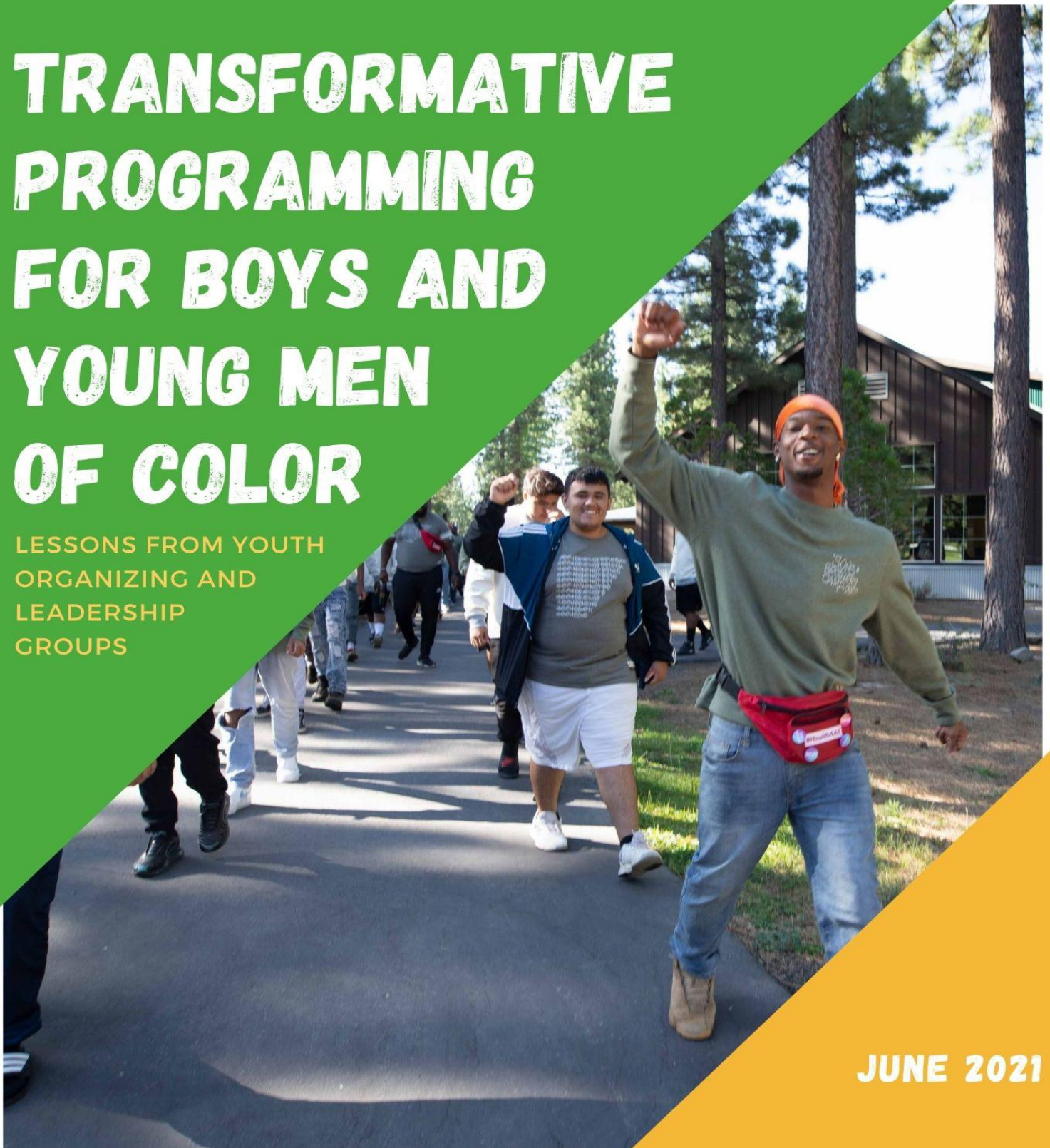


TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

LESSONS FROM YOUTH
ORGANIZING AND
LEADERSHIP
GROUPS



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Initiatives across the country have emerged to address “persistent opportunity gaps” that contribute to the criminalization of boys and young men of color (BMOC), and to poor health outcomes in their communities. The California Endowment (TCE) has been a leader in responding to the challenges faced by this young population. Through focused investments in high-poverty communities, TCE has supported youth-serving organizations that help BMOC heal from trauma and hardship while equipping them to challenge the structural conditions that prevent them from thriving and achieving their goals.

Over the past several years, TCE-supported youth organizing and leadership groups have offered ample programming geared toward BMOC from low-income backgrounds (Philanthropy News, 2013). Activities that center the experiences of BMOC include, but are not limited to, critical civics education workshops on gender, sexuality, and masculinity; healing and restorative justice practices; and campaign engagements that prioritize issues raised by BMOC. Groups also send some of their members to statewide and regional convenings that seek to advance campaigns and enhance the leadership skills of BMOC. For example, the weeklong Sons and Brothers Summer Camp promotes physical and mental well-being as well as leadership development.

This report draws on more than five years of research to highlight some promising practices for engaging BMOC as leaders in their communities. The research uses multiple data sources, including surveys with 171 TCE grantees, 75 in-depth interviews with male-identified members of youth organizing groups, 12 focus groups, and over 800 hours of participant observations within TCE-supported youth organizations. The report begins by offering a rationale for focusing on the contemporary experiences of BMOC. The next section describes the gender composition and leadership development of members of TCE-supported “youth organizing groups” and “youth leadership groups.” This is followed by a section that outlines promising practices. The final section, which will be developed with input from youth leaders, will put forward recommendations for building on promising practices. Overall, this report seeks to inform community-based efforts and investments that help BMOC to heal and thrive individually and collectively while also giving them the tools to address systemic violence and injustice in their communities. This report complements another paper outlining best practices for youth leadership development (Terriquez, 2021).

WHY FOCUS ON PROGRAMMING FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR?

Targeted BMOC programming is needed because this group is often denied opportunities to succeed and thrive. Specifically, BMOC experience unjust policing, police brutality, and criminalization in and out of schools (Allen, Bryan, Guerero, Teng, & Lytle-Hernandez, 2018; Rios, 2011), especially if they are racialized as Black (Wood, Harris, & Howard, 2018). Meanwhile, undocumented young men of color are disproportionately targeted for deportation by ICE agents (Golash-Boza, 2015). Moreover, even when they are not direct targets of systemic racism, surveillance, and police/ICE violence (Shange, 2019, Golash-Boza, 2015), BMOC often

witness these abuses in their communities (Boyd, 2020). Moreover, these disparities are related to the comparatively lower life expectancy and poor physical and mental health outcomes for men of color (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019; Jones-Eversly et al., 2020). These findings hold true for Black and Latinx men, as well as for Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian BMOC, who are also disproportionately affected by state violence and poor health outcomes (Lee et al., 2005; Sangalang & Gee, 2015).

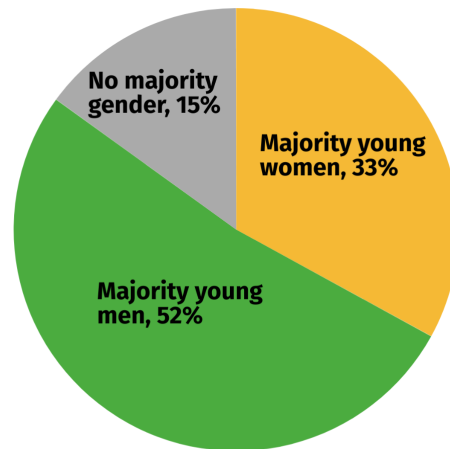
Despite suffering from this brutal systemic violence, which contributes to their underrepresentation in institutions of higher education, some BMOC have led local, regional, and statewide grassroots efforts that seek to address health and other social injustices. These young leaders have benefited from the training and guidance provided by TCE-supported youth leadership and organizing programs.

TCE-SUPPORTED YOUTH PROGRAMS AND GENDERED PATTERNS OF INVOLVEMENT

TCE has invested heavily in the leadership development of low-income BMOC, and these investments seem to have paid off, given robust BMOC participation across various groups the foundation supports. In 2018-2019, we surveyed 171 youth-serving grantees. We have generally categorized these grantees into two categories. The first consists of “youth organizing groups” that focus on engaging young people in policy change and/or civic engagement campaigns. Sixty-seven of TCE’s grantees identify as youth organizing groups. The second is a broad category we are calling “youth leadership groups.” Programming ranges widely, but most of these groups encourage youth voices in their communities and work toward common goals and interests. However, youth leadership groups do not necessarily involve members in the various stages of policy change and voter outreach efforts. As detailed in a separate report, youth organizing and leadership groups differ in the lasting impacts they have on members’ developmental outcomes (Terriquez, Xu, & Reyes, 2021).

Youth Organizations' Gender Composition

N=171



Source: BHC/HCAL/HCOM Youth Program Inventory Survey

Overall, we found that among these 171 grantees, 52% report that young men were the majority of participants in their programming (as illustrated in the above chart). Given this participation, we can state that these organizations offer BMOC potentially safe spaces to connect outside of the school context. This is important because we have found that low-income BMOC remain significantly underrepresented in extracurricular activities outside of sports.

However, it is worth noting that though young men and boys participated heavily in programming, they were not necessarily the organizational leaders driving community change efforts. In a follow-up survey of 67 TCE grantees that identify as “youth organizing groups,” we found that women composed the majority of core leaders in 54% of these organizations, while young men made up the leadership majority in only 7% of groups. The remaining groups had about equal representation of male- and female-identified leaders, and many also had a significant representation of leaders who do not identify along the gender binary. These gendered leadership differences have potential consequences because leaders—especially if they have been in the organization for a year or longer—tend to experience the most developmental benefits. As such, our findings suggest that male-identified youth may not be benefiting from these organizations as much as female and non-binary youth. Unfortunately, we do not have comparable data for youth leadership groups.

Participation in TCE-supported youth programming has proven to have several benefits for youth of color. To varying degrees, groups enhance young members’ understanding of their diverse communities; help them make sense of community problems and possible solutions; prepare them to lead civic action; and promote their healing, well-being, academic achievement, and

professional growth (Terriquez, 2021). Building on this research, this report outlines practices for supporting BMOC as organizational leaders who collectively drive community change.

PROMISING PRACTICES

TCE-supported youth organizations have developed promising practices that help BMOC thrive and exercise leadership in their communities. These practices help recruit, retain, and mentor BMOC, and some also incorporate intersectional approaches to political education, self-care, and healing.

Recruitment and Retention. Recruiting boys and young men who may have experienced hardship and trauma can be a challenge for organizations serving high-poverty communities, especially if schools and other institutions have already alienated them or pushed them out. These young men may not feel like they fit in with community groups or may question their ability to make a difference, given that the odds have been stacked against them. As such, some BMOC may not be initially attracted to groups focused on civic action and leadership, but they may become more interested in joining such groups after attending events that offer free food, celebrate youth culture, or engage them in the arts. Indeed, many of our interviewees say that they joined an organization because it “seemed fun.” Peer recruiting is also an effective tactic for BMOC. Some evidence suggests that male peers or young male staff are particularly effective recruiters of BMOC who may not otherwise become involved in an organizing or leadership group. Still, recruiting challenges remain. It is sometimes necessary for organizations to make intentional and targeted efforts to recruit young men (especially cis-gender straight men) when the groups are dominated by female leaders or have a significant representation of non-binary leaders.

Boys and young men may initially join organizations because they are having a good time at group events, but our surveys and interviews indicate that they choose to remain active when they feel like they are developing new skills and learning things about themselves and their communities. In this light, making intentional efforts to build bonds among members and utilizing restorative justice practices contribute to retention, as do the promising practices outlined below.

Representation and Mentorship. Hiring men of color from a diverse set of gender identities and sexualities is key for youth recruitment and retention. When young men of color see themselves represented in the staff, they are likely to build trusting relationships with mentors. Furthermore, the diverse representation of men of color, including queer and trans men, allows BMOC to challenge and extend their understandings of gender, sexuality, race, and masculinity. This is partly due to the fact that schools and other spaces are less likely to be as diverse and have cis-gender straight male of color and QTPOC representation. Moreover, men of color who serve in staff roles can defy gendered expectations through their nurturing and supportive relationships, thus advancing inclusivity.

Representation is also important among youth leaders. When young boys see themselves represented among older youth leaders, they are more likely to join. Older youth leaders, in turn, can draw on their experience and shared backgrounds to mentor and support newer members. This mentoring experience builds their confidence and commitment to uplifting others as well as their community.

“ I LOVE LEADING. I LOVE DOING THAT, BUT YOU GOTTA PUSH OTHERS TO DO IT. THAT’S WHY SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, I ALWAYS PUSHED OTHER PEOPLE TO LEAD... I SEE MYSELF PUSHING PEOPLE TO REACH THEIR BEST POTENTIAL. ”

- COMMUNITY COALITION MEMBER, AGE 18

Foundational Workshops on Gender, Sexuality, and Masculinity. With schools often serving as sites of criminalization for BMOC, there are few safe spaces that offer these young people an opportunity to discuss gender, sexuality, and masculinity. Foundational workshops can therefore be eye-opening and empowering, introducing the young men of color to notions of masculinity, sexuality, and gender, as well as the terminology and practices that promote queer and trans inclusivity. These discussions can include, but are not limited to, the use of pronouns, gender stereotypes, disrupting gender binaries, and the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations.

“THE GENDER ROLES THAT MEN HAVE TO LIVE WITH AND THE STEREOTYPES THAT SURROUND MEN - NOT BEING ABLE TO CRY, NOT BEING ABLE TO WEAR ANYTHING FEMININE, NOT BEING ABLE TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS - THOSE ARE ALL MISCONCEPTIONS, AND THAT DOESN'T DESCRIBE WHAT A MAN IS OR WHAT A MAN SHOULD BE. IN OUR ORGANIZATION, WE GET TO DECIDE WHAT TYPE OF MEN WE WANT TO BE, AND AS MEN, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXPRESS OURSELVES FREELY IN ANY WAY WE WANT. WE ARE ABLE TO CRY WHENEVER WE WANT WITHOUT HAVING TO FEEL JUDGED.”

- INNER CITY STRUGGLE MEMBER, AGE 18

Building on these foundational workshops—and informed by an intersectional lens—youth organizing groups offer more specialized sessions on social concerns that also touch upon

multiple forms of social marginalization. For example, workshops on the school-to-prison pipeline provide opportunities to discuss and understand the experiences of trans, noncitizen, foster, queer, female-identified, and other youth. In other words, workshops informed by intersectionality allow participants to understand how criminalization is experienced differently or similarly across social locations and identities.

Political Education on Systems of Power. Political education that situates the experiences of young men of color in a structural context can help youth understand the history of white supremacy, anti-black chattel slavery, settler colonialism, and the rise of the carceral state—within and outside of the United States. Such a curriculum teaches young men of color to name the systems of power and domination that directly impact their communities and their own experiences with systemic violence and oppression. Furthermore, this political education allows young men of color to resist deficit frameworks, individualistic solutions to systemic issues, and ideological narratives about “pulling yourself up by the bootstraps.”

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“AT SCHOOL, I DEFINITELY LEARNED ABOUT SLAVERY, BUT THE CURRICULUM IS VERY GENERIC. SO WITHIN YOUTH TOGETHER, WE FOCUSED ON DIFFERENT FORMS OF SLAVERY AND THAT IT WAS HAPPENING IN MULTIPLE PLACES AROUND THE WORLD. WE TALKED ABOUT THAT, TALKED ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION OF CHINESE PEOPLE TO SAN FRANCISCO. MY GREAT GRANDFATHER WAS ACTUALLY ONE OF THE PEOPLE TO MAKE THAT JOURNEY. SO TO HEAR ABOUT MY FAMILY’S EXPERIENCE OF GETTING TO SAN FRANCISCO, TO HEAR THAT STORY FROM OTHER STUDENTS ABOUT HOW THEIR FAMILIES TRANSITIONED OVER, MADE ME FEEL MORE LIKE WE WERE A PART OF A COMMUNITY.”

- YOUTH TOGETHER MEMBER, AGE 18

”

Intersectional and Queer and Trans Inclusive Programming. Political education programming is strengthened when informed by an intersectional lens. For example, intersectional discussions of the carceral state can draw connections among the rise of mass incarceration and prisons, deportations, and the caging of children at the border. It can also reveal how criminalization is rooted in racism, sexism, ableism, and anti-queer logics.

Political education must be inclusive of queer and trans history. For example, workshops on social movements could discuss the legacy of the Stonewall Uprising and/or the participation of queer undocumented youth in the Undocumented Student Movement. Moreover, foundational workshops on gender, sexuality, and masculinity could incorporate discussions of Indigenous sexualities and fluid understandings of gender that defy the modern gender binary.

Normalizing the sharing of gender pronouns and gender-neutral language fosters an environment inclusive of diverse gender identities and promotes mutual respect among youth, adult allies, and other community members. Committing to inclusive practices also involves recognizing when activities and programming center heteronormative ideals, as well as constructively calling out members when harmful language and behavior occurs. For further discussion of LGBTQ inclusive practices, see *Creating Inclusive Spaces for Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous, and People of Color* (Terriquez, Sokol, & Ross, 2021).

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“I’VE LEARNED THAT BEING A QUEER PERSON OF COLOR, SELF-CARE IS VERY, VERY IMPORTANT, BECAUSE YOU’RE GOING TO BE TARGETED BY SOCIETY. AND YOU HAVE A BUNCH ON YOUR PLATE. AS A PERSON OF COLOR, SELF-CARE IS DEEPLY NECESSARY. AND ALSO, THERE’S COMMUNITY HEALING AS WELL. HAVING THAT IS IMPORTANT, BECAUSE WE NEED TO HEAL FROM THE STUFF WE HAVE EXPERIENCED AND OUR ANCESTORS HAVE EXPERIENCED AS WELL.”

- GSAN MEMBER, AGE 16

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Restorative Justice, Healing Practices, and Vulnerability. Healing and restorative justice programming, when done with care and in a manner culturally relevant to BMOC, provides participants valuable opportunities to exhibit vulnerability and experience personal growth. For example, practices like healing circles allow BMOC to defy gender expectations and express their emotions. In these unguarded moments, the young men can relate to and learn from one another, connect their experiences, and build trusting relationships with other youth and mentors.

This programming is not confined to healing circles or similar exercises. Music, art, graffiti, and other forms of expression can also contribute to well-being (see Figure 1).

The arts allow youth to reclaim activities that have been criminalized and offer an avenue for creative emotional expression and movement building.

FIGURE 1.



Authentic Youth Voice. Young men and boys of color develop a sense of agency and strengthen their decision-making skills when they are given the opportunities to make informed and meaningful choices about day-to-day programming, peer recruitment, and campaign selection and implementation (in the case of youth organizing groups). Including BMOC in decision-making processes gives them hands-on experience in diagnosing and directly combatting the systemic issues, including criminalization and over-policing, that affect their communities. In other words, such practices foster an inclusive atmosphere for youth and situate them as experts on the problems faced by them and their communities. Actively participating in decision-making also increases their sense of belonging, strengthens their agency, and provides them with a sense of purpose.

**“I FEEL LIKE
I’M EMPOWERED AND THEY CARE
ABOUT MY VOICE WHEN THEY
LET US YOUTH COME UP AND
TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY WANT
TO SEE CHANGED IN THE
COMMUNITY AND HOW COULD WE
GO ABOUT CHANGING IT.”**
**- BMOC FRESNO MEMBER,
AGE 19**

Giving BMOC Organizational Leadership Responsibilities. Our research indicates that female-identified youth assume more than their share of responsibilities over day-to-day organizational activities (Terriquez & Milkman, 2021). Thus, to support gender equity, BMOC should be actively encouraged to assume ownership of group activities on top of their decision-making responsibilities. To this end, staff can make intentional efforts to include BMOC

in the day-to-day programming in ways that allow them to take responsibility for the planning, implementation, and facilitation of meetings, rallies, and other activities. These efforts should include behind-the-scenes organizational work like taking notes; conducting personal outreach via text, phone, or social media; and setting up or breaking down events. Providing BMOC with such responsibilities can promote more equitable divisions of organizational labor and prepare them to transition into organizational and movement leadership roles.

“YEAH, I THINK I WAS REAL CLOSE-MINDED BEFORE I GOT INVOLVED IN ALL OF THIS, AND I GOT TO MEET PEOPLE OF CERTAIN GENDERS... THEY TAUGHT ME, YOU KNOW, HE, HIM, HIS AND ALL THESE [PRONOUNS], ALL THESE OTHER LITTLE TACTICS...TO BE MORE UNDERSTANDING.”

- LOUD4TOMORROW MEMBER, AGE 19

Statewide and Regional Convenings. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Serrano & Terriquez, 2018; Serrano & Turner, 2020), statewide and regional convenings like the Sons and Brothers Summer Camp offer BMOC programming that empowers participants around their multiple identities, lets them heal from the harm and police violence they experience in their communities, and strengthens their relationships with mentors and other young men. As participant observations and focus groups reveal, such convenings are a site of movement- and coalition-building for BMOC. Speaking to the importance of these spaces, one youth shared that, “Sometimes you need people around you to empower you...to do big things.” Moreover, as this youth elaborated, these spaces provide an opportunity to “change for the better in California, because somebody empowers someone, and they empower more people, and they empower each other, and it just keeps going and keeps going until we make change.”

During these convenings, healing activities, workshops, and other programming are often informed by the many practices we have described. Drawing together youth and adult allies from across the state or from different regional contexts, these spaces are often intersectional and rooted in situating the experiences of young men of color in a structural context. There is a recognition that for young men to heal, renounce toxic masculinity, and be better allies, discussions must address how racialized and gendered experiences have influenced their sense of self and identities. As such, these regional and statewide convenings seek to foster understanding across differences and facilitate multi-racial, LGBTQ-inclusive, youth-led movements.

CONCLUSION

TCE-affiliated youth groups have provided BMOC from high-poverty communities with a range of opportunities to participate in programming and collective efforts advancing racial, gender, and economic equity. To varying degrees, programming for BMOC develops their structural understanding of issues affecting them and the diverse members of their communities. Moreover, it expands their capacity to plan and engage in civic action. When done right, healing and restorative justice efforts promote the well-being of BMOC. Furthermore, the programming and practices highlighted in this report are noteworthy because they engage participants in developing healthy and fluid notions of masculinity and manhood, and foster an inclusive environment for queer and trans youth.

The “promising practices” described in this report on BMOC complement those that apply to youth more generally and which are described in a separate report on Transformative Youth Leadership Development (Terriquez, 2021). The practices listed here are among those that offer BMOC an important space to heal, grow as community leaders, address some of the structural barriers to their own health and well-being, and move closer to making their visions of wellness and equity a reality. We believe these promising practices equip youth to engage community members and elected officials, organize events and speak in public, and understand the structural issues impacting them and their communities. As such, BMOC are better prepared to engage in collective action and/or organize others in ways that are inclusive and promote gender equity.

Finally, we should note that the practices outlined in this report are not shared universally among grantees. As evidenced through surveys, interviews with youth leaders and staff, and our participant observations at events, two Sons and Brothers Camps, and various statewide and regional gatherings, there is wide variation in programming. We also recognize that there are promising practices that have not been mentioned here. This report, however, highlights promising practices that have repeatedly surfaced through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations conducted before the 2020 pandemic and racial reckoning. New effective practices have likely emerged and evolved as programs adapt to youths’ evolving interests and needs. We hope that the promising practices outlined here help practitioners and other stakeholders reflect on, evaluate, and build on efforts to support BMOC.

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