



MBKALLIANCE

# FREEDOM SUMMER

2023 EVALUATION REPORT





## ABOUT MY BROTHER'S KEEPER ALLIANCE

President Obama launched the My Brother's Keeper Initiative in 2014 to address the persistent opportunity gaps boys and young men of color (BYMOC) face, and to ensure they all can reach their full potential. And since 2017, the MBK Alliance (MBKA) has continued its critical mission as a core initiative of the Obama Foundation — leading a national call to action focused on building safe and supportive communities for BYMOC. It is in that spirit that MBKA created the Freedom Summer 2023 grant program to address the summer surge of violence among youth and young adults nationwide.

## ABOUT EQUIVOLVE

Equivolve (EQ) envisions a future free from structural inequality, where every individual's potential is fully realized, fostering a vibrant and dynamic society. As an innovative social strategy enterprise, Equivolve is dedicated to forging a future where everyone can reach their utmost potential, contributing to a world that is more equitable, dynamic, and vibrant. Through our work, we aspire to create a society in which the collective genius and spirit of all its members are recognized and nurtured, leading to a future enriched by diversity, innovation, and shared prosperity.

By focusing on areas in which disparities are most evident—wealth and income, education, health care, housing, employment, criminal justice, environment, and transportation—we leverage our resources and expertise to influence change. In this endeavor, we work closely with leaders in government, philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector, forming collaborative partnerships that amplify our impact.

### Equivolve Team:

Glenn R. Love  
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Marshall Anthony, Jr.  
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Stephanie Moore  
Teja Vemuganti

## INTRODUCTION

**Chicago offers a wealth of opportunities** for its young people, yet concurrently grapples with a longstanding challenge of violence—a concern that escalated in 2020, especially among individuals under 25 years of age. Programs across the city work daily to impact the lives of youth and young adults, particularly boys and young men of color (BYMOC). Many of these programs are rooted in and grown from the communities they serve.





Amidst the vibrant energy of summer, a time rich with potential for growth and exploration, Freedom Summer emerges as a vital initiative providing safe, enriching environments for youth. This annual initiative, part of the Obama Foundation's My Brother's Keeper Alliance (MBKA), invests \$1 million in grants to support Chicago-based nonprofit organizations in creating diverse, engaging, safe spaces where young people can explore new skills such as archery or music production, see new places, and build connections with caring adult mentors. In these environments, boys and young men of color can enjoy summer experiences alongside their peers.

Anchored to the MBK Alliance's sixth milestone: All youth should remain safe from violent crime, the Freedom Summer initiative seeks to help relieve the financial burden individuals, community organizers, and organizations might experience as they work hard to ensure the safety and success of our young men.

This report, a collaborative effort between MBKA and Equivolve, focuses on illuminating the critical, yet frequently undersupported, initiatives funded by Freedom Summer 2023 (FS23). It aims to assess the influence and potential of these efforts in mitigating violence across Chicago, providing an analysis of their presence and contributions within the community.

“It was fun  
and I felt safe.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT





## FREEDOM SUMMER 2023 AT A GLANCE

Freedom Summer 2023 (FS23) dedicated support for boys and young men of color, while also reaching out to a wider youth demographic to foster safer and more supportive communities in Chicago, demonstrating a commitment to enhancing the well-being and prospects of the city's youth.

### GRANTEES

**\$1,000,000 IN GRANTS TO 33 ORGANIZATIONS** working to increase safety in Chicago communities in summer 2023:



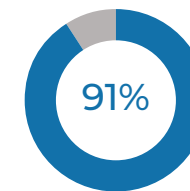
100 Black Men  
ABC Pilsen  
Automotive Mentoring Group  
Black Alphabet  
Brilliance & Excellence  
Building Brighter Futures  
CHAMPS Male Mentoring Program  
Chicago Archery Club  
Chicago Maritime Arts Center  
Chicago Scholars  
Christianaire  
College Mentoring Experience  
Future Ties  
Greater St. John Bible Church  
Guitars Over Guns  
I Am A Gentleman, Inc.  
Increase the Peace

Kids Off the Block  
Lost Boyz  
Male Mogul Initiative  
New Life Centers of Chicagoland  
North Lawndale Eagles Youth Program  
Our Most Valuable People Foundation  
Project I Am  
Ring of Hope  
Root 2 Fruit  
Shoot for the Stars  
The Base Garfield Park  
The Healing Chicago  
Think Outside Da Block  
University of Chicago Med CEEP  
Urban Male Network  
Young Men's Educational Network

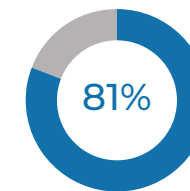
The offerings and design of FS23 programs varied widely, including activities like archery, maritime activities, and auto mechanics. They also provided multiple types of programming, ranging from mentoring to employment opportunities.

### PERCENTAGE OF ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROVIDED EACH TYPE OF PROGRAMMING:

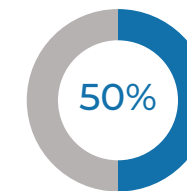
MANY ORGANIZATIONS OFFERED MULTIPLE TYPES OF PROGRAMMING.



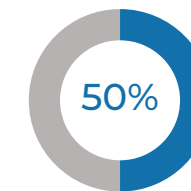
MENTORING



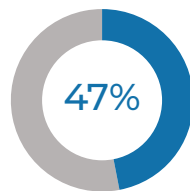
VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION



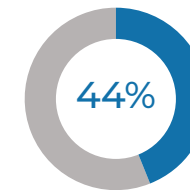
SPORTS



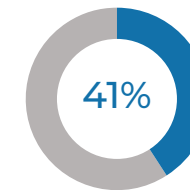
MENTAL  
WELLNESS



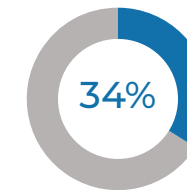
TRAINING



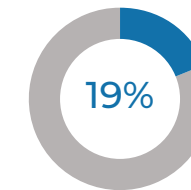
VIOLENCE  
INTERVENTION



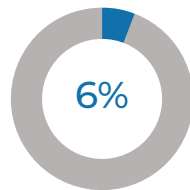
EMPLOYMENT



STEAM



COMMUNITY  
CLEANUP



REENTRY SUPPORT



Some organizations offered continuous programming that served the same group of BYMOC over multiple days or weeks. Some also held community events that engaged individuals from the broader community.

# 4,676

HOURS OF CONTINUOUS  
PROGRAMMING OFFERED  
BY GRANTEES



# 1,369

ADDITIONAL HOURS OF  
COMMUNITY EVENTS  
OFFERED BY GRANTEES



## FS23 IMPACT

# CREATING A SAFE & JOYFUL SUMMER

During the summer of 2023, while Chicago experienced an uptick in violent crime, Freedom Summer programs offered safety, brotherhood, and hope.

Boys and young men of color who participated in the FS23 programs expressed feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods. However, within the confines of the programs, they experienced a reassuring sense of security. The strong reputations and deep community ties of these programs not only bolstered the program participants' sense of safety but also played a significant role in enhancing their skills, confidence, and optimism. **THESE PROGRAMS WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN EXPANDING THE NETWORKS OF BYMOC IN CHICAGO AND FOSTERING A SENSE OF HOPE.**

There was a distinct sense of solace in these positive spaces where BYMOC could trust and feel a sense of connection — both with the program leaders and among themselves. This environment of trust and connection was pivotal in creating a supportive community for BYMOC.

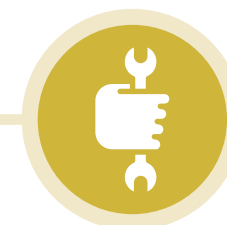
# FS23 PROVIDED SAFE SPACES FOR BYMOC DESPITE PREVALENT VIOLENCE.



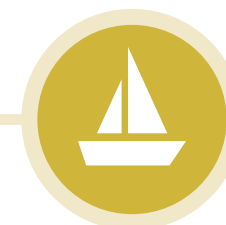
## FEELING SAFE WITHIN PROGRAMS



ARCHERY



AUTO MECHANICS



MARITIME ACTIVITIES



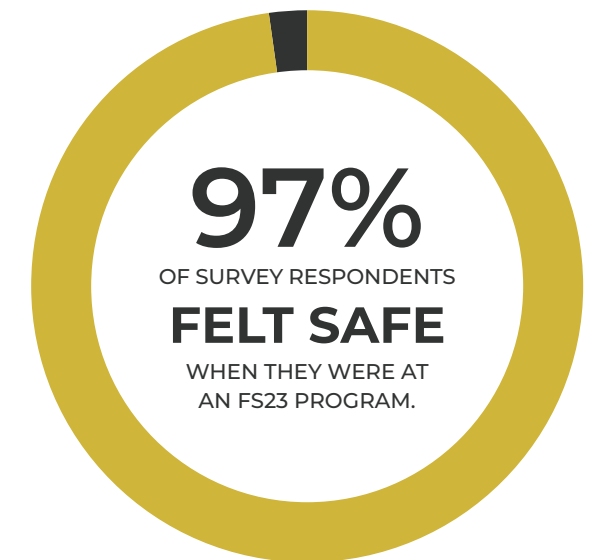
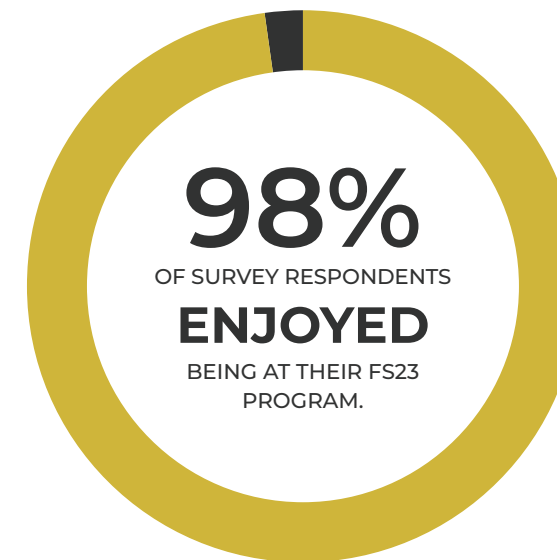
FS23 programs were more than a series of initiatives. **THEY WERE SANCTUARIES OF SAFETY, PROMOTING EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING.** Programs created safe spaces, including community-led events absent of law enforcement. One program participant shared:

“[The program] helped me feel safer because before all our events, our pop-ups, it’s like a lot of people couldn’t come outside or stand out, period. So, it’s like when we throw our events, they be like the open and the welcome space to know that it’s genuine. You can come out, get fresh air, free food, free everything when it’s us for real. So, it just made me feel more comfortable when you know it’s a genuine person behind it.”

BYMOC expressed desire for—and need for—**BROTHERHOOD, SOLIDARITY, AND UNITY.** They indicated that communal understanding and collective healing, often found at Freedom Summer programs, can lead to more peaceful coexistence with others and within their communities. They also indicated a profound bond of solidarity cultivated through their shared experiences and reflecting the potential of Freedom Summer programs to foster deep kinship with one another.

“We have a hard time with trying to open them up and getting comfortable with them.... That’s why we built these relationships that are so significant.... A lot of times, I might over-talk just to not speak for myself but speak for my little brothers. They’re my little brothers. I accept them as my little brothers. Where they can’t speak, I’m gonna speak for them. And that’s what I do.”

**DURING THEIR TIME IN FS23 PROGRAMS, BYMOC BYMOC ENJOYED THEMSELVES AND FELT SAFE.**



“I was able to eat and stay safe.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT





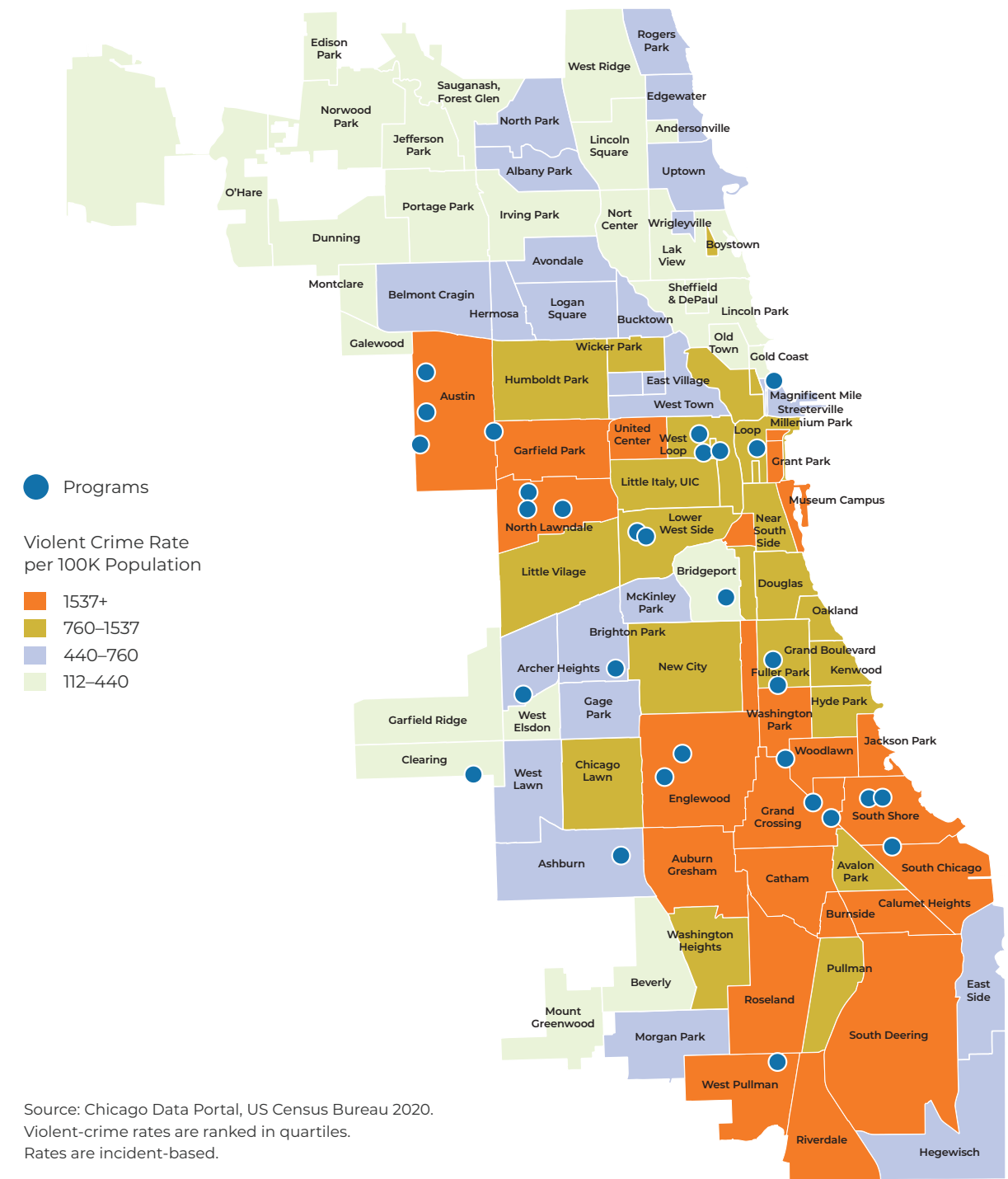
“I was able to make new friends and help out the community.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

## Violent Crime in Neighborhoods

While they felt safe in their programs, 64% of the BYMOC surveyed reported that they felt the level of violence in their neighborhoods had either increased or stayed the same, compared to the previous summer. FS23 programs were concentrated in neighborhoods with high rates of violent crime.

MAP OF PROGRAMS AND VIOLENT CRIME RATES (2022) BY NEIGHBORHOOD



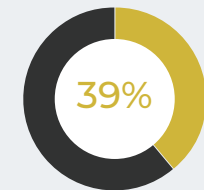
Source: Chicago Data Portal, US Census Bureau 2020. Violent-crime rates are ranked in quartiles. Rates are incident-based.



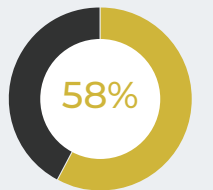
## Feeling a Lack of Safety in Neighborhoods

A substantial number of BYMOC surveyed shared their concerns regarding neighborhood safety. Notably, 39% of BYMOC respondents and a significant 58% of those under 13 years old reported feeling unsafe when alone outside in their communities.

Concerns about safety predominantly stemmed from issues like gang activity, robberies, and shootings. This lack of safety, as articulated by the BYMOC in the programs, reflects a deep-seated sense of insecurity. This feeling arises not only from immediate community threats but also from broader societal structures, including perceptions of the police as more detrimental than protective. Two program participants describe the situation:



39%  
OF BYMOC  
REPORTED  
FEELING  
UNSAFE  
WHEN ALONE  
IN THEIR  
COMMUNITIES.



58%  
OF BYMOC  
UNDER 13 YEARS  
OLD REPORTED  
FEELING  
UNSAFE WHEN  
ALONE IN THEIR  
COMMUNITIES.

“Our police are supposed to protect us, and they come on the scene and wanna pop us. Like, come on, bro! How [are] we supposed to get some safety somewhere? We don’t got no safety. And then our own people turn on us. So, we turn on ourselves—our own people turn on us sometimes. And then the people that [are] sitting here to protect us, they most definitely leave us unprotected.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

“[Violence is] a huge problem. We deal with shootings, robbings, a lot of crime, a high rate of crime, as well. It’s not just a here-and-there thing, it’s something that occasionally happens every day. It’s definitely a huge problem. A lot of times, kids can’t go out to even play, or you have to come in before it even hits nightfall and that’s around five o’clock. What kids [want] to come in at five? They’re actually leaving school. Yes, it’s definitely a huge problem. Something that needs to get resolved quickly.”



# FS23 PROGRAMS ENHANCED FEELINGS OF SAFETY IN NEIGHBORHOODS FOR BYMOC.

The survey of youth in FS23 programs revealed that an overwhelming 89% felt an enhanced sense of safety in their neighborhood as a result of their participation in a Freedom Summer program.



## HOW FS23 HELPED BYMOC FEEL SAFER:



FS23 programs were instrumental in fostering positive **RELATIONSHIPS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT**.

Notably, 60% of survey respondents indicated an improvement in conflict-resolution skills, compared to three months prior.



“It helped with my social awareness by learning from different experiences of other people in my neighborhood and how they’ve dealt with it.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT



### THE REPUTATIONS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS OF FS23 PROGRAMS

played a key role in enhancing BYMOC's sense of safety. The respect garnered by the names of these organizations or programs contributed to reducing negative experiences and potential risks for the youth and young adults. Insights from one young adult further illuminates this aspect:



“The organization sits in the middle of the neighborhood, and we do so much work throughout the neighborhood. It's kind of hard to not feel safe. To me, it goes back to those relationships you have with people. Being with those mentors or those father figures of the organization gives you a sense of safety, belonging, and that's anywhere we go throughout the neighborhood. We're always going to stand on business; even if a rough situation occurs, we're definitely going to try to handle it in the best way possible but keep our students and keep all our staff and stuff like that safe as possible. And thanks be to God, we never had a situation, as far as I know, that made people uncomfortable or unsafe throughout the neighborhood. And it definitely goes back to the footprint that we made throughout [the neighborhood], 'cause everyone knows [the program], especially in [the neighborhood]. It's like, that name itself carries respect, and with respect, a lot of things tend to not come towards you, especially if it's negative things. Yeah, definitely feel safe anywhere we go.”

## Changes in Violent Crime

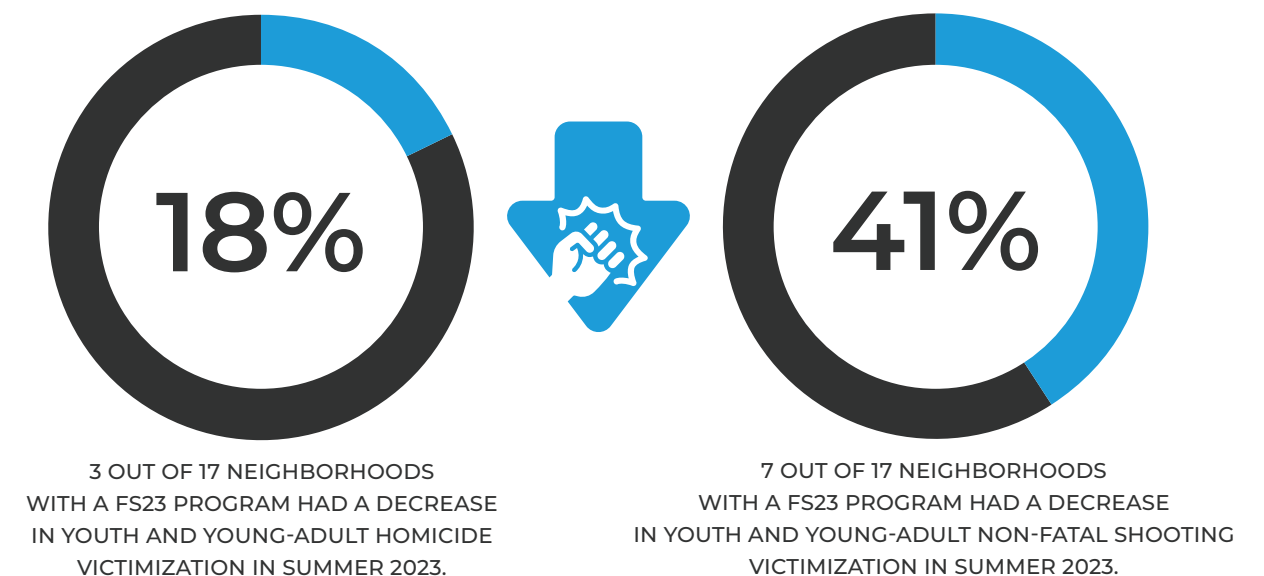
### CITY

While the overall violent crime rate in Chicago increased in summer 2023 (June–August), primarily due to increases in robbery and battery, **non-fatal shootings among youth and young adults (age 0-19) declined**, compared to summer 2022.

### NEIGHBORHOODS

Compared to the previous summer:

We conducted an analysis comparing summer 2023 homicide and non-fatal shooting victimization rates in the 17 neighborhoods hosting FS23 programs with those of 17 similar neighborhoods lacking FS23 programs. The analysis demonstrated that **some neighborhoods with an FS23 program experienced a reduction in non-fatal shooting victims, compared to the previous summer**. Interestingly, a similar decrease was also found in some of the comparison neighborhoods without an FS23 program.



“

It gave me an opportunity to meet new friends that live in my neighborhood.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

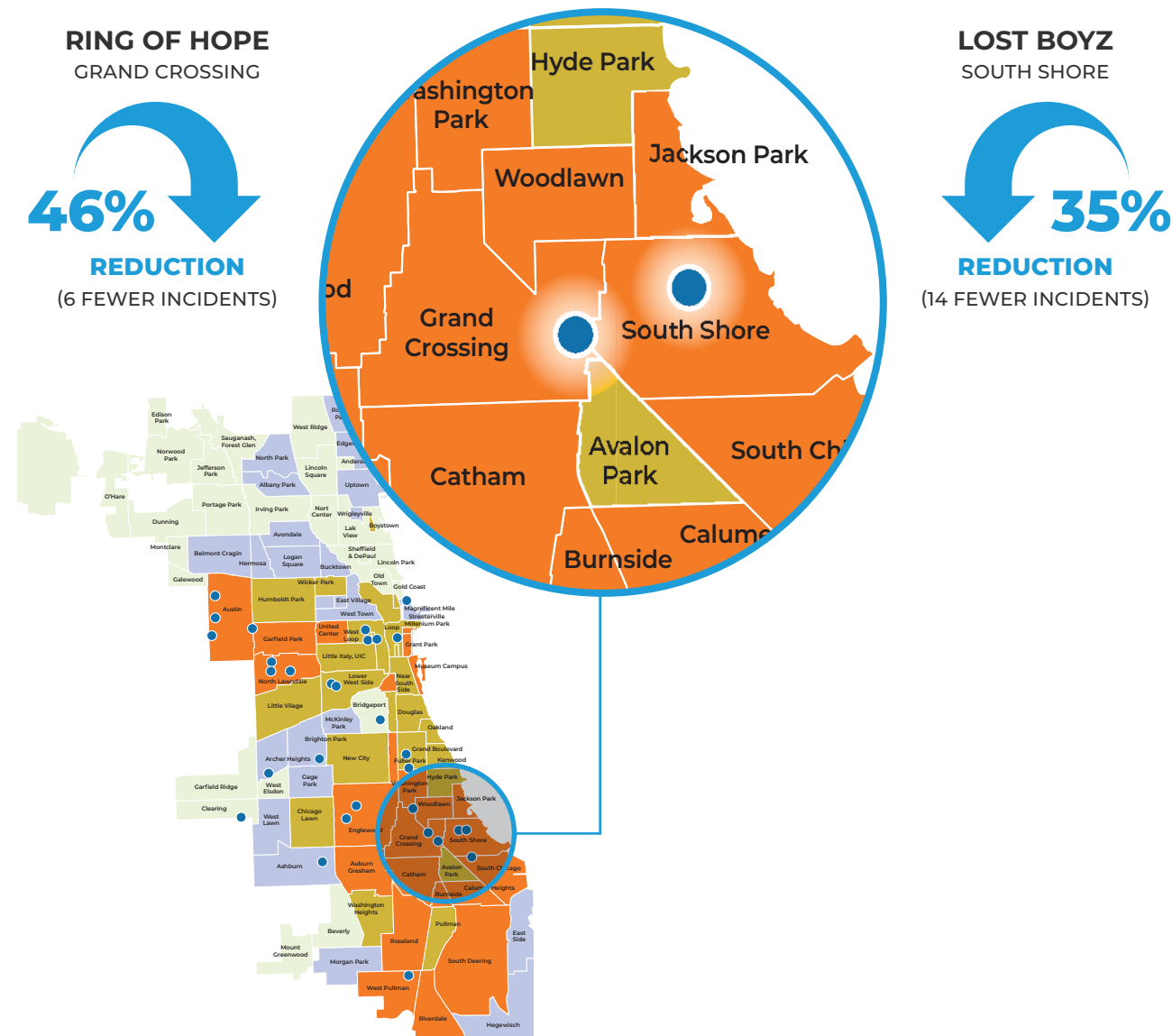


## ZOOMING IN

We used data from a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis of changes in violent-crime incidents within a quarter-mile radius of program offices. These data compare incidents between the summers of 2022 and 2023, revealing significant variation across 31 out of 33 programs located within Chicago.

Ten areas (32%) saw a decrease in violent crime, two areas (6%) remained unchanged, and 19 areas (61%) experienced an increase in violent incidents.

Particularly noteworthy was the area around **RING OF HOPE IN GRAND CROSSING**, which observed the most substantial decrease in violent crime, showing a 46% reduction (equating to six fewer incidents). Following this, the area around **LOST BOYZ IN THE SOUTH SHORE** neighborhood experienced a 35% decrease, translating to 14 fewer incidents.



# FS23 BOOSTED CONFIDENCE AND OPTIMISM AMONG BYMOC.

Participation in the FS23 programs significantly **boosted optimism and confidence among BYMOC**. Post-engagement with FS23, these youth and young adults reported heightened positivity about their futures and a stronger belief in their potential success in academic and professional pursuits.

Survey results underline this impact: 83% of participants expressed increased excitement about their future; 79% felt confident about graduating high school; 72% showed interest in pursuing further education or training post-high school; and a substantial 88% were confident in their ability to succeed in their desired careers.



## HOW FS23 IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND OPTIMISM:





“

The program provided enrichment opportunities and improved my network circle. I became more focused on my goals.

Seeing professional men give back to their communities and helping guide us in decisions for our future has been a great experience.

It benefited me because I learned new things, and [it] showed me that I can do more in life.

Helped me with networking and changing my life and setting up my future for the next person.”

”

Some BYMOC shared experiences of hopelessness and emotional numbness, a consequence of persistent community violence and personal losses. As one youth observed:

“I mean, yeah, [violence is on] an everyday basis—all day, everyday basis.... Like, that’s why I was saying, like you can get what you are looking for. You can. And you also get what you are not looking for. ’Cause so many people just get involved with stuff that has zero to do with them, just because there’s so much stuff that’s going on within the city itself. So, left and right, [there] are always different things going on with it. That’s when I was speaking to the point [earlier] where that’s why you’re getting numb to it? That’s not normal.... That it gets numb to an extent of, what’s going on? And that ain’t cool for real, for real.”



Despite adversity, most BYMOC felt sparks of optimism from neighborhood heroes. BYMOC drew inspiration from those who have overcome similar struggles, viewing their stories as both motivational and a testament to potential success. According to one young person:

“I always believed in [our program leader], but it hit the top notch when she took us out of town and I met all these different types of people—networking with them and really getting my point across to people that really got a name in the real world. When we went to Atlanta, we went to the radio station. We went to this lady [who] started her own business with credit, all types of stuff. I’m like, she’s showing me my dreams right in front of me.”

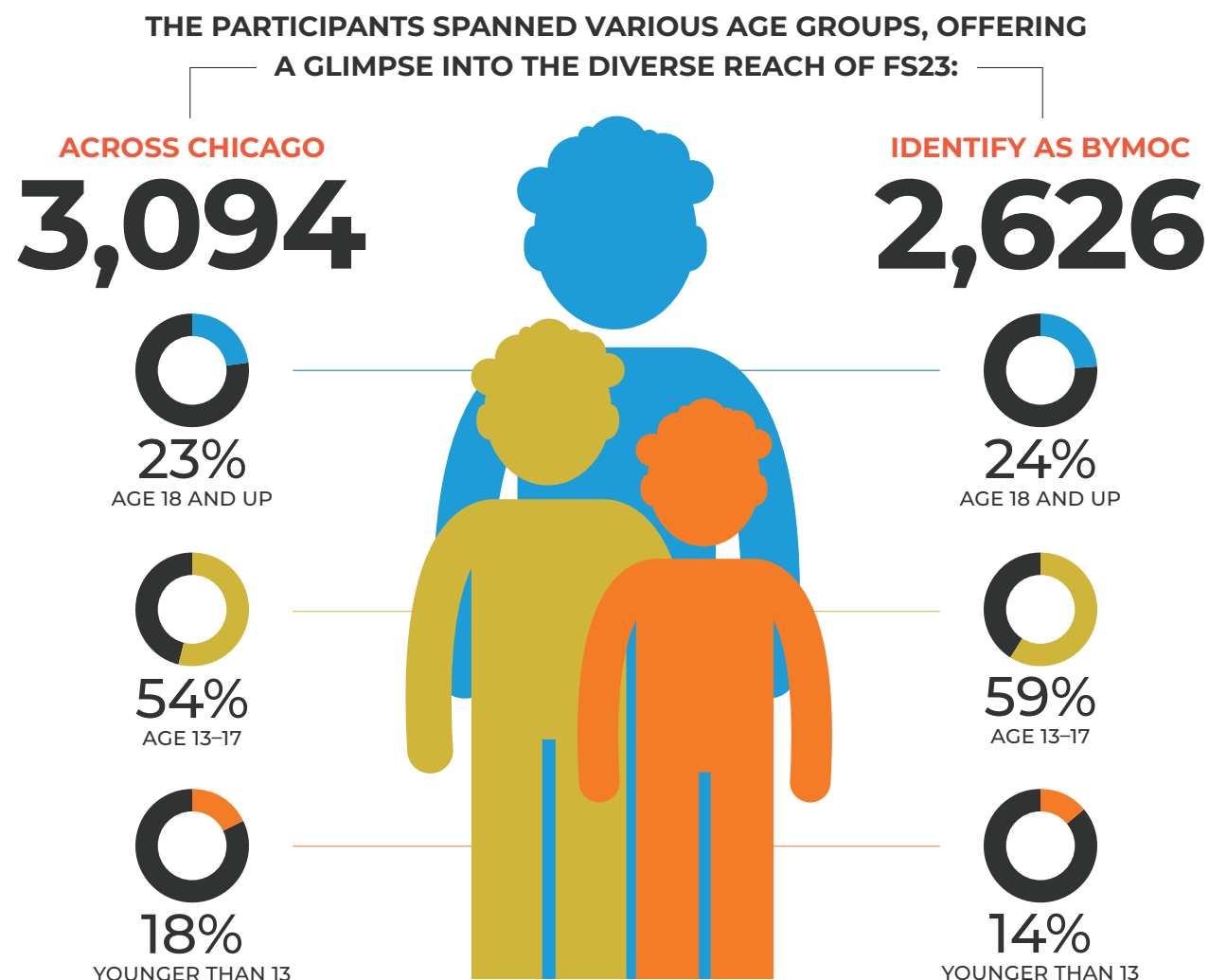
**The programs helped BYMOC believe in themselves, prioritize their mental health, grow spiritually, pursue educational and career aspirations, and embrace guidance from mentors.**




## PARTICIPANTS

These programs, while open to all youth and young adults, primarily served BYMOC. Some of these initiatives were exclusively dedicated to BYMOC, underscoring their focus on this population.

Based on data from 27 of the 33 FS23 programs, they engaged **3,094 youth and young adults across Chicago, 2,626 of whom identify as BYMOC.**



In addition to serving young people in regular programming, many programs hosted community events or activities, offering opportunities for youth to connect to their neighborhoods and build relationships in the broader community.

**7,766**  The number of additional people reached through **191 FS23 community events**

## CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES, CULTIVATING HOPE

# THE IMPACT OF FS23 ON CHICAGO'S YOUTH

In the diverse tapestry of Chicago, where the shadow of violent crime looms large, particularly for BYMOC, the Freedom Summer 2023 initiative stands out as a beacon of change. FS23 not only provided safe and engaging environments for BYMOC but served as a haven for growth and skill development while promoting emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. The initiative's reach, extending through the nurturing of positive relationships and life skills, has been a crucial element in enhancing the well-being of BYMOC.

The mixed changes in violent-crime rates across FS23 neighborhoods underscore the complex nature of addressing urban violence. However, these varied outcomes also highlight the potential of community-driven initiatives—like those supported through FS23—in making tangible differences in the lives of BYMOC.

More significantly, FS23 has illuminated the potential of grassroots efforts in transforming the landscape of growth and development for BYMOC. The program's success in instilling hope and optimism among program participants showcases the profound impact of investing in local, community-based initiatives. These bright spots are not just successes but are ripe for further investment and expansion. They demonstrate the value of applying diverse models and embracing a higher tolerance for risk, in order to support and activate communities from within.



# METHODOLOGY APPENDIX

The purpose of this evaluation was to understand the ways in which FS23 contributed to the safety and flourishing of BYMOC and their communities. The evaluation integrates quantitative data through the analysis of crime statistics and qualitative data through participant surveys, participant focus groups, and grantee reports. Equivolve hosted three virtual office-hour sessions for grantees to address questions related to their particular program structures and ensure collection of quality data.

## SURVEYS

In the final weeks of their summer programming, grantees distributed electronic surveys to participants. There were questions about participants' experiences and outcomes in the program, including feelings of safety, exposure to violence, and future aspirations. A total of 234 participants from 20 different grantee programs responded to the survey: 54 under age 13, 128 age 13–17, and 40 age 18 and up. While the survey was disseminated to all program participants, this report focuses on the responses of participants who identified themselves as BYMOC, unless otherwise noted.

## FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted focus groups with 12 participants from three grantees: New Life, Root2Fruit, and Young Men's Educational Network. The purpose of these groups was to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants' outcomes and experiences with the program, as well as to learn about how the program may have influenced the community. Focus groups were conducted virtually after the end of the summer program. Altogether, the focus groups had a total of 12 participants. All participants self-identified as Black men and were between the ages of 17 and 21.

## CRIME DATA

The evaluation utilized crime data from the City of Chicago's open data portal to assess changes in violent-crime victimization. Datasets analyzed included the Violence Reduction: Victims of Homicides and Non-Fatal Shootings and Crimes 2001–present. Other datasets used to understand crime trends included Arrests and Police Sentiment Scores.

## GRANTEE REPORTS

Grantees submitted final reports at the end of their FS23 programming. Reports included data about program scope (e.g., number and demographics of participants served, hours of programming etc.) and narrative responses related to grantees' capacity, networks, and future needs. Grantee reports were submitted by 27 organizations.







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