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The Survival Line: A Case Study in Anti-Carceral Community-Based Hotline Work

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Abstract: Community members seeking alternatives to policing have played a substantive role in promoting safety and responding to harm for decades. The Survival Line was formed as a volunteer-run hotline to respond to community members' concerns about neighborhood crime or police misconduct. It was established in the summer of 1970 as a mechanism for gathering data while also referring callers to community resources like pro bono attorneys and low-cost social services. It ran as a 24/7 hotline staffed entirely by volunteers from the Action for Survival coalition, a group of community-based organizations, which included the Chicago Urban League. Using historical analytic methods, this study asks the following: what function did this citizen-run hotline serve in 1970s Chicago? This study mobilizes archival research methods to analyze call records, meeting minutes, publicity materials, and internal memos from the Chicago Urban League and its Survival Line archives. This archival analysis found that the Survival Line served multiple functions; it was a non-state response to urban crises, a vehicle for Black solidarity, and a mechanism for gathering data on crime and police misconduct in the city. By functioning as an alternative to policing and state responses to crime, a vehicle for Black neighborhood solidarity, and a data collection mechanism, the Survival Line was at the core of an impactful micropolitical intervention upon urban crises in 1970s Chicago. As a historical example of community-driven violence and crisis response, this hotline has implications for contemporary social work—specifically for direct practice, community organizing, program design and evaluation, and community-based participatory research.

Keywords: anti-carceral social work; mutual aid; crisis response; violence response; policing; community organizing

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1. Introduction

In the early 1970s, the Chicago Urban League formed Action for Survival, a coalition of community-based organizations responding to crime and police brutality. Soon after the coalition's launch, several community leaders developed the Survival Line, a hotline specifically designed to respond to community members who were concerned about neighborhood crime or police misconduct (Landis 1970). The director of the Chicago Urban League (hereafter CUL) initially emphasized that the Survival Line was a mechanism for gathering data on crime and police misconduct; callers were urged to "report the incidents to the police department or the proper authorities before calling Survival Line (Chicago Tribune 1970)". However, call records from the Survival Line suggest that this 24–7 hotline functioned in expansive ways for community members who may have opted to call the line in lieu of engaging with the Chicago Police Department.

One of the core challenges of researching the Survival Line is its abrupt disappearance from the archive. Within the CUL archives, there is no indication of a specific closure of the Survival Line, nor are there hints or clues in the meeting minutes of Action for Survival. Given that the line is no longer operating, there are a number of unanswered questions about how and why the line was ultimately shut down. It is likely that resource constraints played a role. Internal communications demonstrate that there were substantive clerical needs (Eberhart 1971) in order to respond to the hotline calls coming in at a high volume; between July 1970 and October 1973, the line received over 4800 calls (Chicago Defender 1973). The mystery of the Survival Line's closure is an indication that sustainability must be a core priority for organizers of contemporary efforts to collect data, build solidarity, and respond to crises without the state, in order to leave evidence that can be leveraged in service of building new resources for communities.

The Survival Line's origins and functions can be compared to 911, the nationwide community emergency services number launched in the late 1960s and still used today (Mason 2022). However, the Survival Line's roots within community organizing and nonprofit spaces demonstrate an endogenous desire within predominantly Black Chicago neighborhoods for a centralized mechanism to report and respond to emergencies, nuisances, and violence. By providing the initial infrastructure for the Survival Line, CUL functioned as a nonprofit host to an operation that might hold answers to some of the questions surrounding contemporary alternatives to policing.

This study is motivated by the following research question: "What social or political functions did the Survival Line serve in the context of 1970s Chicago, as citizens built responses to municipal police violence and neglect from other municipal services?" The purpose of this study was to examine the multiple functions of a volunteer-run hotline designed with the intention of tracking police misconduct and neighborhood-level needs. Using archival records as the source material for qualitative analysis, this paper takes the Survival Line as a case study in the micropolitics of community-driven responses to violence, exploring the context and origins of the Survival Line, its operations, and the potential lessons it holds for contemporary community organizing related to crisis response and policing in urban settings. By functioning as an alternative to the state's crime response apparatus, a vehicle for Black neighborhood solidarity, and a data collection mechanism, the Survival Line was at the core of an impactful anti-violence intervention in 1970s Chicago. Its existence demonstrates the potential of citizen-led social welfare interventions, departing from the social work status quo of collaboration with state institutions (Feldman 2021).

2. Background: The Chicago Urban League, Action for Survival, and the Survival Line

In the early 1970s, police misconduct began to receive additional attention in Chicago, due to several factors. For one, the police murders of Black Panther Party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark had sparked new organizing efforts among multiple Black neighborhoods and organizations in the city (Balto 2019). Additionally, a police brutality series appeared in the city's predominant mainstream newspaper, the *Tribune*, following a report documenting racist policing from the office Black alderman Ralph H. Metcalfe (Pihos 2021). Despite alderman (and later congressman) Metcalfe's attempts to draw attention to police violence, his efforts were met with silence from City Hall and the police commissioner (Helgeson 2014). Under the Daley mayoral regime, city council operations were largely driven by a "rubber stamp" policy, wherein council members would align with the recommendations of Mayor Daley's administration (Simpson and Carsey 1999). Under these constraints, Black civic and religious organizations mobilized to establish opportunities for political and relational engagement across the socially segregated and politically neglected

neighborhoods of the city; these networks of engagement were entirely separate from the political and social networks of white Chicagoans during this era (Robinson 2019). Well before the mainstream media's eventual indictment of Chicago's brutal and racist policing strategies, CUL began holding meetings with Black organizations in Chicago. Action for Survival formed as a coalition of activists and organizations committed to promoting police accountability and reducing crime for Chicago's Black citizens.[1] One of the early initiatives of Action for Survival, the Survival Line, was established in the summer of 1970 as a mechanism for gathering data while also referring callers to community resources like pro bono attorneys (Pihos 2015). In the first year that the hotline operated, volunteers fielded about 2000 calls (Chicago Daily Defender 1971b).

As a community-generated and volunteer-run resource, the Survival Line existed within an urban ecosystem of politicians, activists, and organizations. It emerged alongside a hotline run by the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, an organization of Black police officers that focused its efforts on promoting police accountability.[2] Survival Line volunteers were also in contact with Alderman Ralph Metcalfe's Blue Ribbon Commission, a coalition engaged in public advocacy against police brutality (Strong 1973). Through the broad organizational network of Action for Survival, Survival Line leadership provided hotline data to the Black Crime Commission, an organization formed in response to the majority-white Chicago Crime Commission. These connections with pre-existing anti-crime organizations and coalitions suggest that the Survival Line was a well positioned node within a broader network of political and social welfare actors in Chicago at the time.

The Survival Line formed within a micro-level political economy alongside 911, a nationwide emergency response system. Federal agencies in the late 1960s expressed an interest in launching a single police telephone number to respond to emergency calls; justified by data-gathering efforts such as the Kerner Commission report, the federal government pushed a narrative that this new resource would be a key mechanism for citizens trying to stop crime—of course, implicit in the initial public narratives about 911 were assumptions of Black criminality and white innocence.[3] Contemporaneous with the Moynihan Report and other sociological theories about Black familial pathology and criminogenic cultural traits was the establishment of 911 (Murakawa 2019). In this particular context, the development of a volunteer-run hyperlocal 24/7 hotline focused on not only crime, but also police misconduct, providing a unique counterstory to the emergence of macro-level governmental anti-crime interventions during the same time period.

The Survival Line's emergence was prompted not only by an uptick in egregious police brutality cases, but also by growing concerns from CUL's policy and research staffers. Not all staff observations were framed in opposition to the police; in fact, some staffers proposed increased communication and collaboration with existing Chicago criminal–legal infrastructure. Reflecting on the "enormous individual and collective political clout" of the Chicago police, the influx of federal funding for local policing, and the increase in police professionalization, CUL's research director Sanford Sherizen proposed increased collaboration with the Chicago Police Department and the Circuit Court of Cook County to "examine areas of injustice and solutions possible (Sherizen 1970)". Sherizen's suggestion aligns with other social service provision strategies that require alignment and collaboration with state apparatuses (Simes and Tichenor 2022). Other staffers took a more accountability-focused lens. An internal all-staff memo about the Survival Line went out in July 1970, noting that CUL's Community Services Department had set it up "to help the Black community find ways to police the police so that they will be accountable to the community, to end crime in our streets, and to provide an effective communications network among Black people in Chicago (Communications Department 1970)". This announcement reflects the scope of problems that the Survival Line was initially positioned to respond to—rather than limiting

the hotline to issues of police brutality, authors of this memo focused on opportunities for Black Chicagoans to make direct interventions in response to urban violence at the hands of both civilians and police. Although this resource was initially created as a means of documenting police misconduct and crime, over time, the hotline became a more viable alternative to ineffective or violent policing interventions.

As the convening organization for the Action for Survival coalition, CUL functioned as an organizational shepherd for other groups seeking to respond to police brutality against Black Chicagoans. Thus, the coalition became a unit of collective action on behalf of multiple Black Chicago communities plagued by racist police violence. As an outgrowth of this coalition, the Survival Line's call logs are evidence of a micro-network of political and social relationships. Each caller received assistance in the form of an investigation or referral, often relying upon the pro bono work of CUL-vetted attorneys and law students (Chicago Daily Defender 1971a; Law Students Aid to AFS 1970; Schultz 1971; Chicago Tribune 1972). While a third of callers were calling about "criminal action and police brutality cases", the Survival Line also made referrals related to housing, education, healthcare, consumer, and benefits issues (Semi-Annual Percentage and Average Report for Survival Line 1971). Action for Survival ran as a relatively autonomous vehicle for Black civic engagement and what some might call mutual aid.

As a localized Black-run resource hub, the Survival Line facilitated connections to resources that would help Chicago's Black residents survive in the face of physical violence and also less-visible forms of structural violence. In the face of welfare state retrenchment, the beginnings of mass incarceration, and the police murders of Black Panther leaders, the presence of Black-led political coalitions building power served the broader needs of Black Chicagoans in lieu of governmental support. As a data hub and resource/referral clearinghouse, the relational ties forged through the Survival Line reflect micro-level political resistance to the status quo of policing as the solution to social problems in the city.

3. Methods

After discovering a small reference to the Survival Line in the context of broader research on policing in 1970s Chicago, I became motivated to understand the development of this hotline as a counterpart to the development of 911 and aggressive policing strategies. This analysis is based on archival research conducted at the University of Illinois Chicago, where the records of the Chicago Urban League are located. In order to conduct my archival analysis, I spent three full research days with the Chicago Urban League collection, utilizing a finding aid to select any and all boxes and folders with documentation pertaining to the Action for Survival coalition or the Survival Line. I located and reviewed a total of 34 folders containing 68 documents that referred to the Survival Line. My analysis focused primarily on internal communications, meeting agendas and minutes, and press releases related to the Survival Line, as many of the mimeographed or photocopied call logs were illegible or too faded to decipher. Despite this source limitation, the typewritten documentation in this archival collection offered a clear picture of the internal organizational dynamics and cross-organizational partnerships that coalesced into this community-based hotline for responding to neighborhood problems and police violence. Through retellings of core hotline moments in meeting minutes and external-facing press releases, the organization's documentation facilitates a narrativized version of the events that sparked the hotline's creation.

The historical analytic method that guided archival analysis in this paper was guided by an abductive approach: "abduction explores the most plausible explanation from an array of possibilities" and departs from the divide between inductive versus deductive approaches (Saldaña 2011). An abductive approach allows for a researcher to engage with

a mass of data and engage in linking, bridging the phenomena captured in the data with possible and plausible explanations based on phenomena that were already explained (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I excluded call logs from my abductive analysis as they were inconsistently legible and therefore difficult to code. Within this analytic approach, I reviewed 68 documents and thematically coded with a focus on the functions—intended and actual—of the Survival Line. After an initial thematic coding process wherein I applied the codes "function" and "purpose" across text in the archival documents in the sample, I conducted second and third rounds of focused and theoretical coding to surface more precise functions present in the sample (Saldaña 2015). This coding process resulted in the emergence of three core functions of the Survival Line discussed in this paper's Section 4.

In order to prioritize rigor (Langtree et al. 2019) and trustworthiness, this historical analysis involved thick description of the phenomena being studied as well as reflective/reflexive memoing throughout the analytic process (Shenton 2004). Since no interview data were included in this sample, data saturation in the collection process was not achievable. Although data saturation is often a helpful metric of rigor in qualitative research, it was not a consideration in the context of this research design, given the archival textual data set, the methodological approach, and the scope of the research question.

As a historical research method, archival research facilitates inquiry that focuses on the documented past. However, one of the dominant challenges of the method lies in its limitation; as a method reliant upon the documents that have made their way into the formal archive, power-conscious archival research requires the researcher to approach documents with a critical and contextualizing lens (King 2016). Document-based historical analysis is a mechanism for exploring research questions that are answerable based upon what can be found and interpreted in the documentation of a given individual or group (Grant 2018). As a non-state archive, the Chicago Urban League papers are a collection of organizational and advocacy documents, cataloging internal correspondence, external communications with organizational partners and the press, financial documents, meeting agendas and minutes, as well as call logs from the Survival Line. Although this archive is less constrained by the hegemonic norms of state-run archives, it is still important to understand this as a conventional collection of historical sources, wherein callers to the Survival Line are predominantly represented through call logs written up by hotline volunteers. In this archive, the voices of service recipients are mediated through the documentary norms of a community organization and its hotline volunteers.

Additionally, one of the limitations of an organizational archive is that the organization and its leaders have made decisions about what to archive and what to discard; this decision requires context sensitivity on the part of the researcher (Barros et al. 2019). Given that the Chicago Urban League was publicly challenging the Chicago Police Department, it is possible that those tasked with archiving the Survival Line's records were concerned with the possibility of state surveillance or subpoenaing; it is also possible that an organization involved in multiple forms of local and national advocacy struggled to retain all of the records required to thoroughly reconstruct the rise and closure of this particular initiative.

Kelly Lytle Hernandez's concept of the rebel archive is a helpful mechanism for understanding the Urban League archives; as a counterpoint to state or government archives, the rebel archive functions as a repository for the voices and experiences of non-state actors who were deemed troublesome by the state (Hernandez 2017). In this project, the rebel archive of the Chicago Urban League lives in Survival Line call logs as well as the correspondence between various members of the Action for Survival coalition. As a counter-narrative to state and newspaper portrayals of violence in 1970s Black Chicago, the rebel archive of Action for Survival lends itself to inquiries about non-state responses to violence and unmet needs within Black Chicago neighborhoods and communities.

4. Results

4.1. Function: An Alternative to the State for Responding to Crisis

We urgently need to create a climate whereby our communities can be safe for both our young people and adults. If not, we come closer to having outside protection prescribed for us, such as the new legislation in Washington, D.C., which gives official sanction to the repressive and intimidating acts which authorities have often committed against Black people (Outline for Speakers Bureau n.d.)

The above quote from a collectively authored Action for Survival memo demonstrates resistance to federal legislation that sanctions "repressive and intimidating acts which authorities have often committed against Black people". This pushback to the state's crime and policing policies underscores one of the needs that Action for Survival sought to address. Black Chicagoans were subjected to violence in their neighborhoods by both civilians and police; the fact that police were not only failing to protect but also actively instigating repressive intimidation tactics was a pressure point for this coalition, spurring interest in ways to handle violence without "having outside protection prescribed for us" in the form of white police occupying Black neighborhoods. Additionally, through an appeal for safe communities, the Survival Line's development reflects a critique of law enforcement as unsafe, especially for Black community members.

In addition to positioning itself as pro-safety and anti-"outside protection", the Survival Line articulated its network as a mix of community-connected organizations, religious institutions, and neighbors. Action for Survival's self-definition as a non-state coalition legitimized safety-making as a project for non-police actors within communities. A 1970 call for court watching and Survival Line volunteers describes Action for Survival as "a group of some 30 community organizations, churches, and concerned individuals who have united in an effort to eliminate all crime running rampant in Black neighborhoods (Greene and Burke 1970a)". As an effort operating outside of the federal, state, or municipal government, the Survival Line attained and maintained legitimacy as a peer-to-peer resource, making claims about protecting community members from violence and prioritizing the interests of the community rather than the state.

As a volunteer-led initiative housed within a coalition of mostly nonprofits, the Survival Line encountered limitations in capacity and resources. Shortly after the launch of the hotline, leaders acknowledged the need for more formal mechanisms of referral to organizational allies such as the Afro-American Patrolman's League; coalition meeting notes suggest that volunteers initially "could not handle all of the calls coming through Survival Line (Walker and Gainer 1970)". Despite capacity limitations, however, Action for Survival continued to make itself available to callers for a variety of community-level concerns; by 1971, at least a third of these calls involved "criminal action and police brutality cases", "gangs or teen nations", or domestic/family violence.[4] The diversity of reasons for calling reflects a community-level need for a centralization of available government and non-governmental resources. In addition to the aforementioned reasons for calling, many Survival Line callers were also seeking support in housing court, at the Social Security office, and with school issues (Semi-Annual Percentage and Average Report for Survival Line 1971). In contemporary contexts, the non-police centralized resource hotline in many cities is 311, but in 1970s Chicago, infrastructure for 311 and 911 had not yet been implemented. The capacity constraints faced by the Survival Line are in stark contrast with the government-funded development and implementation of 911 as an emergency response system inherently linked to police dispatch in most municipalities.[5]

4.2. Function: A Vehicle for Black Neighborhood Solidarity

In a racially segregated 1970s Chicago context, the organizations listed as members of the Action for Survival coalition were predominantly from the south and west sides of the city, centralized largely around the majority-Black Lawndale, South Shore, Woodlawn, Kenwood, Chesterfield, and Englewood neighborhoods (Action for Survival Member Organizations n.d.). An outline of Action for Survival with no author attributed reads as follows: "We must create a network of organizations and communications which will lead to the climate in which Black citizens will feel free to report every criminal incident, both to the authorities from which we expect professional service and protection, and to Action For Survival for follow-up".[6] Indeed, an undated list of "agencies and groups assisting 'Survival Line'" includes a number of nonprofits and neighborhood organizations located in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Agencies and Groups Assisting 'Survival Line' n.d.). By associating and building political power with a number of neighborhood-based groups in predominantly Black Chicago neighborhoods, Action for Survival seems to have defined itself as an explicitly Black coalition operating against the implicitly anti-Black interests of the police.

Additionally, rhetoric focused on Black community members is consistently present in Survival Line materials, underscoring the hotline's function as a mechanism for racial solidarity-building. An early Survival Line proposal with no author attributed articulated the problem in terms of race and class, lamenting that "with each passing day it becomes blatantly obvious that crime is threatening to strangle the Black community in Chicago, and this is crime of all sorts", going on to describe how in "Urban Ghettos", community members are often "caught between the forces of crime and the forces of a (perceived) repressive police department" (Statement of Problem n.d.). This careful description of law enforcement failures and police repression positions the Survival Line as a solution for a racial constituency caught between two different forms of violence: community violence and state violence. As a coalition, Action for Survival mobilized the interests of racialized organizations by constructing or amplifying group-based racial interests related to crime and policing (Ray 2019). This is evident in the group's mobilization of "we", "us", and "our" in informational materials about its work: "Action For Survival is a way for us to address the power structure with a united voice, notifying it of our needs and of our vow to be self-determining" (Action for Survival: Outline for Speakers Bureau n.d.). This messaging aligns with the priorities of the organization providing the majority of the logistical and infrastructural support to the Survival Line (CUL was a municipal branch of the Urban League, a national organization founded in an effort to improve race relations) (Strickland 1966).

In order to maintain accountability to the racial constituency it purported to serve, the Survival Line and Action for Survival navigated internal tensions related to inter-organizational collaboration. In the minutes of a 1970 meeting, a coalition member voiced concerns that publicity and credit should not go to constituent organizations but to Action for Survival at-large. CUL's Director Ashford concurred, and made a point to emphasize that the task force should "be honest in their reports to him regarding the Action for Survival member organizations and our evaluation of their progress and/or failings up to date" (Action for Survival: Chicago Urban League Task Force Meeting 1970). Despite the racial solidarity being built across local Black-led organizations and churches, there were still tensions under the surface about which organizations were contributing sufficiently.

4.3. Function: A Mechanism for Data Collection and Dissemination

In addition to the role of the Survival Line in developing racial solidarity and presenting an alternative to the state for crisis response, the Survival Line functioned as a central

mechanism for collecting data on urban violence. For each call to the Survival Line, callers were asked about what occurred, where it occurred, if callers would be willing to come into the Action for Survival office to discuss the incident, and if callers had taken down any police names or badge numbers (Action for Survival Meeting 1970). About a year after the launch of the Survival Line, CUL's assistant director of Community Organization contacted the Chicago Law Enforcement Study Group to request that a researcher be assigned to the Survival Line "to develop a better statistical base" and create "a case category breakdown with a view toward ascertaining economic and social trends that are in existence within our Metropolitan Area" (Burke 1971). This data-collecting function became central to the Survival Line's public-facing materials; an undated Action for Survival information sheet specified that "important crime data has been gathered" through call logs, implying that these data were not being collected at the municipal level (Background Information on Action for Survival's 'Survival Line' n.d.).

Indeed, while the Chicago Crime Commission technically existed at the time, it was dominated by white leadership without much attention to the experiences of Chicago's black citizens. Data collected from Survival Line call sheets was shared with the Black Crime Commission, a newly formed body that was chaired by a law professor at Northwestern University to "hold public hearings in Black neighborhoods and investigate the city's police, legal and judicial departments, corrective institutions and other facets of crime in the Black communities".[7] In an internal memo, CUL leadership noted that call data from the Survival Line would "provide the basis which the Black Crime Commission will use in forthcoming investigations and reports. The Commission is a group of outstanding persons of unquestioned integrity who will deal judiciously with the facts gathered by Action for Survival and who will be directly responsible to the Black community" (Greene and Burke 1970b). This explicit focus on accountability re-articulates the relational nature of data collection and dissemination in this project, distinguishing it from more traditionally academic or state-sponsored crime research and re-orienting research aims toward the needs of community members.

One CUL memo highlights the potential of Survival Line data to encourage Black residents to report incidents, moving toward a "climate in which Black citizens will feel free to report every criminal incident, both to the authorities from which we expect professional service and protection, and to Action for Survival for follow-up by the Black Crime Commission".[8] By establishing data collection as a reputable mechanism for responding politically to the problem of urban violence, Action for Survival was able to justify its record-keeping, continue documenting the dynamics of various neighborhoods and the police, and communicate at the municipal level about trends in violence and overpolicing. The co-emergence of the Survival Line and the Black Crime Commission allowed community members to participate in knowledge-sharing and empowerment apart from the city's predominantly white political machines.

Beyond the Black Crime Commission, the Survival Line's data practices are also distinctive because of the dissemination of hyperlocal crime and policing data to Action for Survival coalition members and other community organizations. A July 1970 meeting agenda noted the group's approval of a "form letter to be sent to community organizations to inform them of incidents occurring within their boundaries (according to calls received by the Survival Line)" (Task Force Meeting: Minutes of the Meeting 1970). In this regard, data about Survival Line calls functioned as a relational tool for organizing and building networks of resistance. Unlike crime surveillance projects undertaken by local police departments and university criminologists, neighborhood-level crime and police brutality data collected through Survival Line operations could be put to use shaping the mobilization efforts of organizers and advocacy organizations. This use of data as a

relational tool benefited both organizations and individuals in Chicago, prompting Black residents to call in complaints to a trusted non-governmental authority that would take action based on their reports.

5. Discussion: The Survival Line's Innovative Response to Urban Crises

When viewed in aggregate, the Survival Line's tripartite functions as a tool for non-state responses to violence, a Black solidarity-building space, and a data-gathering resource suggest that this case of citizen-led social service provision merits deeper examination. As a resource run by a coalition of hyperlocal neighborhood organizations, the Survival Line self-documented its own existence as a site of resistance to police violence and crime in Black Chicago. The multifunctionality of this hotline demonstrates that policing in Chicago's Black communities created gaps in safety and services. Through coalition-building efforts to create and sustain this hotline, Action for Survival generated a mechanism for building informational and political capital among Black residents of Chicago who had borne the brunt of urban violence.

The written aims of Action for Survival articulate the stakes of the problem that they faced: "At the same time that we are attempting to control that which is rightfully ours, however, we are in grave danger of having this potential control snatched away as our communities become overwhelmed by crime on the one hand and official repression on the other" (Semi-Annual Percentage and Average Report for Survival Line 1971). As contemporary abolitionist and mutual aid organizers contend with the same effects of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls organized abandonment by the state (Gilmore 2007), this example of volunteer-run social service provision, data collection, and solidarity-building offers key takeaways. In the gaps created by social welfare retrenchment and the ever-expanding power of the police (Wacquant 2009), a community-run referral-based hotline is one strategy that might lend itself to both solidarity-building as well as more targeted forms of care provision—these are the antidotes to organized abandonment and welfare state retrenchment as the carceral state continues to expand.

The Survival Line's function as a non-police response to community concerns is perhaps the most salient one for contemporary organizers and activists to examine. Through its use of volunteers, CUL infrastructure, and a broad network of community-based organizational collaborators, the Survival Line is an early example of a community-run resource hub that responded to the wide swath of local and hyperlocal concerns. As the federal government began to pour funding and technical assistance support into a networked nationwide emergency number (911) (Schroeder 1979), the Survival Line offered a Chicago-specific mechanism for requesting help without risking an escalatory response from local police. In addition to complaints about local crime and police brutality, the Survival Line received calls about consumer fraud, Social Security/benefits issues, employment concerns, and housing/landlord complaints (Semi-Annual Percentage and Average Report for Survival Line 1971). The diversity of concerns brought to the Survival Line via callers reflects a throughline between the 1970s and the 2020s: community members in so-called disadvantaged neighborhoods are caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to accessing resources without relying on state-sponsored interventions (Schaible and Hughes 2012).

Despite a history of reliance on policing as the central response to most social issues in urban America, there is a new wave of hyperlocal, community-run, multifaceted responses to social problems (Battle and Powell 2024). A number of mutual aid groups have taken an expansive approach to community needs assessment and response in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bell 2021). This is notable largely because of the function creep (Crawford 2024) that the policing role has undergone in the decades since the advent of

911; as police are called upon to address a wider set of local social problems, community members are less able to solve these problems without potentially involving the punitive or carceral state. For marginalized communities at a greater risk of experiencing police violence, abolitionists have argued that a police-centric response to crisis escalates risk unnecessarily while reifying the police as universal problem-solvers.[9] As the profession of social work continues in its struggle to define itself in relationship to the carceral state (Abolitionist Social Workers 2021), it is necessary for the profession to explore and invest in the development of service-oriented alternatives to policing (Murray et al. 2023). The Survival Line's multiple functions—as a bridge to social services, a means of building racial solidarity for Black Chicagoans, and a tool for tracking neighborhood-level violence and police brutality—should serve as a model for the kind of capacious community resourcing that could advance an abolitionist vision of social and community care.

This paper's findings have substantive implications for contemporary social work practice in the United States. First, social work and nonprofit archives offer opportunities for contemporary social workers to engage with critical perspectives on the attitudes that undergird the profession's tendency to collaborate or collude with institutions and professions responsible for controlling and constraining marginalized populations (Leotti 2022). Social work practitioners might inquire about the histories of their own employer organizations or the historical relationships that contributed to present-day organizational dynamics and constraints in their respective contexts. This historical examination of long-standing community-based organizations and their negotiations with the state (Marwell 2004) may uncover important insights about the specific contours of carceral creep (Kim 2020) in various social service settings. The overreliance upon state intervention positions social workers as handmaidens of the state's social control apparatus, and this history can only be disrupted once it is fully recognized.[10] This practice of archival investigation and reflection invites ongoing inquiry and critical reflection on practices such as non-consensual active rescue (Pendse et al. 2024), mandatory reporting (Harrell and Wahab 2022), and police–social work co-response (Suslovic 1970), which all involve direct engagement with the state as a mechanisms for containing or constraining populations considered risky (Park et al. 2020). With this context, social work practitioners are better primed to disrupt and shift policies and practices within their own areas of practice to minimize the carceral impact of their interventions on community members.

Second, the role of mutual aid and informal networks of care cannot be overlooked; as social work practitioners and scholars continue to develop mechanisms for diverting clients and neighbors away from the police and the carceral state, collaboration with and support for community-led non-social work interventions is necessary (Seebohm et al. 2013; Wu et al. 2025). A primary example of generative collaboration between social work interventions and community-led interventions can be found in the politicized healing framework (Harden and Deligio 2021), a healing modality developed and practiced by the Chicago Torture Justice Center that places equal priority on psychologically grounded interventions for trauma as well as sociopolitical-grounded interventions such as local organizing and advocacy work.

Third, the development of a contemporary anti-carceral social work praxis allows for direct social work collaboration with uncredentialed or non-professionalized care workers and volunteers (Morrow and Parker 2020); through interventions such as the Continuum of Transformative and Reproductive Labor, social workers can use Black feminist insights to acknowledge and uplift the work carried out by non-social workers in community organizing and informal service/care provision (Swanson and Carreon 2024). Through an intentional engagement with the concept of care work, rather than simply the concept of care (Kahn and Lynch-Biniek 2022), social workers are primed to recognize care

workers whose work is not recognized as such in the community, including volunteers and mutual aid leaders who are in the process of developing hotlines and archives of state violence and neglect (Hubbard 2020). With a heightened awareness of social work's positioning in relation to the state, social workers have the capacity to use discretion in their practice and disrupt the pressures of criminalization and carceral collaboration at the individual/micro-level (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). While social workers' radical potential has often been snuffed by their obligations to the state via licensure and liability concerns (Brady et al. 2019), social workers who are sensitized to social justice organizing and care work led by volunteers and non-social workers in the community will be better equipped to support these efforts rather than imposing an interventionist lens that reproduces carceral logics onto marginalized populations (Davies et al. 2021; Valenzuela-Vela and Alcázar-Campos 2020).

6. Conclusions

The legacy of the Survival Line is present in contemporary volunteer-led movements in Chicago to meet the needs of community members without relying on police or social workers. Through initiatives led by organizations such as the Invisible Institute, data about individual police misconduct records is available for citizens and community advocates to review and use (Civic Police Data Project 2025). The group Southside Together organizes tenants against negligent landlords and fights to protect/repair low-income housing, and it also advocates for non-police mental health crisis response through the #Treatment-NotTrauma campaign (Southside Together 2025). The Chicago Urban League continues to produce data about the needs of Black Chicagoans, though its involvement in more direct-action campaigns appears to be more limited (Research & Policy Center—Chicago Urban League 2025).

Despite the substantive findings included in this study, there are several limitations to acknowledge and address. As a singular archival study, these data are not triangulated with oral history interviews or substantive engagement with other archives, which constrains the rigor of the analysis (Rolfe 2006). Additionally, the use of archival records creates a contingency, wherein the data accessible for analysis is mediated and perhaps filtered through the priorities of the organization responsible for documenting and archiving its own data—in this case, the Chicago Urban League (Lara-Millán et al. 2020). Finally, this analysis uses a case study design, which limits the broader generalizability of the findings (Bowman 2019). Despite these limitations, however, the findings discussed in this paper offer insights for future researchers to build upon in their investigations of hotline-based community crisis response. In the wake of police violence and misconduct, historical investigations of community-based models for responding to crime are useful and applicable to more contemporary inquiries from scholars and activists alike.

As a space for building Black political power, an archive of police and neighborhood violence data, and an alternative to policing for some social problems, the Survival Line demonstrates the power of a mutual aid ethos and the labor of mostly volunteers in building a movement hub. In light of ongoing critiques of social work for its carceral and punitive logics (Rasmussen and Suslovic 2025), this deprofessionalized Black organizing mechanism for connecting community members to resources and documenting injustice merits appreciation and offers core lessons.

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Notes

1 Balto, Occupied Territory.
2 Pihos, "Policing, Race, and Politics in Chicago".
3 Establishing 911.
4 Semi-Annual Percentage and Average Report for Survival Line.
5 (Draper and McKeon 2024); Mason, "Establishing 911".
6 Outline for Speakers Bureau.
7 Law Students Aid to AFS.
8 Action for Survival: Outline for Speakers Bureau.
9 Mason, "Establishing 911".
10 Feldman, "Social Work and the State"; (Abramovitz 2006).

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