

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

This project focused on capturing local stories from Latinx communities in the Chicagoland area to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic intersects with environmental pollution in their neighborhoods.



The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the compounded impacts of environmental racism, climate change, and social injustices faced by minoritized communities. Residents of Little Village and other Chicago neighborhoods who were interviewed for this ethnographic project named several common community concerns. Community members identified the need to confront neighborhood changes that aim at displacing residents, government representatives that prioritize profit over the needs of the community, the individual and community risks that come with being essential workers, and the challenges that come with adjusting to virtual learning during this time.

Latinx communities navigate these challenges that exist at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental pollution in their neighborhoods. Amidst this global pandemic, residents continue to learn of the health impacts that come from the air quality in their neighborhood on account of the industrial corridor surrounding them. Ensuring that residents have reliable and accurate information is of utmost importance in order to combat coronavirus infection rates and the impact of environmental racism. As of this report, an accessible and equitable vaccination process for the COVID-19 vaccine is a priority for all.

While this ethnographic project took place in Fall of 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic, many of the community concerns named by residents via this project were issues that existed before the pandemic hit. The dangers of air pollution, inequitable employment practices, lack of healthcare access for all, and lack of green spaces are issues which have been highlighted by community members and existing organizations such as LVEJO.

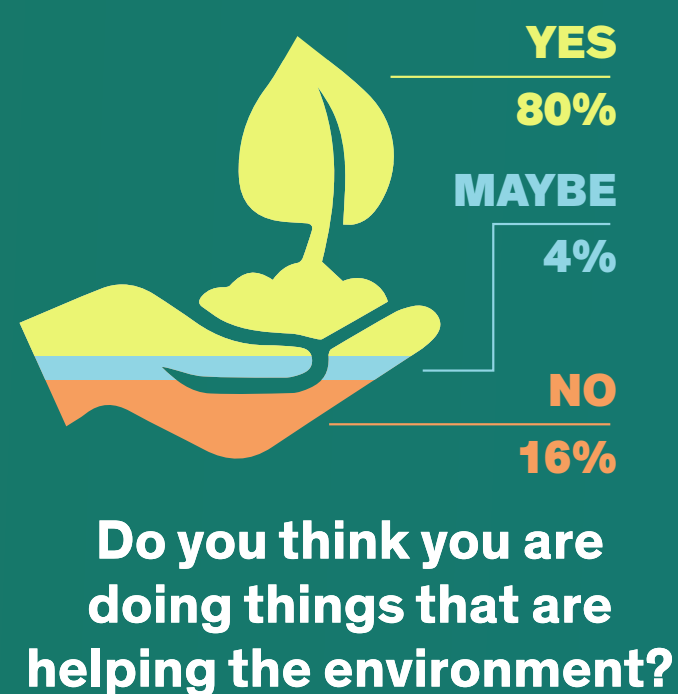
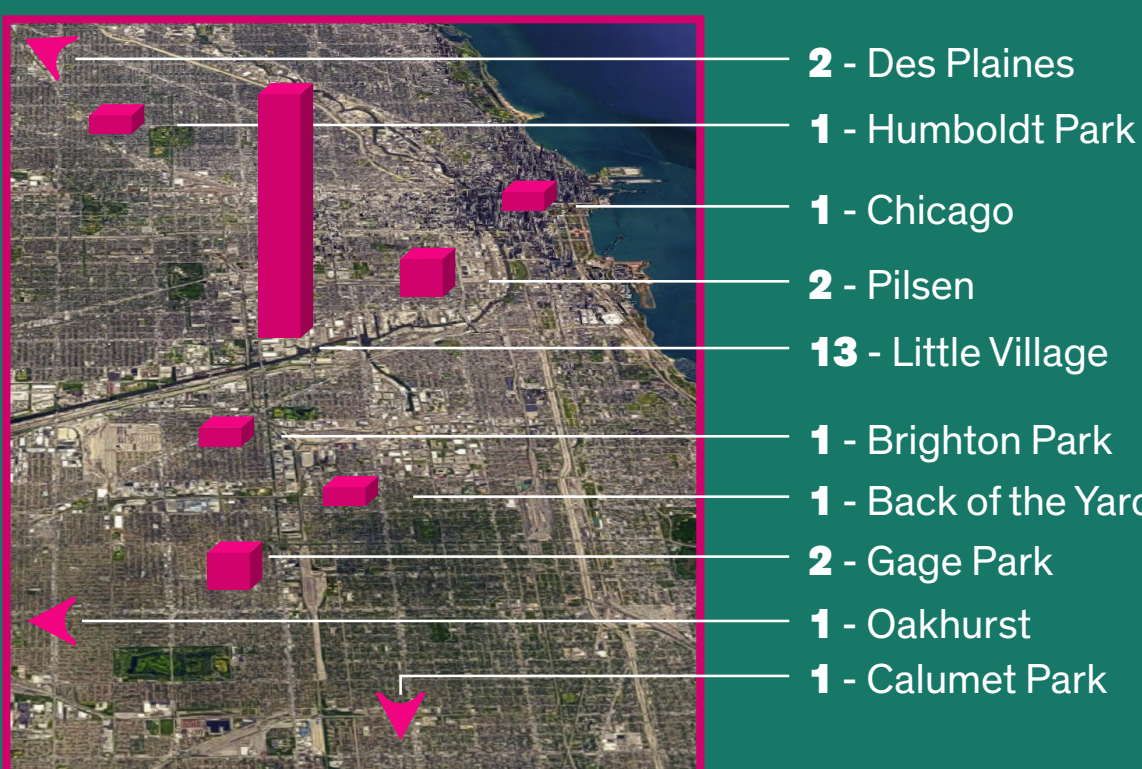


Outside of an Access medical center, a banner shows that they offer flu shots and free COVID-19 testing. Credit: Isabel Tamas, 2021



The image contains terms in different directions highlighting community concerns and themes throughout the ethnographic project. The word cloud includes: education, local-businesses, accessibility, Ivejo, rights, employment, in-person-learning, give-back, online-school, green-space, organizations, air-quality, vaccine, low-income, voting, information, protests, mental health, clean-up.

Neighborhood Representations



Community Concerns Identified

Neighborhood Changes

Neighborhood changes and environmental displacement due to pandemic.

Government Accountability

Local government prioritizing capital and profit over community needs.

Essential Workers

Essential workers reside in primarily low income neighborhoods and thus they and the larger community are put at higher risk while working.

Virtual Learning

Challenges in adjusting to virtual learning and online schooling and role of class.

Future Transformative Solutions

1 Neighborhood Changes and Essential Workers: How to mitigate neighborhood changes and assist essential workers to incorporate in a "green economy."

Designating more green spaces and reducing the amount of cement areas in Little Village has the potential to create new job opportunities. Converting abandoned lots into green spaces would bring new opportunities for workers, landscapers, environmental experts and community members to build these new spaces. This community work allows residents to come together to enhance their community and also has the potential to create summer jobs for youth who can learn these skills. The construction of more green space can combat some of the negative effects of the changing local environment. Green space can also promote outdoor physical activity among residents.

LVEJO is currently fighting to get more green space in Little Village and they have had success in this endeavor in the past. They successfully retrieved a space being used for leftover oil, which was cleaned up and later became The Semillas de Justicia community garden. Another notable action is the neighborhood coming together by creating more green space on a former Celotex site as this space was turned into La Villita park for all to enjoy.¹ Most recently, spaces in the park are being dedicated for gardening and food production. In 2022, a Community Farm initiative at La Villita Park will include a worker-owned cooperative, a community fruit orchard, and offer bilingual training on urban agriculture.

2 Virtual Learning: How to close the Virtual Learning gap.

Funding creative after school programs that will assist in integrating students back to in-person learning again can ensure that we close the virtual learning gap that emerged during the pandemic.

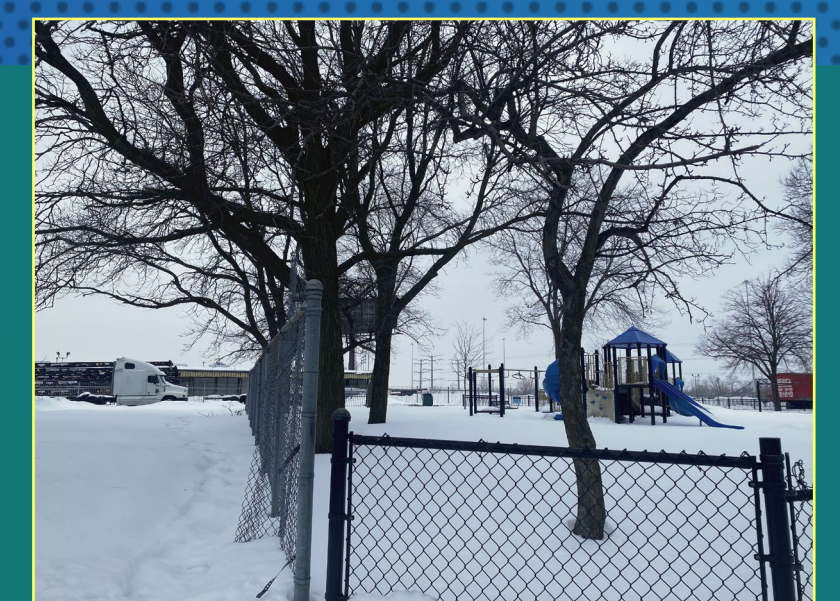
After school programs should be funded by the city in order to ensure students are engaged in their work, fully integrate back to their physical schools, and can interact with other students safely. The transition from virtual learning back to in-person education can be tough on students, so after school programs can help fill any gaps while expanding their knowledge on school subjects. After school programs can further promote physical activities and teach students about self-advocacy in order to access more resources.

Their neighborhood knowledge can also be used as an asset as teachers can engage students in lessons about climate change and the effects of pollution. In addition, educators can engage students in outdoor activities such as gardening to build skills that can transfer to their everyday lives and prepare young people for higher education. Furthermore, more funding should be directed to special needs programs in schools and mental health counselors to ensure that Latinx residents in Little Village and surrounding neighborhoods have access to therapy and counseling without the cost barriers.

3 Government Accountability: How to expand residents' understanding of their role in electing officials and demanding rights.

Little Village residents are protesting for the government to be held accountable as is seen in recent campaigns to halt corporations from moving into low-income communities. Community responses continue after the Crawford Coal Plant Implosion by HILCO Global. The implosion occurred early in the pandemic and most residents reported not being given any warning ahead of time.

In order to hold the local and city government accountable, residents have organized and participated in protests. Access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok have allowed for the spread of information and collective community education. Participating in a series of "kitchen table" conversations and community games (bingo, etc.) can increase awareness and civic engagement on the various issues impacting residents. These strategies further inform Little Village residents on who is running for local elections, how to register those who are eligible to vote, and continue to hold politicians accountable.



A truck and a park is shown to see how factories are located where children are playing, which can cause exposure to air pollution. Credit: Isabel Tamas, 2021

"We need to put more pressure on our elected officials and we need to pay closer attention to what they stand for and what they promise to do."

- Iliana Figueroa



Community protesting against police brutality. Banner reads "CPD stop killing our children!" Credit: Isiah Veney, 2021

"But I wanna be hopeful and I wanna be optimistic in believing that the members of my community and myself are capable of fighting for what we deserve. You know we deserve clean everything. Clean air, clean space, clean water in the space that is ours."

-Silvia Morales



A small business showing multiple signs for clients to wear their masks. It has both English and Spanish translations, providing accessibility. Credit: Nancy Morales, 2021