Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in City 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 City Heights. Located in the eastern section of the City of San Diego, City Heights is one of 14 BHC sites throughout the state. We rely on surveys of core youth participants from three BHC-affiliated organizations that have sought to mentor youth and/or engage them in grassroots organizing: 1) the Al-Salaam Foundation, 2) Mid-City Youth Council, and 3) Social Advocates for Youth.

In what follows, we present survey results from 2013-2014. 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 by sharing recent campaign highlights. 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 City Heights.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 46 youth ranging in age from 13 to 21 participated in the study, representing 95 percent of members in the three BHC-affiliated organizations. Young women somewhat outnumber young men in these organizations, comprising 59 percent of survey respondents (see Figure 1). Program participants are racially/ethnically diverse. Approximately 46 percent are Latino, 39 percent are African American, 9 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and the remaining identified as white or other race.

Figure 1. Gender composition of youth participants

- Young Women: 59%
- Young Men: 41%
Approximately 93 percent of young people in these programs come from low-income family backgrounds (measured by free and reduced lunch eligibility while in high school). None of the survey respondents have parents with a bachelor’s degree.

**Participant Recruitment and Retention**
Survey results suggest that in City Heights, as in most other BHC sites, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to their organizations. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, many respondents (43 percent) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). Youth also commonly learned about their organizations through family members, community events, teachers and counselors, and an afterschool or lunch outreach.

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

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their BHC-affiliated youth group. As Figure 3 suggests, most of these participants were drawn to their group with some concern for advancing the interests of their communities. Fifty-nine percent wanted to make a difference and 46 percent liked what their group focused on. However, the majority were also drawn to their respective group because they seemed like fun. Notably, a third also joined because they wanted to develop new skills. These findings suggest that organizations attract young people who are predisposed to helping their communities and seek to develop their skills and talents. At the same time, organizations attract members by creating a fun community environment.
The majority (52 percent) of the members of City Heights’ BHC youth programs who took part in the survey had participated in their BHC group for over a year. The remaining had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with their group. 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 the group only somewhat overlap with their reasons for joining. Figure 4 shows that 72 percent remained involved because they were developing new skills. However, the majority—57 percent—also stayed involved because they felt they were making a difference. This likely suggests that youth participants felt that their involvement in these groups could have an impact on the well-being of their communities. It is also worth noting that the majority also remained involved because they were having fun.

**Members’ Involvement**

We asked respondents if, through their organization, 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 grassroots organizing and leadership opportunities for their youth, as reflected in the top five responses. Notably, 43 percent of youth collected signatures or canvassed for BHC-related campaigns, 35 percent reported making important decisions, and 35 percent planned a meeting or event. Meanwhile, 30 percent made a public presentation (see Figure 5).
Figure 5. How Youth Participated in their BHC group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collected signatures/canvassing</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned a meeting or event</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made important decisions</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made a public presentation</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College prep/success activities</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical exercise at least once a week</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performed or showcased art</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrote about community issue</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How Members Benefit From Their Involvement

Young people’s involvement in BHC-affiliated programs supported their healthy development. We asked members of the group to rate how their involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact? Figure 6 shows the percent who reported that their group 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—67 percent indicated that this was the case. Most also developed a better understanding of government processes, and improved their ability to communicate with others. Half of these youth improved their ability to plan events, and 48 percent improved their ability to speak in public. These findings suggest that City Heights’ programs may have broad, positive impacts on the leadership capacity of their members.

Figure 6. The degree to which group impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"

Youth-Led Campaign Efforts

While the youth of City Heights have personally benefited from their ties to their respective BHC groups, their engagement has also enabled them to advocate for more park space and begin addressing health concerns in local schools. Perhaps most notably, youth of City Heights won a
campaign to bring a skate plaza to the community. This campaign, detailed by Adam Ward,\(^1\) began in the summer of 2011 after one of the youth members from the Mid-City CAN Youth Council was hit by an SUV while riding a skateboard. Recognizing that the community lacked a skate park and green space more broadly, youth and their allies sought a skate plaza and other additional park space. This effort entailed canvassing neighborhoods to gather community support, meeting with decision makers, and attending meetings of various government bodies, including: City Heights Recreation Council, City Heights Area Planning Committee, City Heights Town Council, and City of San Diego’s Park and Recreation Department. Eventually, on April 2, 2013, the State of California’s Department of Housing and Community Development and the City of San Diego’s Planning Department approved funding for the Central Avenue Mini Park which includes the Skate Plaza. Youth continue to be engaged in efforts to ensure that a full-scale park is built in City Heights. Youth and their adult allies are currently in the process of creating a health impact assessment of a skate park in City Heights. Armed with these data and this report, the youth aim to continue their campaign, holding their elected representatives accountable at both the city and county levels.

Youth in City Heights have also participated in efforts to improve health and other concerns in local high schools. This effort has included a needs assessment in which high school students surveyed over 700 students leading to the identification of bullying and conflict mediation as key areas of concern. As a result, students were trained by the National Conflict Resolution Center to conduct anti-bullying workshops throughout the year. Young people also successfully protested the elimination of four small schools housed within the larger Crawford campus. They opposed the district’s attempt to convert these four small campuses into a traditional large school because they felt that the small schools better suited the needs of their diverse students, including immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Young people convinced the Parent Teacher Association and the San Diego School Board to support their cause. This successful effort evidenced the potential influence of youth voice in school policy decision-making processes.

Youth leaders and their allies hope to build on the momentum of these recent victories by further developing youth leadership in the community. To date, youth have had to rely significantly on the guidance of paid adult staff members. In the future, youth may assume a greater role in determining the strategies and directions of campaigns if they obtain more training in grassroots organizing strategies, while also learning more about how they can intervene in government decision-making processes. Such training will enable young people to exercise more power over the direction of BHC efforts in their community.

In closing, City Heights’ BHC youth-serving organizations are already having a significant impact on the leadership capacity and healthy development of participants. This impact is likely to reverberate into the future as these young leaders develop a lasting commitment to the health and well-being of their community and beyond.

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 directly-affected communities that most need to be a part of the discussion. **Angeli Hernandez** is a community college student involved in the Mid-City CAN Youth Council. **Veronica Terriquez** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation.

For a statewide summary and reports from other BHC sites, please see: [http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/re-publications/](http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/re-publications/)