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 Central Santa Ana. Located in Orange County, Central Santa Ana is one of 14 California communities with a BHC initiative. We rely on surveys of core youth participants from five BHC-affiliated organizations that have sought to mentor youth and/or engage them in organizing, restorative justice, promoting healthy living, and creating healthier school climates in their schools and community: 1) The Cambodian Family, 2) The Center of Orange County, 3) El Centro Cultural de México, 4) Kidworks Community Development Corporation, and 5) Latino Health Access.

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 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 recent campaign highlights in Central Santa Ana. 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 Central Santa Ana.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 52 youth ranging in age from 15 to 23 participated in the study, representing 90 percent of members in these five organizations. Young women outnumber young men, comprising 69 percent of survey respondents (see Figure 1). Program participants are predominantly Latino (88 percent) while four percent are African American, four percent are white, and four percent are Native American.

Eighty-seven percent of the participants in these programs come from low-income family backgrounds (measured by free and reduced lunch

Figure 1. Gender composition of youth participants

Young Men, 31%
Young Women, 69%
while in high school), and only eight percent of the survey respondents have parents with a bachelor’s degree.

**Participant Recruitment and Retention**

Survey results suggest that in Central Santa Ana, as in most other BHC communities, 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, the majority of respondents (54 percent) said they had learned about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). A quarter of survey respondents commonly learned about their organizations through family members. A smaller proportion learned about their groups through community events (13 percent) and online (10 percent). This suggests that resources for outreach might be best used by peer-to-peer outreach.

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

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their organization. As Figure 3 shows, most respondents (65 percent) were drawn to their group because they wanted to make a difference, suggesting that they came to their organizations with some concern for advancing the interests of their communities. Forty-eight percent liked what their group focused on, and 46 percent joined because it seemed like fun. Forty percent 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.

![Figure 3. Reason for joining youth group.](chart)
Our survey also considered the length of involvement in the group (see Figure 4). The majority (54 percent) of the members of Central Santa Ana's BHC youth programs who took part in the survey had participated in BHC groups for a year or longer. Meanwhile, only 13 percent reported being fairly new members who had joined their respective organizations within six months of taking the survey (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 overlapped with their reasons for joining. The most frequently cited reason that youth gave for staying in their group was that they felt that they were making a difference (75 percent). Sixty-seven percent also stayed involved because they were developing new skills, and another 67 percent also indicated that they liked the focus of the group. Through their involvement, youth likely developed their sense of agency to positively contribute to the well-being of their communities. It is also worth noting that half also remained involved because they were having fun.

**Figure 5. 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. Results suggest that the groups provide leadership, grassroots organizing, and academic support opportunities for their youth as reflected in the top five responses. Most (62 percent) reported making public presentations, 60 percent reported making important decisions, 56 percent planned a meeting or event, and 52 percent engaged in activities that help them prepare
for or succeed in college. Forty-four percent collected signatures or engaged in canvassing, likely as a result of involvement in campaign efforts that seek to promote community well-being (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. How youth participated in their BHC group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made a public presentation</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made important decisions</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned a meeting or event</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for or succeed in college</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collected signatures/canvassing</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical exercise at least once a week</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performed or showcased art</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitated restorative justice circle</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrote about community issue</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How Members Benefit From Their Involvement**

Young people’s involvement in civic programs supported their healthy development. We asked members of the group 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 who 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 79 percent learned “a lot” about how to stand up for their beliefs, while the same percentage also developed a better understanding of how government decisions impact the community. Most also improved their ability to communicate with others, learned about health issues that impact the community, improved their ability to speak in public, built or strengthened trusting relationships with mentors, and learned more about their own culture or ethnic/racial group. More than half (54 percent) improved their ability to plan events and activities, and 40 percent learned about college or career options. These findings suggest Central Santa Ana’s BHC-affiliated youth groups may have broad, positive impacts on the leadership capacity of their members.
Central Santa Ana Campaign Efforts and Coordination Among Youth Organizations

To provide some context for survey findings, here we provide brief overviews of the campaigns coordinated by these groups and their youth. Data is important as it provides scaffolding, but the stories behind the data add life and nuance to the results described above. The following campaign snapshots were built upon interviews with key stakeholders.

A word on these campaigns: BHC-affiliated youth organizations in Central Santa Ana have developed collaborative partnerships in order to support the healthy development of youth and engage their members in a range of campaigns. These coalitions include BHC-affiliated youth groups as well as a broader network of family members, educators, and other community stakeholders. The following are snapshots of their campaigns:

- **Promoting restorative justice:** As part of the Central Santa Ana Boys and Men of Color Initiative, young men have been advocating for more rehabilitative, less punitive juvenile justice practices and school disciplinary policies. Campaign activities have included research on different types of restorative justice models, speaking at public forums, educating school leaders and law enforcement about the benefits of such programming, and organizing a local conference that drew 300 youth attendees and adult allies. Recently, a number of Santa Ana City Council members expressed their support for restorative justice practices by adopting language that supports restorative justice in the public safety section of the City’s strategic plan. City leaders also asked for specific research and suggestions to take the next steps in implementing a pilot program.

- **Halting immigrant deportations:** Young immigrants in Orange County have been targeted for potential deportation when they are detained by the criminal justice system. Partially as a result of the coordination between the local police and ICE, the Orange
County Probation Department (OCPD) referred close to 700 youth to ICE from 2009-2013, accounting for 43 percent of California's total ICE deportation holds on minors. Young people and their adult allies have engaged in direct action, community education forums, arts-based activism, and meetings with elected officials. Recently, they won a victory when the Orange County Police Department reported that it would cease to comply with ICE holds for those who committed low-level offenses and thus would no longer detain individuals beyond their release dates. This summer, youth groups are hosting the first anti-deportation conference in Orange County.

- **Creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth:** Central Santa Ana youth are also leading a campaign to educate students, teachers, community members, and administrators on LGBTQ rights. They established Gay-Straight Alliance clubs at schools, advocated for, and implemented trainings on LGBTQ rights of youth, and promoted district-wide, anti-bullying policy to create a safe and inclusive school environment.

- **Advocating for safe biking and walking along city streets:** Youth and their adult allies are leading a campaign to advocate for safer streets that are more conducive to biking and walking. Youth conducted a needs assessment that captured their community's reliance on public transportation and modes of transportation other than driving; since then, they have organized bike rides and are advocating for more bike lanes.

Youth organizers in Central Santa Ana built these campaigns by building coalitions among young people who differ by race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, LGBTQ undocumented youth have been vocal leaders in the movement to stop deportations, and the Boys and Men of Color initiative addresses and discusses LGBTQ issues. Groups also came together to help shape the school climate priorities of Santa Ana's Local Control Accountability Plan. They met with school board members and mobilized their diverse constituencies. In June of 2014, **Santa Ana Unified School District allocated $8.6 million for restorative justice and parent engagement**, including provisions for creating safe schools through anti-bullying and sensitive schools programs (LGBTQ awareness & education), the creation of a School Climate Oversight Committee, and more.

**Looking Forward**
Although youth organizing efforts in Central Santa Ana have actively developed the leadership capacity of youth and built coalitions to respond to shared concerns, they have also encountered obstacles in sustaining youths’ lasting involvement in BHC-related campaigns. One such obstacle is support for a leadership pipeline so that youth can continue to serve as community leaders after they graduate from high school. Transportation is another one: sprawling Orange County challenges participation among those who lack access to private transportation. Notably, Central Santa Ana’s diverse youth sometimes put their safety and well-being at risk because they must confront anti-immigrant sentiment, racial profiling, and homophobia in the course of their community work. Finally, youth organizers expressed the need for grassroots organizing training.
based in, and tailored to Santa Ana, as available trainings utilize strategies based in other communities with more established organizing infrastructure.

In spite of these challenges, Central Santa Ana’s youth programming is likely to have an enduring impact on the leadership capacity and healthy development of participants. Moreover, many are likely to develop a lasting commitment to contribute to their community’s health and well-being.

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. **May Lin** is a graduate student at the University of Southern California. **Veronica Terriquez** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation. We thank Rafael Solorzano, independent consultant, for leading survey administration to youth members of participating BHC-affiliated organizations.

For a statewide summary and write-ups on other BHC sites, see: [http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/publications](http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/publications)