

Young men of color who grow up in poverty are significantly overrepresented in the prison system and significantly underrepresented in institutions of higher education. These disparities are related to the comparatively lower life expectancy and poor health outcomes for men of color. Youth organizing and leadership programming can help combat the poor life chances experienced by young men of color from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This research report highlights how community-based youth organizations, along with statewide and regional youth development opportunities, can enhance the civic capacities and well-being of this young population. Drawing from the Youth Leadership and Health Study, this research report highlights the experiences of adolescent and young adult males who participated in 94 youth organizations affiliated with the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative. Funded by The California Endowment and targeting 14 high-poverty communities across the state, the BHC initiative supports the engagement of young people in grassroots and advocacy efforts aimed at improving health and well-being.

BHC-affiliated youth organizations offer a range of youth development activities that complement grassroots and advocacy campaign efforts. These include media production and the cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, college and career preparation, and/or other activities. In connection with the BHC initiative, a subset of members are also invited to participate in statewide and regional convenings that seek to advance campaigns and further support the leadership development of members. Gatherings open to all genders include Free Our Dreams Youth Organizing Summit, Policy Advocacy Day in Sacramento, and regional campaign planning meetings and trainings. Those specifically for male-identified members include the weeklong Sons and Brothers Summer Camp and the Leadership Academy for Boys and Men of Color. Some of these activities receive additional financial support through The California Endowment's Sons and Brothers plan, which targets additional foundation resources to promote the physical and mental well-being, higher education, workforce development, and leadership of boys and young men of color.

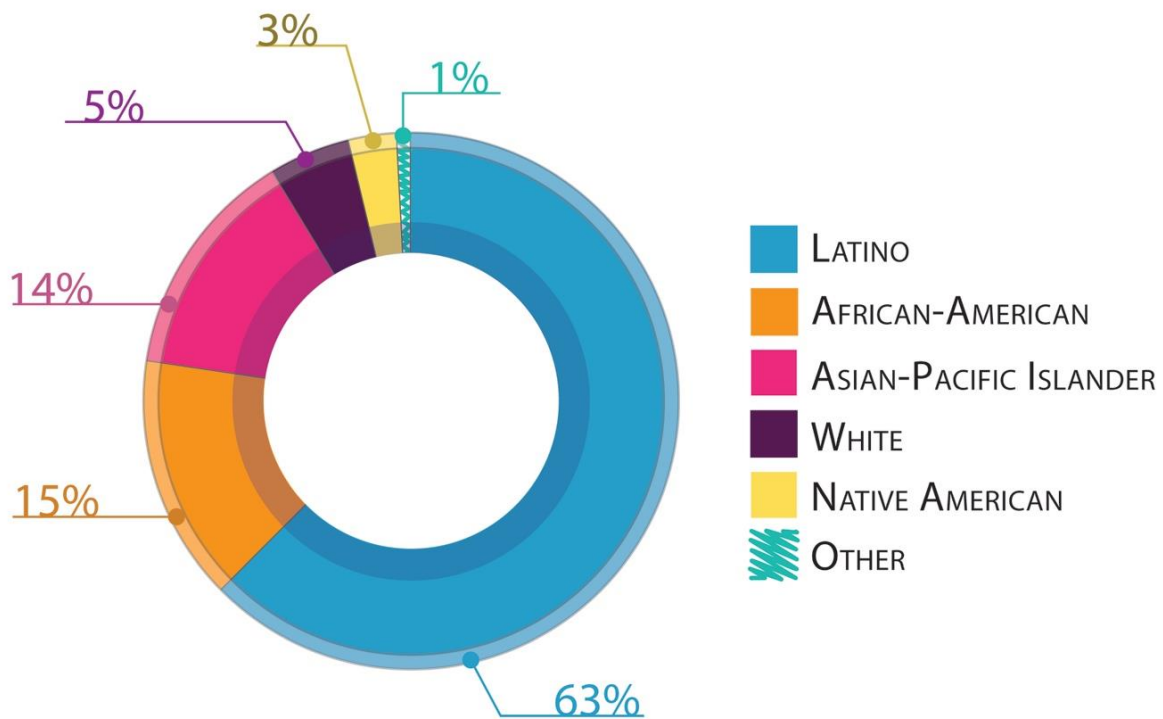
Divided into four main sections, this report focuses on the healthy development of male-identified members of BHC-affiliated youth organizations. The first section relies on survey data to offer a demographic overview of male participants, while the second describes their involvement in their organizations. The third section presents survey results demonstrating how involvement in BHC-affiliated organizations has expanded young male members' basic civic skills, offered them a critical civics education, increased their capacity for civic action, and

supported their personal growth and well-being. Further, this section accounts for the development of young boys and men who attended statewide and regional convenings. The last section draws on over 20 interviews and 200 hours of participant observations to elaborate on how Sons and Brothers Summer Camp, Free Our Dreams, and other statewide and regional programming further promote the well-being and leadership development of young men. Overall, this report evidences the comprehensive developmental outcomes experienced by boys and young men who participate in BHC-affiliated organizations, and suggests that regional and statewide gatherings further expand members' leadership capacities and well-being.

BHC-Affiliated Boys and Young Men of Color

BHC-affiliated youth organizations engage young people from racially diverse, high-poverty communities. As such, youth members generally tend to be reflective of the demographics of their communities, as shown by 2016 survey data collected from 640 adolescent boys and young men. Representing approximately 90% of male-identified regular participants in BHC-affiliated organizations, survey participants averaged 17 years of age, but ranged in age from 13 to 29 years old. Almost all BHC participants were of color. As Figure 1 shows, 63% identified as Latino, 15% as African-American, 14% as Asian-Pacific Islander, 5% as white, 3% as Native American, and 1% as other.

FIGURE 1. RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF YOUNG MALE PARTICIPANTS



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

Sixty-nine percent of survey participants came from an immigrant family, meaning that they had at least one parent or guardian who was born outside the United States. BHC-affiliated organizations also tend to serve young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Sixty-nine percent of male participants were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school and only 12% were raised by a parent or guardian with a bachelor's degree.

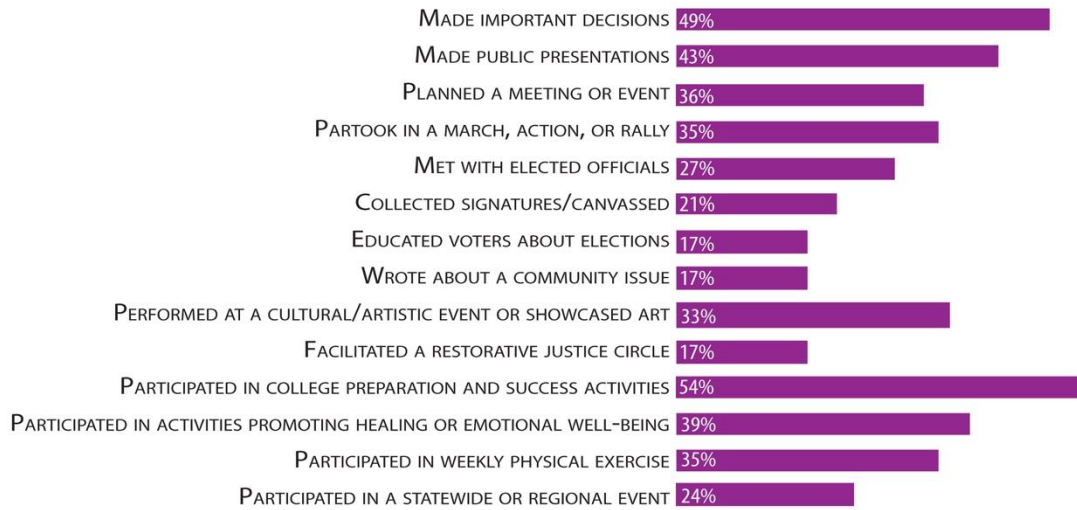
How Boys and Young Men of Color Are Involved

BHC-affiliated youth organizations provide opportunities for boys and young men to network with peers, mentors, and community leaders. They also serve as supportive spaces for young members to participate in guided activities that support their healthy development and civic leadership. As findings from this study (published elsewhere) have shown, the longer that members participate in their organizations, the more activities they engage in and the more responsibility they assume over the activities of their organizations.¹ It is therefore noteworthy that overall, BHC-affiliated organizations evince high retention rates, as 60% of male survey participants reported that they had been involved in their organization for at least a year at the time they took the survey. Meanwhile, 13% had been involved 6-11 months, 19% were involved for less than 6 months, and another 8% declined to state the length of their involvement. It is likely that more experienced members played a role in recruiting and training newer members.

Survey data demonstrate that through their organizations, male participants took part in a range of campaign and youth development activities. As shown in Figure 2, nearly half (49%) reported making important decisions. Given the focus of these organizations, the decisions they made likely revolved around their campaigns or other efforts to improve health outcomes in the community. Surveys also indicate that 43% made public presentations; 36% planned meetings or events; 35% partook in a march, action, or rally; and 27% met with elected officials. Smaller numbers of individuals also collected signatures or canvassed (21%), educated voters about elections (17%), and wrote about community issues (17%). Meanwhile, 33% performed at a cultural/artistic event or showcased art; in our observations of BHC activities, we found that cultural and artistic efforts often promoted campaign efforts or reflected a positive message about the community. Some participants also facilitated a restorative justice circle (17%).

Through their organizations, boys and young men engaged in other activities focused on aspects of their personal growth and development. Most participated in some sort of college preparation and success activities (54%). Some also took part in activities such as healing circles, meditation, breathing exercises, forward stance, and culturally-based spiritual activities that aim to promote emotional well-being (39%). Meanwhile, 35% of boys and young men participated in weekly physical exercise through their organization. Finally, 24% of members participated in a statewide or regional event. While not shown in Figure 2, it is worth noting that veteran members who had been part of their organizations for a year or longer were somewhat more likely than newer members to attend a statewide or regional gathering (71% versus 57%). As the next section shows, these larger gatherings appear to have further enhanced the leadership and well-being of these young male participants.

¹ Terriquez, Veronica and John Rogers. 2017. "Time for Social Change: Youth Development and the Educational Outcomes of Youth Organizing." Pgs. 161-178. In *Learning Time: In Pursuit of Educational Equity*, edited by Jeannie Oakes, Marisa Saunders, and Jorge Ruiz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

FIGURE 2.**HOW BOYS AND YOUNG MEN PARTICIPATED IN THEIR ORGANIZATIONS****How Boys and Young Men of Color Benefit from Their Involvement**

As part of the Youth Leadership and Health Study, members were asked to rate the degree to which their involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*? Such self-reports are subjective and might suffer from social desirability bias, although the range of responses indicates that participants felt comfortable disagreeing, when appropriate. To be conservative, Figure 3 shows the likelihood of BHC-affiliated young men reporting that their involvement had “a lot” of impact on different aspects of their leadership development. Results adjust for how long members had been part of their organizations and compare findings for individuals who attended a statewide or regional event (represented by blue bars) to those who had not yet attended such an event (represented by purple bars).²

To varying degrees, male participants experienced personal growth along a range of indicators. Importantly, those who attended statewide and regional convenings were especially likely to report experiencing a lot of impact on the leadership and developmental outcomes measured in the survey. To begin, boys and young men develop a range of basic civic skills that enable members to share their ideas with public audiences and plan activities for others. For example, the likelihood of involvement resulting in a lot of improvement in their ability to communicate with others was 78% for those who had attended a statewide or regional event and 57% for those who had not. When it came to improving their ability to speak in public, 64% of those who attended statewide and regional activities were likely to make such a claim, compared to 47% of

² Findings are based on logistic regression analysis that accounts for the relationship between measures of youth leadership development and attendance at statewide or regional events, after controlling for whether or not members had participated in their organization for a year or longer.

those who had not attended such gatherings. Meanwhile, these findings were 51% and 38%, respectively, for improving the ability to plan events and activities.

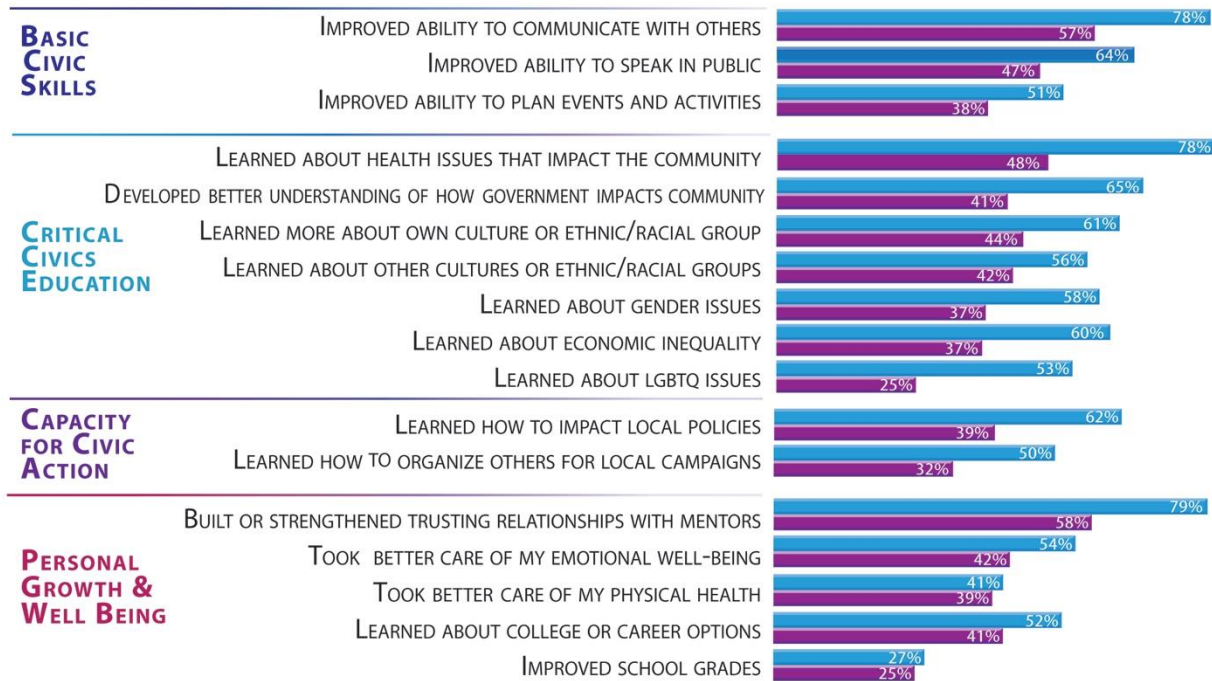
Results also demonstrate that boys and young men are obtaining varying levels of exposure to a critical civics education that teaches them to identify the structural causes of community problems, analyze social policies, and understand the experiences of diverse community members. Results indicate that many were likely to report learning a lot about health or other issues impacting their community, as well as 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. The likelihood of acquiring such critical civics education was greater among those who had attended statewide and regional activities than among those who had not yet participated in such a gathering.

The extent to which boys and young men exercise a leadership role in local campaigns can vary across organizations. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of respondents reported expanding their capacity to take civic action. For example, the likelihood of reporting learning a lot about how to impact local policies was 62% among those who attended statewide and regional events, compared to 39% for the remaining members. Meanwhile, the percentage likely to report learning a lot about how to organize others for campaigns was 50% and 32%, respectively, for these two groups of boys and young men.

Finally, BHC-affiliated organizations differ in the extent to which they devote time to directly supporting members' health and well-being, academic achievement, and professional goals. Boys and young men who were part of these groups were overwhelmingly likely to report building or strengthening positive relationships with mentors, but the likelihood of claiming that their organizations had a lot of impact was particularly high among those who had attended statewide or regional events (79%). At the same time, significant percentages were likely to report taking a lot better care of their emotional health. Although the results are not shown in Figure 3, these findings were associated with participation in healing circles, mindfulness activities, meditation, spiritual practices, or support groups. Meanwhile, a smaller percentage of members were likely to report taking better care of their physical health. Notable percentages were also likely to report learning a lot about college and career options (52% among those who had attended a statewide or regional event and 41% among those who had not). Overall, just over a quarter of survey respondents claimed to have improved their school grades by a lot as a result of their involvement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that BHC organizations play an important role in developing the leadership capacity of their male members and that statewide and regional activities may further contribute to the leadership development among those selected to participate.

FIGURE 3. COMPREHENSIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG BOYS AND YOUNG MEN



ATTENDED STATEWIDE/REGIONAL GATHERING DID NOT ATTEND STATEWIDE/REGIONAL GATHERING

*RESULTS REFLECT PREDICTED PROBABILITIES THAT ACCOUNT FOR THE LENGTH OF TIME THAT A MEMBER HAS PARTICIPATED IN HIS ORGANIZATION.

Sons and Brothers Summer Camp and Other Statewide and Regional Events

Thanks in large part to the support of The California Endowment and other philanthropic groups, some of the boys and young men in this study have enjoyed opportunities to participate in statewide and regional events, which are led by elders, experienced organizers, and peers. Perhaps the most intensive experience targeting male-identified members of BHC groups is the annual Sons and Brothers Summer Camp, which brings together over 100 boys and young men for a week-long retreat. Held in rural Portola near the Northern California-Nevada border, the summer camp curriculum empowers participants around their multiple identities, helps them heal from the harm and violence they experience in their communities, and builds their social networks. Some young men have also participated in Free Our Dreams Youth Organizing Summit, which has brought together male, female, and gender non-conforming individuals to further develop their analyses around structural inequalities and shared policy concerns, enhance organizing and advocacy skills, and build cross-site alliances. A smaller proportion of youth have also participated in Policy Advocacy Day in Sacramento, where they meet with elected officials around statewide policy demands. More recently, some BHC-affiliated youth took part in the Queer and Trans Youth Summit. Key issues addressed during such gatherings include access to health care for undocumented immigrants, changes in school discipline policies, and criminal justice reform, LGBTQ safety and well-being, among other issues.

Additionally, some of the BHC-affiliated boys and young men have participated in regional/local convenings, including the Leadership Academy for Boys and Men of Color, where they connect with youth and staff from other local organizations. Typically, such gatherings focus on advancing regional and statewide campaigns. However, some regions have also held gatherings focused on skills training, collective healing, or other forms of youth development. Together, statewide and regional gatherings facilitate movement building and the development of shared values and identities among a proportion of young male leaders across the state.

Our interview data and participant observations suggest that statewide and regional gatherings help some young men further understand how their different identities—and those of their peers—intersect to shape both the challenges and opportunities they encounter. For example, at the 2017 Sons and Brothers Camp, elders and adult allies hosted workshops that prompted participants to not only discuss how their racialized and gendered experiences have influenced their sense of self, but also to consider how their sexual orientation, immigrant background, culture, language, education, religion, spirituality, and ability status make up who they are, or their “whole selves.” Some of the workshops and trainings specifically focused on finding strength in ancestral roots and spirituality, or in what some elders call “sacred identities.” Importantly, it is common practice in statewide and regional activities for participants to state their gender pronouns in order to create an inclusive space for diverse gender identities. Workshops and trainings that focus on the recognition of diverse identities likely help foster understanding across difference, and thus contribute to the growth of a multi-racial, LGBTQ-inclusive youth movement.

The recognition and celebration of young men’s multiple identities is one of several strategies aimed at supporting young men’s healing and leadership development. At the Sons and Brothers Camp, young men gain significant exposure to elder-led teachings about spirituality and culture. For example, throughout the course of the week at Sons and Brothers Camp, young men participate in several culturally-informed healing circles in which they reflect upon and share their personal hardships—sometimes for the first time in their lives. Practitioners contend that this process represents an important step in healing from the trauma and stress boys and young men experience as a result of racial discrimination, gendered expectations or stereotypes, poverty, and other challenges they encounter in their everyday lives. Additionally, workshops and guided discussions prompt participants to further analyze how their personal challenges connect to larger economic, social, and health inequalities.

Statewide gatherings also incorporate the cultural arts as a form of healing and empowerment. At these gatherings, boys and young men have participated in drumming, poetry, spoken word, hip-hop, and visual arts activities. For example, at the September 2017 Free Our Dreams Youth Summit, youth had the opportunity to attend an “Altar/Art Creating + Healing Practices” workshop. During this workshop, the young men and women in attendance learned about culturally-based approaches to altar making and different healing practices. Meanwhile, spoken word sessions held at the Sons and Brothers Camp have encouraged boys and young men to connect their experiences, identities, and issues facing their lives and communities to the root causes that underlie them (e.g., the school-to-prison pipeline, patriarchy, deportation, racialization, etc.). The arts function as an avenue for participants to find their voice, process their trauma, and express their growing understanding of social issues. As one staff person

shared about his observations at camp, “I think that straight up youth can find a passion right there at the camp.”

When carefully planned, statewide and regional gatherings help generate a network of solidarity as participants come to realize that they share common struggles and campaigns across their different identities and geographies. These shared spaces have helped contribute to the development of shared visions of what an inclusive and just California would look like, evidenced by growing collaborations across regions and in part captured by the Free Our Dreams Platform for Racial and Gender Justice.³ Additionally, interview data and observations tentatively suggest that many boys and young men who attend these events become further inspired to advance their local campaigns and connect to broader initiatives for social change. Moreover, workshops and activities often help participants further develop the tools to continue working on their own healing and personal growth. In sum, statewide and regional gatherings help bolster movement building and participation among boys and young men of color.

Advancing Leadership and Healthy Communities

BHC-affiliated youth organizations have provided boys and young men of color with a range of opportunities to participate in collective efforts that seek to advance health and well-being in their high poverty communities. To varying degrees, the process of engaging in these activities helps members expand their civic skills, develop their critical understanding of issues affecting diverse members of their communities, increase their capacity to engage in civic action, and attend to their own well-being and academic pursuits. Additionally, our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that statewide and regional convenings further enhance young men’s healthy development. As such, BHC, Sons and Brothers, Free Our Dreams, and other TCE-supported youth leadership programming is noteworthy because it engages vulnerable populations in changing some of the structural conditions that present barriers to their own health and well-being. Taken together, the local youth organizations, alongside statewide and regional gatherings, offer boys and young men of color an important space to heal, grow as community leaders, and move closer towards making their visions of wellness and equity a reality.

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, and Sciences. **Veronica Terriquez** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz and PERE faculty affiliate. **Uriel Serrano** is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz.



³ The Free Our Dreams Platform for Racial and Gender Justice can be found at <http://freeourdreams.us/background/>.