



Youth and Community Well-Being in Mid-City Community Advocacy Network

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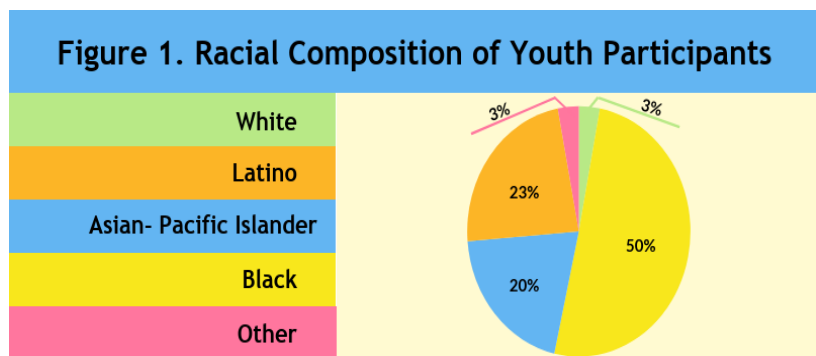
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This report describes youth programming offered by Mid-City Community Advocacy Network (Mid-City CAN), a community collaborative located in the City Heights community in San Diego, California. Founded in 1989, Mid-City CAN’s mission is to create productive, safe, and healthy communities through collaborations, organizing, and advocacy. In order to develop the leadership of City Heights youth, Mid-City CAN develops youths’ social and political consciousness, while providing them the grassroots organizing skills to participate in youth-adult partnerships involving parents and other residents.

This report contains four sections and relies on 2016 survey data collected from Mid-City CAN’s youth members and semi-structured interviews of paid staff. The first section consists of a demographic profile of Mid-City CAN’s youth members. The second section lays out why youth joined Mid-City CAN and how they participated in the group’s activities. The third section presents self-reports of how Mid-City CAN’s involvement enhanced youths’ leadership capacities and well-being. The final section summarizes Mid-City CAN’s local campaigns between 2014-2016. Data for this report come from the Youth Leadership and Health Study which seeks to examine the link between youths’ civic engagement and well-being in low-income communities.

MID-CITY CAN YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

This report draws on 31 surveys collected from young people who regularly participated in Mid-City CAN. Representing 91% of core youth members, survey participants ranged in age from 13 to 23 years old. Men represented 58% of participants, while women



represented 42% of participants. As shown in Figure 1, 50% identified as Black, 23% identified as Latino/a, 20% identified as Asian-Pacific Islander, and 3% identified as white.

Most Mid-City CAN youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 68% were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 10% were raised by at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree.

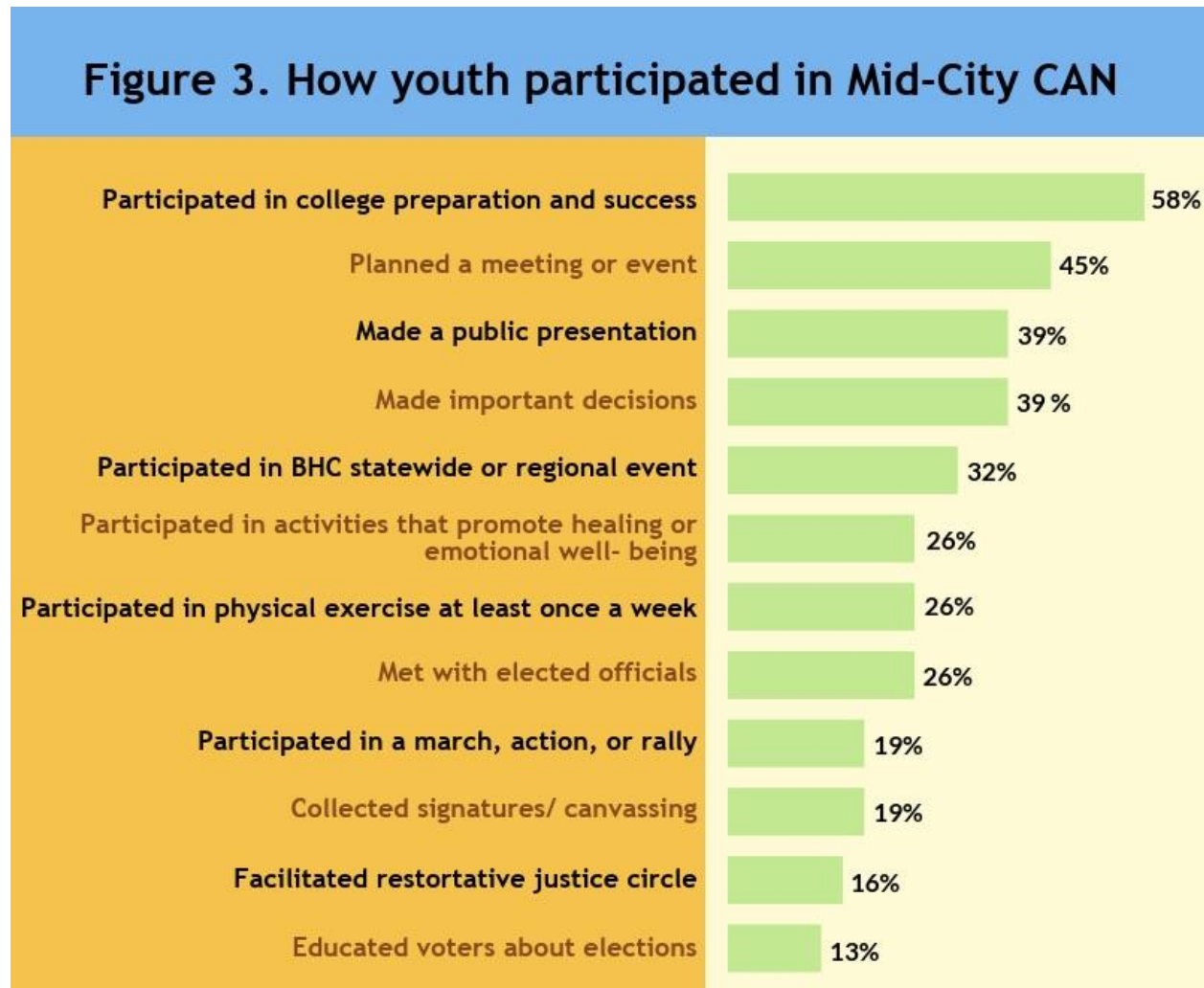
MEMBERS’ INVOLVEMENT

Youth in Mid-City CAN vary in how long they had been involved in the organization at the time of the survey. Quite notably, over half of the participants—61%—had been involved in the organization for at least a year. This suggests that overall, Mid-City CAN was able to retain many of their participants, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 6% had been involved for 6-11 months and 19% were involved for less than 6 months.

Youth were asked to list up to three reasons why they joined Mid-City CAN. Figure 2 lists the top reasons for joining. The most common reasons given were being invited by friends (55%) and because it seemed like fun (55%), suggesting that members became part of the group for social reasons. Many also joined because they wanted to make a difference (52%), they were looking to get paid (48%), they wanted free food (42%), and they wanted to develop skills (35%). Findings suggest that young people were attracted to Mid-City CAN for diverse reasons.



Youth were asked to report the types of activities that they engaged in as part of Mid-City CAN. The list was based on common activities reported in youth organizing and leadership groups across the state of California.¹ As shown in Figure 3, Mid-City CAN oriented members towards the attainment of higher education degrees, as 58% of survey respondents participated in college preparation and success activities.



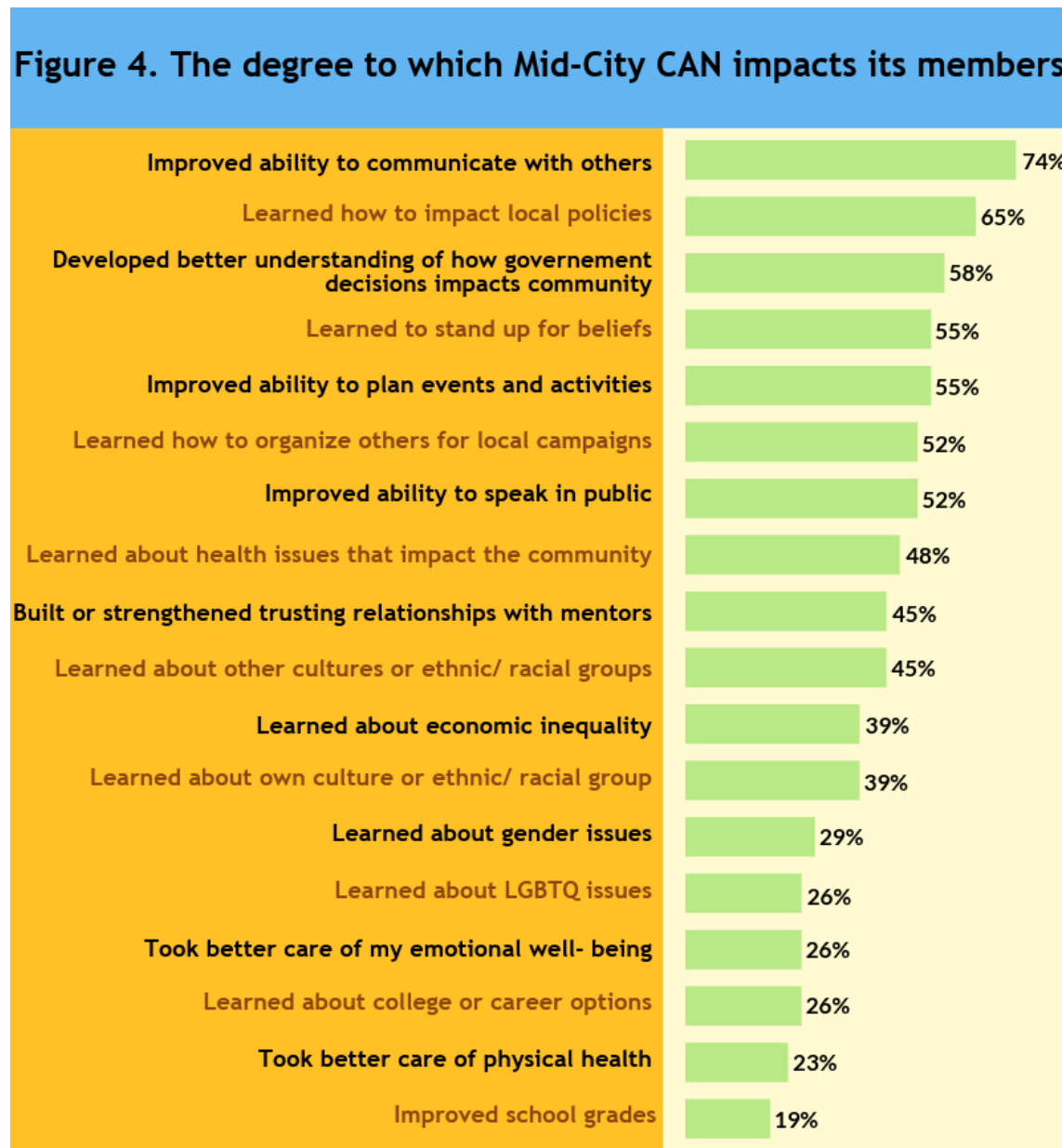
Youth also engaged in a range of civic activities. Forty-five percent planned a meeting or event, 39% made public presentations, and 39% made important decisions. Some also met with elected officials (26%); participated in marches, actions, and rallies (19%); collected signatures or canvassed for a campaign (19%); and engaged in voter education (13%). Nearly a third of youth (32%) participated in statewide or regional events where they met other youth, obtained additional training, learned about approaches to healing and well-being, and/or coordinated civic

¹ 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

actions. A minority of Mid-City CAN members also engaged in activities that advanced individual health and well-being (26%).

HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

Mid-City CAN contributes to its members’ healthy development in a variety of ways and to different degrees. In the survey, 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*? Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey.



Survey findings suggest that Mid-City CAN developed the civic capacity of its members. Quite notably, 74% reported having improved their ability to communicate with others by “a lot.” Youth members commonly reported learning “a lot” about how to impact local policies (65%), how government decisions impact their community (58%), how to stand up for their beliefs (55%), and how health and other issues impact their community (48%). The majority also claimed to have significantly improved their ability to plan events and activities (55%), organize others for local campaigns (52%), and speak in public (52%).

Youth also expanded their understanding of California’s diverse population, as 45% learned a lot about other ethnic/racial groups, and 39% reported learning a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group. Additionally, some also learned a lot about economic inequality (39%), gender issues (29%), and LGBTQ issues (26%).

Participation in Mid-City CAN also appears to have had implications for members’ health and educational outcomes. Forty-five percent of youth reported building or strengthening relationships with mentors. In addition, 26% of youth reported taking better care of their emotional well-being, and 23% reported taking better care of their physical health. Just over a quarter of youth members developed a better understanding of college and career options, while 19% of youth claimed to have improved their school grades as a result of their involvement.

“Before Mid-City CAN I was interested in sports medicine, but in summer going from sophomore to junior year it was whole shift. It showed me my identity, in wanting to help my community. I found myself in this organization.”
– 17-year-old member

“It felt like our voices were finally being heard about something that was important to us. The school board did not have to guess about what we needed, they heard it from ourselves and our parents.”
– 16-year-old member

COLLECTIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

As members of Mid-City CAN’s Youth Council, young members work collaboratively with parents and other adult residents to advance a range of campaigns that address community needs that are prioritized by the youth themselves.

For example, as a result of a 2012 victory of securing full voting rights on city boards and commissions, Mid-City CAN-affiliated youth have participated in the City Heights Town Council and City Heights Area Planning Committee in recent years. Perhaps most notably, Mid-City CAN youth were at the forefront of a campaign to establish two skateparks and a recreation center. After years of advocating and helping to secure approximately 5 million in funding

commitments for the community, Mid-City CAN youth celebrated the opening of the skateparks in January 2018.

An adjacent strand of youth organizing, beyond the core campaign efforts of the youth council, has entailed partnering with adult allies in the following three momentum teams: Food Justice, Peace Promotion, and Improving Transportation in City Heights (ITCH). While the role of youth has varied across the momentum teams, youth have helped facilitate meetings, have participated in workshops and trainings, have spoken at key events and activities, and/or have helped defined campaign strategies. The following outlines the campaign efforts of the three momentum teams between 2014-2016 and describes youths' roles:

- The **Food Justice Momentum Team** aims to incorporate healthy and culturally appropriate food in San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) campuses located in City Heights. Beginning in 2013, the group sought to include more culturally appropriate food options for Muslim students. In response, youth and their adult allies hosted rallies, shared testimonials, and held meetings with the SDUSD Food and Nutrition Services Department to educate staff about healthy food options that also acknowledge the culinary traditions of City Heights' diverse student body. In the spring of 2015, SDUSD approved and began implementing Halal options at Crawford High School. As a result of youth and community pressure, the increased food options were extended to the Crawford Cluster elementary schools and a formal districtwide food policy was adopted by the SDUSD Board of Trustees in 2016. The new policy increases options for schools within the district to provide culturally appropriate food options to their students. Another outcome of the youths' engagement with the momentum team was the establishment of the Food and Social Justice Club at Crawford High School in the fall of 2015.
- The **Peace Promotion Momentum Team (PPMT)** aims to improve school climate through restorative practices and restorative justice. In 2014, City Heights parents and community members mobilized to reduce the criminalization of low-income youth of color and improve the school climate by demanding restorative justice practices in their schools. This garnered the attention of youth on campus who quickly became partners in the campaign. The momentum team and their new youth allies met with SDSUD school board officials to demand a reduction of the types of disciplinary infractions that might lead to suspension. Together they also demanded the implementation of restorative justice practices in their schools. As part of their campaign, youth joined adult allies at SDSUD school board meeting on May 24, 2016 to express their concerns and provide input into the district's Restorative Practices Implementation Plan. Thanks in part to pressure from youth and other community members, SDUSD created a Restorative Practice Department to implement and oversee restorative justice programming. Quite

notably, in Spring 2016, the momentum team also chose to elect a youth as one of the team's co-chairs who exercised leadership alongside her adult counterparts.

- The **Improving Transportation in City Heights (ITCH)** team is composed of community members and parents of City Heights' students and aims to improve public transportation by fighting for accessible and safer transportation. ITCH proposed a pilot program to provide free access to public transportation to low-income students, while also improving school attendance, access to internships, after-school jobs, and extracurricular activities. In 2015, the City of San Diego and San Diego Unified School District implemented a one-year pilot of the Youth Bus Opportunity Program. To support the momentum team in this campaign, youth met with key stakeholders in San Diego Metropolitan Transit System and SDUSD to share their stories and testimonials. They also canvassed and campaigned in their community. In addition, youth attended city council hearings in order to raise awareness of the need for accessible and affordable transportation. They emphasized their goals to improve safety on the way to school and improve access to outside resources for youth such as jobs and extracurricular activities. As a result of youth and community efforts, SDUSD committed over 1,000 free bus passes as part of a three-year pilot program.

THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTH'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CITY HEIGHTS

Mid-City CAN provides its young members with meaningful opportunities to work with adult community members to advance their communities' health through grassroots organizing and advocacy. In the process, it develops its young members' civic knowledge and skills so that they become empowered to take on leadership roles within their communities. Given their direct involvement in and exposure to policy development and implementation processes at a formative age, Mid-City CAN's youth members are likely to be empowered to continue their public service and activism as they become older. As such, Mid-City CAN's efforts may have a lasting impact on community health and well-being in City Heights and beyond.

This report is 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 UC Santa Cruz and PERE faculty affiliate. **Leslie Renteria** is an undergraduate student at the University of California, Merced. **Uriel Serrano** is a doctoral student in the sociology department at UC Santa Cruz.

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