Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in South Sacramento
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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 South Sacramento. We rely on survey data collected from core youth participants from six affiliated organizations that have sought to facilitate youth leadership in Sacramento: 1) African Research Institute, 2) Gifts to Share, 3) The Health Education Council, 4) People Reaching Out, 5) Sacramento BHC, and 6) Youth Voice Program at La Familia Counseling Center.

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 South Sacramento. 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 Sacramento.

Description of BHC Youth Program Members
A total of 72 youth ranging in age from 14 to 19 participated in the study, representing 97 percent of members in these five organizations. Young men modestly outnumber young women (see Figure 1), and program participants are racially/ethnically diverse. Approximately 50 percent are African American, 40 percent are Latino, 6 percent are Asian American/Pacific Islander, and the remaining are white/other. Participants in these programs come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. A substantial percentage—75 percent—were eligible for free and reduced lunch while in high school.

Figure 1. Gender Composition of Core Youth Participants
Participant Recruitment and Retention
Survey results suggest that schools function as important sites for recruiting youth to BHC-affiliated organizations. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, the majority of respondents (51 percent) reported learning about it from a classroom presentation, and 50 percent also learned about it from teachers and counselors (see Figure 2). A minority of youth also learned about their organizations through friends and peers and afterschool/lunch outreach.

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

![Bar chart showing the percentage of youth learning about their organization through different methods: Classroom presentation (51%), Teacher/Counselor (50%), Friend/Peer (20%), Afterschool/lunch outreach (9%).]

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their organization. As Figure 3 indicates, the top reason for joining was to develop new skills, a response given by 38 percent of youth surveyed. A significant proportion, 36 percent also joined because their group seemed like fun. Notably, a good number of participants came to their respective organizations with some concern for advancing the interests of their communities as 31 percent responded that they liked what the group focused on and 26 percent wanted to make a difference. Others joined for personal benefits: 31 percent sought to enhance their résumés and 26 percent wanted to get paid. Twenty-six percent also indicated that they joined upon the recommendation of a teacher or counselor, suggesting the importance of adult allies in encouraging youth involvement in BHC-related activities. 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.
A quarter (25 percent) of the members of South Sacramento’s BHC youth programs had participated in their BHC-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 groups. Members who have been part of their organizations longer may play a role in developing the leadership capacity of newer members.

Survey respondents reported various reasons for staying in their organizations that somewhat overlap with their reasons for joining. Figure 4 shows that 46 percent remained involved because they were developing new skills. However, 39 percent also stayed involved because they liked what the organization focused on and 36 percent wanted to make a difference. This likely suggests that youth participants felt that their involvement in these organizations could have an impact on the well-being of their communities. A significant proportion—38 percent—also remained involved because they were having fun.
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 some opportunities for leadership development for their youth. About a third of youth reported making important decisions, 22 percent planned a meeting or event, and 19 percent made a public presentation. Meanwhile, 31 percent reported involvement in college preparation activities. A fourth also engaged in physical exercise (see Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 5. How Youth Participated in Their BHC Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made important decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare for or succeed in college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical exercise at least once a week</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planned a meeting or event</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made a public presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performed or showcased art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrote about community issue</td>
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<td>Collected signatures/canvassing</td>
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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 reporting that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Results suggest that 50 percent of youth participants learned “a lot” that enabled them to stand up for their beliefs. Another 42 percent significantly improved their ability to communicate with others because of their involvement in their BHC group. Additionally, a notable share built trusting relationships with mentors, developed a better understanding of how government decisions impact their community, and learned about health issues impacting their community. As a result of their involvement, some also learned a lot about college and career options, have taken better care of their personal health, and improved their academic performance. These findings suggest that Sacramento’s programs may have positive impacts on the healthy development and leadership capacity of some of their members.
The Potential for Youth Organizing in South Sacramento

While youth organizations in South Sacramento are engaging their members in activities that promote their healthy development, they are in the process of developing their capacity to engage youth in health-related campaigns. Young people in this community were exposed to the potential power of grassroots organizing as a result of a community effort to install a traffic light near a school. This effort was initiated as a response to the tragic death of 16-year-old Michelle Murigi. After tutoring youth one evening, Michelle was walking home when she was struck by a driver who disregarded the painted crosswalk in front of the school. Her peers enlisted the support of teachers, the principal, the district and eventually city officials to install a traffic light at the crosswalk. Surrounded by youth activists, Michelle’s mother, Mary, turned on the new traffic light on May 9th, 2014.

Building on this small, but important victory, South Sacramento youth became involved in new transportation-related campaigns that focus on creating more crosswalks, increasing pedestrian mobility, reducing bus fare prices, and improving bus schedules and locations. As part of these campaign efforts, youth are learning to engage in community mapping in order to inform their policy demands.

Lacking an extensive history of youth-led organizing and advocacy efforts in South Sacramento, BHC-affiliated organizations are still working on supporting young people so that they may lead health-related advocacy and organizing initiatives. BHC staff and youth could benefit from learning from the leadership development and grassroots organizing strategies used in other BHC
sites. Additionally, organizations can learn from adult advocacy groups on how to leverage their proximity to the state capitol so that they can engage youth in leading statewide policy reform efforts. Over time, BHC youth organizations in South Sacramento might enable young people to help shape local and statewide policies affecting the well-being of low-income communities throughout the state.

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. Dawit Bekele is the HUB Project Coordinator with BHC South Sacramento. Veronica Terriquez is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation. We thank Bobby Powell for his assistance with this research.

For a statewide summary and reports from other BHC sites, please see: http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-leadership/