

RESEARCH REPORT

New York City's Wounded Healers: A Cross-Program, Participatory Action Research Study of Credible Messengers

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December 2022



ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Contents

Acknowledgments	V
NYC Opportunity Response to Urban Institute Cross-Program, Participatory Action Research Study of Credible Messengers	VII
Executive Summary	IX
New York City’s Wounded Healers: A Cross-Program, Participatory Action Research Study of Credible Messengers	1
Background on Credible Messengers	4
Methods and Core Components of Our Study	13
Key Findings	22
Recommendations for Capacity Building	43
Conclusion	47
Appendix A. Community Researchers' Experiences, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations	49
Davon “Champ” Woodley	49
Romel Shuler	50
Helen “Skip” Skipper	51
Appendix B. Project Challenges and Lessons Learned	53
Appendix C. Actions for Achieving Our Recommendations	55
Notes	57
References	59
About the Authors	62
Statement of Independence	65

Acknowledgments

This project was supported through funding and collaboration with the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity and the New York City Young Men's Initiative. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

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The New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity manages a discrete fund and works collaboratively with City agencies to design, test, and oversee new programs and digital products. It also produces research and analysis of poverty and social conditions, including through its influential annual Poverty Measure, which provides a more accurate and comprehensive picture of poverty in New York City than the federal rate. A part of the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives, the Office for Economic Opportunity is active in making equity a core governing principle across all agencies. The New York City Young Men's Initiative is the nation's most comprehensive municipal effort to tackle the broad disparities slowing the advancement of Black and Latino young men. Through an innovative public-private partnership, the City has invested in new programs and policies that are designed to address disparities between young Black and Latino men and women, and their peers across numerous outcomes related to education, health, employment, and the criminal justice system.

We would like to thank former and current Urban Institute staff for their assistance with the project: Jahnavi Jagannath, Rudy Perez, and Susan Nembhard. We are grateful to Jason Davis, who provided meaningful contributions to this project in its early stages. Our special thanks to Janeen Buck Willison, Preeti Chauhan, Zach VeShancey, and Nathifa Forde for their thorough review and constructive input on drafts of this report. We also extend our appreciation to Parker Krasney and Joshua Thomas-Serrano for their ongoing support and assistance. Last, but by no means least, we thank all the New York City stakeholders, organizations, credible messengers, foundations, and community members for their support, time, and insights in the completion of this project.

NYC Opportunity Response to Urban Institute Cross-Program, Participatory Action Research Study of Credible Messengers

As we grapple with acute challenges in public safety, New York City has remained committed to investing in and championing pioneering, evidence-based approaches to combating crime, while working to reduce the harm associated with legal system contact. Credible messenger programs represent one such approach, with proven success in helping people with legal system involvement to modify their behaviors and access critical support services. Credible messengers share lived experiences with the clients they serve, often including prior contact with the legal system. They leverage their background, expertise, and connections to be agents of change in their communities through helping others navigate many of the same institutions and challenges they themselves have experienced.

Since 2012, the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) has worked with City and service provider partners to help manage and research credible messenger programs. In partnership with the Young Men's Initiative (YMI), we worked with the NYC Department of Probation to implement the [Arches Transformative Mentoring program](#), which the Urban Institute found to reduce recidivism at rates rarely seen among programs serving legal system-involved young adults, while helping participants to achieve gains in key attitudinal and behavioral indicators, including self-perception, future orientation, emotion regulation, and relationships with others. The success of Arches and similar initiatives has helped to advance the credible messenger approach, and New York City has emerged as a national leader, convening and providing technical assistance to other municipalities and stakeholders seeking to implement the approach.

This report reflects the findings from a participatory cross-program study of New York City credible messenger programs. As interest and investment in credible messenger programming has grown, NYC Opportunity and YMI commissioned this study to examine the evidence base and historical context for the strategy, and document best practices and common challenges, to support local and national capacity-building efforts for the field.

Further, at a moment when public and civic sector leaders are grappling with legacies of gatekeeping, this study's participatory methodology has provided an invaluable platform to center the voices of credible messengers as we work to identify actionable recommendations and inform City strategy for further investments in credible messenger programming. Credible messengers were hired as part of the Urban Institute research team, and they directly influenced all aspects of research design, data collection, and dissemination of the findings—an evaluation approach that NYC Opportunity will continue to pursue as we seek to center equity-driven practices in our work.

The study highlights key strengths of the credible messenger approach, emphasizing successes related to individual healing, service navigation, conflict de-escalation, and community empowerment. The study also presents several recommendations for strengthening the credible messenger approach in New York City, which focus on improved career ladders for credible messengers and enhanced pay and compensation packages that are commensurate with other human services professionals. The study also recommends providing flexible funding for professional development and provider capacity building, and introducing alternative and healing-based forms of evaluation and performance measurement that more accurately capture benefits that credible messengers bring to their communities, beyond just reducing recidivism.

In February 2022, President Joe Biden [highlighted the credible messenger approach](#) as a powerful tool to strengthen communities through addressing the root causes of crime. That same month, Mayor Eric Adams [announced the City's commitment](#) to connect every young adult probation client to a credible messenger mentor. As momentum for credible messenger programming grows, NYC Opportunity is committed to working with City partners to champion the recommendations presented in this report, and supporting New York City's ongoing leadership in this powerful and empowering movement.

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the purpose, activities, methods, findings, and accompanying recommendations from a cross-program, participatory action research (PAR) study of credible messengers in New York City conducted by the Urban Institute. Credible messengers are people who share unique lived experiences with the people and communities they serve. They are people who have transformed their lives to help vulnerable people do the same. The New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) and the New York City Young Men's Initiative (YMI) funded the Urban Institute to examine the current gaps in the literature on credible messengers, situate credible messengers in their historical and systemic contexts, and examine the everyday use of credible messengers by organizations and agencies in New York City. In this report, we present information gathered from Urban's study, which was conducted from December 2020 until March 2022. The intended audience for this report includes community organizations, philanthropic institutions, activists and organizers, local governments, and other people who employ or work with credible messengers or plan to do so.

The credible messenger movement is traceable to the work of Eddie Ellis, a formerly imprisoned Black Panther Party member who, along with others returning from prison, wanted to give back to his beloved community. Originally, credible messengers were primarily defined as people with lived experience of imprisonment who had transformed their lives to become agents of change in their communities. Their experiences, knowledge, and connections enabled them to connect with similarly vulnerable people in the community. Often through the mentorship of young people, credible messengers emerged as an alternative to carceral approaches to community safety and well-being. Credible messengers have been increasingly used in national and local contexts and are serving diverse groups of people of different ages and with different types of system contact. Although the literature has described the history, meaning, and impacts of credible messengers, it has usually been program-specific, with results that have typically only reached local communities. In response to this gap in research, NYC Opportunity and the Young Men's Initiative funded the Urban Institute to conduct a cross-program PAR study of credible messengers, in which the people closest to the issue being studied were incorporated in every stage of the research process. The purpose of this project was to document and understand the evidence base on the use of credible messengers in human services, the historical and systemic contexts surrounding them, and the current landscape of credible messengers in New York City. To achieve these objectives, we completed four tasks:

- We conducted a comprehensive review of literature.

- We hired community researchers onto the research team.
- We conducted a cross-program research study of credible messengers in New York City.
- We disseminated findings and recommendations to stakeholders and communities.

An adaptation of the Street PAR framework was central to our study. More broadly, we used community-engaged methods by engaging New York City stakeholders including funders, city agency leaders and staff, and organizational leaders and staff in key project activities and deliverables, including the project design, literature review, an inventory of agencies and organizations, a workshop, and this final report. As part of our PAR approach, we hired and trained four credible messengers as researchers on our project team to contribute to and co-lead every component of this study. This research would not have been possible without their expertise and collaboration. We collected data for this study by holding individual and small-group interviews with 14 New York City officials and stakeholders, surveying 30 organizations that employ credible messengers, and conducting interviews with leaders, credible messengers, and people receiving services from three community-based organizations. Through these activities, we answered the following key research questions:

- How are credible messengers defined?
 - » The term credible messenger and its operationalization have become more inclusive since its inception. As a result of our study, we define credible messengers as people who meet at least one of four criteria: they have had direct contact with the carceral system, such as imprisonment; they have been gang or street associated, and/or they live in structurally marginalized communities that have been criminalized en masse and they share common experiences with those they serve; they have been indirectly impacted by the legal system contact of family members and friends; and they have lived experience in other systems, including the foster care system. Moreover, a credible messenger is someone who has become a community agent of change, especially one who guides similarly vulnerable people to opportunities and resources they did not have themselves. This role may be formal or informal, but credibility must be determined by the community and those a credible messenger serves.
- What are the goals and objectives of these credible messenger programs?
 - » All agencies and organizations that participated in the study identified two overarching goals: (1) reduce harm, violence, and crime; and (2) reduce criminal legal system contact. The means by which they achieve these goals vary greatly.

- How do these credible messenger programs operate and provide services?
 - » The city agencies that participated in this study generally oversee the funding and funded activities of community-based organizations that employ credible messengers. Other city agencies provide education, training, resources, and capacity building for organizations that employ credible messengers. Some city agencies also employ credible messengers for work and at various levels, including providing direct services, management, program development, and training and technical assistance. The community-based organizations that participated in this study generally offer resources, support, and advocacy to community members and people experiencing contact with the criminal legal system.
- How are credible messengers recruited and trained for the programs?
 - » Study participants reported that recruitment of credible messengers occurs through community-based organization partners, formal avenues (e.g., job postings), other credible messengers, and community members. Participants reported that the most essential qualification for credible messengers was that the community sees them as “credible.” Having intimate knowledge of and ties to their communities (i.e., their histories, cultures, and networks) is also important. They can have gained this knowledge through their backgrounds (e.g., their neighborhoods or families), by having been street associated, or by having had direct or indirect contact with the criminal legal system.
- What are the needs, challenges, and successes of credible messengers and organizations that employ them?
 - » Participants reported key successes including credible messengers’ ability to facilitate individual and community healing, empowerment, and capacity building; create connections between communities, systems, and policymakers; reshape ideas of public safety; and promote awareness of structural and systemic oppression. The main challenges include the effects of the structural stigmas of race and criminalization, lack of adequate compensation (and benefits), funding, restrictive performance and evaluation requirements, and credible messengers’ workplace challenges. It is important to note that the credible messengers these organizations employ are primarily formerly imprisoned Black and Latinx people who work with similarly vulnerable people. As Ray (2019) notes, many of these “challenges” may be indicative of the racialized nature of these organizations, which have profound implications for broader racial inequality. Because many of the organizations that employ credible messengers are primarily composed of

and primarily serve Black and Latinx people, they may inadvertently marginalize their workers through various constraints (including policies) and added burdens, by valuing "traditional credentials" over lived experience (as is seen in pay inequities across the field), and by allocating resources (and supports) disparately.

- Do cross-program partnerships and collaboration exist?
 - » Participants reported that New York City has many and strong collaborative relationships between city agencies and community organizations. But they also reported that the well-known collaboration and communication efforts generally include the same agencies and organizations and that efforts to identify and include new perspectives and partners are limited, especially those who work in fields outside the criminal legal system (e.g., education, child welfare, workforce development and labor).

We also collected information beyond the key research questions about the landscape of credible messengers in New York City. Overall, the project shed light on

- the meaning and titles of credible messengers and lived experience;
- the recruitment, training, and qualifications of credible messengers;
- the communities credible messengers serve, the services they provide, and perceived impacts on themselves and others; and
- the characteristics and trajectories of agencies and organizations that employ credible messengers.

Given our findings, we make the following eight key recommendations for how organizations and agencies that employ credible messengers can increase their capacity, impact, and sustainability:

- **Increase credible messengers' pay and benefits.** Participants elevated the need to create career ladders for credible messengers and increase their pay to a living wage equal to that of their non-credible messenger counterparts. Participants also reported that credible messengers (just like all people) need access to affordable health care and retirement benefits.
- **Employ people with lived experience in all roles in all fields.** Participants said people with lived experience need to be included in roles and sectors they have been excluded from, such as contract development, policy, education, and research.
- **Invest in organizations led by credible messengers, especially organizations that are genuinely part of their communities, and invest in community well-being.** Participants

recommended that agencies and organizations funnel as much money as possible back into the communities they serve. They believe increasing funding for organizations that are led by and employ people with lived experience will contribute to community healing.

- **Increase collaboration between city agencies, organizations, and community members.** Participants said a larger and more diverse coalition of these stakeholders could lead to more significant innovation, opportunities, and continuous collaboration, to the benefit of credible messengers and communities.
- **Give organizations the flexibility to use funding for capacity building.** Participants said organizations need more diverse funding streams and to be able to use funds for training, professional development, collaboration, hiring, and technology.
- **Reduce the time it takes to execute funding to organizations.** A common challenge participants reported was the amount of time it takes for city agencies to execute contracts. This protracted process imposes a critical hardship for many community-based organizations. They suggested eliminating unnecessary steps to streamline and reduce processing time.
- **Introduce alternative and healing-based forms of evaluation and performance measurement.** Participants said data and outcomes beyond recidivism, violations, and dosage are needed to truly understand credible messengers' work and the true experiences of the people they serve. Participants reported that quantitative and qualitative data are both necessary. They recommended that community members' input be incorporated in the development of these outcomes. Participants also reported that outcome-measurement tools should complement, rather than hinder, service delivery.
- **Organizations should ensure their structures and processes are rooted in the purpose of their work.** As credible messenger programming expands, participants stressed the importance of firmly rooting the work in the radical origins of the credible messenger movement as a transformative justice approach. In addition, organizations should maintain workplace cultures and processes that support the unique needs of the populations they employ.

New York City's Wounded Healers: A Cross-Program, Participatory Action Research Study of Credible Messengers

Credible messengers are a bridge between reformists and abolitionists, and they represent an opportunity to vastly reduce our overreliance on the institutions of policing and other carceral institutions. They also present New York City and other US cities an opportunity to live up to their ideals of justice and remedy some of the injustices of the criminal legal system by centering those most directly impacted in the work of community restoration and healing. In this report, we describe a project undertaken by the Urban Institute to understand and document the evidence base on the use of credible messengers in human services, the historical and systemic contexts surrounding credible messengers' work, and the landscape of credible messengers in New York City. We hope it can be a starting point for more robust conversations on the use and impact of credible messengers, not just in the human services field but across all sectors in New York City and nationwide. We also hope this report begins a process whereby New York City's "wounded healers" or "street doctors," as one credible messenger described them, will be adequately compensated and recognized.

Our work for this project began in December 2020, a time of especially contentious politics in the United States. The senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Department officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020 ushered in some of the largest protest demonstrations in American history.¹ A beloved father, son, and community member, Floyd's public murder enlivened national discourses surrounding race, the criminal legal system, and public safety. But for many people, particularly Black folks, Floyd's murder was less a wake-up call and more a reminder of the inequalities and injustices the criminal legal system produces at virtually every stage, and researchers have documented the anti-Black racism that has created and perpetuated these inequities and injustices (Hinton and Cook 2021). In the United States, Black people are significantly more likely than white people to be murdered by police.² In addition, the United States incarcerates more people than any other country, and those under confinement are disproportionately Black. In the 1990s, Eddie Ellis, a formerly imprisoned Black Panther Party member who would be credited as a founder of the credible messenger movement, found that 85 percent of New York State's prison population was Black or Latinx and that 75 percent

of people in that population came from just seven New York City neighborhoods (CNHJH 2013). Those disparities persist, and the criminal legal system is only one set of institutions that make up the vast structural, systemic, and institutional forms of oppression that Black and Latinx communities face.

Black and Latinx communities, including those in New York City, are acutely shaped by the conditions produced by racial capitalism.³ These unequal conditions include residential segregation, housing inequality, poverty, underfunded schools, crumbling infrastructure, and a lack of investment in vital medical services, including for mental and physical health. These same conditions also drive harm, violence, and crime in many communities (Krivo, Peterson, and Kuhl 2009; Peterson and Krivo 2010). Our study captures a historical shift in how credible messengers and their lived experience have been defined after decades of this acute, structural marginalization and criminalization of Black and Latinx communities. As we describe in this report, the term credible messenger no longer only refers to people who have been imprisoned. Credible messengers now include people residing in structurally marginalized and criminalized communities of color and street- or gang-associated people. It can also refer to the people who have been indirectly impacted by the carceral experiences of family members or friends. Moreover, as interconnections between systems have become more apparent, the term has been used to refer to people impacted by other systems, such as the foster care system.

Although it is essential to acknowledge how these experiences of marginalization influence credible messengers' identities and the challenges they face, the trauma of having survived these conditions and unjust systems does not define them. Credibility and the validation of their experiences come from within the community. Credible messengers and other stakeholders we interviewed often referred to their role as a “calling.” They spoke passionately about working in the communities where they were born and raised. They described the duality of doing something they loved while feeling at times that they were not being taken care of. They consistently repeated that credible messengers save lives. Yet, **credible messengers are actively dealing with the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual injuries of their pasts and structural stigmas of the present.** As one credible messenger remarked at a stakeholder workshop in February 2022, “there’s nothing former” about being formerly incarcerated. We decided to use the term “wounded healers” in the title of this report for this reason: we wanted to eschew deficit-based narratives that reduce people to the challenges they face. Research substantiates these narratives of the many challenges and stigmas that people returning from incarceration face (Miller 2021). The title is also intended to highlight the urgency stakeholders expressed of helping credible messengers deal with these challenges so they can do their work more effectively. We also want to center the visible and invisible healing that credible messengers do in their communities in New York City and across the country.

To achieve the project's broader aims (i.e., document the base of evidence on credible messengers in human services, understand the broader contexts surrounding credible messengers, and study the landscape of credible messengers in New York), we

- conducted a comprehensive review of the literature,
- incorporated community researchers on the project team,
- conducted a cross-program study of credible messengers in New York City, and
- disseminated findings and recommendations.

We used an adaptation of participatory action research (PAR), which involves incorporating people closest to the issue being studied into every stage of the research process. More broadly, we used community-engaged methods (CEM) by engaging New York City stakeholders in key project activities and deliverables, including soliciting their input and participation in the literature review, an inventory of agencies and organizations that employ credible messengers, a workshop, and this final report. As part of our PAR approach, we hired and trained four credible messengers as researchers on our project team and the Urban Institute to contribute to and co-lead every component of this study. This research would not have been possible without their expertise and collaboration. We collected data through individual and small-group interviews with 14 New York City officials and stakeholders, a survey of 30 organizations that employ credible messengers, and conducting interviews with leaders, credible messengers, and people receiving services from three community-based organizations.

The research questions that guided our study are as follows:

1. How are credible messengers defined?
2. What are the goals and objectives of these credible messenger programs?
3. How do these credible messenger programs operate and provide services?
4. How are credible messengers recruited and trained for the programs?
5. What are the needs, challenges, and successes of credible messengers and the organizations that employ them?
6. Do cross-program partnerships and collaboration exist?

In this report, we document some of the tremendous work credible messengers do in New York City and then share eight recommendations for how organizations and agencies that employ credible messengers can increase their capacity, impact, and sustainability.

Background on Credible Messengers

Credible messengers constitute a social movement led by formerly imprisoned people, their families, and their communities. As researchers have documented, in the decades since the modern civil rights movement, a significant amount of activism and organizing work has been absorbed into nonprofit and community-based organizations (Sampson et al. 2005). With this in mind, we focused on understanding the use of credible messengers within the institutionalized context of the human services sector, which commonly includes community-based organizations and local government agencies and institutions. Typically, this includes entities that provide a variety of direct services, such as mentoring. We also focused on organizations and agencies that work with people who have had contact with the criminal legal system, work that comprises the larger share of credible messenger programming. We acknowledge that much of the groundwork for credible messengers involved escaping the reach of the budding American carceral state (for more on the American carceral state, see Gottschalk 2006 and 2014 and Lerman and Weaver 2014). In the context of human services, that groundwork has translated to the spaces and languages of reentry, recidivism, gun violence prevention, gang interventions, and programming for youth considered “at risk.”*

Although the scope of this study is limited to the explicit use of credible messengers and associated programming in the human services sector, we understand that credible messengers work outside that sector. The very emergence of the credible messenger movement in a prison points to the decentralized nature of a much larger movement. The work of credible messengers goes beyond organizational structures and they often operate unrecognized or without formal titles. Indeed, many of the credible messengers we spoke with said they did not know the title until they were given it by their employers.

In this section, we examine the origins of credible messenger initiatives and programming, paying close attention to the historical and contextual factors that led to their development. The first documented use of the term comes from men who had been imprisoned in a New York State prison who encouraged others like them to return to their communities. Channeling a radical philosophy to upend how imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people were treated and how their communities were criminalized, these men took the call to assist other vulnerable people, particularly young people. The literature we reviewed suggests credible messengers now largely occupy the spaces of reentry, violence prevention, and youth mentoring. They work to reduce recidivism, harm, and violence and

* We limit our use of “at risk” to describe young people of color who are made vulnerable for criminalization by structural marginalization. Developed by Victor Rios (2011, 176), we instead use “at-promise” youth to denounce stigmatizing and deficit-based language in favor of more humane language.

promote the more general well-being of their communities through relationship building and restorative justice. First developed in New York City, credible messenger programming and initiatives are increasingly used nationwide. Training designed specifically for credible messengers, however, is still limited to and centralized in New York City. Moreover, though evaluations of credible messenger programs and initiatives are limited, they have been shown to be effective for achieving several notable outcomes, including reductions in recidivism. We describe this evidence in greater detail in the next section. Much remains unknown, however, about the landscape of credible messengers, their work, and their perceived impacts on outcomes other than recidivism.

The Origins of a Movement

In 1979, a group of imprisoned men in Green Haven prison in New York led what would become a radical social movement that organizes and advocates for the humanity of presently and formerly imprisoned people in a society that marks them as “less than.” Led by Eddie Ellis, a Black Panther with a vision of organizing people at the margins of American society (Austria and Peterson 2017), this group conducted a study on the racial demographics and geographic backgrounds of people imprisoned in New York State. That study, which became known as the Seven Neighborhoods Study, found that in the 1970s, 85 percent of the state's prison population was Black or Latinx and 75 percent of those people came from just seven neighborhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens—neighborhoods with large populations of people of color and immigrants (CNHJH 1997).

Referenced in the 1992 *New York Times* article that first elevated his research as an “unaccredited penologist,” Ellis presented a different approach to addressing recidivism and crime: encourage formerly imprisoned people to mentor youth in their old neighborhoods, particularly in poor Black and Latinx neighborhoods, where many of the mentors came from themselves.⁴ The meshing of their lived experiences of marginalization and political transformations in prison enabled them to become community change agents. Like many formerly imprisoned men who do community-based work, their mentoring skills and ability to build transformative relationships came from having already practiced them in prison with each other (Burton 2021). As more community elders were being taken from their communities, youth mentoring by those returning from prison became an important part of young people's positive development (Austria and Peterson 2017).

Many of these men were not solely seeking redemption for their alleged crimes, a concept that is often overemphasized in narratives about formerly imprisoned people. Rather, they were demanding liberation for themselves and their communities and were emphasizing empowerment over

“rehabilitation.” Ellis and other formerly imprisoned people understood the inner workings and origins of racial capitalism and the mass criminalization of Black and Latinx communities,⁵ and they acted to preserve their communities from further oppression and achieve community transformation. Moreover, Ellis’s ideas considered shifting prison demographics; he argued that traditional strategies to combat recidivism were structured in white supremacy and lacked more critical analytic frameworks. As Austria and Peterson contend, these men’s early thinking and organizing would set the stage for or “forecast” the underpinnings of the much larger credible messenger movement (2017, 4).

Credible Messengers Today

People of color and immigrants continue to be overrepresented in jails and prisons (Vera Institute of Justice 2018, 2021). The work of credible messengers to combat this is widespread, transformative, and community based, focusing on breaking the cycle of legal involvement in vulnerable communities. Though there is no formal credible messenger model, we found in our literature review that Ellis’s original vision and contemporary credible messenger programs share four characteristics that are core to the approach:

- a focus on supporting youth and young adults involved with the legal system and/or engaging in criminalized behaviors
- reliance on a “transformative group mentoring intervention” (Austria and Peterson 2017)
- operating separate from the police and other formal legal system actors
- embracing a transformative philosophy and featuring key tenets of restorative justice, acknowledging harm, and repair

Credible messengers embody principles from the restorative and transformative justice frameworks. Consistent with the restorative justice framework, credible messengers address community relationships, particularly on reintegrating people who may have committed harm while healing those who have experienced crimes or other harmful actions (Chowdhury, Davis, and Hammond 2019). Consistent with the transformative justice framework, credible messengers also work beyond the individual, recognizing broadly how race, capitalism, patriarchy, and other structures create the conditions that lead to harm, violence, and crime. They work to address the structural roots of harm and violence while promoting alternative, community-based solutions that involve everyone affected (Kershner et al. 2007).⁶

Most program models that center credible messengers tend to employ mentors who have experienced imprisonment and understand the institutional barriers experienced by those they work with, particularly people who are disconnected from education and employment and might benefit from such programming to prevent contact with the legal system. Forming personal and authentic relationships, which is also important in traditional mentoring spheres, is often considered the cornerstone of credible messengers' work. Credibility with community members and those with shared experiences differentiates credible messengers from other human services providers.

Although credible messengers still work predominantly in community-based organizations (such as the Mentoring Center in Oakland, California), local governments and justice departments have been using them more often (Muhammad and Ahearn 2020). Although many programs offer mentoring and other services similar to the work of credible messengers, few programs explicitly advertise credible messengers in their programmatic frameworks, making it difficult to measure the prevalence of credible messengers. Examples of programs outside New York City that explicitly advertise the use of credible messengers include the following:

- Healthy, Wealthy & Wise, an Oakland-based program operated by Community and Youth Outreach, is a culturally responsive, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy program developed to reach high-risk system-involved youth and young adults. Youth are served in peer cohorts of 15 to 25 people in facilitated group trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy sessions over 14 to 16 weeks, and participants work one-on-one with credible messenger “life coaches.” From 2018 to 2019, only 10 percent of participants paired with mentors recidivated within the first year after release (Muhammad and Ahearn 2020).
- The Credible Messenger Initiative is a transformative mentoring program for youth committed to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services in Washington, DC. This initiative employs community members to share their experiences with the youth and families the department serves. The department defines credible messengers as “neighborhood leaders or experienced youth advocates and individuals with similar life experiences who serve in a variety of capacities to coach, guide, mentor and advocate for youth and families in both group and individual settings” (DYRS 2019, 40). A publicly available evaluation of the program has not yet been published.[†]

[†] Brotherton and colleagues lead this work and will soon release the results of their multi-year study of credible messengers in Washington, D.C as a full-length book.

- Youth Advocate Programs is a national youth-serving organization matching youth in the juvenile legal system with mentors from their own neighborhoods who have also experienced contact with the criminal legal system. The organization's credible messenger program supports adults ages 18 to 35 recently released from incarceration with community-based wraparound support and pairs participants with trained credible messengers who have similar life experiences. Credible messengers help participants with family engagement, workplace skills and credentials, and building social capital. In 2014, John Jay College of Criminal Justice evaluated Youth Advocate Programs and found that 86 percent of participants were not arrested while participating in the program (Austria and Peterson 2017).
- Project Safe Neighborhoods in the Atlanta area is a multipronged approach to community safety by the US Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia, which includes a credible messenger initiative. This is a six-month program in which imprisoned young adult "repeat offenders" participate before release. They meet with credible messengers from EGRESS Consultants and Services weekly during the program and after reentering the community. The US Attorney's Office for Northern District of Georgia partnered with the Georgia Department of Corrections, EGRESS Consultants and Services, and the Offender Alumni Association to implement the credible messenger initiative. Limited information is available on the program, its credible messengers, or evaluations.⁷
- reVision and its partners located throughout Harris County, Texas, employ credible messengers to mentor youth with a positive youth development lens. They offer life skills programs, academic assistance, and career planning. Through partnerships between system actors (e.g., criminal legal, child welfare) and community stakeholders, credible messengers coordinate across organizations to work with youth who are incarcerated as well as those in the community. An evaluation has not been conducted on this coordinated effort.
- READI Chicago is a one-year alliance program that connects the men most impacted by Chicago gun violence to transitional jobs, cognitive behavioral therapy, and support services. Clients participate in 200 hours of cognitive behavioral therapy and receive 12 hours of wraparound support services a week facilitated by credible messengers. The University of Chicago Crime Lab and the Social IMPACT Research Center are currently researching the program's outcomes.⁸
- The Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement has launched a national campaign encouraging credible messengers to be used to disrupt legal system contact among youth of color. The initiative builds on the work of leaders including Clinton Lacey, who spearheaded the growth

of credible messengers in human services programming in New York City and Washington, DC.

Beyond community-based initiatives, local governments have increasingly begun to use credible messengers. Examples include the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, the City of Milwaukee, and Cook County, Illinois. The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution in May 2020 enabling people who have received certain convictions to provide care and services to youth as credible messengers if they can demonstrate they have been “rehabilitated.”⁹ The City of Milwaukee is partnering with community-based organizations to expand mentoring opportunities for youth and the use of credible messengers. Cook County Juvenile Probation is partnering with a community-based organization called Adults Active in Youth Development to operate a program that has credible messengers work in middle schools.

Origins of Credible Messengers in New York City

Although credible messengers originated in New York City in the 1980s, and the Department of Probation laid the groundwork with the development of alternative-to-placement programs for at-risk youth, credible messengers have only become popularized and well known in the past decade, which can be credited to a tragic series of deaths and spikes in violent crime, including the death of Tayshana “Chicken” Murphy in 2011 (Cramer et al. 2018).¹⁰ These deaths prompted residents to call on the city to invest in people and safety instead of policing and arresting those living in low-income housing. Thereafter, based on priorities determined by the Dispositional Reform Steering Committee, a number of initiatives and programs related to credible messengers were created in the early 2010s. For example, NYC Opportunity helped launch YMI, its own dedicated unit in the NYC Mayor’s Office. Following its success, NYC Opportunity and YMI worked with the Department of Probation to launch Arches and Advocate, Intervene, and Mentor (Lynch et al. 2018). NYC Opportunity and YMI also collaborated with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to expand Cure Violence in New York City. Throughout the past decade, organizations have become more recognized as New York City continues to evaluate and invest in organizations that employ credible messengers (box 1 on page 15 provides examples of organizations that employ credible messengers). As a result, these organizations and initiatives have found positive impacts on people who have had criminal legal system involvement. Anecdotally, the New York City Department of Probation reported that in the past decade it has cut “the share of clients charged with violating their probation by about two-thirds and nearly eliminated charges for purely ‘technical violations’—failure to comply with the terms of probation, but with no new arrest—all with no increase in recidivism.”¹¹

The Efficacy of Credible Messengers

While empowering the people and communities they serve, credible messengers in fields such as reentry foster outcomes related to desistance from crime (e.g., effective coping strategies, instilling “hope”) (LeBel et al. 2014). Recently, the Credible Messenger Justice Center (CMJC) published a report chronicling the progress of a select group of credible messenger sites across the country. It also draws attention to the need for more research, funding streams, and increased engagement with local communities and the credible messengers at the heart of the larger movement to change our approach to community safety (CMJC 2022). Studies on the efficacy of credible messengers have focused on mentoring programs and their impact on mentees, who are typically system involved. Searching for evaluations of the efficacy of credible messenger programs, we found four evaluations, two of which were conducted by the Urban Institute.

In the first evaluation, Lynch and coauthors (2018) used a quasi-experimental design to examine Arches, a program supported by NYC Opportunity and the Young Men’s Initiative with sites in New York City’s five boroughs that employ credible messengers to provide group mentoring and Interactive Journaling to young adults ages 16 to 24 who are on probation. They found that just 6 percent of participants had been convicted of another crime 24 months after having begun probation, compared with 14 percent of nonparticipants in the matched comparison group. Participants reported that they appreciated the program and the skills it taught them, though they believed the program was not long enough. Arches stakeholders noted that the program’s credible messengers could benefit from more formal training on group facilitation. In addition, study participants raised concerns about the relatively low compensation of mentors, even those with full-time status, and stakeholders said resources and other supports were needed.

The second evaluation focused on another New York City–based initiative supported by NYC Opportunity and YMI called Advocate, Intervene, Mentor. That initiative is offered in multiple sites across New York City’s five boroughs, with credible messengers who provide one-on-one mentoring to youth ages 16 to 18 who are under NYC Department of Probation supervision. Cramer and coauthors (2018) found that within 12 months of enrolling, only 19 percent of participants were adjudicated, and 6 percent were reconvicted. Within 12 months of completing the program, only 3 percent of participants had a new felony conviction. The authors also found that participants and their families valued the credible messengers’ mentoring, particularly one-on-one meetings and support accompanying youth to appointments. However, they reported the aftercare planning and services were lacking.

The third evaluation was of the Parent Support Program (PSP) from Community Connections for Youth. Serving the Bronx, the PSP mentorship aspect focuses on parents whose children are involved in the criminal legal system, most often sentenced to community supervision. It pairs parents who have navigated the legal system for their children with parents who are currently attempting to do the same. The PSP provides mentees and their children support and guidance. Using New York City and PSP administrative data, Impact Justice recently found that young people whose parents participated in the program were more likely to violate their probation than young people whose parents did not participate, which is likely because of the higher level of needs of these children and “more severe levels of final disposition” than children not in the program (2019, 12). The evaluation found, however, that children involved in the program were less likely to be removed from their homes, more likely to have their probation violations dismissed, and more likely to resume probation after a probation violation. Impact Justice attributed many of its positive findings about the program to the program's use of the parent coaches who advocated on the families' behalf (during court) and helped parents communicate with their children, manage conflicts, and navigate the juvenile legal system.

In the fourth evaluation, the Center for Employment Opportunities in New York, which offers people exiting prison the ongoing support necessary to build career capital and financial stability, measured the effectiveness of its Credible Messenger Initiative. Launched in 2017, that initiative pairs young adults with full-time credible messenger mentors. Examining outcomes for 251 participants, the Center for Employment Opportunities found that clients who were paired with a credible messenger mentor participated in the program at higher levels and were more likely to obtain full-time employment than clients who were not paired with a credible messenger mentor; these mentees were also more likely to achieve “job start ready” status, obtain a job placement, and reach the 365-day job-retention milestone.

Employment and Training of Credible Messengers

Stigma around previous imprisonment is a common barrier to employment, including for credible messengers. Employers may be hesitant to hire credible messengers because of restrictions placed on people who are leaving prison or on parole, such as community supervision conditions that prohibit formerly imprisoned people from interacting with peers or laws that preclude people with certain criminal convictions from certain employment opportunities. Barriers to hiring credible messengers and implementing credible messenger programs are rooted in structural racism and “the social distance created by race, class, and criminalization” (Austria and Peterson 2017, 4). This has to do with how criminal legal institutions and systems are racialized, as evidenced by the perpetual racial disparities

found nationwide (Alexander 2011; Bobo and Thompson 2010). Moreover, research has shown that race largely drives the disparities seen in outcomes such as employment status, disparities that are only exacerbated by having a criminal conviction (Pager 2003). Scholars have drawn attention to how the convergence of Blackness and criminality in the collective imagination of American society reflects the racist, anti-Black belief systems that portray Black people as inherently criminal and crime as a “Black problem” (Muhammad 2011). These flawed belief systems contribute to the policies and practices that exclude people with criminal convictions from various work, including mentoring youth. Ironically, though, the factors that may make employers hesitant to hire credible messengers (i.e., their experiences with the criminal legal system) are the very factors that give them the credibility that social workers and others working in human services programs may lack. Credible messengers also seek credibility in the form of training and education.

Lately, agencies and organizations have started discussing the utility of requiring formal training and accreditation for credible messengers, similar to the requirements of peer support specialists in the state of New York.¹² On the one hand, these requirements can standardize and legitimize credible messengers in the eyes of prospective employers, such as government employers and funders, thereby creating formal positions with consistent career paths, wages, and benefits. On the other hand, certification requirements could supersede the value of lived experiences, which are the crux of the credible messenger philosophy (John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity 2018). Although certification is not required, stakeholders agree that training and education is beneficial. Examples of existing formal trainings for credible messengers include the following:

- The Credible Messenger Justice Center is a training and research center formed through a partnership between the New York City Department of Probation, the City University of New York, and Community Connections for Youth. The CMJC has launched the Credible Messenger Institute, offering a certificate for completion of six sessions that address social relationships in the context of mentorship, including maintaining boundaries and professionalism.
- Community Connections for Youth offers a five-day, 10-module training series called the Credible Messenger Boot Camp for credible messengers working with youth involved in the juvenile legal system.
- The Institute for Transformative Mentoring at the New School provides trauma-informed training. It has provided training for program staff at Cure Violence and at Arches (a group mentorship program for young adults that we discuss later in this report).

- The Navigator Certificate in Human Services and Community Justice offered by the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity prepares people with lived experience in the criminal legal system for employment and advancement in human services careers. Graduates of the semester-long training who matriculate at John Jay College, the Borough of Manhattan Community College, or St. Francis College receive six undergraduate credits.

Methods and Core Components of Our Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and document the evidence base on the use of credible messengers in human services, the historical and systemic contexts surrounding the work of credible messengers, and the current landscape of credible messengers in New York City. To achieve this, we employed a modified version of the Street PAR framework to conduct four tasks: a comprehensive review of the literature; incorporation of community researchers onto the project team; a cross-program study of credible messengers in New York City; and dissemination of findings and recommendations. In addition to using Street PAR, we engaged NYC Opportunity, city stakeholders, foundations, and organizations to solicit their insight and feedback on the project's design, implementation, findings and recommendations, and dissemination efforts. Between August and December 2021, we conducted a cross-program qualitative study of credible messengers in New York City. We strove to collect stakeholder perspectives from three levels: deep individual perspectives via virtual small-group interviews with organizational leadership, credible messengers, and people who receive services from credible messengers; organization-level perspectives via an online survey of 30 organizations that employ credible messengers; and agency-/policy-level perspectives via virtual interviews with 14 New York City officials and partners. After completing data collection, we analyzed the qualitative data using NVivo and determined the study's key findings and recommendations.

Participatory Action Research

PAR values the expertise of people closest to the issue at hand. A cornerstone of the larger category of community-based research, PAR involves collaboration between technical researchers and members of the community directly impacted by the issue being studied. Typically, these are community members who have been acutely impacted by structures and systems, such as the criminal legal system. This approach involves incorporating community members and other directly impacted people as full members of research teams by training them and involving them in every stage of research, from designing research questions to disseminating the work.

Central to this approach is the interrogation of the hierarchies of power between technical researchers and the people directly impacted by their research. Much research on marginalized communities has ranged from questionable to unethical and has often only perpetuated structural oppression (e.g., the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the Moynihan Report, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Henrietta Lacks). PAR calls for discussing the roots and causes of a social phenomenon, promoting traditions of empowerment, and extending ideas about what research must be. PAR questions the utility and validity of traditional research methods that tend to exclude marginalized communities when describing their realities. The collaboration between researchers and community members from beginning to end promotes equity and validity in all aspects of the research, providing an opportunity to repair some of the harms of past research, redistribute power, and mobilize research to create social change.

In our study, we employed a modified version of **Street PAR**. Yasser Payne developed this approach for engaging with “street” associated people (people who have experienced contact with the legal system, and people in otherwise criminalized populations), who are seldom involved or focused on in PAR approaches (Payne 2017). Although Street PAR has many of the same benefits as other PAR approaches, it differs in that it is a way of focusing on the people associated with the “streets” and the criminal legal system, who are often the most vulnerable people in our society because of the intersections of race, class, and criminalization. Street PAR challenges racist and classist assumptions of this group's contributions, potential, and capabilities. Payne views people who are street associated as experts who best understand their realities and has sought to equip them with research tools for growth, development, and mobility.

As Payne and Bryant (2018) note, Street PAR projects have three features: they have a research orientation that centers the lived experiences and perspectives of street-associated people; they involve an intervention for community members involved in the projects; and they involve a vehicle for action or activism that involves local community members. Thus, we conducted a qualitative study, in partnership with community members (community research assistants [CRAs]), we offered consistent training and professional development/networking opportunities for their respective career trajectories and their upward mobility, and we held a workshop with community stakeholders to review the results of the study and offer an operationalized call to action. Street PAR has traditionally occurred in person with the researchers directly engaging and working hand-in-hand with community members. This was not possible for our project. All project activities were conducted virtually because of the ongoing public health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

An Inventory of Organizations That Employ Credible Messengers

While reviewing the extant literature on credible messengers, our team noted that no known central resource exists of all organizations that employ credible messengers. We needed an inventory of organizations in New York City to effectively engage the community of stakeholders who are closest to the work of credible messengers, recruit and hire credible messengers for the project team, and sample and recruit organizations for the cross-program study. To create such an inventory (box 1), the project team searched online; consulted with agencies, organizations, and foundations in New York City; and drew on the knowledge of the team's CRAs. We confirmed the accuracy of the list with city agencies and stakeholders and through the survey we disseminated to organization leaders as part of this study.

BOX 1

Agencies, Organizations, and Programs We Contacted to Participate in Our Cross-Program Study

- Atlas
- Bronx Connect
- Center for Community Alternatives Next STEPS
- Center for Court Innovation
- Center for Employment Opportunities Credible Messenger Initiative
- Center for NuLeadership
- Central Family Life Center
- Children's Village
- City University, People's Police Academy
- Community Capacity Development
- Community Connections for Youth Parent Peer Support Program
- Community Mediation Services
- Credible Messenger Justice Center
- CUNY Office of Research, Evaluation and Program Support
- Exodus Transitional Community
- Exponents
- Fortune Society
- Gangstas Making Astronomical Community Changes
- Good Shepherd Services
- Harlem Commonwealth
- Health People
- Housing Works
- Harlem Commonwealth
- Howie the Harp / Community Access
- Institute for State and Local Governance
- Institute of Transformative Mentoring
- John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity
- Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub
- LifeCamp
- New York Center of Interpersonal Development
- ManUp!
- NYC Department of Probation
- NYC Criminal Justice Agency
- NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity
- NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice
- Osborne Association
- Phipps Neighborhood
- Pinkerton Foundation
- Ready Willing and Able
- Sheltering Arms
- Women's Prison Association
- Youth Advocate Programs
- Youth Justice Network (formerly Friends of Island Academy)

Notes: Not all of these agencies, organizations, and programs participated in our cross-program study. Participation was voluntary, and 33 chose to do so.

Community Researchers

Before hiring community members to join the project team, the team reviewed Urban's policies, practices, and culture to ensure the hiring process was equitable and that those hired would feel comfortable in our work environment. We also consulted with Urban's Community Engaged Methods group, Urban researchers and leadership, Urban's human resources office, NYC Opportunity, stakeholders in New York City, and experts in the field to identify and address challenges related to recruitment, hiring, training, technology, and workplace culture as early in the process as possible. For example, the project team confirmed Urban had no policies excluding people with criminal convictions from employment. The team then developed a job description and team structure to accommodate the hiring of CRAs, people with lived experience in the criminal legal system who work as credible messengers, violence interrupters, peer workers/mentors, or in similar roles. Furthermore, we were able to classify the CRA position as temporary part-time status (as opposed to other classifications such as consultant or intermittent employee status). This classification ensured CRAs' resources, technology, and experiences were as similar as possible to those of the full-time Urban researchers. To prepare to hire and onboard the CRAs, we developed a comprehensive training manual to complement formal trainings.¹³ In addition, the team met consistently to discuss the hiring process and the environment we wanted to create and maintain. The team decided to develop a symbiotic mentoring system pairing technical researchers with the CRAs, which facilitated mutual learning and growth in each member's area of expertise. Pairs conducted research activities according to their interests, though every team member conducted similar types of tasks.

Furthermore, the team advocated for and modeled a cultural change within Urban by incorporating the CRAs in the organization's full range of activities, including onboarding processes, required institutional trainings, staff meetings, business development, and social activities. Doing so acknowledged the value of the CRAs' expertise while signaling to the Urban community that their role was equal to that of Urban staff. Lastly, we facilitated networking opportunities between Urban staff and the CRAs to promote a more inclusive work culture. These efforts enabled the CRAs to be involved in the organization long term by connecting them with other Urban research projects and enabling them to serve on a community advisory panel.

Regarding the formal hiring process, we began by posting the CRA position on Urban's job opportunities page. To maximize the number of applicants, we worked with NYC Opportunity and organizations in the city known to employ credible messengers to share Urban's job posting and a virtual flyer about the position. City stakeholders and partners shared the flyer and job posting widely with their networks and with credible messengers. Qualified candidates had at least one year of

experience working as a credible messenger or in a similar role, currently lived or worked in New York City, were interested in learning about and conducting research, were at least 18 years old, had strong organizational and communication skills, and were willing and able to work virtually part time for up to one year. The position was open for six weeks. Urban received over 30 applications, and 8 applicants met the criteria and were invited for interviews. In June 2021, 4 CRAs joined the project team (see appendix A for their reflections and experiences). Consistent with all researchers hired by Urban, each CRA completed a series of trainings in their first two weeks, including trainings on the rights and protections of human research subjects, network and data security, and common human resources issues. They then participated in two project-specific trainings: an introduction to research ethics and methods,¹⁴ and a training on the project's purpose, scope, and activities.¹⁵ Once onboarded, they reviewed all previously created materials (e.g., research plan, literature review, interview and survey questions) and provided feedback. They then began steering and contributing to all remaining aspects of the study, including

- development of research materials (such as interview protocols and institutional review board packages),
- outreach and recruitment of study participants,
- data collection, specifically leading individual and small-group interviews,
- analysis and interpretation of qualitative data (i.e., interview and survey data),
- drafting of written products and presentations, and
- dissemination of findings and recommendations.

Community Engagement

Understanding the stakeholders in New York City had expertise and knowledge that would add important context to our work and make it more applicable, we collaborated with NYC Opportunity and New York City stakeholders and organizations on several key facets of our project, including the design, implementation, findings and recommendations, and dissemination efforts.¹⁶ Upon beginning our project, we consulted with city stakeholders when creating the CRA position description and during recruitment. We also solicited insight and feedback on the literature review and inventory of New York City organizations and agencies that employ or work with credible messengers. In addition, we interviewed city stakeholders to understand their experiences, insights, and recommendations regarding credible messengers in the city. After collecting data, we hosted a four-hour workshop with

50 city stakeholders to discuss the project activities, key findings, and recommendations to validate our interpretations and ensure the information was accurately and appropriately reported. It was also an opportunity to build community with each other and begin mobilizing the research produced.

The Cross-Program Study of Credible Messengers in New York City

Between August and December 2021, the project team conducted a cross-program qualitative study to answer the following research questions:

1. How are credible messengers defined?
2. What are the goals and objectives of these credible messenger programs?
3. How do credible messenger programs operate and provide services?
4. How are credible messengers recruited and trained for the programs?
5. What are the needs, challenges, and successes of credible messengers and the organizations that employ them?
6. Do cross-program partnerships and collaboration exist?

We answered these questions by capturing perspectives of people working at different levels and in different roles in credible messenger initiatives: city officials, system actors, city partners, organization leaders, credible messengers, and people who receive services from credible messengers.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL PERSPECTIVES

We conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with staff at three organizations that employ credible messengers to capture richer, individual-level perspectives on credible messengers and the communities they serve. We identified three organizations with which to conduct these interviews. We balanced four criteria when selecting these organizations: first, we paid attention to gaps in the literature and organizations that had not been studied; second, we looked for organizations serving diverse populations; third, we considered input from New York City community and topical experts on potential organizations; and fourth, we considered input from the project's CRAs. Organizations employing any of the CRAs were excluded to avoid conflicts of interest.

Project team members selected and shared their three most preferred organizations based on these criteria. We ended up selecting Community Connections for Youth, Gangstas Making Astronomical Community Changes, and Exodus Transitional Community (box 2). Once we selected

them, the CRAs and NYC Opportunity provided contact information and made introductions. We conducted outreach to the organizations' leaders by email, phone, and text messaging; outreach via phone was the most effective method and preferred by the organizations. After inviting them to participate, we met with each organization's leaders to discuss the study and their capacity to participate in the data collection (namely interviews).¹⁷

We conducted nine 60-minute, semistructured, virtual interviews with small groups of three to five people between October and December 2021 (approximately 30 people in total). Through the interviews, we sought to capture the leaders' and credible messengers' perspectives and experiences. To avoid coercion and power imbalances, we conducted interviews with organization leaders, managers, and coordinators and with credible messengers separately. When credible messengers were also leaders, managers, or coordinators, they participated with the other leaders, managers, and coordinators. Discussion topics included organization/community history, operations, processes, services, challenges, needs, and the perceived impact of credible messengers. The project team provided each credible messenger a \$25 Visa card via email to thank them for their time.

We originally planned to conduct three virtual 60-minute, semistructured focus groups with 8 to 10 community members who received services from credible messengers to capture their perspectives and experiences. For a number of reasons, the schedules of the community members were difficult to align, so we instead conducted small-group and individual virtual interviews (i.e., of one to five people). We conducted most of the interviews in English and held interviews for bilingual participants (primarily Spanish speaking). Discussion topics included services, successes, challenges, needs, and the perceived impact of credible messengers. Each focus group participant received a \$25 Visa card via email. Although the organizations serve youth and adults, only people 18 or older could participate in the interviews.

BOX 2

The Three Organizations Whose Leaders We Interviewed for Individual-Level Perspectives

Community Connections for Youth is a nonprofit human services organization serving the South Bronx that equips grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to develop alternatives to incarceration for youth. In 2013, it partnered with the New York City Department of Probation to establish a support program for parents of youth involved in the juvenile legal system, the Parent Peer Support Program. Through this program, parents of youth involved in the system are trained as peer coaches who are then able to help families navigate the system. The program aims to reduce family-related violations of probation, and peer coaches connect parents and family members of youth involved in

the system to support groups and programming. Community Connections for Youth currently employs three credible messengers as peer coaches in the Parent Peer Support Program.

[Exodus Transitional Community](#), which was founded by Julio Medina in 1999, offers a broad spectrum of services for adults and youth impacted by the criminal legal system along the Hudson River corridor, from Poughkeepsie and Newburgh, New York, to East Harlem in New York City. Exodus has several contracts with the New York City Department of Probation, including partnerships with the Arches Transformative Mentoring Initiative, Arches Alumni Next Steps, and the Neighborhood Opportunity Network for its youth programming. Among other services, Exodus offers youth empowerment programs for young people ages 16 to 24 with a focus on a variety of areas, including job readiness, trauma-informed care, and Interactive Journaling. Exodus operates trauma-informed sessions run by youth mentors, who are trained credible messengers. Exodus also operates the Center for Trauma Innovation, which offers innovative interventions to help communities address and heal from trauma, with a particular focus on young people, LGBTQIA++ people, immigrants, and adults with histories of legal system involvement. Ninety percent of Exodus staff are people of color directly impacted by the criminal legal system, and there are approximately 100 credible messengers in the agency.

Lastly, [Gangstas Making Astronomical Community Changes \(G-MACC\)](#) is a nonprofit founded in 2012 by National Gang Specialist and Youth Advocate Shanduke McPhatter. Based in Brooklyn, G-MACC produces several consulting initiatives, workshops, events, and programs centered around mentorship and support for community members impacted by the criminal legal system. G-MACC initiatives include its partnership with the New York City Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence Crisis Management System, where G-MACC uses the Cure Violence Model to provide assistance to at-risk people and the community through conflict mediation, community engagement, and transitional support, and the Gang Violence Identification and Prevention program, which identifies similar people for mentorship and guidance. To support its programming, G-MACC currently employs 31 people in credible messenger-related roles.

ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL PERSPECTIVES

To capture organization-level perspectives, we conducted an online survey of organizations that employ credible messengers. We used our inventory (see box 1) to identify organizations and invite them to complete the survey. We emailed organization leaders, introduced the study, explained why it is important to the field, encouraged them to participate, and provided a unique hyperlink to the survey.

The project team designed the survey in consultation with NYC Opportunity and New York City stakeholders. Most of its questions were free-response questions. It covered the same topics discussed in our interviews, including the organization's purpose; definition and use of credible

messengers; services; needs, challenges, and perceived impacts of credible messengers; needs, challenges, and successes of people receiving services from credible messengers; cross-program collaboration and partnerships; and recommendations for capacity building. We administered the survey using Qualtrics, which allows for individual usernames and passwords, skip patterns, email reminders, and secure and encrypted transmission of survey responses via the internet without local data storage. It also enables people who are deaf or hard of hearing to participate.

Project team members pilot-tested the survey for ease of navigation and webpage errors and to determine whether its length was appropriate, and revised it as needed before its launch. Survey data collection spanned August to November 2021. It was distributed via email to 30 organization leaders with a request that the person most familiar with credible messengers complete the survey. We monitored response rates and sent weekly email reminders to partial completers and nonresponders. Two-thirds of the way through the data collection period, we called nonresponders, partial completers, and soft refusers to encourage participation. These efforts resulted in a 77 percent response rate (23 of the 30 organizations invited to take the survey did).

AGENCY-/POLICY-LEVEL PERSPECTIVES

To capture the high-level perspectives and experiences of funders, policymakers, and staff at city agencies, we conducted 14 60-minute, semistructured virtual interviews with 17 stakeholders directly involved in credible messenger initiatives. We worked closely with NYC Opportunity to identify the original list of relevant stakeholders. The project team's CRAs and stakeholders we interviewed recommended additional stakeholders. We conducted outreach to the stakeholders via email and phone. Interview topics were the same as the in-depth individual-level interviews and survey; they included the city's history with credible messengers, operations, processes, services, challenges, needs, perceived impacts of credible messengers, collaboration efforts, and advice for building organizational capacity.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Because one of the goals of this study was to understand the current landscape of credible messengers in New York City, we asked stakeholders at all levels similar questions. We also processed, analyzed, and interpreted the data as a whole. Triangulating our data in this way helped us better answer our research questions and inductively develop much broader themes directly from all participants.¹⁸ Upon completing our data collection, we cleaned the interview notes and uploaded them into NVivo, our qualitative data analysis software. Because the survey questions were qualitative, we also used NVivo to code the Qualtrics data. We used NVivo to code the data into

general themes, after which we developed a template for summarizing the data further and identifying key findings. We then held a two-hour retreat where we (the project team) discussed the synthesized data, determined the key findings, and identified key recommendations.

Limitations

We sought to include as many agencies and organizations involved in credible messengers' work as possible to provide a representative landscape of credible messengers in New York City. But it was only possible to identify ones that either report their credible messenger work online (e.g., on their own websites) or were known by others with which we had contact. Our index of organizations and agencies does not include every one that employs credible messengers, is led by credible messengers, or is involved in the work of credible messengers. It is a living index that will grow as additional agencies and organizations are identified so future studies on credible messengers can be more representative and collaborative partnerships can grow and deepen throughout New York City. In addition, we understand the context these entities operate in (i.e., New York City) may not entirely translate to entities in other contexts (such as those in rural areas and those with different geographies, histories, and policies). We recommend that those developing credible messenger programming in other localities consider these factors, although we believe our study offers insights that will be useful for localities across the country. For more on our project's challenges and lessons learned, see appendix B.

Key Findings

In this section, we present key findings gathered through interviews and surveys. Our qualitative data are exploratory and we analyzed them deductively. As such, the data yielded rich findings that went well above and beyond what we sought to answer with our research questions. We present the findings of our three data collection activities together to present a more complete picture of the landscape of credible messengers in New York City and the collective insights gathered from study participants. We begin with an overview of the agencies and organizations included in our research, including descriptions of the organizations' goals, sizes, and structures and of roles and duties within the organizations. We then discuss collaboration between them. Then, we explore how they use the term credible messenger and who the participants perceive credible messengers to be. In addition, we discuss how the agencies and organizations recruit credible messengers, what qualifications and credentials they need, and what training they receive. We also discuss the vast array of services they

offer and the people and communities credible messengers serve. We conclude by discussing the perceived impacts of credible messengers and the challenges they face.

An Overview of Agencies and Organizations Involved in Credible Messenger Programming

Most of the people we interviewed for our cross-program study were in executive leadership roles in city agencies or community-based organizations. Others included supervisors, managers, coordinators, outreach and direct service providers, parents, young adults, consultants, researchers, and academics. Most who participated reported having multiple roles, and many identified as credible messengers themselves. Their experience working with or as credible messengers ranged from 1 year to over 30. Every participant had multiple responsibilities, which included strategic planning, operations management, policy development, fundraising and grant management, finance and accounting, education and training, research and data analysis, outreach and direct service provision, relationship development and partnership formation, and advocacy.

The agencies' and organizations' overarching goals depend on their funding streams and their communities' needs. The city agencies that participated generally oversee the funding and funded activities of community-based organizations that employ credible messengers. Other city agencies function to provide education, training, resources, and capacity building for organizations that employ credible messengers. Some also employ credible messengers for various work and at different levels, including direct service provision, management, program development, and training and technical assistance. The community-based organizations that participated generally offer resources, support, and advocacy to community members and people who are system involved (most often in the criminal legal system). All agencies and organizations that participated identified two overarching goals: reduce harm, violence, and crime; and reduce criminal legal system contact. The means by which they achieve these goals vary greatly, however. As one participant explained,

The main causes of gun violence are everything but violence, they are the social conditions in which people are in; it's economic deprivation. Communities are devastated by crime and drugs and other factors—poor health, poor food, poor housing, poor education—they all affect communities and have heavy justice involvement.

Most organizations that participated are located and function around the communities they serve. In fact, study participants stated that community presence and integration are paramount in the success of their work.

The structures of the agencies and organizations that participated varied, as do their sizes, which ranged from under 25 employees to over 200. All organizations and agencies employed and worked directly with credible messengers; they had from 1 to over 25 employees who identified as credible messengers who worked in a part-time or full-time capacity. Most of these credible messengers fulfilled direct-service roles, though many study participants reported that credible messengers also fill director, manager/supervisor, and other senior leadership roles. One-quarter of the agencies and organizations that participated were led by credible messengers. All study participants reported that credible messengers can and do advance to more senior roles within their organizations, although they said capacity (typically dictated by funding) constrains how often and how many credible messengers can advance. Participants reported that some credible messengers have other passions and move on to work in other fields (e.g., policy, business, education, STEM, art). There is a need to “make credible messengers promotable” in multiple fields and roles so they can secure permanent, benefited, sustainable employment that matches their talents and passions.

Collaboration between Agencies and Organizations

Participants reported that New York City has many and strong collaborative relationships between city agencies and between city agencies and community organizations. One explained that “New York City pushes the limit by funding initiatives that might not be funded by others. Staff across agencies are connected with one another and are continuously communicating.” These relationships, however, are mainly between established city agencies and organizations. Participants reported that the city agencies that have long been involved in credible messenger initiatives communicate and collaborate often and create opportunities for the organizations they fund (e.g., Crisis Management System sites; Arches and Advocate, Intervene, and Mentor sites; and Neighborhood Opportunity Network sites) to communicate and collaborate with one another (for instance, by creating the Credible Messenger Justice Center). Participants reported that this collaboration fosters knowledge sharing and support but can create unintended competition for resources and recognition; they reported that well-known collaboration and communication efforts generally include the same agencies and organizations and that those efforts to identify and include new partners and perspectives are limited. One explained,

There are a lot of places trying to do this work but are largely siloed. We need more collaboration because currently agencies and organizations are working in silos, which is leading to competition for resources and competing priorities. Sometimes this work can have an us-and-them mentality with different priorities. Many are stuck in their own ways. And sometimes funder and fundee priorities don't align. There is a general unwillingness to bring others in or consider bringing others in.

Participants reported silos regarding cross-field collaboration and reported that the agencies and organizations that typically communicate and collaborate are largely unaware of similar efforts pursued in other fields (e.g., by the Department of Education, Department of Labor, universities, and private corporations). One participant explained that “credible messenger mentors tend to work across organizations with multiple jobs, and genuinely work with one another within and between communities. But those organizations and agencies are not collaborating to the greatest extent they could.”

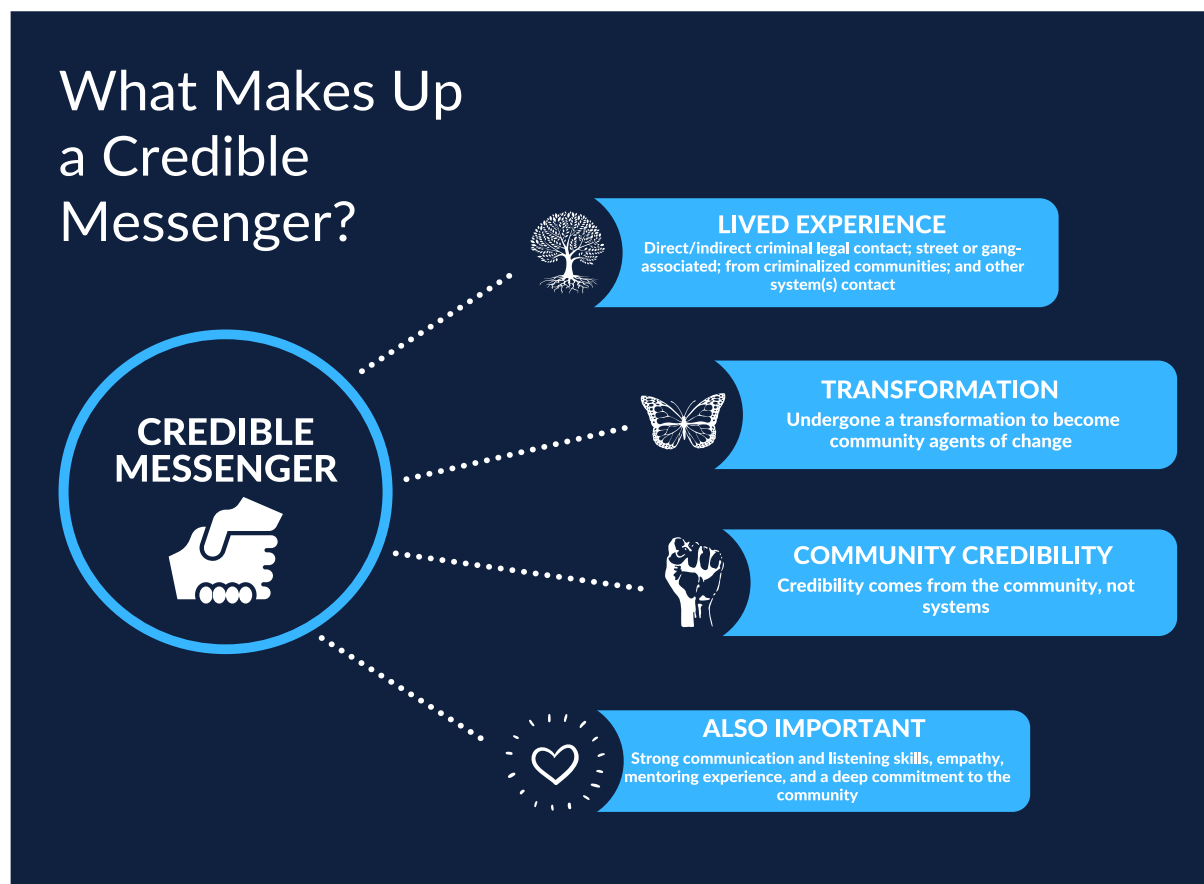
The Meaning of Lived Experience and Credible Messengers

The term **lived experience** was defined broadly by study participants as experiences that they share with people they serve or that are related to their work. Participants overwhelmingly recognized the importance of directly and indirectly relating to the experiences of the communities and people they serve vis-à-vis contact with various systems, backgrounds, and personal experiences. Participants say intimate knowledge, connection, and embeddedness are paramount. Examples of lived experience might include having personally navigated the criminal legal system (i.e., direct experience) or having had a family member or friend who did so (i.e., indirect experience); direct and indirect experience of having navigated the foster care system; or having navigated challenges related to marginalized communities. Many credible messengers have both direct and indirect lived experience. Relatedly, “**credible messenger**” and its operationalization have evolved since the term's inception, becoming more inclusive. Thus, we define credible messengers as people who meet at least one of four criteria:

- They have had direct carceral experiences of criminal legal contact, including imprisonment.
- They are gang- or street-associated people, or they live in structurally marginalized communities that have been criminalized *en masse* and share common experiences with those they serve.
- They have been indirectly impacted by the criminal legal system contact of family members or friends.
- They have lived experience in other systems, such as the foster care system.

Participants reported in interviews and surveys that **a credible messenger is someone who has undergone a transformation to become a community agent of change**, especially in guiding similarly vulnerable people to opportunities and resources the credible messenger did not have. This role may be formal or not, but **credibility must be determined by the community and those served by credible**

messengers. (Figure 1 illustrates the experiences and qualities of credible messengers, as articulated



by stakeholders in this study.) In general, study participants described the purpose of credible messengers as serving marginalized Black and Latinx people through their shared lived experiences. One participant said, “Since they have that lived experience, they can relate to others, they come from similar neighborhoods and know what it’s like firsthand. They understand firsthand the challenges and can work with others in a way that is credible and impactful.” The purpose of a credible messenger transcends their job description and their daily duties. They engage in restorative justice for themselves, the people they serve, and their communities, in addition to helping others and themselves avoid further system contact. One participant who had worked with credible messengers said, “It’s good that the person is in the same shoes as you, so they understand what you’re going through. They call[ed] me about the program. I was losing it because I didn’t know where to go or how to get help. They came to rescue me.”

FIGURE 1
Experiences and Qualities of Credible Messengers

Source: Urban Institute.

Credible messenger is just one term participants used to describe people with lived experience who have undergone a transformation to become community agents of change. In fact, most used other terms interchangeably, describing credible messenger as a quality over a job title. Box 3 covers other terms participants used when discussing the work of credible messengers. We also briefly define particularly prominent terms—violence interrupter, peer mentor, youth advocate, and peer support specialist—in boxes throughout the remainder of this section. These boxes describe terms such as violence interrupter that are commonly used in conjunction with the term credible messenger.

BOX 3

Terms Similar or Adjacent to Credible Messenger

- Certified recovery peer advocates
- Community health workers
- Community network specialists
- Court advocates
- Frontline staff
- Justice-involved (people)
- Justice peers
- Outreach workers
- Peer advocates
- Peer coaches
- Peer mentors
- Peer navigators
- People who are directly impacted
- People with lived experience
- Previously incarcerated people
- Teachers
- Violence interrupters
- Youth advocates

Participants overwhelmingly stated that credible messengers' purpose and work were more important than the terms used to describe them. As one put it, "The labels don't matter as much as the work and the impact." In fact, many offered constructive feedback on and expressed concerns over the term's increased use. These concerns were related to the potential dilution of the term (including the dilution of its radical origins and principles), the commodification of the term, and territoriality over the term by certain members of the field. As one participant expressed, "Once a term becomes calcified the bigger picture is lost. This is happening to the purpose and work of credible messengers. The purpose and big picture are being lost by concerns about the terminology." According to credible messengers, the bigger picture means helping others through the challenges of life that they have overcome. One stated,

We are them and are trying to help them because we know what it's like. We must be hands-on even though a lot of these organizations are not hands-on. We take it personally when something happens to our people. They need us to be on the streets. The only goal is to stop us from dying because we are dying at astronomical rates. Only us can help us. Nobody can come into our communities and tell us how to fix it.

Violence Interrupters

Violence interrupters aim to prevent street violence and elevate the importance of taking a relationship-based approach to crime interventions. Popular non-systems-based approaches to responding to violence, particularly gun violence, in communities across the country use violence-interruption tactics that blend mentoring and community engagement. Violence-interruption programs are intentionally constructed outside the legal system and do not involve the use of force or the threat of punishment to curb violent behavior (Wical, Richardson, and Bullock 2020); rather, they presume that violent behavior—like all behavior—responds to structures, incentives, and norms, so violence interrupters aim to change those social norms (Butts et al. 2015). Furthermore, staff at organizations doing this work must be carefully recruited to “be seen as Credible Messengers by the most high-risk young people in the community” (Butts et al. 2015, 41). Violence interrupters demonstrate a unique ability to engage with their community in earnest and creative ways because of their positionality. In addition to fostering more effective engagement, violence interrupter programs involve reinvesting in historically oppressed communities and those negatively impacted by the criminal legal system.

Recruitment and Qualifications of Credible Messengers

Study participants reported that recruitment of credible messengers occurred through community-based organization partners, formal avenues (e.g., job postings), other credible messengers, and community members. They reported that the input of the community in determining credibility is paramount to success. Noted strategies included word of mouth, relationship-building, and community walks with potential credible messengers. One study participant stated, “To come from a place of 'vetting' is starting from the wrong place. Instead, look for people who are already doing the work and trusted by other credible messengers.” Although credible messengers have typically been people who have experienced incarceration, this is not the only lived experience credible messengers can have (credible messengers have various backgrounds and life experiences). The type of lived experience a person has does not entirely determine whether they are qualified to be a credible messenger. Participants reported that the most essential qualification is that a person's community considers them “credible.” Participants also said having intimate knowledge of and ties to their communities (i.e., their histories, cultures, and networks) is also important to credible messengers' work. A person can have acquired this knowledge through their backgrounds (e.g., their neighborhood or family), by having been street associated, or by having had direct or indirect contact with the criminal legal system. In addition, many participants discussed the importance of credible messengers possessing the skills to effectively engage and build strong relationships with the people and communities they serve. These

skills included being able to communicate, set boundaries, practice deep listening, work with young people, have empathy, mentor, and practice vulnerability in sharing their stories.

Peer Mentors

Peer mentors form relationships and share life experiences with people (typically younger adults and youth they are not related to) to improve their personal outcomes. The purposes of these mentor-mentee relationships vary by program but often include emotional, social, educational, and employment support (Miller et al. 2013). Relationships may be formal or informal and take place in individual or group settings. The ability of mentoring relationships to positively influence the development and achievement of individuals has direct implications for the efficacy of credible messenger work.

Participants rarely discussed qualities and skills that disqualify credible messengers from employment. Recency of criminal convictions and types of criminal convictions were the two areas of concern. There was some disagreement as to whether recent criminal legal contact or street involvement should be disqualifying, and many participants were concerned that otherwise capable and effective credible messengers were being excluded. Participants reported that criminal histories involving abuse (e.g., child abuse or sexual abuse) can disqualify a credible messenger from employment. These histories are not universally disqualifying, though, and participants' concerns involve stigmas associated with these conviction types and reflect the types of work performed by each organization. For example, participants reported that credible messengers with histories of abuse might not be appropriate for roles involving the direct provision of services to youth, and those who are or have recently been involved in criminalized activities might not be appropriate for violence interruption roles. Such credible messengers may be better suited for other roles.

Credible Messengers' Credentials and Training

With the exception of one participant, study participants did not consider formal credentials (e.g., certifications) as essential to the success of a credible messenger. Indeed, many study participants expressed concerns about requiring certifications, namely that such requirements impose barriers to opportunities for people who already have limited access to resources and opportunities. Relatedly, most participants expressed concerns about who would have the authority to define the requirements and monitor them. Participants also shared concerns that certificates should not be “a stamp”

indicating that someone is an effective credible messenger. In addition, they shared that requiring certificates creates the risk of making credible messengers clinical, in that people are seen as ill and needing to be fixed, and limits credible messengers from fostering deep, long-lasting relationships with the people they serve. This has particularly occurred as the term credible messenger has entered fields other than the criminal legal field and been used to describe roles other than mentoring roles. One survey respondent explained,

People can have informal training and experiences to be effective and successful. Credible messengers need to be committed to lifelong learning and development. We want to build out and formalize the field, but credentials will exclude people. Credible messengers are most effective in the areas that cannot be taught. However, other training and certifications to help be more effective in their job would be good. There needs to be a balance in the skills/training required. But no official certification for being a credible messenger.

Moreover, the importance of providing ongoing training while limiting the number of formal requirements or credentials for entering the field cannot be overstated. Most participants discussed the importance of required or standardized training and ongoing personal and professional development for credible messengers. Participants identified several trainings that are highly important for credible messengers, including trauma-informed care, conflict mediation, motivational interviewing, crisis intervention, setting boundaries, and relationship building. Participants said more training and educational opportunities for current credible messengers in soft and hard skills are needed. Soft skills include communicating, regulating emotions, navigating boundaries, understanding organizational cultures, and accepting supervisory and professional feedback; hard skills include managing one's own and others' trauma, population-specific skills (e.g., positive youth development, LGBTQAI++ topics), and workplace/business skills (e.g., managing time, supervising, using online calendars, writing emails, writing grants, developing contracts and business).

Youth Advocates

Youth advocates ensure that youth maintain their human rights while helping them develop skills in all areas of life, such as education, health, housing, employment, and relationships. They support youth in and help them navigate systems, including the education, mental health, and foster care systems. For example, programs that provide support through mentors in the education system operate both inside and outside traditional school buildings and can use credible messengers to provide mentoring services. They have less bureaucratic constraints than school-based programs, are less hierarchical, provide more wraparound services, can generate more social trust, and are in a critical position to increase the level of support available to overburdened schools and address the unique needs of vulnerable populations (Baldrige, Hill, and Davis 2011). They have proven more effective than school-based youth development programs because their programming is cognizant of the life experiences

and circumstances of the youth they serve. Youth advocates are more likely to provide culturally competent mentoring and programming.¹⁹

The training and professional development that participants discussed are largely available in New York City through the Credible Messenger Justice Center and the Institute for Transformative Mentoring (ITM). The CMJC offers regular training, seminars, and conferences and created CMJ Assist, which replicates an employee assistance program that provides legal, financial, mental health, and substance abuse services to credible messengers. And ITM offers education and training that centers healing, restorative practices, and circle keeping. As part of its Navigator Certificate in Human Services and Community Justice curriculum, the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity uses the Social Resilience Model to build participants' resilience, teach them self-care strategies, and teach emotional self-regulation for credible messengers and the people they serve.²⁰ Participants reported that access to these resources is limited and that many credible messengers and organizations that employ them are not aware of them. Study participants reported that many credible messengers do not have the time or financial capacity to access these resources. For example, most credible messengers need scholarships (which are limited) to attend ITM training. They also need to take time off work (which is not always feasible) to attend CMJC and ITM training or to seek the support services offered by CMJ Assist.

Peer Support Specialists

Peer support specialists originated in the mental and behavioral health fields, where they have been successful in the recovery process for conditions such as drug and alcohol dependency. They are board certified to provide one-on-one and group support to others experiencing similar situations. Peer support specialists form respectful, mutually empowering relationships with people to provide them emotional and social support, resources and access to services, advocacy, training, and case management. They extend the reach of treatment beyond the clinical setting into the everyday environments of people seeking a successful, sustained recovery process. In recent years, peer support specialists have become prominent in the criminal legal field, providing support and guidance to people released on bail or returning from imprisonment.

Services Credible Messengers Provide

Though credible messengers fulfill various roles in various fields, study participants reported that they all have an intrinsic drive to help others experiencing the hardships they have overcome, whether they are compensated for it or not. They therefore typically provide direct services to community members while doing their formal work. One participant stated simply that credible messengers “help people achieve full potential by championing dignity and value.”

In addition, participants reported that most credible messengers are employed to mentor and support youth and young adults who are involved in the juvenile legal system and to support adults who are on community supervision. They shared that this is likely because most funding originates from city agencies that require and define the mentoring of people who are involved in the criminal legal system. Most of the organizations we studied match mentors with people they share experiences and have a rapport with rather than using assessments or intake evaluations—the power is given to the credible messenger and mentee. Moreover, many organizations do not use one-to-one matching, but rather rotate the people providing services to increase the amount of support and the variety of knowledge provided to those who need it. Knowing the many structural barriers to program participants, credible messengers are able to provide holistic services centered on their needs. One study participant said,

Credible messengers are able to relate to and serve clients and give support in any area of their life that they may need or want, be that physical support for medical well-being or a place to live, mental support for psychological or emotional well-being and other emotional support in the scheme of hope and perseverance. In other words, from just talking to an individual, to escorting them to an appointment and holding their hand through a difficult situation, or helping them navigate a difficult system, to applying for a job or helping them connect to prospective employers etcetera. They are trusted to do it all.

While working with people to fulfill their contract requirements, credible messengers support their communities by targeting specialized populations. For instance, one credible messenger described taking “an empathic strengths-based approach,” stating, “We are super inclusive. We do not turn anyone down. Trauma, LGBTQ, immigrant, whatever they need. Like if they come in and need a meal, we make it happen.” Participants reported time and again that the community-based organizations that truly embody the values Eddie Ellis said characterize credible messenger work are most effective because, as one participant put it, they strive “to end incarceration [through a] cross-sectional community to fulfill people's needs. A really good service provider isn't going to end incarceration, but if we really want to get to zero...we need everyone involved. It's about families building their own capacity through other families.” Another participant stated that credible messengers “provide

community healing by addressing all the factors impacting these communities by offering a realistic approach for community members.” In this way, credible messengers offer a transformative model that seeks to repair, support, and empower the communities they serve, and they understand the structural changes that are needed to create change in communities.

Communities and People Credible Messengers Serve

Credible messengers in New York City largely serve structurally marginalized and criminalized communities of color. More specifically, they serve poor Black and Latinx communities and people who are experiencing or have experienced criminal legal system contact. Most organizations that employ credible messengers serve youth and young adults (and their families), especially those with ongoing criminal legal contact, although some also serve adults who are vulnerable to legal system contact. Credible messengers and the organizations that employ them take a structural and restorative approach to their work and strive to serve whole communities. One survey respondent stated,

We keep people from the policing and punishment systems while simultaneously divesting money from these systems to redirect to community-based, community-driven, human-centered housing, education, business, and justice solutions. This requires deep relationship-building, individual transformation, and community investment, but more importantly, the honesty and bravery it takes to dismantle existing systems rooted in punishment and pain. Then it requires the confidence and skills to build new muscles and bandwidth to confront our own contradictions and to create the world we want to live in and leave for our children.

This highlights the importance of the critical and holistic analytic framework with which credible messengers do their work. Most of the organizations that use this framework assist social circles in addition to individuals (i.e., immediate family and friends) because they have had the greatest impact when taking a holistic approach.

Perceived Impacts of Credible Messengers' Work

When asked about impact, participants voiced concerns about the performance and impact measures used to assess the effectiveness of credible messengers and credible messenger programs. Typically, evaluations and performance measures define success in terms of reduced system violations, rearrests, reconvictions, and/or reincarcerations. Although participants did mention that credible messengers are effective at reducing violence and recidivism, individual healing and growth are the key areas that they said credible messengers impact. They also said credible messengers foster communitywide healing, empowerment, and capacity building and break down stigmas about people with system involvement, thereby creating more space for those people in the workforce and in society more broadly.

In some cases, the people participating in credible messenger programming referred to credible messengers as family; for instance, one stated, “Ha sido muy positivo —nos han apollado. Desde el primero cuando—nos han beneficiado bastante—son parte de mi familia. Para mi ya están en mi Corazón. Nos volvimos una familia” (*“They have been very positive. They have supported us. From the first time. They have been quite beneficial. They are a part of my family. For me, they are in my heart. We became a family”*). Moreover, credible messengers can help communities empower people to “heal and grow and learn together. Credible messengers offer a different approach in which people get what they most need to thrive” and to continue the work of community restoration after they stop participating in programming. One program participant shared the following:

They make me want to be a messenger sometimes. I see a younger person like me and then I want to help them. I used to hang around a bad crowd of people. Ego is everything when you walk out your building. People's respect was the most important, but now ego isn't the most important thing anymore. Now I don't care about my ego or what they say. I do me now. I like the new me now.

As one person said, “credible messengers create a community of trust.” Participants shared that through this trust, credible messengers are helping communities heal themselves. In their work, they go beyond the often-overemphasized level of the individual (i.e., program participant) to understand and address the broader structural issues impacting individuals. They also view the people they serve as extensions of their communities. One study participant summarized the work of credible messengers:

Credible messengers are impacting the quality of life of our community. Many youth feel safer going to school, articulating problems at home. Families are receiving much-needed support and assistance, without losing their dignity. Credible messengers are impacting public safety, working with NYPD [New York Police Department], diverting youth from the system. Able to be preemptive with interventions when provided information about problem areas in the community. Youth development, credible messengers are able to recruit and engage hard-to-reach youth, the ones most youth programs don't want or cannot handle. Credible messengers are able to break and intervene in violent situations without involving police, due to their knowledge, experiences, and respect earned by the community. Credible messengers are instrumental in providing informal mental health support to countless people. People contemplating committing a violent act, doing themselves harm. Helping people to realize it's okay they have mental health challenges, debunking the stigma, and labels associated with mental health in general. Credible messengers are community advocates speaking to government and business leaders about the pain in our community.

Furthermore, study participants reported that credible messengers are instrumental in facilitating conversations between community members, stakeholders working in the legal system, and policymakers about improving services and policies. “These conversations boil down to relationships and public safety breaks down when relationships break down,” one stakeholder said. “There is so

much pain and trauma from systems that needs to be acknowledged before healing can begin and relationships can be formed.” In addition to offering the people they serve guidance on articulating and overcoming their challenges, credible messengers are also reshaping community members’ ideas of public safety and giving them options and resources other than carceral institutions such as policing. One participant shared,

Before calling the police, what does it mean to have a credible messenger there instead to heal the harm? There is something great that happens when you have a community advocate that has your back. Having credible messengers step in to diffuse situations is really important because young people make mistakes. What does it look like to reassure them and help them through their hardship rather than lock them up?

Study participants likened credible messengers’ work to that of first responders. In the eyes of study participants, credible messengers present an effective model of preventing and intervening in conflicts that may lead to harm or further criminal legal contact. As one said,

Another important strategy that we use with our families is to help them not have an overreliance on the police and external forces. And yeah, it puts a little bit of burden on us as a team but for example...if there is a conflict in the home...sometimes they won't call the cops, they'll call us. Like: “Can you talk to this kid?” When I was working at [organization], I would go to the kid's house. And remove the kid from the home and be like: “Come, let's go...let's just go take a walk. Let's go get some coffee. Let's go to McDonald's.” And sometimes that's all they need. Just a moment to get away from their family, calm down, cool off, and then go back. You know? Because we all know that when you call the cops that usually pisses the kid off more. Like: “You called the cops on me? You buck wilding!” You know what I'm saying? What do you expect? There have been situations where we do intervene and after a while, they [families] get used to not relying on the system and that is not their first point of strategy.

The intimacy and strength of the relationships credible messengers create with people enable them to build rapport and work with people more humanely than is possible through other approaches. By building relationships with program participants and their communities, they teach others not to rely on carceral systems and instead practice healthy communication, deescalation, and community care. At the same time, they are increasing education regarding the role structural and systemic oppression plays in their lives and those of community members, which is critical to empowerment. One study participant shared,

Credible messengers are tied to the larger conversations around oppression. Credible messengers are repairing harm in neighborhoods as a result of systemic racism. This is why you can't come from a place of “you made bad choices” to be effective with people who are system involved. You need to look more broadly about the system contributions to each person's system involvement. Understanding true Black/Brown culture beyond extension of poverty and crime. Credible messengers pull the shade up on the misconceptions of communities and see more issues more broadly, but partners and systems actors need to see more broadly too. Credible messengers are just a cog in how all this works.

Finally, participants reported that agencies and organizations that employ credible messengers are better equipped to improve communities than those that do not “because they are the actual image of survival.” One participant stated, “The serum is made from the venom. They get the community and what it’s like to go through something and overcome it. It is extremely important for someone who feels like they are going through something alone.” Being embedded in communities and having credible messengers who are members of those communities are paramount to organizations’ success.

Challenges

The main challenges for credible messengers and their organizations included the effects of the structural stigmas of race and criminalization, a lack of adequate compensation and benefits, funding, restrictive performance and evaluation requirements, workplace challenges, and trauma.

RACISM, CAPITALISM, AND TRAUMA

When asked about the challenges credible messengers experience in their lives and work, study participants discussed racism, capitalism, and trauma, all of which marginalize credible messengers and restrict their work, including those who lead and/or are employed by organizations led by people of color or other marginalized people. As one study participant said,

Despite being in the workforce like other people, credible messengers are still marginalized. CEOs of organizations who are credible messengers are still treated differently than other CEOs who are not credible messengers. Credible messengers face marginalization because many are from minority populations and are marginalized for being formally criminal justice involved. They get it from both sides. Credible messengers have been proven to be effective, but are still not funded or paid, given benefits, or even given a seat at the system or agency table like other people. Other people are allowed to be citizens, but credible messengers still are not. Credible messengers need to be shown they are valued because they are saving lives.

It is important to restate that the community-based organizations we studied primarily employ formerly imprisoned Black and Latinx people to work with similarly vulnerable people. The traditional expectations of US workplaces and stigmas that marginalize people of color and those with lived experience in the criminal legal system remain present regardless of organizations’ demographic and experiential makeup. As Ray (2019) notes, many of these “challenges” may be indicative of the racialized nature of organizations, which has profound implications for broader racial inequality. Organizations that are primarily composed of and primarily serving Black and Latinx people may inadvertently marginalize their workers of color through various constraints and added burdens (including hiring criteria, workplace policies, and compensation practices) by valuing traditional

credentials over lived experience (as is seen in pay inequities across the field), and by allocating resources (and supports) disparately.

PAY AND BENEFITS

Low pay and a lack of benefits are among credible messengers' most pressing challenges. Study participants reported that credible messengers are not paid a living wage, rarely receive raises, and are typically paid less than their non-credible messenger counterparts (e.g., social workers, case managers). Moreover, credible messengers are regularly asked to speak at events or participate in data collection efforts without compensation. Study participants reported that health insurance is limited, as are other benefits including training, professional development, and counseling, which as we have discussed credible messengers need to do their work after having faced the hardships they have faced. As one study participant stated,

We have people who are putting their lives on the line every single time they go out. To question their pay and their intentions is a disrespect. Health insurance, 401(k), and all those benefits are needed. They should be able to retire. They should be able to get sick and get care. They should be able to care for their families and themselves while doing the dangerous and impactful work they are doing.

Low wages and limited benefits force many credible messengers to work multiple jobs to support themselves and their loved ones.

FUNDING AND EVALUATION

Study participants also reported that the timing of funding execution cripples smaller organizations that cannot fund their activities up front while waiting for contracts to execute. This can cause services to be stopped or, more commonly, can lead to staff doing work without pay for long periods. One study participant explained, “We are a nonprofit, so we have allocated funding. So no, we don't pull a regular paycheck. We are all volunteers because regardless of the pay or not, we are doing this work all the time. We get paid however much from the city. When that is done, we are still working without it. We still need a source of income so we get that anyway we can, but still do this work.”

A lack of funding for this work more generally is another major challenge study participants cited. They reported that larger organizations that have the capacity to construct strong proposals are typically funded over smaller, community-based organizations. They explained that larger organizations tend to be more removed from the communities they serve, acting more as corporate businesses within communities rather than as core components of communities run and empowered by community members. When larger organizations are funded over smaller, community-based

organizations, the opportunity to reinvest in communities is diminished because the funding is not directly funneled to those who need it most. Discussing this issue, study participants reported that larger organizations and organizations that are not led by credible messengers tend to lack cultural and infrastructural values that support healthy workplaces for credible messengers and other people with relevant lived experience. One participant explained, “Programs built and run by credible messengers are generally overlooked for funding opportunities to other organizations that are only just now bringing on credible messengers. And these larger organizations are still hiring the traditional way with traditional workplace cultures.” Another stated, “Organizations are now invested in credible messengers and the work, but they used to be the same organizations that were starkly against the work of credible messengers.” Many participants echoed the need to center credible messengers in the movement to increase their organizational use.

Related to issues of funding, study participants said performance measures and evaluation criteria used to determine whether an organization will gain and maintain funding are a significant challenge in several ways. First, funding criteria tend to be very restrictive in that funding typically can only be used to provide certain services to certain people. This inhibits organizations, especially small ones, from using funding to build capacity and empower communities. For instance, funding criteria typically inhibit organizations from using funding to increase business functionality, such as by hiring business-oriented staff (e.g., human resources, finance/accounting, administrative, or grant-writing staff), acquiring business software (e.g., QuickBooks, Salesforce), or engaging in training and collaboration events (e.g., Credible Messenger Justice Center events, Institute for Transformative Mentoring training and certificates). Moreover, funders can impose strict funding rules that require organizations to serve certain community members, preventing them from fully serving communities that need their services. In addition, study participants reported that the people they serve do not typically engage in services immediately and that it can take more than one attempt for them to successfully engage. But contract requirements typically only measure immediate engagement or “failure,” “violations,” and “recidivism.” According to study participants, this approach captures neither the true needs of those who receive services nor their true journeys through the process. As one said, “People come back multiple times before they are ready to make a transformation. Get creative and get available for people when they are ready to engage in programs. Leaving one, two, three times should not mean failure in the eyes of systems and communities.” Finally, although many organizations serve all community members, evaluation measurements sometimes focus on just those program participants who are system involved, which creates misconceptions around the extent and areas of credible messengers' effectiveness.

WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

Study participants also reported that credible messengers face workplace challenges, including challenges pertaining to culture and technical and administrative skills. They reported that many organizations are beginning to hire credible messengers and people with lived experience in the criminal legal system but are not adjusting their workplace cultures and supports to accommodate them. One participant explained that credible messengers “have the same needs as other employees, but they may be intensified depending on where the person is in his/her/their recovery, transition from incarceration, and etcetera.” Another stated,

Credible messengers just smack up against invisible organizational culture that is antithetical to really relating to people from a place of lived experience and humanity. It's more about what are the policies. Often there's alignment between credible messengers' personal mission and their agency, sometimes there isn't. They need to be up front about this when training them. And with navigating cultures too. They need to know and be able to seek help and guidance, and not seeing that as a way to say they're not qualified to do the work.

Indeed, although credible messengers are typically experts in their communities, in building relationships, and in navigating systems, because of the hardships they have experienced, they often have not traveled the typical educational and professional path that teaches workplace knowledge and skill sets expected of employees in the United States. Credible messengers need the education and training to obtain these skills and form habits that may come more naturally to those who have received traditional education, such as using email, writing reports, submitting timesheets, reading spreadsheets, managing time, and adhering to meeting decorum. Study participants reported that organizations do not account for these needs, setting credible messengers up for difficulties throughout their careers. And what's more, even credible messenger-led organizations experience the funding-related restrictions and requirements that make it difficult for them to meet credible messengers' needs.

TRAUMA

Study participants, including credible messengers, reported an overwhelming emotional toll from the work. Many reported that credible messengers typically have compounded trauma from having lived in marginalized communities and having navigated the criminal legal system. Credible messengers are typically returning citizens navigating stigmas and barriers that they face as people with criminal records and as people from marginalized populations. Credible messengers are working to assist others experiencing similar hardships in addition to building lives for themselves and their loved ones. This requires them to relive past hardships and traumas while overcoming new ones. They are required to intervene in other community members' most physically and emotionally challenging

circumstances, yet they are typically left to bear the weight of this work with low pay, few benefits, and limited resources (or access) to assist them. Two participants shared the following:

Some challenges are mostly when I relate to the stories that you hear all the time. It gets emotional. But you have to learn how to take your job and be able to say, I can listen to this without getting emotional, I can listen to this story without feeling too much fatigue. We all go through it.

For me, it's trauma. I still go through trauma. It's been five years, but I still feel it. Anything triggers me. I try to learn how to control it because in my job title I have a lot of things that trigger me. I work with a lot of kids that might say something to me that might trigger me. Might say something that might make me feel like I'm back in prison. Might make me feel like I'm back in the lifestyle that I used to be in. It's learning how to control the triggers and move past that.

Study participants reported consistently that credible messengers need technical, financial, legal, emotional, and familial support more than their non-credible messenger counterparts but that these supports are difficult to access.

Summary of Key Findings

The data collected throughout the cross-program study included information above and beyond the study's key research questions. In this section, we present the key findings from our three data collection activities as a whole to accurately portray the landscape of credible messengers in New York City. Most of the people who participated in the study were in executive leadership roles in city agencies or community-based organizations. Other participants were supervisors, managers, coordinators, and outreach workers, direct service providers, parents, young adults, consultants, researchers, and academics. Most organizations that participated in the study were developed and work in the communities they serve. In fact, study participants stated that being integrated and present in the community is paramount to their success. Although all agencies and organizations that participated in the study identified two overarching goals—reduce harm, violence, and crime, and reduce criminal legal system contact—the means by which they achieve these goals vary. Moreover, participants reported that there are many strong collaborative relationships between city agencies and between city agencies and community organizations, although these relationships are mainly between city-level agencies and stakeholders. Study participants reported that although this collaboration fosters knowledge sharing and support, the well-known collaboration and communication efforts generally include the same agencies and organizations and efforts to identify and include new partners and perspectives are limited.

Participants defined “**lived experience**” as experiences that credible messengers share with the people they serve or experiences relevant to the work they perform. (Many credible messengers have both direct and indirect lived experience.) Moreover, they considered intimate knowledge of, connection with, and embeddedness in credible messengers' communities as paramount to their work. Relatedly, the definition and use of the term “**credible messenger**” and its operationalization has evolved since its inception. We define credible messengers as people with direct carceral experiences of criminal legal contact; people who are gang or street associated or who live in structurally marginalized communities and share common experiences with those they serve; people who have been indirectly impacted by the criminal legal contact of family members or friends; and people with lived experience in other systems. **A credible messenger is someone who has undergone a transformation to become a community agent of change.** This role may be formal or not, and credible messenger is just one of many interchangeable terms that stakeholders use. **The most essential qualification study participants reported was that the community sees credible messengers as “credible.”** Study participants also reported that enabling communities to determine credibility is paramount to the success of credible messenger programming.

Moreover, many study participants also discussed the importance of credible messengers possessing the skills to effectively engage and build strong relationships with the people and communities they serve. Study participants rarely discussed qualities and skills that disqualify credible messengers from being hired; they said that what disqualifies a credible messenger will depend strongly on the specific type of work they will be doing and the population the organization employing them serves. Participants did not consider formal credentials or training essential to success as a credible messenger. Participants' main concerns about certification involve the barriers to opportunities that certification can create for people who already have limited access to resources and opportunities. Almost every study participant, however, discussed the importance of required/standardized training and ongoing personal/professional development for credible messengers once hired. They indicated a need for more awareness of and access to training and educational opportunities for current credible messengers that can teach them hard and soft skills that complement their current roles and provide them opportunities to move into other fields related to their passions (e.g., policy work, business, education, STEM, art). They reported a need to, as one participant put it, make credible messengers “promotable” in multiple fields and areas of work so they can secure permanent, benefited, and sustainable employment that matches their talents and passions.

Credible messengers perform various roles in various fields but all have an intrinsic drive to help others experiencing the hardships they have overcome, whether that work is paid or unpaid. This is

why most credible messengers work providing direct human services. Most organizations pair credible messengers with people based on shared experiences and rapport, rather than using assessments or intake evaluations. The organizations and credible messengers take a nondeficit approach to their work and strive to serve whole communities. Study participants repeatedly said that the community-based organizations that truly embody the values of credible messenger work that Eddie Ellis described are most effective. They also reported that agencies and organizations that employ credible messengers are better equipped to improve communities than those that do not. In addition, having staff who are embedded in communities and understand communities because of their shared experiences is paramount to organizations' success.

Although study participants did mention that credible messengers are effective at reducing harm, violence, and recidivism, they said individual healing and growth are their key areas of impact. They also said credible messengers are able to foster communitywide healing, empowerment, and capacity building. Through their consistent dedication to others, they are able to grow personally and break down strongly held stigmas about people who have experienced criminal legal system contact, thereby creating more space for people in the workforce and in society. Study participants reported that credible messengers are instrumental in facilitating conversations between community members, people working in the legal system and other systems, and policymakers about improving services and policies. They are also reshaping community members' ideas of public safety, giving them resources and options other than calling the police. Also, they are making people more aware of the role structural and systemic oppression plays in their lives and the those of community members.

When asked what challenges credible messengers experience, study participants said racism, capitalism, and trauma all function to marginalize credible messengers and obstruct their work. Another major challenge is the low pay and lack of benefits. In addition, participants reported that health insurance is limited, as are other benefits including training, professional development, and counseling. A lack of funding for this work is another major challenge, as is the time it takes for funding to execute. Relatedly, participants said performance measures and evaluation criteria used to determine what organizations receive and maintain funding are very significant challenges, and that funding restrictions prevent organizations from building capacity. Lastly, participants said credible messengers face several workplace challenges, including challenges related to workplace culture, technical and administrative skills, and the emotional burden of the work.

Recommendations for Capacity Building

Study participants and the project team identified eight key recommendations to help organizations and agencies that employ credible messengers become more impactful and sustainable (appendix C provides examples of how stakeholders could act on each recommendation). In this section, we list and elaborate on these recommendations.

Increase credible messengers' pay, benefits, and supports. Study participants elevated the need to create career ladders and increase the pay of credible messengers to a living wage that is equal to their non-credible messenger counterparts in the same or similar roles. Urban evaluations of the Arches program (Lynch et al. 2018) and interventions for at-promise youth (Jannetta et al. 2022) shared this finding. cursory searches indicate that a “living wage” in New York City is at least \$20 an hour for an adult with no children and at least \$64 an hour for an adult with three children.²¹ For credible messengers, a living wage would include payment for time spent speaking to others about their experiences (e.g., conferences, media) and providing guidance to other professionals in policy and research (e.g., committees). In addition, participants said affordable health care and retirement benefits are difficult for organizations to afford. Yet such benefits are required for many city contracts. It is imperative that policymakers, funders, and organization leaders think creatively about how to provide employees affordable and quality health care and retirement benefits. For example, participants suggested that policymakers and funders allow city contractors to “buy in to” city benefits for employees. Lastly, participants said awareness of and access to training and resources that are necessary for credible messengers need to be increased. This includes personal support and soft and hard professional skills. For example, the Institute for Transformative Mentoring could prerecord courses and offer them at a discount or free online, and the Credible Messenger Justice Center could distribute packets for organizations to provide to all newly hired credible messengers describing the resources offered through CMJ Assist. Employers could allocate time each week or month for credible messengers to access training and support without taking time off.

Hire people with lived experience to be employed in all roles in all fields. Inclusivity means genuinely involving the people closest to the issues in shaping policies and processes at all levels, including outside the criminal legal system and beyond service provision. For example, study participants suggested that credible messengers be involved in designing city contracts, deciding on contracts, and monitoring contracts to ensure the requirements and performance measurements are accurate and comprehensive and that the contractors selected effectively serve communities. They also suggested that credible messengers and community members be engaged to inform policymakers on considerations that only people with lived experience might consider. One study participant stated,

“We need people in political seats that understand this work and have been through the same thing. We need somebody in the seat that has actually been through the same thing. These people holding these seats haven’t been on the streets or in the field doing this work. They need to go out and do the work themselves to get it.” Another stated, “The more impact that credible messengers have in decisionmaking spaces, the more impact they’ll have on the ground level.” Lastly, because people with lived experience with the criminal legal system are typically relegated to entry-level positions related to criminal legal work, the breadth and depth of their impact is stifled. Study participants suggested that agencies and organizations provide credible messengers opportunities *outside* the criminal legal system. For example, participants suggested that credible messengers might make effective replacements for school resource officers.

Invest in credible messenger-led organizations and organizations that are truly part of their communities and invest in community well-being. Study participants recommended that organizations funnel as much money as possible back into the communities they serve. Also, they believe increasing funding for organizations whose leaders and employees have lived experience will contribute to community healing. One study participant shared, “Credible messengers could become like an AmeriCorps for people and communities. This needs to be more than just jobs for credible messengers. People cannot be recycled through the same social services and nonprofits over and over. We need smaller unknown orgs to be leveraged and built so permanent programs can be made with well-paying jobs, led by community members and credible messengers. Give them resources and training to really grow.” Moreover, participants recommended that funders allow communities to determine which organizations are fundable, including by using participatory budgeting processes. Furthermore, in addition to evaluating proposal applications when making awarding decisions, they suggested that funders conduct site visits and speak with community members to evaluate applicants. Participants also suggested that funders and organizations create collaborative partnerships and regularly identify new grassroots organizations to include in conversations and funding. For example, agencies and funders might support start-ups and struggling organizations in building/rebuilding themselves by incentivizing other organizations to mentor them and by offering capacity-building training and resources.

Increase collaboration between city agencies and communities. Although there is a great deal of this type of coordination and collaboration in New York City, participants expressed concerns that the efforts are becoming exclusive, are leading to unintended competition, and are inhibiting innovation. They said new people across fields and disciplines need to be included in these efforts. For example, funders can bring fresh perspectives and opportunities to the table by collaborating with other funders

(including government agencies and foundations inside and outside the criminal legal sphere) on funding initiatives and funding portfolios. Agencies could bring fresh perspectives and opportunities to the table by researching and connecting with other agencies and departments (e.g., the Department of Education, Department of Labor, or Department of Housing and Urban Development) to explore shared/competing priorities and opportunities to collaborate. Lastly, organizations and credible messengers could research other businesses and organizations (related and unrelated to their own work) within the communities they serve to partner on events and initiatives.

Allow funding to be used flexibly for capacity building within and between organizations. Study participants elevated the importance of flexible funding for training, collaborative efforts, and business development. They mused that funders that allow organizations to use portions of funding to increase capacity might make their initiatives more successful. For example, allowing organizations to fund training and professional development might increase staff capacity and effectiveness. It might also increase knowledge and resource sharing between organizations with shared values and missions. Participants also said organizations need to hire employees and acquire software dedicated to business operations so they can focus on the services they provide rather than gaining and maintaining funding and credibility. Moreover, because different types of funders have different contract requirements, participants suggested that organizations diversify their funding streams to have more flexibility in spending and increase capacity.

Reduce the time it takes to execute funding to organizations. A common challenge reported by study participants was the length of time it takes for New York City funding agencies to execute contracts. This protracted process imposes a critical hardship for many community-based agencies. One study participant shared, “The funding process needs to be revamped because organizations spend all their time trying to justify why funding should be given and this takes away from the ability to do actual work.” Participants suggested that by eliminating unnecessary steps taken by organizations and the city and by streamlining the process, the time to execution can be reduced. For example, the creation of an online portal for the creation, review, and acceptance of contracts, task orders, and invoices might increase the speed of execution. With that, a system of accountability for organizations and city departments may also reduce delays. Finally, organizations might be more sustainable if they gain funding through diverse funders, including governments and foundations, to spread out contracts beyond those that take a long time to execute.

Introduce alternative and healing-based forms of evaluation and performance measurement. Most performance measures and evaluation outcomes involve immediate program engagement, violations, and recidivism. Crime statistics such as recidivism rates, often generated through the

institution of policing, have led to a racialized understanding of safety and criminality (Muhammad 2019). The hyperpolicing of poor Black and Latinx people creates a dilemma for evaluations that exclusively focus on recidivism. Recidivism still has utility as a metric, but extensive literature suggests that multiple factors contribute to recidivism and program engagement (Price-Tucker et al. 2019; Yukhnenko, Blackwood, and Fazel 2020). Study participants said evaluation data and outcomes other than recidivism, violations, and dosage need to be introduced for the impact of credible messengers on communities to be truly understood.²² They reported that quantitative and qualitative data are both necessary for accurately capturing the experiences of staff at community-based organizations and the people they serve. They recommended that stakeholders developing these outcomes incorporate community members' input. Depending on the people served and the types of services provided, examples of outcomes might include school attendance, employment retention, savings account growth, community home ownership / long-term renting in the community, community events, physical and mental health and well-being, costs saved by diverting people from system involvement, and measures of individuals' and communities' upward mobility.²³

Ensure the purpose of the work drives the structures and processes. Study participants consistently reported concerns that the credible messenger initiatives in New York City have become more concerned with processes and structures than the purpose of the work. For example, they reported that agencies and organizations are “caught up” in the terms, definitions, and qualifications of credible messengers and are beginning to “overclinicalize the work,” as one put it. They said agencies and organizations need to return to the roots of the credible messenger movement and the work of Eddie Ellis to reorient conversations so the purpose of the work drives the process. One study participant shared,

Make sure you do not lose the reason for doing this. Although systems are funding this, credible messengers are coming from an abolitionist point of view. Remember the ultimate goal credible messengers are looking for equity in communities not equality. Cannot do social justice work in the justice realm and not do it in other realms, like for girls of color and LGBTQAI++ is so important. This work is still very patriarchal. It needs to consider other groups of people that are system involved. Try to break out of the status quo place. The problem of racism is faster than you.

Participants reported that many organizations are beginning to hire credible messengers because funding is more accessible if they do so. It is imperative that the decision to hire credible messengers is driven by values, not money. Moreover, workplace environments need to be safe and functional for all employees, especially people with lived experience of trauma and oppression. Study participants encouraged organizations across fields to research and to rework their policies, processes, and cultures before hiring credible messengers. This is not one-size-fits-all, and exact policy and practice

structures will depend on individual agencies and organizations. For example, one organization reworked its benefit structure to include paid time for self-care activities; another requires biweekly clinical supervision, team meetings, and team building; and one allows training attendance during paid work hours. One study participant suggested that organizations “be proactive with ensuring credible messengers understand organizational culture versus peer culture versus the culture they experienced in prison.” By putting in the effort before hiring credible messengers, organizations will likely recruit and retain more credible messengers for longer, and credible messengers will be able to focus on the work rather than navigating challenging workplaces.

More research is needed in this growing body of work. To our knowledge, fewer than five publicly accessible evaluations explicitly focus on credible messengers. More qualitative approaches would also greatly enhance the field’s ability to further understand process, context, and the lived experiences of credible messengers and program participants and of other stakeholders. Research would also benefit from examining credible messenger programming in different parts of the country.

Conclusion

Our study on credible messengers in New York City occurred from December 2020 through March 2022. This multifaceted and multimethod project included a comprehensive review of literature on credible messengers; the recruitment and hiring of four community researchers; a cross-program study of credible messengers in New York City; and community-engaged design, implementation, and dissemination activities. This project shed light on the landscape of credible messengers in New York City, specifically on definitions of and terms around credible messengers; the recruitment, training, and qualifications of credible messengers; the communities credible messengers serve, the services they provide, and perceived impacts on themselves and others; the needs and challenges of credible messengers; the characteristics, needs, and trajectories of agencies and organizations that employ credible messengers; and collaborative efforts between agencies, organizations, and stakeholders throughout New York City. The eight recommendations we provide in this report can help agencies and organizations be more impactful and sustainable. This report only provides a glimpse of the extraordinary efforts, legacy, and potential of credible messengers in New York City. It is meant to provide the groundwork for policymakers, funders, organizations, credible messengers, and communities to increase the capacity of credible messengers and those who employ them and take the next step in their evolution. To many New Yorkers, including those we spoke with, credible

messengers save lives; it is now all of our responsibility to take that next step in ensuring their well-being and futures.

Appendix A. Community Researchers' Experiences, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

In this appendix, we present three of this project's community researchers' reflections on being a credible messenger and member of this project team, lessons they learned from doing this research, and recommendations for credible messenger programming.

Davon “Champ” Woodley

Experiences as a Credible Messenger/Peer

The people who do this work love it, but must navigate difficult and triggering situations with inadequate supports:

The most fundamental thing I took away from this is that there is a huge passion for this, the level of work, for those who are actually participating in it and actually conducting these programs. But there is a lack of care and concern on how they debrief from their day-to-day experiences.

I actually had to get fingerprinted and processed, to become a volunteer to serve, to directly serve fellows on Riker’s Island. Even though I’m five years removed from incarceration and almost seven to eight years removed from being on Rikers Island, that feeling of stress and anxiety still takes over me at times. And to know that I’m willing to do this work, and to show up authentically for it, and to service those who are in the same situation I was not so long ago, is still something that I need to work through to this day.

Experiences with This Project

Discovering shared experiences and passions is powerful:

One of the things I loved most about some of the findings that we had with several other credible messengers is that they all share the same passion that I do. And that made me feel more connected to those who actually care about the communities, populations in which we serve directly.

Lessons Learned

Compensation that reflects the difficult work of credible messengers is needed:

The most important thing that I've taken away is that, even though they're not doing this for the money, it still is appropriate to show that their struggle through their successes is well compensated 100 percent.

"The thing that actually stands out, stands true, is that people really do love this work. I love this work. And although I've been through a very traumatic experience with a lot of different situations, I will continue to do this work. I would just like to see my work and my worth also to be compensated, you know additionally, because I do see myself doing this in the longevity. I do see myself doing this with a passion and understanding.

Recommendations

Provide fair compensation and good supports, and be conscious about trauma:

Some of the advice that I would take is, not only speaking to those who work this field, but actually catering to their needs as well. Offering them a level of service or resource to help them debrief from talking about their experiences. Sometimes as little as showing appreciation as far as compensating them a little bit extra for their time, whether they took a hour out of their day on their lunch break, and that may be the only time of the day they have to themselves, or whether it's taking time away from their free time to actually speak on something.

Romel Shuler

Experiences as a Credible Messenger/Peer

On being a returning citizen, not a justice-involved person:

So, I'm a formally—well we call ourselves returning citizens, right, I'm a returning citizen. I've been away for two decades. I've been home now approximately eleven years.

Experiences with This Project

This project was a learning opportunity in which those involved worked to be inclusive:

The vetting process was really really tedious, and once I got on board, I knew immediately that it was a different level of learning, and a different level of insight in the work that I've been doing in the past decade.

So, what I got from Urban, some of the trainings, the coding trainings, qualitative and quantitative approaches, research, interviewing...All the other pieces that I felt was needed in

order to really exact some change and get some of the data. What are people really looking for, how to do it, in a way that's inclusive, and not exclusive, because we know that the communities that we serviced have been marginalized.

Lessons Learned

Multiple perspectives matter:

And my experience being able to talk to Mari [McGilton], because I spoke to Mari more often than a lot of the other people in our group. But we all spoke together, but the insight, and it led to peeling some of the layers away on myself, and then looking at it from a different perspective. Because I guess when you're in or affected by certain policies and you're living, that lived experience kind of limits your view if you're looking at it from a certain lens. If I am injured by a certain experience, I'll have a certain bias toward that experience. But then, when you speak to someone who may not have had that experience, their view, their lens if you're open-minded will allow you to look at that experience a little bit different and would allow you to grow. Not to say that it's not traumatic, not to say that it's less impactful, but it allows you to grow.

Recommendations

People with lived experience will make the best change agents, but they must be properly equipped:

We have to utilize individuals with certain levels of expertise and insight. Because that's invaluable. That expertise and insight in making certain decisions and affecting certain policies and making real change. If we do that, I think that that's one of the beginning steps of making change in our communities, and how we address some of the ills, and some of the missteps of the past.

Growth is something that's definitely needed, more tools in the tool belt is definitely needed for individuals who are returning citizens, to actually contribute to this change. And I think that I can say, every person that I know that's a returning citizen that's out here trying to exact change, would agree, that more tools and direction is needed.

Helen “Skip” Skipper

Experiences as a Credible Messenger/Peer

The people doing this work are impacted by a harmful system even once they're “back in the community,” and for too long their experiences have been overlooked:

I speak and present about the validity of lived experiences. And then we look at the criminal justice system. This is a space where the voices and the expertise of lived experiences have

been forgotten. And it's only recently that we have started moving up on the food chain. It's simple.

And a lot of people want to say formally impacted—there's nothing formally about that. Once you are impacted by the criminal justice system you are forever tarred by that brush. But credible messengers, peer supporters, anyone who uses lived experiences, are removing the tar from our feathers as we work to build, to innovate, to deliver promising new practices.

Experiences with This Project

Pride and appreciation are the core feelings when reflecting on this experience:

I need to take this time just a brief moment to thank Urban for giving me a background and grounding in research. For helping me flesh out in my own mind whether I want qualitative or quantitative research—and I have gone through that question with my research associates. I have learned about data and coding, I have learned about human subject research done correctly, not like the Tuskegee project and things like that. I'm so proud to sit here and give my thoughts, I'm so proud to be a part of this important work.

Lessons Learned

Research is key to identifying structural issues and uniting peer work:

And one last thing, you're gonna hear a lot about "credible messengers." And as you guys know, I'm a peer. Call me a "uber peer" whatever but at the end of the day it distills down to lived experiences.

Recommendations

Do not only make space for people at your table. Genuinely seek other tables out and join them:

We know that lived experience is valid. We know that. But we have been forgotten and we have been left out when it comes to research. Research is important as you look at systems as you look what works and what doesn't, as you look at policy and procedures...Research into systems that oppress, systems that traumatize, has not been fulfilled in the correct manner.

My advice for other research organizations is to stop building research from the top down. Involve those of us who the research directly affects. You guys have heard me say it before but I'm going to say it one more time. I'm not begging for a seat at the table as a person with lived experiences. I am the table, please come sit with me. It's only when you listen and learn from us, we are the subject matter experts in the room, can you begin to fix what's broken.

Appendix B. Project Challenges and Lessons Learned

In this appendix, we highlight some of the project-related challenges and the lessons we learned as a result. In particular, three key challenges arose during the project related to interviews with people who receive services from credible messengers, the survey, and incentives.

Regarding **interviews** with the people who receive services from credible messengers, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented any in-person data collection. The virtual nature of the data collection activities and methods created several challenges. For example, the entire research team worked remotely and never met in person. This required us to be mindful about creating intentional opportunities for immersion of the CRAs into Urban Institute and research culture and processes. We offer our project as a model for future projects that focus on conducting PAR in a virtual context. Furthermore, the people who receive services do so at various times of day, rarely are together as a group at once, and have busy schedules that change often. Thus, scheduling focus groups was challenging at times. In projects that include interviews with people who receive services from human services organizations, interviews should be held in person and scheduled far enough in advance to increase the number of participants and the certainty that they participate. If in-person data collection is not an option, projects should conduct individual interviews over the phone. This format allows for scheduling around one schedule, rather than many, and gives participants the flexibility to converse while multitasking if they need to. It also eases accessibility concerns around the need for a computer with a microphone, camera, and internet connection.

Similarly, regarding **the survey**, the online format and the nature of the questions required time and lengthy responses, which was not ideal for respondents due to their busy schedules. Projects that include an online survey of community-based organization leaders should include selection at the beginning of the survey where respondents can indicate a preference to complete the survey over the phone. By offering this option after the informed consent, leaders have the flexibility to complete the survey based on their needs, thereby increasing the number and quality of responses.

Regarding **incentives**, this study originally only offered people who received services from credible messengers sites \$25 tokens of appreciation for their time during the focus groups. However, after consulting with study participants, incentives were also offered to the credible messengers who took part in the small-group interviews. During the cross-program study, the project team became acutely

aware that most employees of the community-based organizations work long hours with little free time and low pay. For their time and insights, we provided a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25 gift card. Projects that interview employees of community-based organizations and the people they serve should creatively and thoughtfully show appreciation for the time they contribute to research and data collection efforts.

Appendix C. Actions for Achieving Our Recommendations

TABLE C.1

Actions Stakeholders Could Take to Achieve Our Recommendations

	Policymakers / city agencies	Organization leadership	Credible messengers
Increase credible messengers' pay and benefits.	Allow contractors to use funding to train and develop organization employees.	Build in time during the week for access to training and professional development both internally and externally.	Know your value: engage in self-care, including by identifying needs and taking the time to seek and access support.
Reduce the time it takes to execute funding to organizations.	Begin work on task orders and contracts as early as possible. Eliminate unnecessary steps in the execution process. Create accountability for processing in a timely manner.	Begin work on task orders and contracts as soon as possible. Diversify funding streams beyond government sources.	Learn contracting and funding processes to support organizations in identifying and gaining funding opportunities.
Be inclusive of people with lived experience to be employed in all fields and roles.	Invite community members to be a part of policy development and funding decision meetings.	Hire credible messengers and others with valuable lived experience to all levels of the organization.	Explore and understand passions and interests, and seek out opportunities for advancement.
Allow for flexible funding for capacity building within and between organizations.	Allow contractors to use funding on organization administrative supports such as grant writers and QuickBooks.	Review and deeply understand contract language to creatively use funds while remaining in compliance. Ask funders for permission to spend funding in areas that are not explicitly prohibited.	
Invest in credible messenger-led organizations and those that are truly a part of their communities and invest in community well-being.	Dedicate time to working with and for the communities you represent.	Invest in community well-being. Speak to community members about their needs and be creative about meeting them. Hire community members.	Seek employment at organizations in your community and/or challenge your employer to integrate further into its community.
Introduce alternative and healing-based forms of evaluation and performance measurement.	Build in new forms of performance/outcome measurement into contracts. Allow contractors to suggest additional forms of measurement.	Build data collection processes and platforms using traditional types of data (e.g., recidivism, dosage) and creative types of data (e.g., upward mobility measures).	Speak with community members about what success means to them to identify relatable measures that your organization can track.

	Policymakers / city agencies	Organization leadership	Credible messengers
Increase collaboration between city agencies and communities.	Allow funding to be used on collaboration and coordination efforts. Offer events for similar contractors to connect and incentivize partnerships.	Connect with other organizations and businesses in your community (including those in different fields) to create and drive growth and reinvestment in neighborhoods.	Develop individual relationships with community leaders and business owners, and create connections between them and your employer(s).
Ensure the purpose of the work is driving the structure.	Create funding opportunities and structure policies/initiatives that center the mission and philosophy of Eddie Ellis's vision over the bureaucratic definitions and structures	Choose services and structures that center your values and community.	Educate systems and leaders of the purpose and values of credible messengers when bureaucracy threatens to take over.

Source: Urban Institute.

Notes

- ¹ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.
- ² Rashawn Ray, “Bad Apples Come from Rotten Trees in Policing,” Brookings Institution, May 30, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/05/30/bad-apples-come-from-rotten-trees-in-policing/>.
- ³ Inequality is created by capitalism. Racial capitalism describes the process by which inequality is worsened and understood through racial categories (Robinson 1983). For more on this subject, see the short film “Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKrJI&t=133s>.
- ⁴ Francis X. Clines, “Ex-Inmates Urge Return to Areas of Crime to Help,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/23/nyregion/ex-inmates-urge-return-to-areas-of-crime-to-help.html>.
- ⁵ David Greaves, “Eddie Ellis: Prison Reform Visionary,” *Our Time Press*, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://ourtimepress.com/eddie-ellis-prison-reform-visionary/>.
- ⁶ See also Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,” transformharm.org, accessed May 17, 2022, <https://transformharm.org/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/>.
- ⁷ “Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN),” US Attorney’s Office, Northern District of Georgia, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndga/PSN>.
- ⁸ “About,” READI Chicago, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.heartlandalliance.org/readi/about/>.
- ⁹ Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors Resolution No. 20-287, <https://milwaukeecounty.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4537257&GUID=1E31410A-BAFE-404B-89AA-E70196BC9C9D>.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Abrams, “The Murder of Tayshana Murphy: Sometimes Poetic Justice Is Not Justice at All,” Grantland, November 22, 2011, <https://grantland.com/features/the-murder-tayshana-murphy/>.
- ¹¹ Ted Alcorn, “Reporting for Work Where You Once Reported for Probation: Where Mistrust between Communities and Law Enforcement Runs High, Can People with Criminal Histories Bridge the Gap?” *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/12/credible-messengers-reform-criminal-justice-system/603514/>.
- ¹² For more on the peer specialist position, see the New York Peer Specialist Certification Board’s June 2017 webinar, available at https://www.academyofpeerservices.org/pluginfile.php/43187/mod_resource/content/1/063017_%20NYPSCB_Update.pdf.
- ¹³ The internal manual is a living document that all members of the project team have added to and revised to ensure it is comprehensive and accessible and can be used for future projects. The manual covers the fundamental principles and tools of research and qualitative research methods; it also covers research ethics and best practices and includes example materials, definitions, and links to resources.
- ¹⁴ Training also involved discussions on ethics and justice in conducting research on topics related to structurally marginalized communities and people. This covered racism in social science, past harms by researchers, and ways of enhancing equity in our project team and project. These conversations continued during team meetings throughout the project.
- ¹⁵ The CRAs and other team members received other formal training on skills and topics at each stage of the project as needed; these skills and topics included survey methods, informed consent and effective interviewing, note taking in data collection, coding and synthesizing qualitative data, and project management.

- ¹⁶ NYC Opportunity consulted with city agencies, organizations, and stakeholders to develop the original project concept and the request for proposals to ensure the scope and purpose of the project captured the needs and interests of those closest to credible messengers and their work.
- ¹⁷ To adhere to health and safety standards during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews took place over Zoom.
- ¹⁸ See Flick (2004) for information about triangulation in qualitative research.
- ¹⁹ As an intervention focused on individual behavior and embedded in multiple sociopolitical processes, mentoring cannot be separated from cultural assumptions and broader political contexts. Scholars have criticized role modeling and mentoring for their roots in reductionist views of race and gender (Colley 2002; Singh 2020). The idea that at-risk youth, particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth of color, need "strong role models" is inextricable from lasting cultural views of minority communities as broken or irresponsible compared with white communities and structures. The contemporary "youth mentoring movement" is tied to the genesis of foundations and corporations such as United Way of America and Procter & Gamble in the late 1980s and should be contextualized within the rise of neoliberal approaches to public policy (Fernandez-Alcantara 2019). Neoliberalism and its preference to remove government structures and encourage individual "solutions" to social ills is directly related to the conception and funding of mentoring programs. Modern mentoring programs conscious of this history may prove more effective in reaching youth by moving away from "model behavior" myths and toward research-based interventions that focus on shared cultural experiences and the inherent capabilities of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.
- ²⁰ The Social Resilience Model is a collective, skills-based approach to improving individual and group well-being and resilience. It harnesses the tension between current realities and emerging futures by teaching neuroscience-based skills to heighten attention, shift patterns of dysregulation, and promote capacity for individual stability and generativity. See <https://www.thresholdglobalworks.com/about/social-resilience/>.
- ²¹ "Living Wage Calculation for New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY," MIT Living Wage Calculator, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/35620>.
- ²² For more, see National Information Services' "Measuring Community Safety," available at <https://www.safety-metrics.nis.us/measuring-safety>.
- ²³ See <https://upward-mobility.urban.org/tracking-progress-toward-upward-mobility>.

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