Youth Leadership in East Salinas: Results from the Youth Program Evaluation
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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 on youth programming in East Salinas, one of 14 BHC sites throughout the state. We rely on survey data collected from core youth participants of the East Salinas Urban Arts Collaborative, a BHC-affiliated organization that has sought to offer safe spaces for creative expression among young people in the community since 2010.

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 by sharing recent campaign highlights in East Salinas. 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 East Salinas.

Description of Youth Program Members

In all, 16 youth took part in the East Salinas Urban Arts Collaborative in the summer of 2013, when our survey was conducted. Members of this organization are no longer in high school and average 21 years of age. Young men dominate the membership of this group (see Figure 10); in East Salinas, as in many other communities, young men tend to dominate the graffiti art scene. Reflecting the demographics of the community as a whole, most members (81 percent) are Latino; the remaining are Asian American/Pacific Islander and white. Only two members (just under 13 percent) have parents with a college degree. Meanwhile, 45 percent of the group’s members had attended a community and/or four-year college.
Participant Recruitment and Retention

Survey results suggest that in East Salinas, as in all other BHC communities, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to the organization. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, most (88 percent) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). However, it is worth noting that a quarter of members also learned about the organization from a community event.

![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 group. As shown in Figure 3, the most common reason given was a friend’s invitation (56 percent), but half also said that they liked what the group focused on. Other common reasons for joining include wanting to make a difference, having free time, and having fun. 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.

![Figure 3. Reason for joining youth group](image)
Members varied in how long they had participated in the Urban Arts Collaborative. A total of four members (25 percent) reported that they had been part of the group for a year or longer. The remaining had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with the organization. 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 organization somewhat mirrored their reasons for joining. Figure 4 shows that half remained involved because of their peers, and half also reported staying because they liked what the group focused on. Members also commonly reported staying in the group because they were developing new skills, they wanted to make a difference, or simply because they were having fun (all four members who had been in the organization for over a year reported this last reason).

**Figure 4. Reasons for staying involved**

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. Not surprisingly, among members of the Urban Arts Collaborative the most common type of involvement (64 percent) consisted of performing or showcasing art. A minority (19 percent) also reported engaging in some kind of physical exercise through their organizations, while a few reported working with adults to make important decisions, planning activities, and participating in activities that helped them prepare for college. See Figure 5.
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 qualify 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 6 shows the percent who reported that organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Results suggest between 50 percent to 63 percent of the group’s membership benefited “a lot” with respect to developing their understanding of government, increasing their ability to stand up for their beliefs, improving their ability to communicate with others, and strengthening relationships with their mentors. Many also considerably improved their ability to plan events and activities, improved their school grades, or learned about their own culture or ethnic/racial group. These findings suggest that the Urban Arts Collaborative may have broad, positive impacts on the lives of members beyond simply providing a safe space for creative expression.
Expanding Youth Programming in East Salinas

Youth leadership programming in East Salinas is still at a developmental stage. To date, programming has in large part focused on the arts, while also supporting physical activity. For example, events such as the Urban Exhibit at the Cesar Chavez Library and the Music and Arts Summit sponsored by the Urban Arts Collaborative have created venues for young people to share their graffiti and urban arts. Some BHC youth have also worked with local officials to advocate for safe places for arts activities—an avenue of collaboration worth exploring further. In a separate effort, youth affiliated with various other BHC organizations also participated in the first annual Ciclovíá, an event in which major streets in the community were closed to facilitate bike-riding and other physical activity. Involving hundreds of residents, Ciclovíá’s goals included promoting community building, health education, and fitness. In the future, youth may play a greater role in planning Ciclovíá and related activities.

The expansion of youth leadership programming in East Salinas may take at least a few directions. To further support arts activity, it may be necessary for BHC stakeholders to help improve relationships between law enforcement and the community so that youth feel welcome in public arts spaces. On a broader level, East Salinas BHC organizations may seek to further increase youths’ involvement in organizing and advocacy efforts aimed at improving community health. Such efforts may require programming focused on building youths’ leadership skills and a critical understanding of social inequalities that contribute to community health problems. Additionally, adult allies may consider learning from other BHC sites about how to engage in multigenerational organizing and advocacy strategies. Such investments in supporting the capacity of young people to participate as partners can foster local leadership that could benefit East Salinas beyond the life of the BHC Initiative.

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For a statewide summary and reports from other BHC sites, please see:
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