small group or individual sessions. Therefore, our sample reflects youth who perhaps sought out the listening session experience and were ready to voice their experiences, reflections, and suggested strategies for change.

Our sample also reflects youth of color with the economic or institutional advantages of internet and technology access. Some of the youth in our study noted how they cultivated and responded to social media and communities online. Because most of our listening sessions occurred online, this meant that those youth participants felt comfortable and able to access wi-fi and technology. As noted above, all the youth in our sample were enrolled in K-12 or higher education schooling during the time of our study. However, due to salient racial and economic segregation in Louisville, youth residing in historically Black or Latine and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods during 2021 and 2022 faced constrained infrastructures for digital access. The twin pandemics highlighted inequities in regular access to technology, including smartphones, computers, and internet availability in the city of Louisville, even among those enrolled in educational institutions. Future research should examine the role of online communities for youth of color as they develop critical consciousness. Our work also suggests that scholars could compare youth reflecting on catalyzing moments within and outside of organized youth spaces. Ultimately, future research should explore mechanisms to identify youth strategies for collectivity both inside and outside traditional structures or formally organized programs and to build critical consciousness among youth of color in response to catalyzing moments.

Conclusion

We showcase the agentic ways in which youth of color engage in critical reflections on their own, offering insights on the potential for the development of critical consciousness outside of organized programs. Our findings suggest that youth of color seek their own spaces to collectively reflect and engage in collective care, while also wanting

greater opportunities to access culturally sensitive, institutionally funded, and safe organized programs. The COVID pandemic, public spotlights of racism, and racial uprisings catalyzed youth of color in Louisville to recognize and make connections across preexisting disparities and inequities embedded in micro and macro structural levels. Exposure to catalyzing events can fuel critical understandings of shared struggles and the need for collective care and action; however, repeated exposure to traumatic and unprecedented events may also desensitize youth to injustices or inequities, making it more difficult to reach critical consciousness praxis. Recent trends showing reductions in youth-centered spaces and related funding are not unique to Louisville. As more cities experience problems with funding disinvestments and non-profit youth program struggles and closures, it is important for future research and policy-makers to understand mechanisms to foster critical consciousness praxis for youth of color. Our study underscores the need for more opportunities for youth of color to find praxis in self-guided or non-traditional contexts, as less accessibility to programmatic spaces looms on the horizon.

Data availability statement

Due to anonymity and confidentiality agreements with respondents, the raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will not be made available by the authors.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board at University of Louisville. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants or their legal guardians.

Author contributions

MG: Formal analysis, Project administration, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. RB: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Data curation,

Conceptualization. AB: Formal analysis, Project administration, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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