Youth Leadership in the Eastern Coachella Valley: Results from the Youth Program Evaluation
Aurora Saldívar, Angela Ross, and Veronica Terriquez, Ph.D.

A central component of Building Healthy Communities (BHC), a 10-year initiative launched by the California Endowment with the goal of promoting the health and wellness of communities, is youth leadership and youth-led organizing groups. As part of a broader assessment on the impact these BHC youth organizations have on participants and their communities, this report focuses on youth organizing groups in the Eastern Coachella Valley region. Covering the city of Coachella and the surrounding unincorporated areas of Thermal, Mecca, and North Shore, the Eastern Coachella Valley is one of 14 California communities with a BHC initiative. For this analysis, we rely on survey data collected from core members of five groups: 1) the BHC Regional Access Project, 2) Boys and Girls Club, 3) RAICES, 4) Inland Congregations United for Change-Coachella, and 5) New American Media.

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 Eastern Coachella Valley. 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 the Eastern Coachella Valley.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 46 youth ranging in age from 14 to 24 participated in the study, representing 88 percent of members in the five participating groups. Approximately 65 percent of the participants we surveyed are adolescents (i.e. under the age of 18). The gender composition of our sample is almost even, with slightly more men represented than women (see Figure 1). Participants in these organizations identify predominately as Latino (89 percent), which resembles the Latino majority of the broader Eastern Coachella Valley region. The remaining primarily identify as Native American (7 percent), African American
(2 percent), and Asian American/Pacific Islander (2 percent). Most of the youth (87 percent) come from immigrant families, meaning that they have at least one immigrant parent. Program participants also come from mostly low-income backgrounds—85 percent of youth were eligible for free or reduced lunch when in school and only 7 percent have a parent with a bachelor’s degree.

**Participant Recruitment and Retention**

Survey results suggest that in Eastern Coachella, as in most other BHC sites, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to their organizations. Most of the participants (70 percent) reported learning about their group from a friend or peer (see Figure 2). Others also initially learned about their organization from a community event, family member, or afterschool or lunch outreach.

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

Members were asked to list the top three reasons they first decided to join their group. Many appeared motivated by an investment in their community. As Figure 3 suggests, 63 percent of were drawn to their group because they wanted to make a difference in their community. Almost half of the respondents reported they liked the focus of the group (48 percent). However, it is worth noting that having fun was also an important motivator for many youth (46 percent), as was the recruitment efforts of peers (41 percent). 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.
Most (63 percent) of the members of Eastern Coachella Valley BHC youth organizations had been involved with their group for a year or longer (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 remaining in their groups reflected their initial reasons for joining, with significant additional emphasis on community engagement and personal development. Eighty percent of program participants reported maintaining their involvement because they wanted to make a difference in their community (see Figure 5). Almost three-fourths (74 percent) of the respondents reported the desire to develop their skills, and 63 percent reported the focus of their organization was a key reason for staying involved with their group. Through their involvement, youth likely developed their sense of agency to positively contribute to the well-being of their communities. At the same time, having fun was also important to retaining a significant percentage (39 percent) of youth.
Figure 5. Reason 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. Notably, almost two-thirds (65 percent) reported participating in activities that helped them prepare for or succeed in college (see Figure 6). It appears that youth are offered leadership opportunities within their groups: sixty-one percent of youth participants reported working with adults to make important decisions in their organizations, 54 percent reported planning a meeting or community event, and 50 percent reported making a public presentation. About a quarter of respondents (24 percent) also reported writing about a community issue. The same percentage reported participating in physical exercise at least once a week with their program.

Figure 6. How youth participated in their BHC youth group
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 the degree to which their group 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 of respondents who reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Members overwhelmingly reported learning “a lot” about how to stand up for what they believe in (85 percent) and about health or other issues impacting their community (80 percent). Eighty percent also greatly improved their ability to communicate with others. About three-fourths (76 percent) of respondents also built or strengthened relationships with mentors, 72 percent improved their ability to plan events and activities, and 65 percent improved their ability to speak in public. These results suggest that Eastern Coachella Valley BHC programs have substantial and wide-ranging impacts on the personal, political, and leadership development of youth participants.

Figure 7. The degree to which organization impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"

Youth-Led Efforts and Future Directions for Youth Programming in the Eastern Coachella Valley

Youth in Eastern Coachella Valley, as in the other BHC regions, have worked to address a range of issues that impact the healthy development of young people. Coachella is not an area with a strong organizing base, particularly in terms of youth-led organizing, so BHC work has focused more on community building and education in its early years. Some of the recent youth-led
campaigns in Coachella revolve around addressing over-use of school suspensions and expulsions and engaging students and parents in the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) for public schools. Youth are continuing to forge relationships with school board members and decision-makers to voice their interests and concerns.

Eastern Coachella Valley BHC-affiliated youth groups also helped engaged a broader young population in activities that promote healthy development and political awareness. BHC-affiliated groups coordinated the now-annual HUE FESTIVAL that takes place each year in a Coachella park. As an alternative to corporate-sponsored large festivals that occur in Coachella, HUE FESTIVAL features various local musical and creative performances as well as art installations and a car show. Young people have also shared their voice by writing about issues that affect their lives and communities in various social media and online news platforms.

Looking towards the future, Eastern Coachella Valley BHC youth-led efforts can build on their growing momentum. Importantly, BHC-affiliated adult and youth organizations can work towards establishing more equitable partnerships between young people and adult organizers. This will further facilitate young people’s ability to exercise leadership and decision-making in local campaign and advocacy efforts. Through ongoing collaboration with BHC consultants and other BHC sites, organizations can continue to develop best practices in youth organizing and leadership development that attend to the specific needs of youth in the region. As such, Eastern Coachella Valley’s BHC youth programs have the potential to build a leadership pipeline among young people who are committed to addressing health-related and other issues that affect low-income, rural communities.

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. Aurora Saldívar is a community college student involved who has been involved in different aspects of BHC work in Eastern Coachella Valley. Angela Ross is a graduate of the University of Southern California and an incoming graduate student in U.C. Berkeley’s City and Regional Planning Program. 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/