

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES THROUGH YOUTH LEADERSHIP

The Comprehensive
Developmental
Outcomes of
Youth Organizing

Supported by The California Endowment since 2010, the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative has sought to promote community well-being through youth leadership in grassroots organizing and advocacy campaigns. To this end, youth-serving organizations in 14 low-income communities have developed a comprehensive approach to expanding the capacities of young people of color to make a positive difference in their economically distressed communities.

BHC-affiliated youth organizations differ in their foci, strengths, resources, and track-records of working with youth. Despite these differences, the BHC initiative has facilitated cross-site learning, collaboration, and shared technical assistance that has generated overlap in how groups engage their members. As such, this report briefly outlines themes that have emerged over the years in BHC groups' efforts to promote youth's leadership development. To varying degrees, groups have expanded their young members' basic civic skills, offered them a critical civics education, expanded their capacity for civic action, and supported their personal growth and well-being. This summary report draws on data from 1396 youth, ages 13–26, who represent 92% of regular participants in 96 BHC-affiliated groups. Five years of participant observation, staff surveys, and semi-structured interviews of youth and staff also inform analysis.

KEY THEMES IN BHC YOUTH'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Four key themes encapsulate the ways in which BHC-affiliated groups have developed youth's leadership capacity. BHC groups have developed youth's **BASIC CIVIC SKILLS** so that youth are able to share their ideas with public audiences and plan activities for others. Groups have also provided their members with **CRITICAL CIVICS EDUCATION** that teaches youth to identify the structural causes of community problems,

analyze social policies, and understand the experiences of diverse community members. By engaging youth in collective efforts to change social policy, BHC-affiliated groups have expanded members' **CAPACITY FOR CIVIC ACTION** through meetings with decision-makers, collaboration with diverse stakeholders, collective action, and voter engagement efforts. Finally, BHC groups support their young members' **PERSONAL GROWTH AND WELL-BEING** by providing them with strategies for healing from trauma, self-care, academic achievement, degree attainment, and professional growth. Featuring findings based on indicators of these four themes, Figure 1 shows youth members' self-reports indicating the degree to which they believe their organizational involvement impacted their personal development.

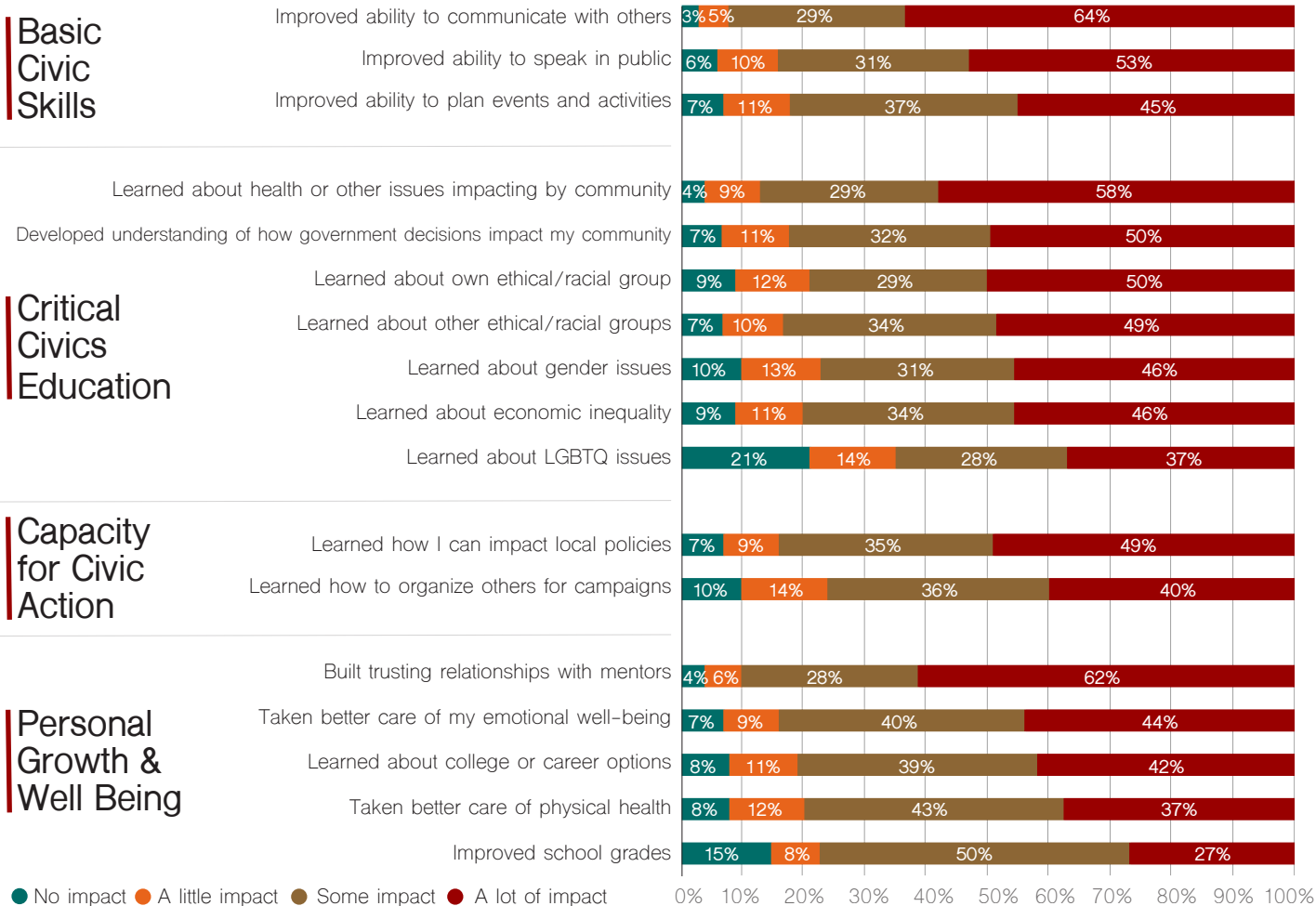
BASIC CIVIC SKILLS

BHC-affiliated youth acquired basic civic skills, to varying degrees. While school extra-curricular activities can confer such skills, opportunities for meaningful extracurricular involvement tend to be limited in BHC and other low-income communities. BHC groups help compensate for the shortage of opportunities. For example, the percentage of youth reporting that BHC involvement resulted in "a lot" of improvement in their ability to speak in public was 64%, while many others reported that they improved their ability to communicate with others (53%), and to plan events and activities (45%).

CRITICAL CIVICS EDUCATION

Through their organizations, BHC youth receive different levels of exposure to a civics curriculum typically not available in low-income K–12 schools. Results indicate that 58% of youth participants learned a lot about health issues impacting their community, while around half also learned a lot about how government decisions impact their community. Some also learned a lot about their own or other ethnic/racial groups, economic inequality, gender issues, and LGBTQ issues.

FIGURE 1: THE IMPACT OF BHC GROUP INVOLVEMENT ON YOUTHS' LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



CAPACITY FOR CIVIC ACTION

Youth in BHC groups have won a broad range of policy changes aimed at improving community health. The degree to which youth take an active role in different stages of these campaigns varies across organizations. Nonetheless, survey results show that 49% have learned a lot about how they can impact policies, and 40% have learned a lot about how to organize others.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

BHC groups differ in the extent to which they devote time to helping young people heal from trauma, develop healthy lifestyles, and achieve their academic and professional goals. Overall, most youth developed positive relationships with mentors. A significant percentage (44%) reported taking a lot better care of their emotional health, likely as a result of healing circles, mindfulness activities, meditation, spiritual practices, or support groups. At the same time, BHC involvement also encouraged some youth to take better care of their physical health. Youth also learned about college and career options, and a smaller percentage improved their school grades. BHC grassroots campaigns not only expose young people to college-educated professionals, they can also provide youth the opportunities to apply and develop academic skills.

Promoting Lasting Youth Leadership in California

Since the inception of the BHC initiative in 2010, affiliated youth BHC organizations have expanded meaningful opportunities for their young leaders to advance their community’s health. By supporting their youth members and providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in their communities, BHC groups have become an important component of the social movement infrastructure.



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