

## Overview

Founded in the 1960s, the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization has facilitated organizing campaigns that increased the resources and services available to families and residents of the North Kenwood and Oakland communities of Chicago. KOCO continues to develop new generations of African American leadership that will build stable, viable, and just communities where opportunity is not denied based on race or economic status.

## Mission

“Through the sustained engagement of low-income and working families, KOCO develops multi-generational leaders who impact decision-making processes and public policies, improving the quality of life in our local communities.” – KOCO website



## Constituency

- African Americans
- Ages 6-65+
- Foster Children
- Relative Caregivers
- LGBTQ
- Homeless
- Disabled
- Immigrants
- Formerly Incarcerated

## Local Conditions & Critical Issues Impacting 0-5 Childhood Health in Chicago

**Access to Quality Education:** Under-resourced public schools, overcrowded, school closures, teachers’ contract dispute/strike, etc. “[Traditional neighborhood public schools]...have been systematically under attack for years. You have a situation where neighborhood schools are just woefully under-resourced. It used to be people would talk about access... you know, the digital divide kind of stuff. But now... we’re talking more basic [resources] where... students are literally taking bathroom tissue to school because schools don’t have any; now we have a situation where textbooks are being shared...not just worksheets and workbooks, but actual textbooks...and in some instances...they’re prohibited from taking them home because the money isn’t there to replace it if the book gets lost. So these sorts of things create a situation where, you know, students are effectively really only able to learn for those 8 hours they’re in school, you know, so they aren’t getting a lot of homework just because budget isn’t there to make sure that students are able to have homework.” –Jawanza Malone, Executive Director

**Limited Access to Early Childhood Education, including Head Start:** 45% of eligible 3-5 year olds are enrolled in early childhood education.<sup>1</sup>

**Lack of Affordable Childcare Options:** South Chicago community members specify a lack of affordable childcare as contributor to high stress which could further contribute to mental illness.<sup>2</sup>

**Neighborhood Violence & Community Safety:** “With [school closings], you have students from rival neighborhoods that are now in school together, in the same class together, and there isn’t any consideration to figure out how to diffuse those issues when they come up. And so you have instruction time that’s being devoted to discipline...there isn’t anyone really dedicated to making sure that problems are diffused and conflicts are resolved adequately. Students are being suspended and expelled from school because of big confrontations with other students...But what happened that’s unique I think to our situation is that as students are finding themselves pushed out of school, they began to form cliques to protect themselves. And so you had 3 distinct groups, or cliques that developed that came out of the schools that were merged together, and then as those cliques began to become more organized and become more involved in drug trade and criminal activity, they are now the primary perpetrators of violence in our community. And so 2 years after this merger happened, we saw a 300% increase in violence in our area. And nobody wants to take responsibility for that. School district didn’t want to take responsibility. The police department didn’t really want to take responsibility. The blame was placed squarely on the parents.”

**Structural Problems in the Community:** This includes racism, police harassment, food insecurity, homelessness, unemployment, and gentrification.

## Substance Abuse

## Local Conditions, Cont'd

### Restricted Access to Physical Health & Mental Health

**Facilities:** "Mental health is a major issue here, and school counselors virtually don't exist in schools anymore. And with the mental health centers, being closed... we have a situation where oftentimes parents of the children have mental health issues that go unaddressed, and so that just trickles down to the students."

### Key Indicators of Childhood Health in Chicago



3.4% of 0-17 year olds in Oakland and 5.1% in Kenwood do not have **health insurance**.<sup>1</sup>

**26.5%**

of African Americans adults report that it is "somewhat" or "very" difficult to find **affordable, fresh produce**.<sup>2</sup>

**19.1%**

of Kindergarteners in Chicago are **obese**.<sup>1</sup>

**55.4**

per 100,000 residents: **homicide rate** for African Americans, compared to the city rate of 10.8/100,000 residents.<sup>1</sup>

### Current Wellness & Safety Efforts

- **Food Pantry** provides 600-800 bags of food to neighborhood households once a month
- **After School Program** (ages 6-12) provides students with help on their homework and access to the arts
- **Monthly Health Market** offers fresh produce, health screenings, and healthy lifestyle presentations (e.g., nutrition, exercise, etc.)
- **Mentorship/Leadership Development Program** that provides tutoring to elementary-high school students (in partnership with DePaul University)
- **Tenant Councils** work to preserve affordable units in Section 8 housing and develop the leadership and organizational skills of residents through community organizing efforts



### Community Defined "Best Practices" to Improve Childhood Health

- Direct action organizing
- Engage community members at the individual level to build long term relationships
- Transparent policies
- Multigenerational leadership development

### KOCO Accomplishments in Wellness & Safety

- **Parent Patrol**—street observations to dissuade neighborhood violence and diffuse conflicts before they arose
- **Local Housing Authority Reform**—resulted in rent reduction and management replacement
- **Working to improve the poor living conditions** endured by senior citizens living at two senior housing developments.<sup>1</sup>



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