



December 2016

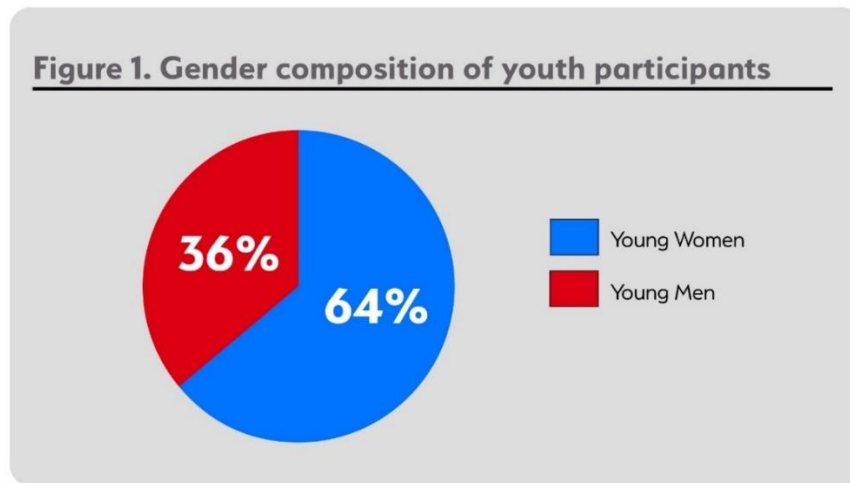
Since 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) has invested in youth leadership and youth-led organizing groups as a key component of its Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative. These youth groups have sought to support the healthy development of their members while engaging them in organizing, advocacy, and other efforts to advance their community's well-being. As part of a longitudinal evaluation, this report focuses on BHC-affiliated youth programming in City Heights.<sup>1</sup> Located in the eastern San Diego, City Heights is one of 14 BHC sites in California.

This report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or “core” youth members of 8 organizations that engage their members in grassroots organizing and advocacy; media production and the cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, and/or other activities. These groups include: (1) Access Youth Academy, (2) City Heights Youth for Change, (3) International Rescue Committee, (4) Izcalli/La Maestra, (5) Media Arts Center, (6) Mid-City CAN Youth Council, (7) Youth Empowerment Focus, and (8) Youth Voice. One of these groups, Mid-City CAN, was featured in a 2014 report on BHC affiliated youth-programming in City Heights.<sup>2</sup>

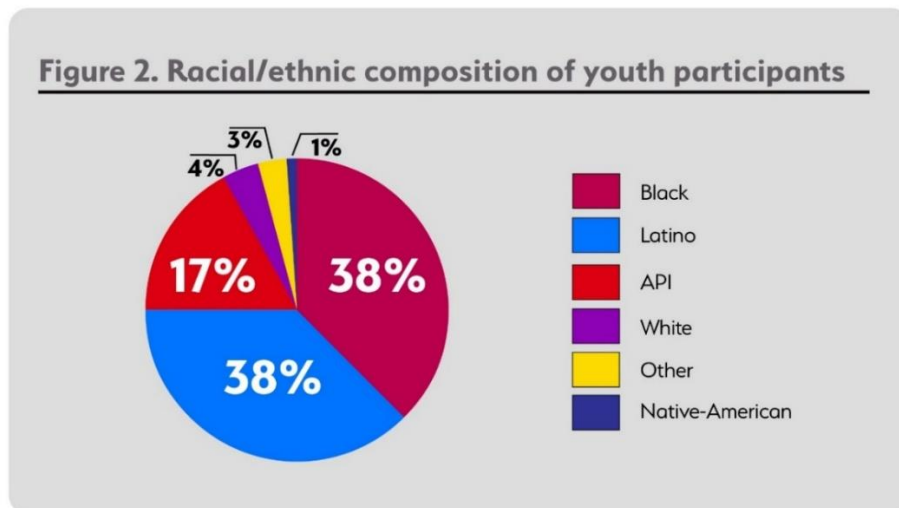
This report is composed of four main sections. First, we begin by providing a demographic profile of core youth leaders in BHC-affiliated groups. Second, we describe why and how youth participated in their BHC group. Building on earlier evidence from this evaluation, we then present self-reports of how youth acquire a range of civic and educational skills and experiences, while also enhancing their own well-being. Lastly, we conclude by briefly summarizing interviews with key stakeholders to show how BHC-affiliated youth organizations have collectively engaged their youth members in addressing health, safety, educational, and other school and community concerns. In sum, this report provides further documentation of youth leadership efforts just past the midpoint of the 10 year BHC Initiative.

## DESCRIPTION OF BHC YOUTH PROGRAM REGULAR PARTICIPANTS

This study draws on 121 surveys collected from young people who regularly participate in BHC youth programs in City Heights. Survey respondents represent 89% of core youth members in participating organizations. The average age of the members at the time of the survey was 16, but they ranged in age from 13 to 26 years. As Figure 1 shows, young women outnumbered young men in these organizations.



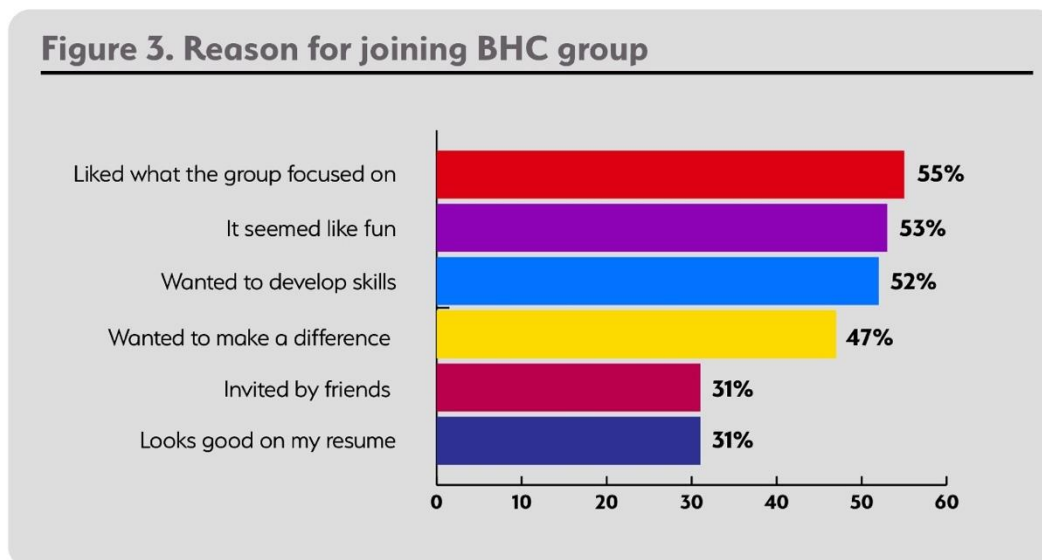
Participants were generally representative of the diverse racial/ethnic composition of the City Heights community. As shown in Figure 2, approximately 38% identified as Latino/a, 38% as Black, and 17% as Asian-Pacific Islander. The remaining 8% percent identified as White, Native American or other race/ethnicity. Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 72% were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 7% were raised by a parent with a bachelor's degree.



## MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

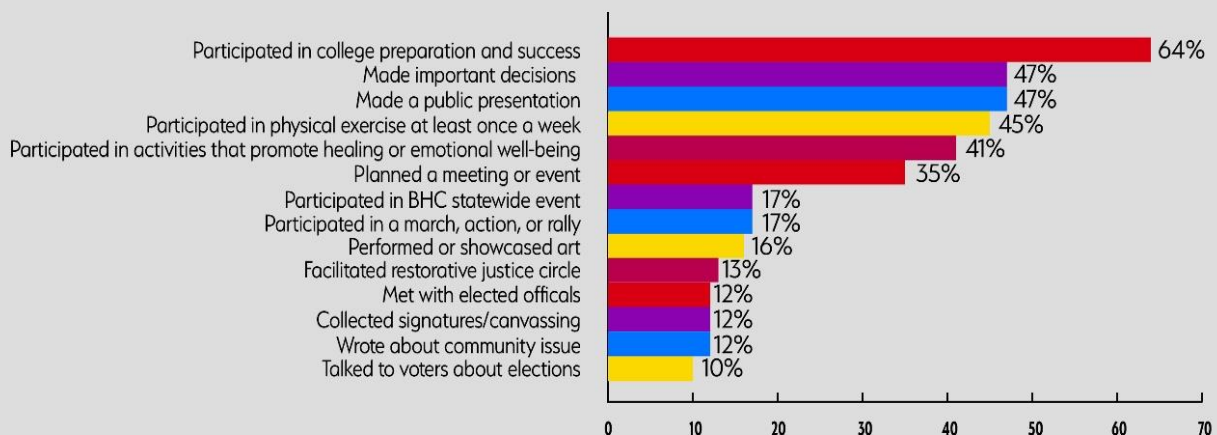
Youth in City Heights vary in how long they have been involved in their organizations. Quite notably, over half of participants —69%— had been involved in their BHC-affiliated youth organization for at least a year. This suggests that overall, BHC organizations were able to retain many youth, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 11% had been involved 6-11 months, 13% were involved for less than 6 months, and some did not specify how long they had been involved in their organization.

Youth were asked to list up to three reasons why they joined their BHC-affiliated youth organization. Figure 3 lists the top reasons for joining. In City Heights, the most common reason given was the “focus of the organization” (55%), suggesting that groups’ programming played an important role in attracting members. At the same time, most youth (53%) also joined because it seemed like fun, indicating that organizations met youths’ social interests while engaging them in civic activities. Other frequently reported reasons for joining their organization included the desire to develop new skills (52%) and wanting to make a difference in their community (47%).



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>3</sup> As shown in Figure 4, youth in City Heights most commonly claimed to have participated in college preparation and success, as indicated by 64% of members. Many youth also participated in civic activities; nearly half (47%) made public presentations and/or made important decisions, while over a third (35%) planned meetings and events. Youth also became involved in activities that promote healing or emotional well-being (41%) and weekly physical exercise (45%). Survey results suggest that BHC-affiliated youth organizations provided youth with opportunities for leadership and self-development.

**Figure 4. How youth participated in their BHC group**



### 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>4</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 5 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.

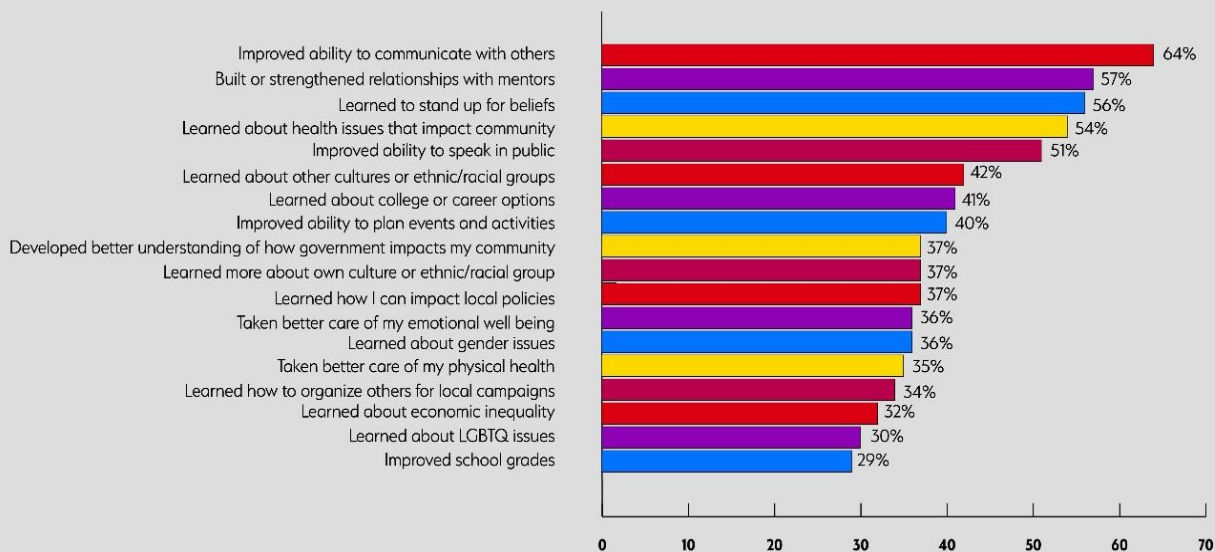
Survey findings suggest that members felt their ability to communicate with others developed “a lot”, as 64% reported this was the case. The majority of youth also reported that participation had a lot of impact on their relationships with their mentors, ability to stand up for their beliefs, understanding of health or other community issues, and ability to speak in public. Some youth significantly developed their capacity to impact policy change (37%), and/or learned a lot about how to organize others to participate in campaigns that benefit their communities (34%).

Youth frequently learned about their own cultural and racial backgrounds and the diversity of the California population. As results show, 42% learned a lot about other ethnic/racial groups, and 37% reported learning a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group. Meanwhile, 32% learned about economic inequality, and 30% reported learning about LGBTQ issues.

Participation also had implications for members’ health and educational outcomes. While 36% percent of youth reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being, 35% percent

claimed to have taken a lot better care of their physical health. At the same time, 41% learned a lot about college and career options, and 29% significantly improved their grades in school.

**Figure 5. The degree to which BHC impacts its members: Percent responding “a lot”**



## COLLECTIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

In addition to supporting the healthy development of members, most BHC affiliated youth organizations sought to positively impact the community. Their efforts included the following:

- Reducing language barriers to health care access.** Immigrant and refugee families lack sufficient access to translations services at community-health clinics and schools. In City Heights, the Somali Bantu-speaking refugees who arrive in the United States with low literacy rates face barriers, while access to information and services for other non-English speaking groups remains a challenge. As a result, the children of immigrants and refugees often play an important role in navigating institutions for their families. In response to this community need, youth demanded greater access to translation services, particularly for refugee communities. Along with their adult allies, they have participated in efforts to increase translation services at local health clinics. They have also played a leadership role in the development of the San Diego Unified School District’s Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which sets priorities for the spending of supplemental funds targeting high needs students. Youth effectively made the case for much needed translation services at District sponsored meeting focused on the LCAP. In spring 2015, youth secured commitments from the District to provide interpretation in Karen, Kizigua, Somali, and Swahili beginning in the 2015-2016 school year.

- Promoting restorative justice and healing. Youth have also advocated for the implementation of Restorative Justice Programs in schools. The purpose of restorative justice programs is to reduce suspension and expulsion rates, particularly among students of color. As an alternative to punitive discipline, restorative justice aims to address the cause of problems and heal the harm inflicted. To date, a few schools have adopted student lead community building circles (also known as *circulos*) in some classrooms. Aimed at restorative justice, these circles consist of discussions in which both parties develop a plan to repair the damage and move forward. In efforts to expand the implementation of restorative justice programs, youth are demanding that the school district adopt a School Climate Bill of Rights. This School Climate Bill of Rights would establish a youth advisory council that would guide the implementation plan for restorative practices. Additionally, as part of the Invest in San Diego Families Coalition, youth and their allies are demanding restorative justice programs training for law enforcement in San Diego County.
- Increases access to culturally appropriate and healthy food on school campus. City Heights youth also organized to increase access to healthy and culturally appropriate food on school campuses. As part of a Food Justice campaign, youth hosted rallies, shared testimony, and held meetings with the San Diego Unified School District's Food & Nutrition Services Department to educate staff about healthy food options that also acknowledge the culinary traditions of City Heights' diverse student body. A school board resolution was passed in 2016 to require culturally appropriate foods for all students. Halal chicken is now served weekly at eight San Diego Unified School District schools and the Food Justice team is continuing to advocate for even more options.
- Increasing transportation access to school. In 2015, youth demanded free bus passes to attend four different high schools in San Diego. As part of this effort, youth leaders met with the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS), the San Diego Unified School District, and City Council to raise awareness for accessible and affordable transportation. Youth argued how free bus passes would increase school attendance, reduce tardiness, and enable students to access greater employment opportunities. As a result of youths' organizing and advocacy efforts, the San Diego Unified School District invited youth leaders to help define the criteria for receiving bus passes under the Fall 2016 Youth Opportunity Bus Pass Pilot Program. Importantly, City Heights youth leaders helped define the policy that determined student eligibility for a free bus pass in the four participating high schools. As a follow-up to this effort, youth are working closely with Assembly member Gonzalez to push for Assembly Bill (AB) 2222 which will allow eligible students and community members to receive free or reduced-fare transit passes.
- Improved school and city infrastructure and services. In coalition with parents and other community stakeholders, youth have worked to improve well-being and safety in and

outside of schools. For example, they successfully advocated for the installment of air conditioning at Crawford High School, where high temperatures sometimes prevent students from learning and pose dangers to their health. Youth also demanded pedestrian sidewalk near Crawford High School after a student was killed during a hit and run accident on a street that lacked adequate walkways. With support of the City Heights Community Development Corporation, youth and adult allies conducted a detailed analysis of the sidewalk infrastructure on 54<sup>th</sup> Street and Lea Street and hosted community workshops to inform the residents about the need to improve pedestrian safety, and attended city council budget hearings. As a result of this effort, a sidewalk, crosswalks, medians, and bike lanes were installed. In a separate effort, young people are seeking to develop relationships with law enforcement in order to enhance police/community relations, improve safety, and reduce racial profiling.

### THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTHS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Since the inception of the BHC initiative in 2010, affiliated youth BHC organizations have expanded meaningful opportunities for their young leaders to advance their community's health. These youth leaders are likely to continue their public service and activism as they transition to adulthood. Moreover, youths' efforts may have a lasting imprint on community health and well-being in City Heights.

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<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> Hernandez, Angeli and Veronica Terriquez. 2014. "Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in City Heights." Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/City\\_Heights\\_July2014\\_final\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/City_Heights_July2014_final_for_web.pdf)

<sup>3</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>4</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/>.