School Mental Health Providers’ Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on Racial Inequities and School Disengagement

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School disengagement is a critical factor that will likely exacerbate long-standing racial inequities in educational outcomes during the aftermath of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Due to their training and contact with at-risk students, school social workers and other school-based mental health professionals (SMHP) are in an ideal position to understand the impact of COVID-19 and virtual learning on K–12 students. To that end, this study reports on findings from a survey of SMHP about the differential impact that the COVID-19 outbreak is having on students and their families. The findings suggest that COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on families overall, especially among populations who were experiencing hardships before the current outbreak. In addition, several barriers were noted for student learning, with many students—particularly students of color—completely disengaging from school during spring 2020. However, SMHP reported several important insights on how to support students and their families—some requiring immediate action on the part of school districts and others requiring greater community-level investment into the economic, social, emotional, and overall health of families. Findings are discussed in light of addressing disengagement and educational inequities for students of color.

KEY WORDS: educational outcomes; racial inequities; school disengagement; school social workers

Two pandemics are deeply affecting students today—COVID-19 and the long history of institutionalized racism in our education system. Racial inequities in educational outcomes were pervasive and seemingly intractable before the COVID-19 pandemic (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2016; Dixon & Rousseau, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paschall, Gershoff, & Kuhfeld, 2018). Before COVID-19, students of color faced significant challenges as compared with White students in several educational domains, including teacher–student relationships, classroom–school environment, exclusionary discipline, and referrals to special education (Carter et al., 2016; Dixon & Rousseau, 2014; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). The disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on communities of color in combination with existing structural inequalities threaten to deepen racial inequities for students of color (Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020; Kullar et al., 2020; Webb Hooper, Nápoles, & Pérez-Stable, 2020).

Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the way that students learn and engage with school through the transition to online learning. As a result, a substantial number of students disengaged from school during the spring 2020 semester (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020; Huffman, 2020). School disengagement is a critical factor that will likely exacerbate long-standing educational disparities based on income, race, and ethnicity during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools have a responsibility to address school disengagement now via targeted prevention and intervention efforts to reduce the likelihood that entrenched educational disparities will be worsened by COVID-19.

Due to their training and contact with at-risk students, school social workers and other school-based mental health professionals (SMHP) are in an ideal position to understand the impact of COVID-19 and virtual learning on K–12 students. To that end, the present study reports on findings from a survey of school social workers and other SMHP...
(for example, counselors) about the differential impact that the COVID-19 outbreak is having on the education of students in low-income, immigrant communities and communities of color. The goal of this study was to collect and disseminate rapid cycle data on the specific areas of highest need in these communities. These data can be used by schools, school districts, practitioners in school and community settings, policymakers, and funders to target support and prevent the widening of inequality in educational outcomes, especially for students of color.

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR**

Over the past few months, it has been alarmingly clear that people of color in the United States, particularly Black and Latinx individuals, are dying at a disproportionately high rate from COVID-19 (Adhikari et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2020; Kullar et al., 2020). Data suggest that disparities are driven in large part by resource deprivation and economic inequality associated with the history of racial segregation (Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020; Webb Hooper et al., 2020). In addition, the legacy of structural racism present in society has resulted in communities of color being at greater risk for underlying chronic conditions; being exposed to poorer environmental conditions; being uninsured; and working low-wage, frontline “essential” jobs with exposure to conditions that limit social distancing (Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020; Kullar et al., 2020; Webb Hooper et al., 2020). Secondary effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as job loss, food insecurity, and financial or functional barriers to obtaining basic needs have also disproportionately affected low-income communities and communities of color (Montenovo et al., 2020; Wolfson & Leung, 2020).

Before COVID-19, students of color had a fundamentally unequal experience of school compared with their White counterparts. Students of color on average attend schools with fewer resources, are more likely to be exposed to exclusionary discipline, and are less likely to be tracked into advanced classes (Carter et al., 2016). Known as “education debt,” students of color, especially Black and Indigenous students, have been systematically denied access to an equal education, let alone one that is culturally affirming (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Racial inequities in educational experiences and outcomes are likely to be compounded by COVID-19 as the consequences of existing educational structural inequities are intensified (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020; Drane, Vernon, & O’Shea, 2020; Ed Trust and Digital Promise, 2020; Karpman, Zuckerman, Gonzalez, & Kenney, 2020). Research has identified a number of factors that contribute to racially disparate outcomes in schools, including teacher–student relationships and attitudes, the school environment, access to academic and emotional learning support, subjective approaches to discipline and referral to special education, and ideologies that mask White privilege institutionally and interpersonally (Carter et al., 2016; Howard, 2019; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015).

For many students of color, and low-income students, this pandemic comes with increased financial hardship, daylong sibling care, limited access to technology at home, emotional hardship, and limited access to food (Huffman, 2020). In addition, students are engaging with school in completely new ways as a result of COVID-19; the move to remote and hybrid models of learning is expected to continue for the 2020–2021 academic year in many communities. As such, school disengagement is altogether different than the traditional metrics of attendance, course failure, low test scores, and suspensions (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). In a virtual environment, school disengagement means not engaging in online schoolwork, including not completing assignments, not logging into online learning platforms, and not connecting with teachers. Early evidence suggests that higher rates of disengagement occurred among students of color and low-income students compared with White students in spring 2020 (Dorn et al., 2020; Huffman, 2020).

The potential for disparate COVID-19 impact on disengagement is multifactorial. Low-income communities, with increased financial susceptibility to COVID-19-related stressors, are disproportionately made up of individuals of color (Webb Hooper et al., 2020). In addition, students of color are referred to special education programs at higher rates than their White counterparts (Carter et al., 2016), placing them at risk of disruption to these supports in an online learning environment. Latinx immigrants face unique and substantial vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 exposure, food insecurity, and job loss (Karpman et al., 2020; Montenovo et al., 2020;
Wolfson & Leung, 2020). These vulnerabilities compound with pre-existing educational barriers for immigrants and potential disruption of targeted student and family supports for immigrant families (Montenovo et al., 2020). Consequently, students of color face vulnerabilities not only based on their race, but also due to their intersectional identities within other student populations at risk of COVID-19-related educational disruption or disparities.

Understanding the effect of school disengagement on student outcomes is critical at this time to inform prevention and intervention strategies aimed at reducing the potentially long-term and devastating effects that the COVID-19 pandemic may have on historically marginalized students. Thus, the more we know about how COVID-19 is uniquely affecting educational outcomes and who is at greatest risk for school disengagement, the better we will be able to intervene and take immediate action that can prevent widening disparities in educational outcomes.

PRESENT STUDY
School social workers and other SMHP play critical roles in supporting vulnerable K–12 students and thus are ideally positioned to recognize the ways in which COVID-19 and virtual learning are affecting students. These professionals are trained to identify academic, social, emotional, and health needs among students and provide interventions to support students in managing these needs, to reduce negative developmental consequences. In many districts, SMHP are the primary point of contact for many students. This gives SMHP specific insight on the experiences of at-risk students and families. To this end, we report on findings from a survey of school social workers and other SMHP on the differential impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral health of students in low-income communities and communities of color. We aim to rapidly disseminate findings to school practitioners, policymakers, and funders to support schools and prevent widening educational inequality, especially for communities of color and low-income communities.

METHOD
Recruitment and Procedures
School social workers and other SMHP professionals were recruited by e-mail to participate in the survey. The online survey was open from May to June 2020 to reach school personnel before the end of the 2019–2020 academic year. The survey was confidential, and respondents created a unique identifier. A focus group with school social workers from eight large and diverse Colorado districts was conducted to inform survey development and dissemination efforts. These SMHP then distributed a recruitment flyer, with a brief study description and a link to the online survey, via e-mail directly to their district SMHP colleagues working in Colorado. Participants consented to participate on the first page of the survey. Study procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the sponsoring university.

Sample
A total of 58 SMHP responded. Respondents were 56.9 percent school social workers and 43.1 percent school psychologists or in a related mental health field. Respondents were 87.7 percent White, 12.3 percent Latinx, and 3.5 percent Black, which is representative of the school workforce in Colorado (Colorado Department of Education, 2020). In addition, 91.4 percent of participants identified as female, 5.2 percent as male, and 3.4 percent as nonbinary. On average, SMHP had 6.96 years of experience working in mental health, 7.28 years working in schools, and 5.69 years working in their current role. SMHP worked with students across all ages: 26.3 percent ages four and younger, 64.9 percent ages five to eight, 71.9 percent ages nine to 11, 56.1 percent ages 12 to 14, 45.6 percent ages 15 to 18, and 17.5 percent ages 18 to 21. Most SMHP worked in urban settings (53.4 percent) with 5.2 percent being rural, 1.7 percent dense rural, and 46.6 percent suburban or semurban. However, 50 percent of the sample (n = 29) came from one large urban district. Not all SMHP reported their school district. Of those who did, 62 percent reported that low-income students made up over 50 percent of students within their district. In addition, 72.5 percent of SMHP reported that over 50 percent of students in their districts are racial or ethnic minority students.

Measures
SMHP responded to open-ended and Likert scale questions that asked about specific domains in which COVID-19 might have had an impact for families and students, including employment or
income issues, food insecurity, housing instability, access to online learning and necessary technology, school disengagement, mental health problems, grief and loss, health care access, caregiving and child care responsibilities, trauma, and direct exposure to COVID-19. SMHP responded to two categories of Likert scale questions. The first asked about the proportion of students and their families who faced adversity in the domains listed earlier. Likert scale response options were 0 percent to 5 percent, 6 percent to 25 percent, 26 percent to 50 percent, 51 percent to 75 percent, and 76 percent to 100 percent. SMHP were also asked to rate the importance of each domain (not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, or extremely important). These items were followed by a series of open-ended questions asking SMHP to provide further detail about the impact of COVID-19 and disruptions to student learning and engagement.

Analysis
All Likert scale responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. All Likert questions were then supplemented with a series of open-ended qualitative questions, and respondents were invited to write up to a paragraph. These responses were coded using thematic coding. An initial coding of responses into themes was coded by the seventh author (KB), then reviewed by the first and second authors (TMJ and AW). Analytic memos were then written by KB and again reviewed and updated by TMJ and AW. All authors contributed to conceptualizing the study and writing the manuscript.

RESULTS
Family Needs and Challenges
The most frequent areas of concern for families endorsed by SMHP were under- or unemployment and food insecurity followed by housing instability, caregiving burden and caregiver mental health, and substance use and abuse issues. All of the concerns listed by SMHP were exacerbated for students of color, immigrant families, and most students with pre-existing disabilities or mental health concerns. A chart of SMHP ratings of family needs can be found in Figure 1. In addition, SMHP qualitatively reported on the unique impact of COVID-19.

For families already experiencing economic challenges before the pandemic, SMHP reported that COVID-19 worsened many families’ economic conditions, leading to greater financial and housing instability and increased food insecurity, which consequently negatively affected students’ school engagement. One SMHP explained, “Parents are overwhelmed with responsibilities regarding work and family; there is no safety net in this country, so families are finding it difficult to prioritize school for their kids. They are just trying to survive.”

While these challenges were intensified for families struggling pre-pandemic, SMHP also shared that families who were not previously in crisis or experiencing such hardship were now also dealing with new challenges revolving around child care, safety at home, decrease in access to resources, lack of public transportation, social isolation, and decrease in overall mental health. A common challenge reported by SMHP was child care, with some families relying on older siblings to supervise younger children in the home. Moreover, SMHP reported that some families were facing issues with domestic violence at home, or that they were concerned some students’ housing situations were unsafe. Safety concerns were also perceived by SMHP as creating barriers to student learning. Besides the struggle to maintain an income, many of the support systems on which families relied were now less able to help them as they became strained by increased community need. SMHP discussed how disruptions to public transportation systems made it difficult for many families to not only get to work, but also obtain food from grocery stores or food pantries. One SMHP explained,

Resources our families routinely use to survive are now overwhelmed with need, so their needs are not being met as well (food banks, housing support, sources for clothing), child care options are severely limited, parents that do have jobs (food industry, construction, health care workers) are risking exposure to COVID, and this is extremely stressful.

Social isolation was recognized by SMHP as a challenge most families were facing during COVID-19 due to stay-at-home orders, fear of exposure, and a lack of opportunity to engage with others. SMHP were concerned about students who had not left their house, were unable to engage with peers, and
overall had a lack of connection to others. The erosion of social support had devastating effects on students’ mental health, as one SMHP explained, “This week alone I’ve had six kiddos go to the hospital because of the feeling of impending doom, isolation, and uncertainty coupled with typical kid angst. It’s been heartbreaking to watch.”

**Student Disengagement**

Eighty-seven percent of SMHP reported that 25 percent or more of the students they serve disengaged from school in spring 2020, and 27 percent of respondents said that more than half of the students they work with have been disengaged from school. Moreover, of the students who disengaged, more than half of respondents reported that disengaged students were disproportionately low-income students or students of color. SMHP reported that contributors to disengagement included families’ financial challenges, struggles to meet basic needs, technology issues, student mental health, and increased caretaker roles among students. Although supporting students’ access to technology was essential, many SMHP explained that there was more to online learning than having access. When explaining reasons why students disengaged, one SMHP reported,

> It is unclear because every student who needed a device has received one, and to

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**Figure 1: School Mental Health Practitioners’ Perspectives on Family and Student Needs and Challenges following Pandemic-Related School Closures**

| Family needs and challenges                                                                 | 0  | 5  | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 | 35 | 40 | 45 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Under- or unemployment                                                                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Food insecurity                                                                             |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Housing instability                                                                         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Caregiving responsibilities                                                                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Parent/caregiver substance use/abuse issues                                                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Parent/caregiver mental health issues                                                      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Health care and/or health insurance access                                                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Grief/loss                                                                                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Medical debt                                                                               |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |

| Student needs and challenges                                                               |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Mental health                                                                              |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| School disengagement                                                                       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Sibling/other family member caregiving                                                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Grief/loss                                                                                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Exposure to interpersonal violence                                                        |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Lack of parental supervision/support                                                       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Suicide risk                                                                               |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Lack of access to Internet/technology                                                      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Technical supports for remote learning                                                    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Exposure to racism/discrimination                                                         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Substance use                                                                              |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |

Note: Rows ordered by largest number of school mental health practitioner respondents reporting the category of need was “extremely important” for families and for students.

*Interpersonal violence was defined as possible child abuse or domestic violence.*
our knowledge, all Internet/WiFi issues have been resolved. I think it comes down to families feeling overwhelmed and lacking the routines and structures in place required that remote learning requires.

Another common reason students disengaged from school was caregivers’ struggle with having to support multiple children in the home. Parents often had a limited number of devices to access the Internet; parents were working from home; and parents were simply overwhelmed with trying to support multiple children using different platforms and requirements simultaneously. Other barriers included not having a space at home conducive to learning, language barriers with school communications, and learning platforms not being provided in the family’s native language.

SMHP attempted multiple ways to re-engage students, including conducting welfare checks; attempting communication via e-mail, text, mail, and phone; video conference using various platforms; and visiting in person to provide tangible support. Welfare checks were often conducted by public officials (for example, law enforcement). In some cases, school personnel, including SMHP, visited students’ homes. Some school districts provided tangible support in the form of delivering meals and groceries, providing mobile hot spots or free Internet services, and giving Chromebooks to students. One SMHP reported that they had given up on checking in, as families still were not responding even after multiple attempts.

**Student Needs and Challenges**

The top two student needs identified by SMHP were mental health concerns and school disengagement, followed closely by caring for other family members, exposure to interpersonal violence, a lack of parent supervision and support, grief and loss, and suicide risk, as reported in Figure 1. Qualitatively, SMHP explained that housing instability was a major factor for many students. Many students lived in very small living spaces, did not have stable housing, or were expecting eviction once the governor’s moratorium on evictions was lifted. One SMHP explained, “Some of our families live in one- or two-bedroom apartments and have four to six kids trying to participate in virtual class meetings in the same room, often with the TV on and toddlers grabbing their materials.” Students were also struggling with social isolation, as few students had regular connections with others outside of their families.

Many students and families were directly affected by COVID-19. More than half of SMHP who responded reported that 6 percent to 25 percent or more of students they worked with had a family member who at some point had COVID-19. Two SMHP reported that 6 percent to 25 percent or more of students they worked with had COVID-19 themselves at some point, and 10 SMHP reported that 6 percent to 25 percent of students they worked with knew someone who had died from COVID-19. One SMHP worked with a student who had died from COVID-19. All of these exposures to the direct effects of COVID-19 increased students’ stress, anxiety, depression, and grief. SMHP reported concern for the physical health of students, as many students and their families did not have access to health care or avoided seeking care even when they exhibited symptoms of COVID-19.

**Specific Populations of Concern**

SMHP expressed concern for many student populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic and related physical school closures. These populations included immigrant families, students and families who do not speak English, high school seniors, students with existing mental health issues, students with disabilities, and students facing existing educational disparities. SMHP reported significant concerns about students of color and low-income students who often were facing marginalization in school before COVID-19. In addition, SMHP reported that many students with individualized education plans or disabilities were not being adequately supported, including students with hearing or visual impairments, students who needed one-on-one support, students with learning disabilities, or students with behavioral issues.

Notably, many SMHP reported specific concerns for immigrant families who were primarily Latinx and were more likely to work in jobs directly affected by the pandemic; many family members worked in the restaurant industry and were laid off or worked in essential jobs such as agriculture and meat packing, and as such, had a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19. One SMHP explained,
Several of my immigrant families work in the meat-packing industry and employment has been spotty; risk of exposure has been very high. Many others work in food service and have been either extremely busy or out of work. Again, risk of exposure at work is high.

Another said, “It’s hit [immigrant families] hardest and made already difficult situations worse.” SMHP reported that some families they serve who had undocumented members were facing increased fear related to their immigration status. One SMHP reported, “I have three student families that are dealing with a parent/caregiver being sent back to Mexico.” Another commented, “My undocumented students are dealing with a disproportionate level of COVID-related stressors (un/underemployment, uninsured, no stimulus money, must take the risk of working a lot.)” One SMHP explained there were “huge effects for undocumented parents and students losing jobs and being unable to support family here and in other countries.” These extra burdens led to worse mental and physical health for immigrant families. Another reported that they were unsure of how immigrant families were doing as “it is difficult to reach them.”

Family Resilience and Bright Spots

Despite the tremendous amount of adversity that families faced as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, SMHP reported that families continued to show resilience and that there were bright spots in the midst of the hardships. According to SMHP, there were many ways that families supported each other, such as “coming together, helping each other,” “making more connections [with] other family members,” and “getting creative when it comes to finding gratitude.” SMHP perceived that the pandemic resulted in “closer family relationships because some parents are able to spend more time with their children,” which allowed them “to slow down and spend quality time together.” Another area of resilience was the commitment of some parents to their children’s online learning. One SMHP explained, “Some of the families have really embraced the remote learning, and the parents are feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment in their increased involvement in their kids’ learning.” Some parents “sought training to learn to be their kids’ teacher at home, [and] most are doing an amazing job!” Many SMHP noted how some parents were more engaged with their children’s education than ever before.

For some students with previous mental health challenges, SMHP observed that the move toward online learning was beneficial. Some students with anxiety or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder were “flourishing with online learning.” Students who were easily distracted or struggled with large groups were doing better at home. SMHP believed that some families have an increased awareness and appreciation of their children’s mental health, and “mental wellness is becoming a great priority.” SMHP pointed out that families have a deeper respect and understanding of the efforts of school personnel, noting that parents reported they took the school for granted before closures.

Transition Back to School

Four main themes arose when SMHP were asked to consider beginning school again in the fall, whether it be face-to-face or online: (1) supporting students’ and families’ basic needs, (2) an increased focus on social and emotional health, (3) equitable access to technology, and (4) clear communication and expectations. SMHP reported that assisting families with resource connection and meeting basic needs will be essential for many students to transition back to school. A few SMHP suggested that districts coordinate with local agencies that support students with these resources. SMHP overwhelmingly agreed that a stronger emphasis on social and emotional health will be required when students transition back to school and that social and emotional needs must be attended to before learning can happen. Most schools in Colorado remain online or at least have a portion of their school week online. As such, SMHP expressed concern about being able to adequately address mental health needs among students and recognized that unmet needs may continue to serve as a barrier to student reengagement. SMHP recognized that students will be dealing with grief, trauma, anxiety, depression, possibly loss of loved ones, and economic hardships. Yet only 40 percent of SMHP reported that they thought their school or district was adequately prepared to address student trauma. Students will need “honest and developmentally appropriate conversations about past, present, and current situation; appropriate responses to anxiety, depression, loss of loved ones/economic opportu-
nities, and/or grief.” SMHP suggested that staff need to be “in the know about trauma-informed practices,” that schools will need “scaffolded supports, structured connections, and accountability strategies,” and that schools need to “build some capacity and strong relationships before pushing academics.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to survey school social workers and other SMHP on the impact of COVID-19 on students and families, particularly on students of color and those who have historically experienced marginalization in the education system. The findings suggest that COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on families overall, especially among populations who were experiencing hardships before the current outbreak. In addition, several barriers were noted for student learning, with many students—particularly students of color—completely disengaging from school during spring 2020. Given the long history of systemic racism and education debt faced by students of color historically (see Ladson-Billings, 2006), these findings are of particular concern. Unless immediate action is taken to reengage vulnerable students in school, it is likely that the all-too-common disparities faced by students of color will persist and likely worsen, which stands to widen the existing gaps in economic and health indicators.

Moreover, SMHP reported several important insights on how to support students and their families—some requiring immediate action on the part of school districts and others requiring greater community-level investment into the economic, social, emotional, and overall health of families. SMHP recommended that districts invest in mental and emotional health support, assistance with resource connection and ability to meet basic needs, technology assistance, and infrastructure to support successful transitions back to school. In particular, addressing trauma and grief among students may be critical in the aftermath of COVID-19, yet SMHP reported that their schools may be underprepared to do so. A primary role of school social workers and other SMHP is to support the mental health of students and by doing so, they can encourage educational attainment through active engagement in school. Yet, as recognized by this sample, supporting students also requires attention to the needs of their families. As argued by Teasley (2004), school social workers can promote school engagement by collaborating with other school staff and with social services providers to meet family needs that might interfere with student success. COVID-19 has made clear that cross-system collaboration within communities will be key for meeting the complex needs of families affected by this crisis.

Along these lines, SMHP recognized that communities must also invest in families via strengthening public social safety nets, such as greater social support and public services, better economic opportunities, and improved access to health care. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the basic structures of society have been completely upended. As a result of this pandemic, entrenched educational, economic, and social inequities have become considerably more pronounced and can no longer be ignored (Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Kullar et al., 2020; Webb Hooper et al., 2020). COVID-19 has presented a unique juncture in which traditional social structures and beliefs are being reimagined and restructured (for example, workforce, education), creating an environment ripe for reimagining the structural status quo. Furthermore, at this juncture, inaction is an act of injustice—it is complicity in widening educational, economic, and social inequities that have been allowed to persist for far too long. Social workers across many settings can play a critical role in reimagining the very systems in which they work. For school social workers, a tangible way to mitigate increasing racial inequities is to address student disengagement. To do so successfully, especially for students and families who have historically experienced marginalization, educational models must infuse cultural and racial awareness, center the cultural wealth of communities of color, and address microaggressions and explicit racism within the education system itself (Carter et al., 2016; Howard, 2019; Yosso, 2005).

LIMITATIONS

Despite these important insights, there are several important limitations to consider, including the small sample of respondents, a small number of participating school districts, and the largely descriptive nature of the findings. This sample of SMHP identifies as predominantly White. Consequently, there are likely experiences that students of color have in the education system and barriers that
families of color face in society that are less visible to this sample. Although social work demands a recognition of the ways in which power and privilege affect our practice, it is possible that this sample may not have perceived how their White privilege limited their perceptions of the needs and challenges students and families of color were experiencing. For example, SMHP respondents highlighted critical barriers for immigrant families, including recognizing their heightened fears of deportation for families with undocumented members. However, no SMHP respondent expressed concern that welfare checks in some districts were being performed by law enforcement rather than by SMHP or other social services providers. The fact that many SMHP did not recognize the potential negative impact of law enforcement arriving at students’ homes was likely due to the largely White sample of SMHP respondents. It is critical to consider the impact law enforcement has on students and families of color. An abundance of empirical data show that interactions with law enforcement, including school resource officers, have disproportionately and negatively affected students of color (Chan, Counts, Katsiyannis, & Ryan, 2019; Curran, Fisher, Viano, & Kupchik, 2019; Ryan, Katsiyannis, Counts, & Shelnut, 2018). These undeniable historical inequities lead to a range of negative outcomes, including increased anxiety and school disengagement for Latinx and undocumented students (Cardoso et al., in press; Enriquez, 2017), and often lead to arrest, which then perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline, which is particularly harmful for Black students (Chan et al., 2019; Christie & Dunn, 2010; Pigott, Stearns, & Khey, 2018; Ryan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, while resilience among families was widely recognized, many respondents suggested that COVID-19 had provided an opportunity for families to spend more time together, which contributed to greater investments in their child’s education. Although this is certainly true for some families, these comments stand in direct contrast to the needs and barriers reported for low-income families and families of color. We believe this suggests that SMHP may not have fully seen the ways in which resilience was present for families of color. For a reimagining of the education system to occur, school social workers and other SMHP must examine their practices and school policies that are rooted in White norms and values and other forms of structural racism (that is, curriculum, texts and content free of racism, classroom norms and behaviors, disciplinary approaches, assumptions about families’ homeschooling capacity, and so on). Accordingly, future study is necessary that centers family and student voice and further examines the role of colorblindness among White school staff.

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