



**Testimony to the New York City Council's
Committee on Oversight and Investigations**

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Good afternoon Chair Torres, and committee members, my name is Ashley Sawyer and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations at Girls for Gender Equity. Thank you to members of the New York City Council and this committee for prioritizing this critical hearing about the racial justice implications of COVID-19. Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is a Brooklyn based, national policy and youth development organization which advocates to remove the systemic barriers which prevent cis and trans girls and gender non-conforming youth of color from leading self-determined lives.

We at GGE have been urging this body of government to take the issues that girls and women, especially Black and Latinx youth, experience seriously. As many of you know, we helped design the New York City Young Women's Initiative – a participatory governance process where cis and trans girls and GNC youth of color developed a set of over 80 recommendations for city government in the areas of anti-violence and criminal justice, education, health, community support and opportunity, and economic and workforce development. GGE has continued our work, despite the pandemic, by creatively providing programming and social work support for the young people in our programs remotely. **Through that on-going connection, and our research and advocacy, we know that girls and non-binary youth of color have taken on a tremendous burden during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Across the country, COVID-19 has impacted both the health and the economic stability of communities of color. **Black and Latinx people make up a disproportionate percentage of**



essential workers in this country and in New York City, and that includes young people. When GGE was a part of the *Why We Can't Wait* campaign which hosted town halls with Black girls several years ago titled, *Breaking the Silence*, one of the messages that emerged was that girls, especially Black girls are often treated as “2nd parents” and take on tremendous caregiving responsibilities in their families. The current pandemic is no different. This week, one of GGE's young people, [Sue Suilla Dailey was included in a TIME Magazine article](#) about the caregiving responsibilities that she has had to take on during this crisis, completely interrupting her educational plan.

Girls of color take on shifts in big-box retailers like Target, Whole Foods, and in [local grocery stores](#). With communities of color hit particularly hard by the pandemic, older youth, especially youth of color, are being exposed to the virus, and expected to juggle both school work (often without the adequate technology), caring for younger siblings, and working in low-wage jobs to help their family pay rent or have enough food to eat. **This will put youth of color, at a significant academic disadvantage in the months, and possibly years to come.**

Our city has examples of other crises to look at, after Hurricane Katrina, students in that predominantly Black school district were grade levels behind, and [social psychologists are still writing](#) about the emotional and mental impact of that crisis on young people. **I have already spoken to a GGE alumna who let me know that she's lost two uncles and an aunt to COVID-19. In ordinary times, if a young person lost so many loved ones in a short period of time, we would expect her school staff to surround her with support and services. In this moment, she is cut off from those types of social supports.** Black and Latinx youth in this city will have lost friends, neighbors, mentors, grandparents, aunts, uncles, caregivers, siblings, and parents. We know that this pandemic will be extremely harmful on youth of color who will have to manage the stress of death, and loss of whatever economic stability they had previously. That trauma is expected to harm youth of color emotionally and mentally in ways that can thwart their academic potential for years, perhaps decades to come.



We cannot forget that the health impact of COVID-19 has not excluded children of color, Black and Latinx youth are disproportionately impacted by comorbidities such as asthma (especially in [places like the Bronx](#) and East New York which have some of the highest childhood asthma rates in the entire country) which means of the millions of youth in this city, we are likely to see youth of color who have been hospitalized and who have been very ill themselves. **This is especially true for youth who are incarcerated in Horizon and Crossroads who have had COVID-19 and were forced to suffer through this illness while in confinement. Youth of color cannot be overlooked in our City's response and recovery efforts.**

Our recommendations:

- Ensure adequate resources are committed for mental health and trauma response in Department of Education (DOE) schools for the years to come. This means *increasing* the number of school-based social workers, restorative justice practitioners, intervention specialists, and supportive, non-law enforcement adults in schools. **The DOE must be encouraged to make budget decisions that prioritize the mental and emotional health of students through trust-building rather than enhanced policing.**
- Ensure students have access to an adapted Summer Youth Employment Program (85 % of youth participants are youth of color), so that youth and their families can have the money to eat, pay for utilities, and cover rent.
- Ensure that there is an explicit commitment to addressing the racial justice issues which impact health, and doing so in a way that includes young people.
- Funding organizations, including organizations within Council's Young Women's Initiative which are doing the work to meet the needs of young people of color who have been most harmed by this pandemic.