Youth Leadership in Richmond, California: 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 specifically on youth programming in Richmond. Located in Contra Costa County in Northern California, Richmond is one of 14 California communities with a BHC initiative. For this analysis, we rely on surveys collected from youth members of four groups: 1) the Bay Area Peacekeepers Inc., 2) New American Media, 3) RYSE Center, and 4) Urban Tilth.

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 their organization. To provide information on the programming offered by youth groups, we show how youth were involved in different types of activities. We then share how youth benefited from their involvement. To complement survey findings, we account for some of the ways that youth are seeking to contribute to their community’s health and well-being by sharing key campaign and other highlights of youth work in Richmond. We hope that this report serves as a resource for those planning youth programming in Richmond.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 70 youth participated in the study, ranging in age from 15-28, and representing 95 percent of core members in the four participating groups. Approximately 44 percent of the participants we surveyed are adolescents (i.e. under the age of 18). Young men and women are equally represented (see Figure 1). Participants in these organizations are racially/ethnically diverse. About 60 percent of youth members identified as Latino, 31 percent as African American, 6 percent as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1 percent as Native American, and 1 percent as white. A majority of youth (69 percent) come from immigrant families, meaning they have at least one immigrant parent. Eighty-four percent of the participants in these programs come from low-income family backgrounds (measured by free and reduced lunch while in high school), and only 7 percent were raised by a parent with a bachelor’s degree.
Participant Recruitment and Retention

Survey results suggest that in Richmond, as in most other BHC communities, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to their organization. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, more than half of the participants (54 percent) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). Others learned about their group from teachers, counselors, and classroom presentations.

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their organization. Many appeared motivated by an investment in their community. As Figure 3 indicates, 54 percent of youth participants reported that they joined their organization because they wanted to make a difference in their community and 53 percent of youth reported that they joined in order to develop their own skills and knowledge. Half (50 percent) liked what the group focused on, and 43 percent joined because the group seemed like fun. These findings suggest that organizations attract young people who are predisposed to helping their communities and seeking to develop their skills and talents. At the same time, organizations recruit members by creating a fun community environment.
Most (73 percent) youth members 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.

As Figure 5 shows, the reason youth stayed involved generally overlapped with their reasons for joining. Seventy-nine percent of program participants reported maintaining their involvement because of a desire to build their skills (see Figure 5). About two-thirds of the respondents (66 percent) reported wanting to make a difference in their community and half (50 percent) reported the focus of their organization as a key reason for staying involved. Through their involvement, youth likely developed a 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 (44 percent) of youth.
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. Youth are offered leadership opportunities within their groups: fifty-one percent reported working with adults to make important decisions, 43 percent reported making a public presentation, and 29 percent said they had planned a meeting or community event (see Figure 6). Notably, half (50 percent) of youth also reported participating in activities that helped them prepare for or succeed in college. Meanwhile, 37 percent indicated that they engaged in physical exercise at least once a week as part of their program. Other common activities included arts-related performances and writing about community issues.

Figure 6. How youth participated in their BHC group

How Members Benefit From Their Involvement
Young people’s involvement in civic programs supported their healthy development. We asked members 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 (67 percent) and about health or other issues impacting their community (66 percent). Fifty-nine percent significantly improved their ability to communicate with others and the same percentage also built or strengthened relationships with mentors. Half of survey respondents reported that as a result of their involvement, they have taken care of their personal health “a lot,” and 49 percent reported learning “a lot” about how government decisions impact their community. These results suggest that Richmond BHC programs have substantial and wide-ranging impacts on the healthy development of participants.
Figure 7. The degree to which group impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"

Youth-Led Efforts and Future Directions for Youth Programming in Richmond

While the youth of Richmond have personally benefited from their ties to their respective BHC groups, they are also learning how to promote the health of their communities. Richmond BHC youth organizations have not only focused on education, youth leadership development, and health, but they have also engaged their members in advocacy efforts. These efforts have involved coalitions with educators, community members, artists, and other stakeholders that seek to reach common goals.

Richmond BHC youth have sought to have a voice in city policies and budgetary matters. During a city-sponsored Youth Summit in April 2014, young people focused on creating an advisory Youth Council that would report to the City Council on issues affecting Richmond youth. In July 2014, youth organizers presented their research ideas from the summit to the City Council. The Youth Council was approved by the Richmond City Council, but without any funding. The city is currently recruiting youth for the roughly 15-member council and appointments will commence in November of 2014. Part of the goal of this council is to ensure that youth-led and youth-envisioned programs are being funded. The Youth Council will be part of an intergenerational oversight committee of a sustainable fund designated for youth programming. The Youth Council will also have the power to initiate proposals to go in motion through the City Council as well as plan community events and organize an annual Youth Summit. BHC affiliates plan to return to the City Council in the fall to request funding for the Youth Council.

Richmond BHC youth also established relationships with the school board through their participation in the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). In December of 2013, youth members conducted a forum on LCFF to educate their peers about the increased education funds, and to solicit feedback on how that money should be spent. BHC youth later presented these suggestions to the state and they are now on the public record. In early 2014, West Contra Costa
Unified School District began collecting community feedback on LCFF, but this outreach was aimed primarily at parents. Many parents felt that they wanted more participation from students, so BHC youth organizations got more involved by bringing in student perspectives. At the end of June 2014, the district approved the local control accountability plan, which included the creation of a new position: Director of Community Engagement. Additionally, the plan stipulates that parents and students will be a part of the hiring process for this position.

Youth are also increasingly active on the Richmond Food Policy Council, which is focusing on an initiative around healthy corner stores. Though the council is not youth-led or youth-driven, three different Richmond youth organizations are represented, each with their own chair on the council. Some of the youth organizations have their own street teams that will help in a community-based data collection phase of the healthy corner store initiative. This initiative seeks to locate corner stores already trying to offer healthy food and reach out to identify the resources and infrastructure they needed to expand their healthy food options. The council also regularly hears reports from youth organizations and works to provide support for youth-led projects and campaigns.

Youth leadership efforts have included the creation of 12 videos featuring young people’s stories that create an alternative to the picture of Richmond painted by the media. Young people have also led and facilitated panels for community film series and actively contribute to the Richmond Pulse—a local bilingual intergenerational newspaper. Additionally, some young people have been involved in promoting food justice and urban farming, while others have been advocating for the concerns of youth who have gone through the juvenile justice system.

BHC affiliated groups are working to build a culture of grassroots organizing in Richmond, and in doing so some groups seek to expand young people’s capacities to define and take ownership of campaigns. While still lacking a large base of youth engaged in grassroots organizing efforts, Richmond’s youth program efforts exhibit the potential to have an enduring impact on the leadership and well-being of those who do become involved.
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. Sergio Solis is a community college student formerly involved with the RYSE Center and Urban Tilth. 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 on other BHC sites, see: http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/publications/