

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>


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*Field Report*  
**Beyond the Block**  
By Kyle Coward

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## FIELD REPORT

 *My Block My Hood My City* participants examine a Huichol bead art exhibit at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago.

# Beyond the Block

Chicago's My Block My Hood My City uses the concept of travel to get young, low-income residents more connected with their city.

BY KYLE COWARD

**B**eing a tourist in your own city can be powerful. Vibrant metropolises offer opportunities to explore rich educational, economic, and cultural resources and engage with diverse ideas and people. But not everyone living in an urban setting is able to take advantage of these assets.

This is the reality for an untold number of inner-city residents, many of whom are young persons of color. In low-income areas of Chicago, where the specters of drugs, violence, and unemployment are a daily reality, Jahmal Cole knows how the lack of interconnectivity to the larger city can hamper a young person's educational development and socioeconomic prospects.

"Everybody I knew growing up wanted to be a rapper, or a basketball player, or a drug dealer," says Cole, who was raised in an impoverished section of suburban North

Chicago, Illinois, where some family members were in gangs. "What you aspire towards, what you think is possible, is shaped by your neighborhood."

Smart and socially conscious from a very young age, Cole nonetheless was on a path toward the street life as a teenager. But he managed to turn a corner once his mother enrolled him in an alternative high school about 30 minutes away in Kenosha, Wisconsin. After graduation, Cole moved back to Chicago and started volunteering with mostly teenage inmates at Cook County Jail, many of whom had never seen the city's downtown.

"All they talked about was, 'My hood is this, my hood is that,'" he recalls. When he asked them why they never talked about their city, they said they did not feel welcome downtown and never went. "There are no black businesses there," they said.

From that point on, Cole committed to harnessing the transformative power of travel for good. In 2013, he created My Block My

Hood My City, which aims to help young people dispel limiting beliefs about where they can go, both figuratively and literally. The organization plans monthly field trips to different parts of the city, enabling lower-income youth to interact with entrepreneurs, artists, and community activists they would otherwise never meet. Getting "explorers," as Cole calls participants, to envision a life beyond their block is the ultimate goal.

## A DIFFERENT SLICE OF LIFE

After graduating from Nebraska's Wayne State College in 2001, Cole moved to Chicago's South Side to pursue social activism. By day, he made a living working in tech. In his free time, Cole steadily lined up speaking engagements discussing his message of inner city youth outreach. He also published three books documenting both youth empowerment and community development. With My Block, Cole was able to realize his dream of helping young people by giving them some of the travel experience that his mother gave him.

With a team of volunteers, Cole coordinates excursions that offer opportunities for youth to interact with a broad spectrum of individuals and causes. Participants are picked up in vans driven by volunteers after a day at school, usually at 3:00 p.m. Around 4:00, youth spend about two hours or more meeting with professionals at organizations hosting that day's trip. Many of the visits go beyond discussion and conversation, and often kids are afforded the opportunity to get some exciting hands-on experience, anything from trying their hands at 3-D printmaking to creating mock digital advertisements. Participants are taken out to dinner afterward, with many trying different ethnic cuisines such as Venezuelan or Ethiopian food for the very first time. Each student is dropped off at home between 8:00 and 9:30 p.m.

For \$500, businesses and organizations can host an excursion. The trips are underwritten by individual donations from \$1,000 to 5,000, which goes toward sponsoring 15 students per outing.

The program currently serves teenagers living in four of the city's 77 officially



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designated communities. Teenagers from the four communities—which are majority minority—are recruited from schools and non-profit organizations and are chosen based on recommendations by officials at their schools.

Prior to starting the program, fewer than half of participants said they felt a connection to their city, felt at ease being in neighborhoods other than their own, or felt willing to explore the city on their own. After completing the program, nearly all of the participants report feeling connected to the city and say they are more likely to explore it on their own. All participants say they feel more comfortable in other neighborhoods.

Noah Hackworth says the program exposed him to a different slice of life than his daily experience growing up on the city's South Side. "I've known people who've never even been downtown before," he says, and yet that fact is not a pressing concern compared with other issues on their minds. "They're thinking, 'How am I going to go from point A to point B without being killed?'"

Hackworth credits his time interacting with local entrepreneurs in helping him realize that professional success could be attainable by means other than basketball, which consumed much of his free time beforehand. Today the 21-year-old is studying to be an athletic trainer and learning digital marketing and investing in his free time. He hopes to become an entrepreneur one day.

## OBSTACLES TO TRAVELING

Various studies have demonstrated the benefits of travel, from boosting a person's mental well-being to improving one's creativity. My Block takes those findings and applies them to a more local context.

"When people feel that they're trapped in a neighborhood, their stress level goes up," says David Sloane, a professor at the University of Southern California's Sol Price School of Public Policy, who studies urban planning and health disparities. "Particularly if that neighborhood is struggling with social issues, they don't feel they have the ability to use their entire neighborhood. And they certainly don't feel like they can go other

places, because they feel they have to stay in their home."

Lack of access to adequate transportation may also impede inner-city residents from traveling more throughout their city, which can impede their ability to secure a meaningful living. For example, a 2015 report from the Rudin Center for Transportation at NYU's Wagner School found a correlation in New York City between inadequate public transportation in lower-income neighborhoods and both lower wages and higher unemployment for residents of those areas.

"We've had a history of policies and practices that intentionally segregate low-income persons of color," says Tamika Butler, executive director of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust and an advocate for fair transportation access. "Tell me about young people who have been pushed out to the edges of a metropolitan area by gentrification and displacement, and don't have access to transportation services," she says. "How are they going to get to the job centers?"

"When you walk out your door, you should be able to make a choice of what mode of travel you want to take," says Olatunji Oboi Reed, a prominent Chicago mobile-justice activist who recently founded the nonprofit Equiticity to promote improved transportation access for majority-minority communities. "And that's not the case right now in Chicago and a number of cities around the country for black, brown, and low-to-moderate-income people."

The transition back to normal life following an invigorating vacation can be a culture shock. For My Block's inner-city explorers, the experience of returning home can be equally jarring.

"Do you know how much it sucks to take a teenager back home when there's tape around their house and there's been a shootout?" Cole asks.

Some researchers and practitioners question the ultimate value of such travel. DeAnna McLeary-Sherman, founder of the True Star Foundation, a Chicago nonprofit that teaches media skills predominately to minority youth, agrees that kids should feel

comfortable stepping outside of their communities. But even more critical, she says, is that kids have access to resources within their communities and understand the value and importance of where they come from.

Kimya Barden, an assistant professor of inner city studies at Northeastern Illinois University, says that exposure to other people, cultures, and ideas should be framed in the context of a shared human experience that can be brought back home. "Travel can be couched in the idea that children living in an urban context also have a responsibility to be change agents in their communities."

Allen Linton, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Chicago who assists My Block's five-person staff and 10-member board, knows there is more work to do to reach more young people. "This is still a very small operation that has good impact, but it's time-consuming, and intentionally so," he says. More staff and volunteer assistance will help take some of the pressure off Cole and allow the organization to develop a long-term plan.

To tap into additional financial streams, My Block is developing local public and private partnerships to supplement the foundation and corporate grants that constitute the majority of its funding. For 2018, My Block's budget is estimated at around \$500,000. Cole says he wants to expand the size and reach of the program to other Midwestern cities, and eventually make My Block a national organization.

Cole also hopes to appeal to prospective student explorers by expanding excursions outside of Chicago. A recent group traveled to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and another trip took students to Michigan's Mackinac Island. This summer, the organization will take 15 participants on a trip to Ghana for 11 days, with the goal of making explorers aware of the socioeconomic struggles that others who look like them face in different parts of the globe.

"I want them to think globally," Cole says about the trip. "I think being isolated has led to a lot of narrow-mindedness in Chicago." ■