



# Sowing the Seeds of Change: The ICUC Youth Organizing Project



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**The Youth Organizing Project really changes you. It shows you how to speak your mind and stand up for what you believe in and your rights. Other people don't know how to do all that.**

– George,<sup>1</sup> 17-year-old member of the Youth Organizing Project

## INTRODUCTION

As the youngest of five siblings, George joined the Youth Organizing Project, the youth component of Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC), during his sophomore year of high school. It was, as he describes, “a life-changing experience.” He had seen his older brother initially classified early on as a gifted student, only to be neglected later by the school system and ultimately end up in prison. He felt that the schools had failed his brother, but that ICUC gave George the tools to not only tackle AP classes but also make a difference for his younger siblings and his community. George was very shy and a target for bullies at school, but ICUC helped him come out of his shell and improve his ability to build relationships with others. He explains that young adult ICUC organizers helped boost his self-esteem, tutored him in classes he was struggling with, and taught him about professionalism.

Such opportunities are rare for low-income youth in the Inland Empire of Southern California, a region known for socioeconomic inequity and sparse educational resources. By the time George graduated high school, he had served as Associated Student Body (ASB) Vice-President and held countless leadership roles in ICUC's Youth Organizing Project. In addition to leading the local organizing committee of ICUC at his high school, he became involved in campaigns to pass Proposition 30 (an initiative that would increase education funding) and to pressure Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform. As someone who was raised in a very low-income family, George developed high aspirations through his involvement in ICUC. After obtaining a bachelor's degree, George plans to attend law school so he can become a public defendant.



<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used in this report to preserve the confidentiality of research participants.

George's story is not unique among youth involved in ICUC. As this report shows, ICUC has had a strong positive impact on the healthy development and leadership of its members, while enabling them to shape policy and envision social changes that benefit young people in the Inland Empire more broadly. ICUC's Youth Organizing Project success can be attributed, in part, to its systematic involvement of youth members in various stages of local campaigns, while at the same time providing youth with culturally relevant mentoring and other support.

To provide some frame of reference for ICUC's efforts, this report begins with a brief overview of the history and geographic context of ICUC's work with youth. It then outlines the process by which ICUC seeks to develop youth members' leadership and engage them in campaigns. Next, it describes ICUC's current youth membership and the involvement of its members in youth organizing activities. Then, the report details the various ways in which ICUC contributes to the healthy development and leadership capacity of its members. We conclude with a brief note on some of the challenges ICUC encounters and its potential to have a lasting impact on the well-being of youth members and their communities. The findings presented here are based on surveys collected from 61 ICUC youth in 2013, follow-up in-depth interviews with 10 ICUC youth members, interviews with staff, participant observations, and archival data.

## ICUC AND THE INLAND EMPIRE

Founded in 2005, The Youth Organizing Project is the youth branch of ICUC, the Inland Empire local affiliate of the PICO National Network. PICO, one of the largest and most established faith-based grassroots community organizations in the United States, has a track record of involving its members in collective campaigns that address shared community concerns. As one of the few PICO affiliates with youth-led programs, ICUC has engaged young people across the Inland Empire, including those residing in low-income communities within San Bernardino, Ontario, the Coachella Valley, and Riverside.

The Inland Empire covers a vast urban, semi-urban, and rural region of over 27,000 square miles of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. This area, which grew from 1.5 million inhabitants in 1980 to 4.3 million in 2012, has yet to develop sufficient civic infrastructure to keep up with its population growth<sup>2</sup>. As a result, many of its lower-income youth and other residents lack opportunities for civic participation.

Latinos comprise the majority of the population in the Inland Empire. Predominantly from low-income and working-class immigrant backgrounds<sup>3</sup>, Latinos in this region have had to confront widespread anti-immigrant sentiment alongside local legislation that has hampered their successful incorporation. To make matters more difficult, the Great Recession that began in 2007 hit Latinos and other residents of modest means particularly hard; the Inland Empire experienced the highest unemployment and housing foreclosure rates of any metropolitan area in the nation<sup>4</sup>. As such, many young people who grow up in the region continue to encounter a number of economic and social barriers to attaining a higher education and achieving the American Dream. However, these challenges also set the stage for mobilization at the grassroots level.

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<sup>2</sup>Ramakrishnan, S. Karthick, Dino Bozonelos, Louise Hendrickson, and Tom K. Wong. 2008. "Inland Gaps: Civic Inequalities in a High Growth Region." Policy Matters: A Quarterly Publication of the University of California, Riverside 2:(1)

<sup>3</sup>First author's tabulations of the 2012 American Community Survey; DeLara, Juan. Forthcoming. "The Last Suburb: Immigrant Integration in Inland Southern California.

<sup>4</sup>DeLara, *ibid.*

# ICUC's YOUTH MEMBERSHIP

Targeting socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, ICUC's Youth Organizing Project involves high-school-age youth as well as young adults in its activities. Survey data collected in the fall of 2013 from 61 members, or 93% of the core leaders at the time, indicate that ICUC youth averaged 18 years of age and ranged from 14 to 24 years old. Comprising 54% of participants, young men slightly outnumbered young women. Nearly 4 out of 5 (79%) came from low-income backgrounds, meaning they were eligible for free or reduced lunch at school. Only 10% had a parent with a bachelor's degree. Most members (89%) identified as Latino; the remaining identified as African American, Asian-Pacific Islander, Native American, and Other. Eighty-five percent were raised by at least one immigrant parent (see Table 1).

**Table 1. ICUC's Youth Organizing Membership**

(Sample size=61, Response rate 93%)

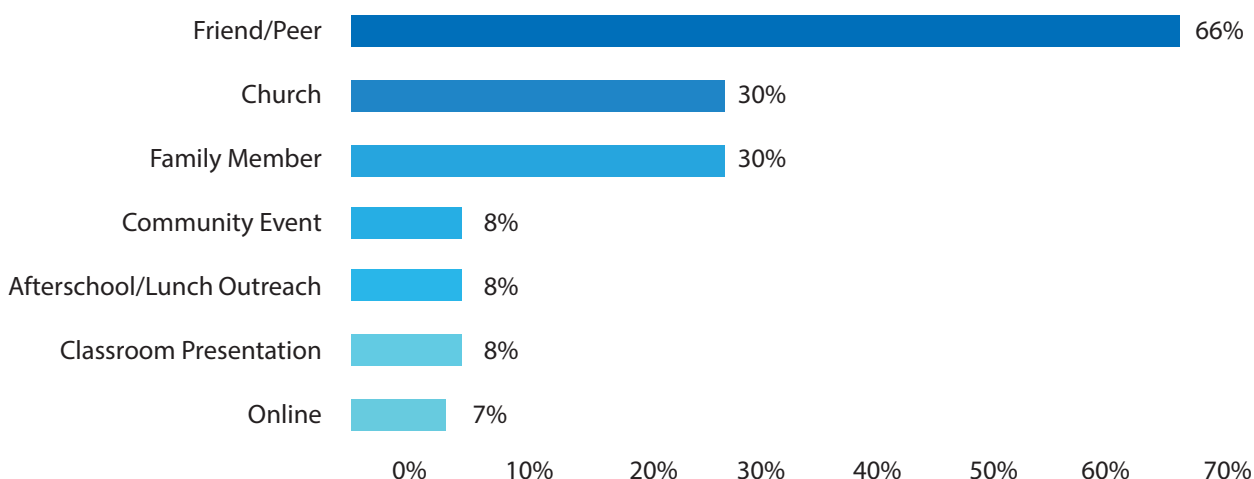
<b>MEMBERS' BACKGROUND</b>			
Average age	18.3		
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	54%	Female	46%
<b>Socioeconomic background</b>			
Low-income	79%	Has parent with BA degree	10%
<b>Race/Ethnicity*</b>			
Latino	89%	African-American	7%
Asian-Pacific Islander	2%	Native-American	2%
Other	2%		
From an immigrant family	85%		
<b>Length of time involved in ICUC</b>			
Involved in group < 6 months	16%	Involved in group 6-11 months	11%
Involved in group 1 year+	67%	Did not specify	5%

\*Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding error.

## *Member Recruitment and Retention*

Peers and religious institutions 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, most respondents (66%) reported learning about it from friends or peers (see Figure 1). Peer-to-peer recruitment evidences youths' leadership within the organizations and the important role that young people play in sustaining their organization. At the same time, many youth (30%) also reported hearing about their organization through their church or religious institution. This is because ICUC's Youth Organizing Project follows a faith-based organizing model and maintains solid ties with multiple faith congregations. Accordingly, ICUC staff and volunteers recruit new members through church youth groups, church announcements, and the recommendations of clergy. Members also commonly learned about the organization through family members, including older siblings who had been in the organization, and parents who heard about it through church.

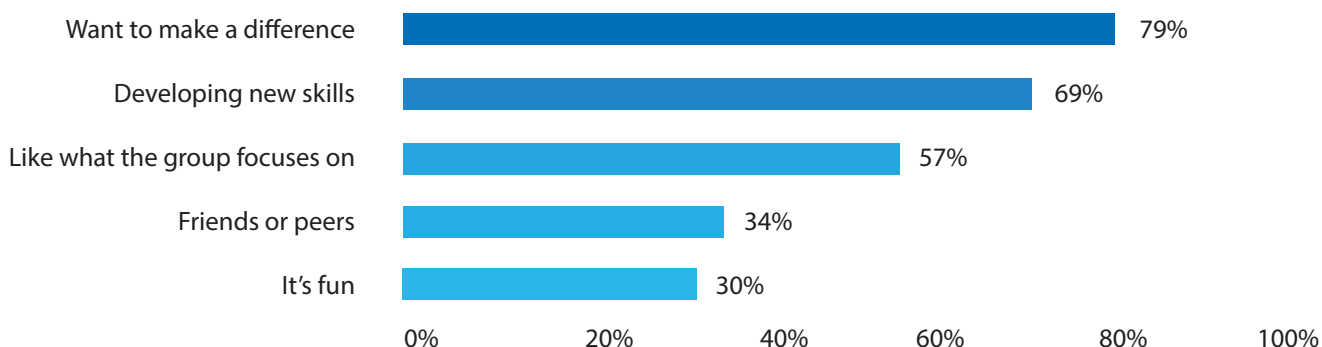
## Figure 1. How members learned about ICUC



It's worth noting that two-thirds (67%) of ICUC youth members who took part in the survey had belonged to the group for a year or longer. The remaining had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with the group. Members who have been part of the organization over a longer time may play a role in developing the leadership capacity of newer members.

ICUC members gave various reasons for remaining in the organization. When asked to report one or more reasons for staying involved, nearly 4 out of 5 (79%) indicated that they wanted to make a difference (see Figure 2). The majority—57%—also stayed involved because they liked the focus of the organization. Youth participants likely felt that their involvement in these groups could have an impact on the well-being of their communities. Importantly, 69% indicated that they remained involved because they were developing new skills. Social connections also play a role in retaining some members, as approximately one third (34%) reported maintaining their involvement because of friends or peers. It is worth noting that 30% also remained involved because they were having fun. ICUC's youth component is notable for its age-appropriate, fun, interactive activities, and the incorporation of overall youth culture.

## Figure 2. Reasons for Staying Involved in ICUC



## GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING PROCESS AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Much of ICUC's youth organizing entails engaging its members around grassroots campaigns. Youth receive guidance and training, mostly from young adult organizers, but also from older ICUC and PICO staff. In line with the broader PICO model of organizing, this process entails youth participation in three main interrelated components:

**1. One-to-Ones.** One-to-ones consist of face-to-face meetings where members or potential allies focus on getting to know each other, discuss community concerns, identify and develop campaigns, or recruit participants. As a way to build relationships and trust, youth members typically conduct one-to-ones with their peers, but they also conduct these meetings with teachers, school administrators, or other allies to help build support for a campaign.

**2. Research.** With the guidance of staff, youth members conduct research (broadly defined) to develop their campaigns. This research process can entail analyzing existing data and other information about the problems in their communities, as well as possible solutions. On occasion, it involves the collection of original data. For example, ICUC youth members have developed surveys around school lunch and nutrition, violence in their communities, and school discipline to inform their campaigns. Research, as defined by PICO, can also entail meeting with informants or other stakeholders who can provide insights into the campaigns.

**3. Actions.** The PICO model of action largely focuses on public actions that seek to hold elected officials and other decision-makers accountable to the communities that they represent. "Actions", in the PICO terminology, refer to formal public events in which community members report on their research about specific community issues, propose solutions that they have crafted for these issues, and urge public officials to commit to support these proposals. ICUC youth carry out these formal actions as well as other activities aimed at shaping public opinion and policy decisions that affect their communities. ICUC youth activities have included marches held at schools, City Hall, and outside of elected officials' offices, as well as community forums, prayer vigils, and other efforts that target decision-makers. Youth also carry out educational and political activities, such as candidate forums, public information sessions about an issue or policy, canvassing neighborhoods to educate community members about issues, voter registration, and "Get Out The Vote" (GOTV) drives. These activities expose youth to a variety of ways in which they can build or exercise civic engagement and political power.



Over the last several years, ICUC youth members participated in these three components of the organizing process to advance various campaigns. Table 2 lists key campaigns from 2006 to 2014 that involved youths' leadership:

## Table 2. ICUC Youth-Led Campaigns

### Anti-Violence Campaign (2006-08)

The anti-violence campaign was largely initiated in response to the murder of San Bernardino High School student Melanie Meirs, who was killed in 2005 during a drive-by shooting. ICUC youth organized a prayer vigil calling for an end to violence in the city. They demanded that the city council direct some of the anti-crime funds generated by the city's Measure Z tax toward youth programs instead of solely toward policing. The campaign was informed by a survey ICUC youth conducted of 8,776 students that addressed race relations in schools as well as students' experiences with violence and its impact on truancy. Youth reported being unsatisfied with city parks as well as employment options. As a result of their efforts, in 2008 the city council allocated one year of funding totaling \$250,000 toward summer youth employment and other violence prevention efforts.

### Breakfast Campaign (2008)

An ICUC youth survey conducted at five high schools in San Bernardino to gather student input on school lunches and student diets demonstrated that a majority of students did not eat breakfast. Because breakfast is such an important meal for students, the school administration at Cajon High School responded to these findings and ICUC youth demands by setting aside funding for breakfast carts at the school's entrances. These grab-and-go-type carts allowed eligible students to get a free breakfast on the way to class.

### GOTV & Prop 30 (2012)

ICUC youth planned rallies and forums to garner support for and raise awareness of California Proposition 30, a voter initiative that increased funding for public schools. Youth also canvassed neighborhoods to educate voters and participated in phone-banking. Within a four-week period, ICUC youth spoke directly with more than 15,000 voters. To ICUC's knowledge, this was the largest youth-led grassroots GOTV effort ever carried out in this region of California.

### Campaign for Citizenship and Comprehensive Immigration Reform (2013)

The main focus of this campaign was to convince Congressman Gary Miller, an anti-immigrant incumbent, to support comprehensive immigration reform that included a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Youth assisted with calling voters to encourage them to call Congressman Miller and voice their support of comprehensive immigration reform that included a pathway to citizenship. ICUC youth also helped organize two prayer vigils outside Congressman Miller's office to push for his comment and support of immigration reform. Congress subsequently took immigration reform off the table. Given that most ICUC youth members come from immigrant families, they plan to continue their support for immigration reform in the future.

## Local Control Funding Formula (2014-)

ICUC youth, in collaboration with adult ICUC members and other allies, helped lead organizing campaigns related to the implementation of LCFF in San Bernardino, Coachella, Riverside and Ontario. In San Bernardino, youth made three demands concerning how San Bernardino City Unified School District should spend new funds for education generated from Proposition 30 and the Local Control Funding Formula. The first demand was to eliminate “willful defiance” as a suspendable offense and to allocate more funds towards the implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) in all schools. PBIS provides training for teachers on how to handle interpersonal conflicts among students and funding for counselors to work with students who have consistent issues. The second demand was to allocate more funds toward parent engagement—specifically towards a program called Parent-to-Parent, which demonstrated success at one elementary school in San Bernardino. The third demand was to put more money toward programming for English Language Learners in order to ensure that they are reclassified as English Language Proficient and consequently eligible to enroll in courses that fulfill their A-G requirements. ICUC youth held a forum at a local church to gather community feedback on their demands, which they later presented to the school board. In response, the school board allocated an additional \$1.3 million towards parent engagement for 2014-2015; other demands, however, were not met. In other districts in the region ICUC youth leaders supported similar campaigns, and they continue organizing on this issue.

## School suspensions and willful defiance (2014-)

After conducting research on school suspensions in San Bernardino City Unified, ICUC youth discovered that over half of suspensions were for reasons of “willful defiance.” As a result, ICUC youth leaders have been lobbying school board members to change district discipline policies that allow for students to be suspended for “willful defiance,” a vague term applied to represent a range of behaviors that may be considered disruptive. Additionally, ICUC youth are advocating that the district allocate more funding towards Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS).

ICUC youth have largely become connected to these campaign efforts through Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) based in their high schools. LOCs typically meet weekly to discuss or make progress on the different elements of the organizing process. At the same time, LOCs also serve as an important site for youth development, as members receive mentoring or information that can advance their academic or personal success. Youth also have the opportunity to deepen their involvement and further develop their skill sets through an annual training retreat and occasional invitations to participate in activities with adult ICUC members or with the broader PICO network.

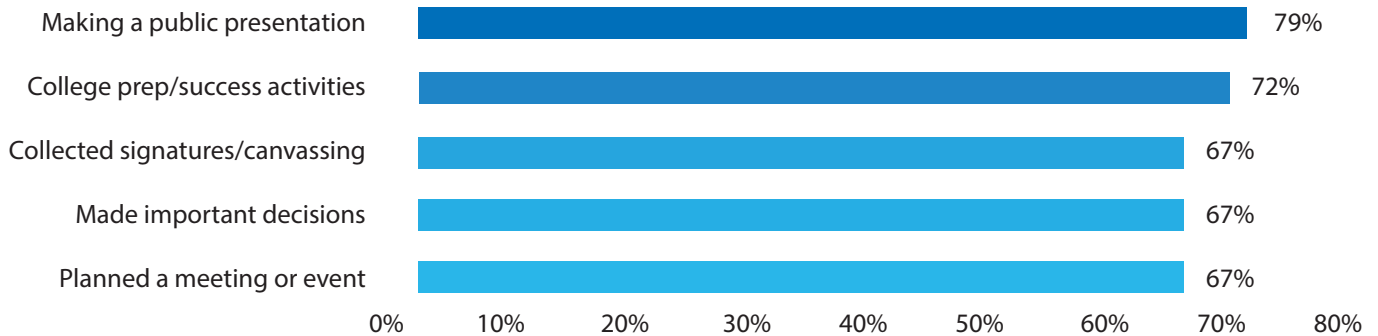
By engaging in organizing and broader ICUC and PICO efforts, youth organizers participate in a range of activities that enhance their leadership capacity. Survey results shown in Figure 3 indicate that most members (79%) reported making a public presentation. This finding can be attributed to opportunities to speak in public at community forums, school board meetings, city council meetings, and ICUC meetings. Seventy-two percent of youths reported participating in college preparation and/or college success activities. Because ICUC has been advocating the implementation of an A-G graduation requirement in school districts for several years, many youth learn about college admission and requirements through their involvement in ICUC. Sixty-seven percent of youth reported collecting signatures and/or canvassing. Because some PICO-driven campaigns focus on government legislation, ICUC youth members participated in voter registration drives as well as canvassing and phone banking. ICUC youth were involved in such activities



during voter education efforts around Proposition 30 (focused on funding for schools) and the Campaign for Citizenship (described in Table 2).

Youth members actively participate in decision-making and build leadership skills in ICUC—67% reported making an important decision with adults and the same percentage reported planning a meeting or event. Interviews with youth members and participant observations indicate that youth enjoy opportunities to assume a range of roles in ICUC activities, from chairing meetings and events, to discussing campaign issues with decision makers, to leading the closing prayer. Due to the expectation of youth to tap into their leadership capacity, even more introverted members who may have preferred more informal roles are challenged to assume public responsibilities.

### Figure 3. ICUC Youth Members’ Involvement



## THE IMPACT OF ICUC ON MEMBERS’ LEADERSHIP CAPACITY & HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

ICUC’s Youth Organizing Project has contributed to members’ leadership capacity and healthy development. We asked members to rate how their involvement in ICUC impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact? Figure 4 shows the percent of respondents who reported that their group involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Survey results, along with in-depth interviews of a subsample of 10 members, suggest that involvement in ICUC had wide-ranging impact on the lives of participants.

### Figure 4. How ICUC Members Benefit From Their Involvement



Perhaps most notably, ICUC youth reported developing a range of leadership and civic skills through their involvement. Eighty-four percent of members reported that they improved their ability to communicate with others “a lot.” This dominant pattern among members may, in part, be attributed to the one-to-ones that members conduct as part of the organizing process. Members, after all, are required to individually talk to peers about their campaigns. Additionally, weekly ICUC meetings, coupled with small committee breakout groups that ICUC uses to discuss and plan activities, likely enhanced members’ communication skills. Most ICUC youth (82%) also reported that they learned “a lot” with respect to being able to stand up for their beliefs. Campaign-related activities, in particular, serve as important venues that provide members with ample opportunity to stand up for their beliefs in a variety of ways.

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**“I learned how to talk to people, to come out of my little shell and stop being so shy.”**

– 17-year-old female ICUC leader

**“When I first joined, I learned that I was really shy. I didn’t really stand up for myself and I didn’t really care about what was going on in my community, but once I got involved, I started changing and learning about my community, what’s going on.”**

– 16-year-old male ICUC leader

**“I am a very outspoken person, but this taught me how to do it respectfully, how to speak without coming off as insulting anyone.”**

– 19-year-old female ICUC leader



Through their involvement in ICUC, youth not only learn about government structures and processes, they also learn how to have a voice in local decision-making. This is significant because prior research indicates that low-income youth of color in the United States often lack access to meaningful civic experiences in adolescence and early adulthood<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the types of young people who get involved in ICUC tend to come from immigrant families with limited exposure to political processes in the United States<sup>6</sup>. ICUC's youth organizing campaigns, therefore, have a strong impact on the civic development of members, as over three-fourths (77%) reported developing a better understanding of how government decisions impact their communities. This understanding can, in part, be attributed to the two-hour Civics 101 workshop, offered at the 2013 annual retreat, that taught members about the federal, state, and local government structure, as well as familiarized them with the elected officials who currently represent their regions. Additionally, ICUC youth leaders learn about the process through attending government meetings, developing and leading campaigns, and participating in ongoing trainings.

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**“I learned more in ICUC than I learned in my Government class. I learned it better. Anything that’s being taught in Government is being taught in ICUC.”**

– 20-year-old female member

**“It’s giving me a head start. If I never joined ICUC, I would not know what’s been going on in this government.”**

– 16-year-old female ICUC leader

Given that ICUC offers its youth leaders a range of opportunities for civic participation, it is perhaps not surprising that two-thirds (66%) reported improving their ability to plan events and activities “a lot.” The same percentage also reported improving their ability to speak in public. Another 59% indicated that they learned a lot about health issues impacting their community. It is worth noting that ICUC frames issues such as school discipline, immigration reform, and school meals as public health issues or as concerns shaping community well-being.

Through their involvement, ICUC youth leaders receive other forms of guidance and support that can contribute to their healthy development and long-term success. ICUC young adult organizers, who are from the same or similar communities as the general youth membership, serve as important resources and role models for many of the members. Survey results indicate that 72% of youth built or strengthened relationships with mentors “a lot” as a result of their involvement.



<sup>5</sup>Levinson, Meira. 2012. *No Citizen Left Behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.; Terriquez, Veronica. 2014. “Training Young Activists: Grassroots Organizing and Youths’ Civic and Political Trajectories.” *Sociological Perspectives*. Online.

<sup>6</sup>Terriquez, Veronica and Hyeyoung Kwon. 2014. “Intergenerational Family Relations, Civic Organisations, and the Political Socialisation of Second-Generation Immigrant Youth.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*:1-23.



**“The organizers are very understanding, and they’re like family. They’re there when you need someone to talk to. Our organizer helped me in everything—with college applications and financial aid. That’s something school is supposed to teach you, and I personally think my school didn’t do that for us.”**

– 19-year-old female ICUC youth leader

In-depth interview data confirm the important mentorship role that young organizers play in supporting members, not only through the organizing process, but in navigating personal challenges, school concerns, and the transition to college. Indeed, most ICUC youth leaders (57%) report learning a lot about college and career options through their participation in ICUC. This occurred through their relationship with mentors, broader exposure to opportunities, and in some cases, through the campaign process. For example, some ICUC youth leaders were unaware of the A-G college requirements before joining the organization. Because the A-G courses are not required for graduation in the school districts that include San Bernardino, Riverside, Ontario and Coachella high schools, students are sometimes unaware that they need to take certain classes in order to be eligible to apply to a four-year college right out of high school. Notably, ICUC staff and campaigns consistently highlight the salience of a quality high school education and college enrollment in opening doors of opportunities for ICUC youth leaders. As a result, involvement in ICUC youth organizing reinforces members’ investment in their own educational success.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Although youth organizing efforts in the Inland Empire have actively developed the leadership capacity of youth and built coalitions to respond to shared concerns, they have also encountered some challenges. One such challenge is transportation. The sprawling Inland Empire coupled with very limited public transportation options make it difficult for youth to attend ICUC meetings and events off high school campuses. ICUC youth also encounter significant ageism. Lacking a history of youth organizing in the region, adult stakeholders do not always take seriously the role of youth engagement in civic decision and policy-making processes. The challenges that youth sometimes encounter when engaging in political processes may be complicated further by the discrimination that Latino immigrants and their children experience in the Inland Empire. Notwithstanding, youth leaders’ ties to the larger ICUC membership and ties to religious institutions do lend some credibility to the efforts of its young members. Over time, as young members have developed their own relationships with elected officials and other decision-makers, ICUC youth have increased their standing as stakeholders. Nonetheless, ICUC youth leaders must continue the work of establishing themselves as legitimate stakeholders in the community.

In spite of these challenges, ICUC youth organizing project’s membership-driven approach to organizing, as well as the organization’s focus on local campaigns, provide members with formative experiences that are likely to have an enduring impact on their leadership capacity and healthy development. Additionally, ICUC’s organizing efforts may continue to influence policies that have the potential to enhance youths’ academic opportunities, health outcomes, and general well-being of this rapidly changing region.

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