# Choices by Default? Opportunities and Constraints for Families of Color in Youth Activities

Nahrissa I. Rush, McNair Scholar - Douglas Hartmann, Ph.D. Department of Sociology

## INTRODUCTION

As part of the Kids Involvement and Diversity Study (KIDS), this project explored how understudied families of color choose activities for their children, and how those choices may in fact be limited. In some cases, choices made might not really be choices at all, or options are limited and families are forced to settle for other activities.

This research also focused on how families of color experience extra-curricular activities, specifically regarding racism and differential treatment. Several families reported either blatant or covert experiences with racism, primarily involving sports.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do families of color choose activities for their children?

What are the constraints on their choices and how does it impact their experience?

Do they report instances of racism or differential treatment while participating in these activities and how are these issues addressed when they occur?

## METHODOLOGY

Since 2015, over 130 interviews with both parents and children have been held as part of the larger KIDS project. Of the almost 60 interviews with parents that have been collected for the study, the interviews with parents of color and parents with children of color were reviewed.

White parents with children of color were included as they represent a unique viewpoint and perspective outside of traditional white families.

These interviews represent families of varying socioeconomic, educational and cultural backgrounds to capture the diversity of the study.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

### Choices by Default

**“Anything that he has asked, expressed interest in is available through the community center, the school or somebody I know. So he has no problem.”**

### Forced Alternatives

**“I wanted her to be on the debate team but they don’t have a debate team and the mock trial was the closest thing to the debate team.”**

### Choosing Activities to Prepare for Experiencing a White World

**“She’s a young African American woman and she’s going to be the only young African American woman in certain spaces. So you might as well go in there and find your comfort, and be able to express yourself and be comfortable in those spaces. ‘Oh my god it’s so comfortable any spaces I go. I be comfortable around black people, white people, Asian people, Latino people.’ I want her to be able to be her wherever she go. I feel like putting her in mock trial and encouraging her to do things that she’s passionate about is going to lead her to be able to be successful in any realms...and in any direction that she chooses to go.”**

### Differential Treatment

- “Being just big and aggressive.”
- “You’re Black, you can’t do that.”
- “I’m not isolating myself not at all. I just - some people want to get to know you and share your enthusiasm for whatever you’re cheering for or whatever you’re showing up for and others don’t.”

### Explicit Instances of Racism

**“And they’re calling our girls [Name of School] Monkeys. Where they’re chanting ‘[Name of School] Monkeys,’ and chanting ‘We’re at the [Name of School] Zoo.’...I feel like some of these white schools come into our inner-city schools, and have this elitist-ass attitude, and feel they can treat and talk to our kids any type of way. And treat us, as adults, any old type of way because we have less money, or we appear to have less money.”**

## DISCUSSION & INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

### Illusions of Choice

- Some families feel that they have options, but at the same time express only choosing activities that are close in proximity or accessible through their networks.

### Constraints on Choice

- Activity choices are limited due to cost, location and variety of options available.
- Some families of color are hesitant to enter new arenas that they have viewed as typically “white” and off-limits or unwelcoming.

### Impacts on Experience

- Many families have experienced differential treatment through refereeing, interactions with parents or by participants from other schools when traveling.
- White parents with children of color find it easier to navigate extra-curricular activities.

## SIGNIFICANCE & FUTURE RESEARCH

There is much broad research on children’s activities, but it is lacking a focused examination on how families of color choose which activities to participate in, and how they experience them.

More scholarship in this area will yield a better understanding of how access effects choice which can help to remedy the disparities caused by unequal participation in extra-curricular activities.

The KIDS project is ongoing and there is more to be gleaned from both current and future interviews. With a diverse research team and race matching during interviews we will be better able to have deeper conversations with families of color about race and differential treatment.

Going forward we will also perform a more systematic comparison of the experience of families of color compared to white families, thereby being able to draw more defined conclusions.