

# Youth Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being in California

Summary of Key Findings from the 2016 Youth Leadership and Health Survey

by Veronica Terriquez,  
University of California Santa Cruz

Since 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) has invested in youth leadership and youth organizing groups as a key component of its Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative. These youth groups have sought to support the healthy development of their members while engaging them in organizing, advocacy, and other efforts to advance their community’s well-being. As part of a longitudinal evaluation, this report focuses on BHC-affiliated youth organizations in 14 BHC Sites (See Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

This summary report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or “core” youth members, of 98 organizations that engage their members in grassroots organizing and advocacy, media production and cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, and/or other activities. This report provides a demographic profile of participants and describes their involvement. It also presents self-reports of how youth acquire a range of civic and educational skills and experiences, while also enhancing their own well-being. Gathered just after the 5-year midpoint of the BHC initiative, survey results evidence how the BHC initiative is contributing to the leadership and healthy development of a large cohort of California’s youth.

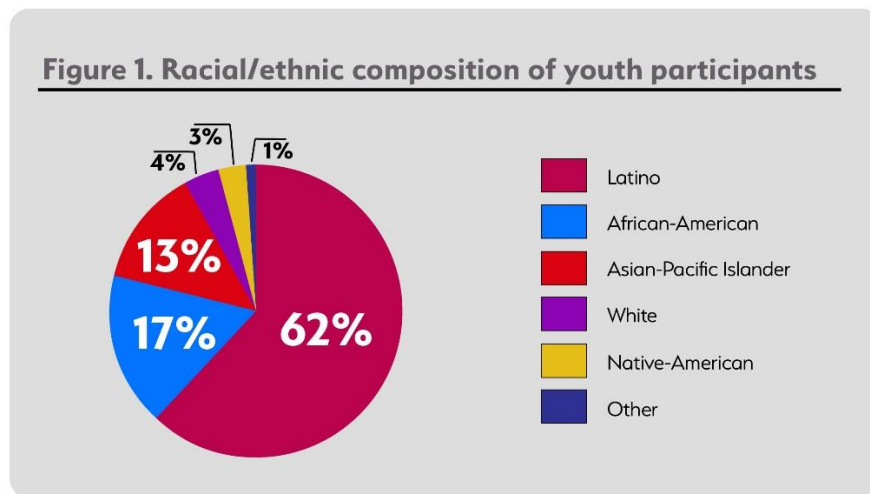
**Table 1. Building Healthy Communities Sites**

|                                     |
|-------------------------------------|
| Boyle Heights                       |
| Central Santa Ana                   |
| City Heights                        |
| Eastern Coachella Valley            |
| Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands |
| East Oakland                        |
| East Salinas                        |
| Fresno                              |
| Long Beach                          |
| Merced                              |
| Richmond                            |
| South Kern                          |
| South Los Angeles                   |
| South Sacramento                    |

## DESCRIPTION OF BHC YOUTH PROGRAM REGULAR PARTICIPANTS

This study draws on 1396 surveys collected from youth who regularly participated in BHC youth programs across the state. Survey respondents represent 92% of core youth members in participating BHC youth organizations. The average age of these members at the time of the survey was 17, but they ranged from 13 to 29 years of age. Women outnumbered men, comprising 53% of participants. Participants were generally representative of the racial/ethnic composition of their own communities. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 62% identified as Latino/a, 17% as African-American, and 13% as Asian-Pacific Islander. The remaining 8% identified as Native-American, White, or some other race.

Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 73% were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 12% were raised by a parent with a bachelor's degree.



## MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

Youth in BHC-affiliated organizations vary in how long they had been involved in their organizations. Quite notably, nearly two-thirds of study participants—61%—had been involved in their BHC-affiliated organization for at least a year. This suggests that overall, BHC organizations retained many of their participants, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 13% had been involved 6-11 months, 17% were involved for less than 6 months, and the remaining did not specify how long they had been involved in their organization.

Youth in BHC-affiliated youth organizations were asked to report the types of activities that they engaged in as part of their BHC group. The list was based on common activities reported by BHC staff in an earlier survey.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 2, youth most commonly claimed to have participated in college preparation and success (55%). Many youth also participated in civic activities, perhaps in relation to grassroots campaigns and other efforts to promote community well-being. Nearly half—49%—made important decisions. Additionally, 44% made a public presentation, nearly a quarter met with public officials, and 22% collected signatures or

canvassed for a campaign effort. Smaller percentages wrote about a community issue (17%) or educated voters (16%).

Youth also became involved in activities that promote their health and well-being. Thirty-nine percent participated in healing circles, meditation, or other activities that support emotional well-being, and 32% participated in physical exercise at least once a week. Some also showcased art or performed at a cultural event (29%), and a quarter participated in statewide or local BHC-sponsored activities. Survey results suggest that BHC-affiliated youth organizations provided youth with a variety of opportunities for leadership and self-development.

**Table 2. How Youth Participated in their BHC Group**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Participated in college preparation and success                         | 55% |
| Made important decisions  | 49% |
| Made a public presentation  | 44% |
| Participated in activities that promote healing or emotional well-being | 39% |
| Planned a meeting or event  | 37% |
| Participated in a march, action, or rally                               | 36% |
| Participated in physical exercise at least once a week                  | 32% |
| Performed at cultural/artistic event or showcased art                   | 29% |
| Participated in BHC statewide or regional event                         | 25% |
| Met with elected officials  | 24% |
| Collected signatures/canvassing   | 22% |
| Wrote about community issue   | 17% |
| Facilitated restorative justice circle                                  | 17% |
| Educated voters about elections   | 16% |

### HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

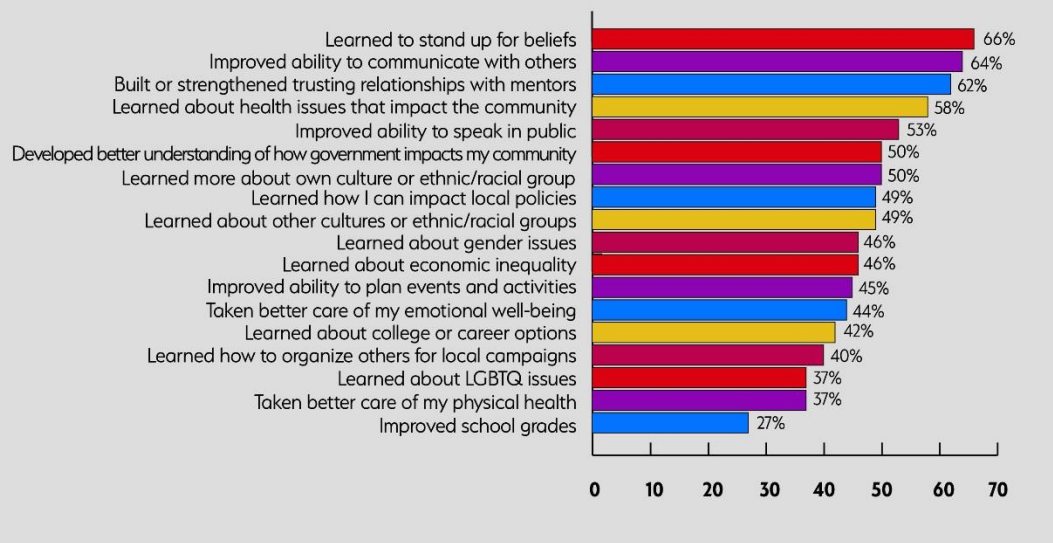
As demonstrated in earlier phases of the BHC youth program evaluation, BHC youth organizations contribute to their members’ healthy development in a variety of ways and to different degrees.<sup>3</sup> In the survey, we asked members to rate the degree to which their group involvement impacted different 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 many members developed their civic and leadership skills. Most notably, 66% learned “a lot” about standing up for their beliefs. Participation also made a lot of impact on majority of youths’ ability to communicate with others (64%), understand health issues that impact their community (58%), speak in public (53%), and understand how government decisions impact their community (50%). Significant percentages also learned a lot about how to plan events (45%), influence policy change (49%), and organize others to participate in campaigns that benefit their communities (40%).

Youth frequently learn about their own cultural and racial backgrounds and the diversity of the California population. As results show, 50% reported learning about their own culture or ethnic/racial group, while 49% learned about other ethnic/racial groups. Many also learned

about gender issues (46%) and economic inequality (46%). At the same time, 37% reported learning about LGBTQ issues.

**Figure 2. The degree to which BHC impacts its members: Percent responding “a lot”**



BHC involvement also had implications for youths’ health, well-being, and overall personal development. A significant percentage—44%—reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being and 37% reported taking a lot better care of their physical health. Most participants built or strengthened relationships with mentors (62%), while a significant proportion learned about college and career options (42%). Quite notably, over a quarter reported improving their school grades by a lot over the course of their involvement.

In sum, the BHC initiative is having a significant impact on the healthy development and leadership of racially diverse low-income youth across the state. This statewide report is accompanied by site level reports which outline survey results and summarize local youth-led campaign efforts for each of the 14 BHC sites. Together, these research reports document a coordinated effort to advance health and social justice through investments in youths’ leadership across California.

*This report is published by the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity.*



<sup>1</sup> For a list of publications related to the BHC youth program evaluation visit:

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-leadership/>

<sup>2</sup> 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](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/VT_BHC_Youth_Program_Staff_Inventory_Report.2016.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Terriquez, Veronica and Gabriela Dominguez. 2014. “Building Healthy Communities Through Youth Leadership.” Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: <http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/BHC-youth-leadership/>