

THE HEALTH INITIATIVES OF THE YOUNG LORDS PARTY

How a group of 1960s radicals made health a revolutionary concern

Health care as a basic human right was an important theme in the social movements of the 1960's. Some groups arose from larger movements to specifically address the health concerns. For instance the Health Revolutionary Union Movement (HRUM) emerged from the movement of leftist auto workers in Detroit; the Woman's Health Movement grew out of the rebirth feminism. Yet few groups enjoyed as much success in effecting health care reform while omitting health in its mission as did the Young Lords Party in New York City. The Young Lords Party (1969-1972) was made up of radical Puerto Rican youth who captured the media attention with their flamboyant identity politics and innovative tactics that called attention to the problems of urban poverty. They are best known for the implementation of social reforms through their "service to the people" campaigns, and for their use of unorthodox tactics to achieve them. For instance, they occupied Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx to call attention to the dilapidated physical structure of the hospital as well as the sub-standard health care provided there. They hijacked the NYC x-ray vehicle to improve access for the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis in East Harlem; they administrated their own door to door lead screening campaign after a child in East Harlem became gravely ill from lead poisoning. Lastly, Young Lords called for access to reproductive services in facilities under community control when a Puerto Rican woman became the first fatality after New York City legalized abortion. This feminist position legitimizing abortion and calling for surveillance of these services by women set the Lords uniquely apart from all other nationalist movements at the time.

The success of the health campaigns of the Young Lords can be traced in part to their ability to work with diverse groups of people. While some organizations dogmatically refused to work with others, the Lords joined the "Think Lincoln" coalition to explore the causes of and solutions to the poor care delivered at Lincoln Hospital. They also befriended a number of medical residents, most of whom were white, who secretly provided them with material support such as tine tests and lead screening kits for their screening campaigns. The residents also provided protection as they ensured the Lords safe passage through police lines after the Lincoln occupation by dressing them in their white lab coats, helping them pose as doctors and avoid arrest.

Some of the long lasting contributions of the Young Lords' health initiatives include the Emergency Repair Program (1969), which obligated landlords to remove lead based paint from apartment buildings, was enacted in part through their efforts. Another was the informal attention they gave to the drug problem in Latino neighborhoods by prohibiting drug use among Lords members and helping some who wished to join lose their habits. Several former Lords helped found the Lincoln Detox Program which used acupuncture to treat drug abuse after the group disbanded in 1973.

Through a colorful and sometimes problematic history, the Young Lords saw health care an organic part of social change. They fought for community control of the institutions that provided health care, and empowered Puerto Ricans to fight for both the resources and respect that good health care requires.