Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in South Kern County
Marylou Chavez and Veronica Terriquez, Ph.D.

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 South Kern County. Located along the I-99 corridor in the California Central Valley, South Kern is one of 14 California communities with a BHC initiative. We rely on survey data collected from core youth participants from three affiliated groups that have sought to facilitate youth leadership and creative expression in South Kern: 1) Boys and Girls Club, 2) New American Media, and 3) the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

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 2013-2014 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 South Kern County.

Description of Youth Program Members
A total of 38 youth ranging in age from 15 to 22 participated in the study, representing 92 percent of members in the three BHC-affiliated groups. Young men and women are about equally represented (see Figure 1), and program participants are racially/ethnically diverse. Approximately 94 percent are Latino, three percent are white, and the remaining are African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American.

Participants in these programs come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Almost all—97 percent—have parents who did not obtain a bachelor’s degree.
Participant Recruitment and Retention

Survey results suggest that in South Kern, as in most other BHC communities, peers play an important role in recruiting youth to their BHC-affiliated groups. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, most respondents (54 percent) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 2). Youth also commonly learned about their groups through community events, family members, and teachers and counselors.

Figure 2. How youth learned about their BHC-affiliated youth group

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their group. As Figure 3 suggests, most of these participants were drawn to their group with some concern for advancing the interests of their communities. Sixty-six percent wanted to make a difference and 54 percent liked what their group focused on. Other common reasons for joining included having fun (54 percent) and wanting to develop new skills (29 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.

Figure 3. Reason for joining BHC-affiliated youth group
Most (51 percent) of the members of South Kern’s BHC youth programs who took part in the survey reported being involved in their BHC-affiliated group for a year or longer. The remaining had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with their respective group (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 reasons 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 (71 percent). Many also stayed involved because they liked the focus of their group (60 percent), and/or because they were developing new skills (57 percent). Findings likely suggest that youth participants felt their involvement in these groups could have an impact on the well-being of their communities.

**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 opportunities for their members.
Notably, over half (57 percent) reported making a public presentation; the same percentage also planned a meeting and event, while 51 percent reported making important decisions. Given the overall low rates of youth civic activity among the general population in California, an impressive 46 percent also reported collecting signatures or canvassing regarding a community issue.

Figure 6. How youth participated in their BHC 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 how 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 6 shows the percent that reported that the 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” about issues impacting their communities—77 percent indicated that this was the case. Most also learned to stand up for their beliefs, improved their ability to communicate with others, acquired a better understanding of how government decisions impact their community, built or strengthened their relationship with mentors, and improved their ability to plan events. These findings suggest that South Kern’s programs may have broad, positive impacts on the leadership capacity of their members.
Recent Youth-Led Campaign Victories and Future Directions for Youth Programming

While South Kern youth have personally benefited from their ties to their respective BHC groups, their engagement has also enabled them to contribute to efforts aimed at improving the health and safety conditions of four local parks: Weedpatch Park, Lamont Park, Di Giorgio Park, and Rexland Acres Park. Because they shared concerns that local parks were neglected and full of trash, youth began collecting beer caps, beer boxes, broken glass bottles, and cigarette butts in all four parks, and painted over graffiti in one, effectively doing the work that should have been done by the county government. Armed with evidence of pervasive alcohol and tobacco consumption at parks, youth and their allies initiated the “Beautiful Parks, Healthy Communities” campaign which focused on the passage and enforcement of ordinances to prevent the use of alcohol and tobacco consumption in public parks. This campaign involved gathering support for the ordinance from local residents, other youth, Parks and Recreation Commissioners, and the County Board of Supervisors. Youths’ activism included canvassing neighborhoods about the issue, presenting at community meetings and a large youth conference, and individual meetings with decision makers. On January 14, 2014, the Kern County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to restrict the use of alcohol in the purposed parks, DiGiorgio and Rexland Acres. Two weeks later, the supervisors voted to restrict the use of tobacco at all four parks. Youth testimony and broader community pressure played an important role in gaining the supervisors’ support for these ordinances. Youth leaders hope that the passage of the alcohol and tobacco ordinances enables more families to engage in healthy physical and recreational activity in local parks.

Youth leaders and their allies hope to build on the momentum of these recent victories by increasing the number of young people involved in promoting the community’s health. Efforts to
ensure that youth voices are heard and heeded in this community may include the development of a youth council that will advise the Arvin City Council. Youth leaders hope to continue benefitting from guidance and support from adult allies while also receiving more buy-in and recognition for their viewpoints from residents. In doing so, BHC youth programming may further increase young people’s leadership capacities and strengthen their contributions to campaigns focused on improving community health and well-being in South Kern County.

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. Marylou Chavez is a student at Bakersfield Community College and is the Youth Representative of South Kern in the BHC Statewide Steering Committee. 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/