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MILPA's Efforts to Promote Youth and Community Well-Being in Salinas

Dr. Veronica Terriquez, Dr. Ruben Espinoza, Uriel Serrano, and Ana Mendoza

This report describes youth programming offered by Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA), a grassroots collective in Salinas, California. MILPA's mission is to promote community well-being through civic engagement, coalition building, professional development, and spiritual healing practices. The collective's multi-faceted work includes programming that aims to re-integrate formerly incarcerated men into the community; "Rites of Passage" curriculum focused on youths' social, emotional, and character development; healing arts; culturally-relevant political education; grassroots organizing and advocacy; and internships for college students. Much of MILPA's programming is informed by Uto-Aztec philosophies, the guidance of diverse elders of color, and the cultural traditions of their predominately Mexican-American members.

Containing four sections, this report relies on 2016 survey data collected from MILPA's youth members and semi-structured interviews of paid staff. The first section consists of a demographic profile of MILPA's youth members. The second section lays out why youth joined MILPA and how they participated in the group's activities. The third section presents self-reports of how MILPA involvement enhanced youths' leadership capacities and well-being. The final section summarizes MILPA's involvement in local campaigns.

MILPA'S PARTICIPANTS

In the spring of 2016, MILPA's adolescent and young adult membership consisted of 29 individuals, all of whom participated in a survey for the Youth Leadership and Health Study, the larger investigation from which data for this report originate.¹ The average age of MILPA youth members was 19 at the time of the survey, but they ranged in age from 13 to 29 years. Sixty-nine percent of members identified as men, while the remaining identified as



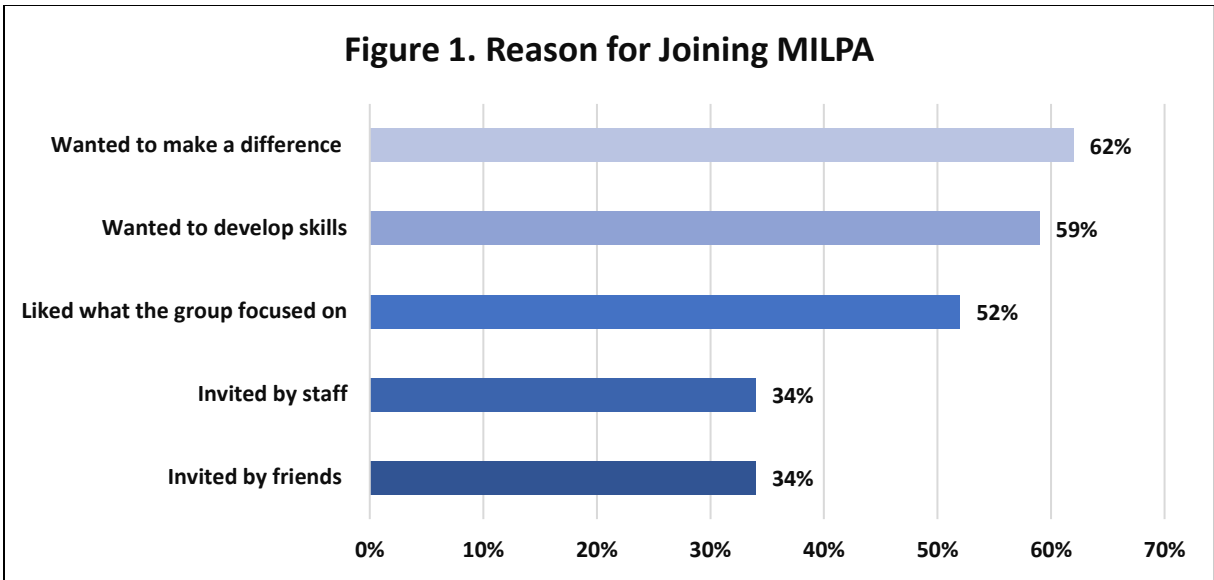
women. This gender imbalance is due to MILPA's focus on supporting formerly incarcerated men and its membership in the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, a diverse coalition aimed at improving the lives of young low-income males. MILPA's membership generally reflects the ethnic composition of East Salinas; 89% of youth members identified as Latino, while the remaining identified as either African-American (7%) or White (3%).

Most of MILPA's youth members came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 69% were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 7% were raised by a parent or guardian with a bachelor's degree.

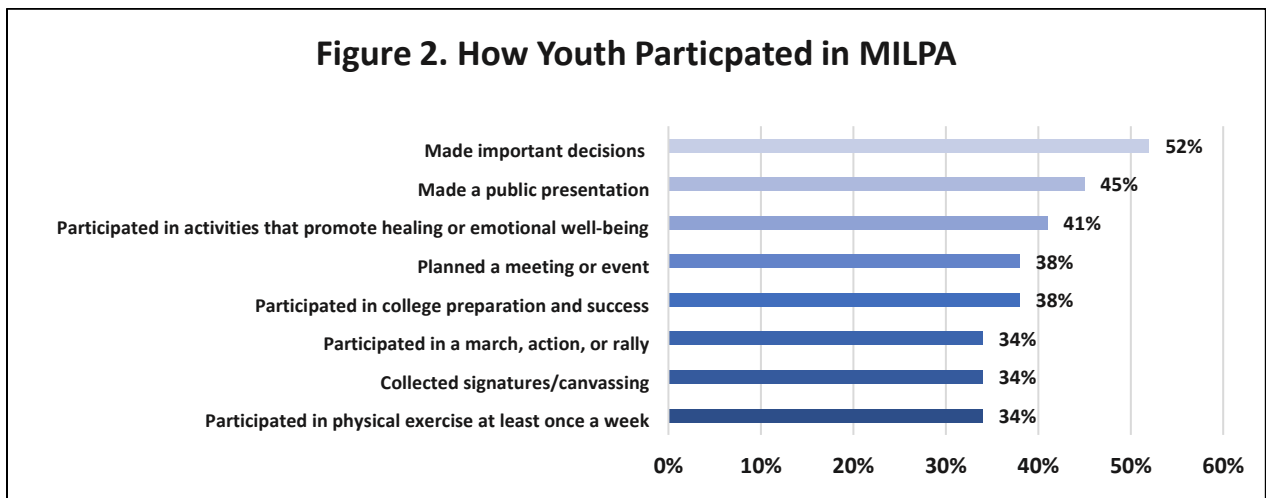
MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

Youth in MILPA vary in how long they had been involved in the organization. Overall, 41% of members had participated in the organization for at least a year at the time of the survey. Of the remaining youth, 14% had been involved 6-11 months, 31% were involved for less than 6 months, and another 14% declined to state the length of their involvement with MILPA.

In the Youth Leadership and Health Survey, youth were asked to list up to three reasons why they joined MILPA. Figure 1 lists the top reasons for joining. The most common reason given was wanting to make a difference (62%), but many also joined because they wanted to develop their skills (59%), and they liked what the organization focused on (52%). Others also joined because the group seemed like fun (34%), or because they were invited by friends (34%) or staff (34%). Overall, findings suggest that youth got involved with MILPA based on their community and personal interests, or because they were actively recruited.



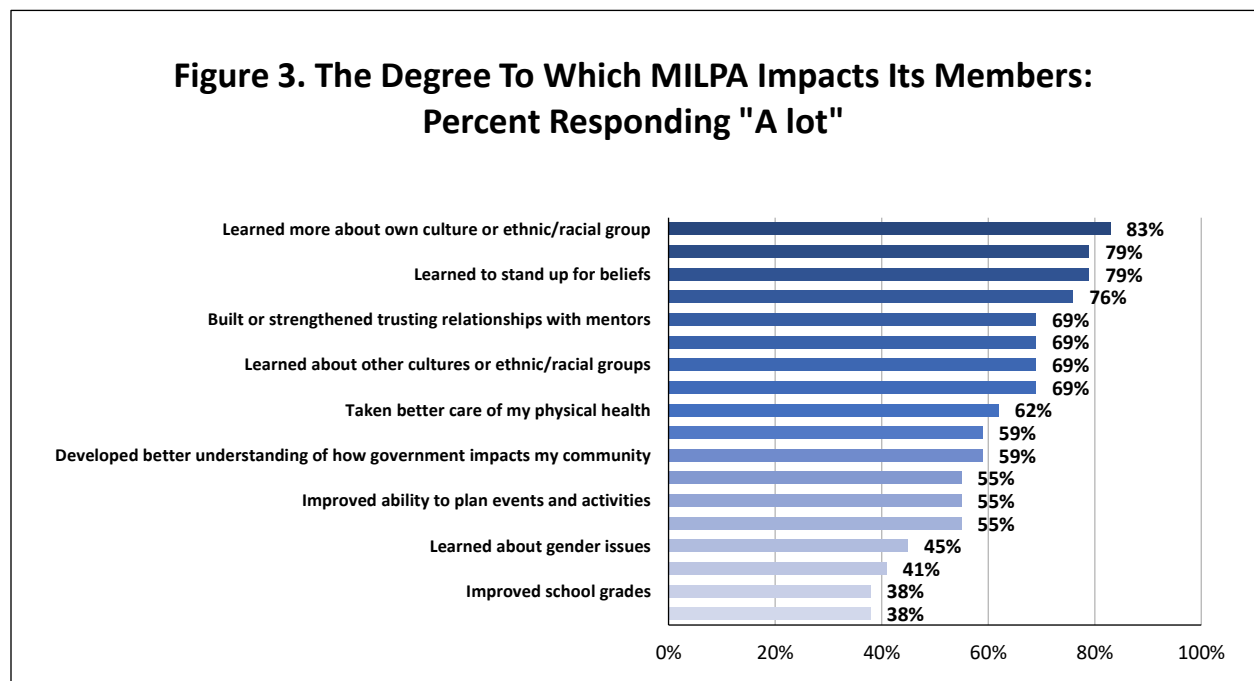
Youth were also asked to indicate the types of activities that they engaged in at MILPA. The list was based on common actions and activities offered by over 130 youth organizing and youth leadership organizations across the state.² Most youth claimed to make important decisions (52%), as indicated in Figure 2. Many also made public presentations (45%) or engaged in activities that promote healing or emotional well-being (41%). Some also participated in civic activities such as planning a meeting or event (38%); partaking in a march, action, or rally (34%); and collecting signatures and/or canvassing for a campaign (34%). Similar percentages also engaged in college preparation and success activities (38%) or in weekly physical exercise (34%).



HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

MILPA contributes to its members' healthy development in a variety of ways and to different degrees. In the Youth Leadership and Health Study survey, members were asked to rate the degree to which their MILPA involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*? Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who reported that their involvement with MILPA had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey.

Survey findings suggest that MILPA members expanded their civic, organizing, and advocacy skills. Over three fourths reported that their involvement had a lot of impact on their ability to stand up for their beliefs (79%), their ability to communicate with others (79%), and their understanding of health or other community issues (76%). Most MILPA members also improved their ability to speak in public (69%), learned how to impact policy change (69%), and gained a better understanding of how government decisions impact their community (59%). Some also learned a lot about organizing others to participate in campaigns that benefit their communities (41%).



Through their involvement, MILPA youth members learned about their own and others' diverse populations. As results show, 83% reported learning a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group, while 69% learned a lot about other ethnic/racial groups. Additionally,

youth also learned a lot about economic inequality (55%), gender issues (45%), and LGBTQ issues (38%).

MILPA seeks to promote the holistic well-being of their members through mentoring, healing circles, physical exercise, and ongoing encouragement to invest in their education. Members overwhelmingly built or strengthened relationships with mentors (69%). Many also reported that their involvement had positive health and educational benefits. Results indicate that 62% have taken “a lot” better care of their physical health and 59% have taken “a lot” better care of their emotional well-being. Meanwhile, 55% learned “a lot” about college and career options and 38% significantly improved their grades in school. These education-related findings may partially be attributed to the college and university field trips some members attended.

COLLECTIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

In addition to supporting the healthy development of members, MILPA engaged members in local campaigns. Through collaboration with other community stakeholders, their efforts included the following:

- **Improved Recreational Space:**

In February 2016, MILPA youth worked with other youth organizations to improve the skate park conditions in Natividad Creek Park. They gathered petitions from local skaters and met with city officials in order to successfully obtain a commitment for



nighttime lights and water fountains for the park. With support from an external grant, MILPA youth members also joined the Skateboard Youth Advisory Council in order to further provide input into park improvements.

- **Increasing Funding for Youth Services:** In response to the significant shortage of youth programming in East Salinas, MILPA has joined other local organizations to advocate for increased funding for art and youth programming in the communities. To this end, MILPA members joined a June 2016 march in Oldtown Salinas. The purpose of the march was to lobby city leaders to support local youth activities. The efforts of the youth and their allies proved

successful, as city council committed to move \$280,000 from the city's general budget into the city's art and youth budget.

- **Registering and Educating Voters:** Low-income voters in East Salinas, as in many parts of the state, are registered to vote at low rates. In response to the limited voter turnout in this community, MILPA youth devoted time to registering voters in 2014. This same year they also educated voters about Proposition 47, which reclassified six nonviolent crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. In fall 2016, MILPA renewed its voter registration efforts and educated voters about Proposition 57. This ballot initiative increased sentence credits for good behavior, rehabilitation, and education, as well as provided parole opportunities for felons convicted of nonviolent crimes. Proposition 57 also gave judges more discretion to decide whether to try certain juveniles as adults in court. MILPA concentrated their voter registration and education efforts at public community events.

THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTH'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN MILPA

Since their inception in 2012, MILPA has expanded meaningful opportunities for their young leaders to engage in collective efforts that advance community well-being. These youth leaders are likely to continue their public service and activism as they become older. As such, MILPA's efforts may have a lasting impact on community health and well-being in Salinas.

This report was published by the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), a research unit within the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences. **Veronica Terriquez** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UCSC and PERE faculty affiliate. **Ruben Espinoza** is an Assistant Professor at Chapman University. **Uriel Serrano** is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC). **Ana Mendoza** is an undergraduate student researcher and Sociology major at UCSC. This report is funded by The California Endowment and by a UCSC COR Faculty grant.



¹ Terriquez, Veronica. 2016. "Youth Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being in California: Summary of Key Findings from the 2016 Youth Leadership and Health Survey." Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at:

http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/BHC_Youth_Survey_2016_Statewide_Summary.pdf

² Terriquez, Veronica and Abdiel Lopez. 2016. "BHC Youth Program Inventory Survey: Key Findings." Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at:

https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/VT_BHC_Youth_Program_Staff_Inventory_Report.2016.pdf