Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in Boyle Heights
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In order to foster the healthy development of adolescents and young adults, The California Endowment has invested in youth leadership and youth-led organizing groups as a key component of its Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative. As part of a broader assessment of the impact of BHC youth programming on participants and their communities, this report focuses specifically on youth programming in Boyle Heights. Located in the City of Los Angeles, just east of downtown, the Boyle Heights neighborhood is one of 14 California communities with a BHC initiative. We rely on survey data collected from core youth participants from seven affiliated organizations that have sought to facilitate youth leadership in Boyle Heights: 1) InnerCity Struggle, 2) The Labor Community Strategy Center, 3) Legacy LA 4) LA CAUSA, 5) Proyecto Pastoral, 6) Boyle Heights Beat, and 7) the YMCA.

In what follows, we present survey results. We begin with a demographic description of youth survey participants and lay out both how youth were recruited and why they remained in the organization. To provide information on the programming offered by youth groups, we show how young people were involved in different types of activities. We then share how youth benefited from their involvement. To complement survey findings, we draw on interviews with key stakeholders to account for some of the ways that youth are seeking to contribute to their community’s health and well-being through recent campaigns in Boyle Heights. We conclude with a brief note on challenges and how youth programming might grow in the future. We hope that this report serves as a resource for those planning youth programming in Boyle Heights.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 184 youth ranging in age from 13 to 25 participated in the study, representing 91 percent of members in these seven organizations. Young women outnumber young men (see Figure 1). Given that Boyle Heights is a largely Latino community, 95 percent of surveyed youth are Latino. The remaining identify as African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native American, or other. Most youth—81 percent—come from an immigrant family with at least one foreign-born parent. Participants in these programs come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Almost all—92 percent—have parents who did not obtain a bachelor’s degree, and 78 percent were raised in a low-income family.
Participant Recruitment and Retention
Survey results suggest that in Boyle Heights, as in most other BHC communities, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to organizations. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, most (60 percent) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). Youth also commonly learned about their organizations through family members, classroom presentations, and teachers and counselors.

![Figure 2. How youth learned about their BHC-affiliated youth group](image)

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their organization. As Figure 3 shows, most respondents (41%) were drawn to their group because the group seemed like fun. But many also came to their respective organizations with some concern for advancing the interests of their community. Forty percent liked what their organization focused on, and the same percent wanted to make a difference. Other common reasons for joining included wanting to develop new skills (35%) and being invited by friends (33%). These findings suggest that organizations attract young people who want to help their communities and seek to develop their skills and talents. At the same time, organizations attract members by creating a fun community environment.

![Figure 3. Reason for joining youth group](image)
The majority (51 percent) of youth had participated in their BHC-affiliated group for a year or longer. The remaining percentage of youth had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with their groups (see Figure 4). Members who have been part of their organizations longer may play a role in developing the leadership capacity of newer members.

Youths’ reasons for staying in their respective BHC-affiliated youth group somewhat overlap with their reasons for joining. Figure 5 shows that 66 percent remained involved because they were developing new skills. However, 52 percent also stayed involved because they wanted to make a difference, and 44 percent stayed involved because they liked what the organization focused on. Youth likely felt that they were developing the capacity to contribute to the well-being of their communities. At the same time, youth also stayed involved for social reasons, 48 percent thought the group was fun and 27 percent noted ties to peers as a key factor contributing to their ongoing involvement.
Members’ Involvement
We asked respondents if, through their group, they had participated in any of a list of activities. The list was based on activities commonly reported among BHC groups across the state. Results suggest that the groups provide educational development opportunities for their members. Seventy-two percent of youth reported involvement in college preparation activities (see Figure 6). BHC groups also provide youth with leadership opportunities. Notably, 43 percent of youth made a public presentation, 35 percent reported making important decisions, 26 percent collected signatures or canvassed, and 26 percent planned a meeting or event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 6. How Youth Participated in Their BHC Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for or succeed in college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made a public presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made important decisions</td>
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<td>Physical exercise at least once a week</td>
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<td>Planned a meeting or event</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collected signatures/canvassing</td>
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<td>Wrote about community issue</td>
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<td>Performed or showcased art</td>
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<td>Facilitated restorative justice circle</td>
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How Members Benefit From Their Involvement
Young people’s involvement in BHC-affiliated programs supported their healthy development. We asked youth to rate how their organizational involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact? Figure 7 shows the percent that reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Results suggest that participants overwhelmingly learned “a lot” that enabled them to stand up for their beliefs—76 percent indicated that this was the case. Seventy-two percent learned about health issues that impact their community, and 66 percent developed a better understanding of government processes. Additionally, many improved their ability to communicate with others (66 percent) and built or strengthened trusting relationships with mentors (64 percent). These findings suggest that Boyle Heights programs may have broad, positive impacts on the leadership capacity and personal development of their members.
Recent Youth-Led Campaign Victories and Future Directions for Youth Programming

While Boyle Heights’ youth have personally benefited from their ties to their respective BHC organizations, their engagement has also enabled them to address school climate, student health-related issues, educational equity issues, and overall community and environmental health.

Youth in Boyle Heights played an active role in pushing for LAUSD’s adoption of the School Climate Bill of Rights, which rolls back punitive discipline policies and creates restorative alternatives to suspension. In addition to this, some youth groups mobilized for the approval of the “Wellness Centers Now” resolution. The “Wellness Centers Now” resolution calls for school-based comprehensive health services, including primary and preventative care, as a way to address the specific health needs of students. Youth collected over 1,000 signed petitions, and approximately 60 youth attended LAUSD meetings to call to the importance of the resolution. On May 13, 2014 LAUSD passed this resolution with a unanimous vote, thus allocating $50 million for school-based health and wellness centers in high-needs schools around the district.

In keeping momentum, Boyle Heights’ youth and allies have also been very successful at mobilizing to address the education achievement gap of high-needs students, including low-income students, English learners, and foster youth in LAUSD. Boyle Heights’ youth and their allies have secured support for the “Equity is Justice” resolution. The “Equity is Justice” resolution calls for the adoption of the Student Need Index—developed by organizations in Boyle Heights and South Los Angeles—as the central guide for the distribution of Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) funds. The Student Need Index assures that the schools with the highest need receive priority for LCFF funds. Youth facilitated educational workshops, as well as breakout sessions at a town hall meeting on LCFF legislation. Youth also collected signatures from community members in support of this resolution. On June 10, 2014 over 100 youth and parents attended a rally during the LAUSD Board meeting considering the resolution. In yet
another win, the LAUSD approved the “Equity is Justice” resolution, directing the Superintendent to use the Student Need Index in the allocation of funds to schools in the district.

Youth are also involved in various community health projects, including improving and rebuilding low-income housing around the Los Angeles area through construction work. Some youth are involved in promoting health and well-being at Ramona Gardens, a local public housing development project; they are advocating for community garden-making, urban greening, and access to health foods. In addition to this, young people and their allies have proposed a vision and plan to address pollution and air quality in Ramona Gardens by targeting zoning in industrial locations.

Youth groups hope to build on the momentum of these recent victories by pushing for three high schools in the Boyle Heights area to directly benefit from the “Wellness Centers Now” resolution. These particular youth groups hope to receive additional resources to expand existing wellness centers and to build entirely new wellness centers where necessary. Additionally, as soon as the LAUSD Superintendent releases a list of schools receiving LCFF funds based on the Student Need Index, youth organizations’ next step is to create school site councils in Boyle Heights schools for youth input and accountability on budget processes. As youth organizations continue their work, they hope there is continued support from adult allies in the form of investment in youth-friendly spaces across organizations, continued training, and technology and transportation assistance. In doing so, BHC youth programming may further increase youths’ leadership and strengthen their voices in campaigns focused on improving community and personal health and educational equity in Boyle Heights.

USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) conducts research and facilitates discussions on the issues of environmental justice, regional inclusion, and social movement building. PERE conducts high-quality research that is relevant to public policy concerns and that reaches those directly affected communities that most need to be engaged in the discussion. Lizette Solórzano is a graduate student at the University of Southern California’s Department of Sociology. Jazmin Casas is a community college student and Media Justice Organizer at InnerCity Struggle. Veronica Terriquez is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation. We thank Esthefanie Solano for assistance with this research.

For a statewide summary and reports from other BHC sites, please see: http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-leadership/