



Youth Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being in Fresno

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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 Central, Southeast, and Southwest (CSS) Fresno. ¹ Located in the heart of the fertile Central Valley, CSS Fresno is one of the fourteen BHC communities in California.

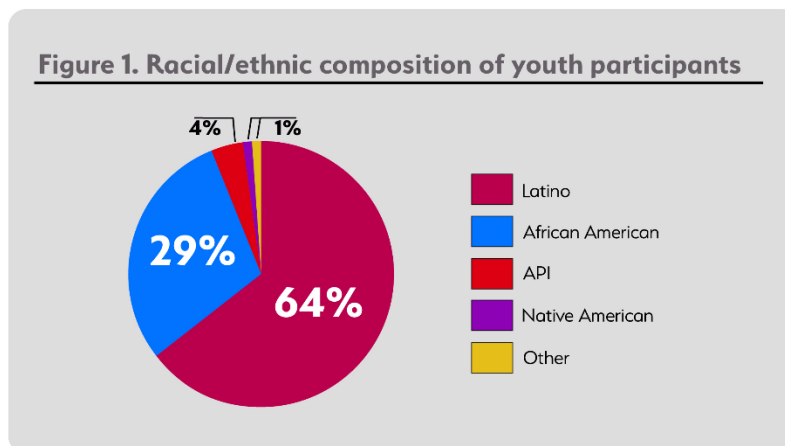
This report draws on survey data collected from core members of eight organizations that engage their members in grassroots organizing and advocacy, media production and the cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, and other activities. These groups include: Californians for Justice, Fresno Barrios Unidos, Fresno BHC, the Fresno Police Department, Helping Others Pursue Excellence (HOPE), Radio Bilingüe, the kNOw Youth Media, and the Youth Leadership Institute. A few of these groups are featured in a 2014 report on BHC affiliated youth-programming in CSS Fresno.²

This report contains 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 came to participate 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 capacities, while also enhancing their own well-being. Lastly, we conclude by briefly summarizing interviews with key stakeholders to show how BHC-affiliated youth organizations 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 92 surveys collected from 52 youth who regularly participated in BHC youth programs in Fresno. Seventeen of these young people participated in more than one organization and were asked to fill out the survey once for each organization for which they were a member. Survey respondents represent 87% of core youth members in participating BHC youth organizations. The average age of these members at the time of the survey was 18, but they ranged from 13 to 24 years of age. Women outnumbered men, representing 58% of participants. Participants were generally representative of the racial/ethnic composition of Fresno. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 64% identified as Latino/a, 29% as African-American, and 4% as Asian-Pacific Islander. The remaining 2% percent identified as Native-American or Other.

Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 75% or were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 16% were raised by a parent with a bachelor’s degree.

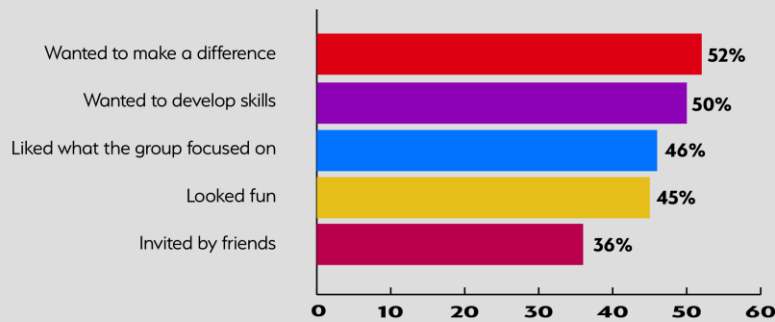


MEMBERS’ INVOLVEMENT

Youth in CSS Fresno vary in how long they had been involved in their organizations. Quite notably, nearly two-thirds of study participants—62%—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, 9% had been involved 6-11 months and 14% were involved for less than 6 months. A small number did not specify how long they had been involved in their organization.

Youth were asked to list up to three reasons they joined their BHC-affiliated youth organization. Figure 2 lists the top reasons for joining. In CSS Fresno, the most common reason given was wanting to make a difference (52%), followed by the desire to develop skills (50%). Other frequently reported reasons for joining their organization included liking what the group focused on (46%), having fun (45%), and being invited by friends (36%). Findings suggest that BHC groups attracted young people who were seeking to improve their community, but were also looking to learn new skills while enjoying the company of their peers.

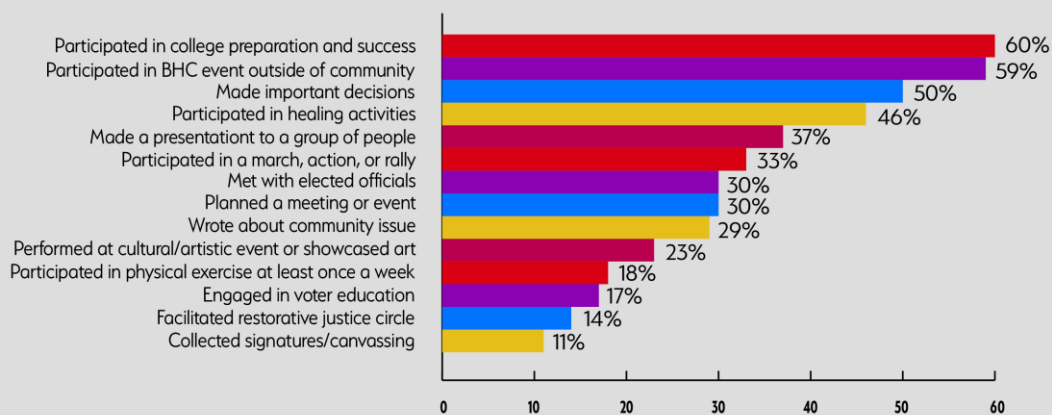
Figure 2. Reason for joining BHC group



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.³ In CSS Fresno, youth most commonly claimed to have participated in college preparation and success (60%), as shown in Figure 3. Fifty-nine percent of members reported participating in BHC statewide or regional gatherings such as Youth Advocacy Day in Sacramento, Boys and Men of Color Retreat, the Sisterhood Rising Leadership retreat, and other smaller scale activities. Fifty percent of members reported making important decisions, 46% percent participated in healing circles or other activities that promote emotional well-being, and 37% percent made presentations to groups of people.

As Figure 3 further shows, youth’s involvement with other types of civic activities include participating in a march, action, or rally (33%), meeting with elected officials (30%), and planning a meeting or event (30%). Youth also wrote about community issues (29%), performed or showcased art (23%), and facilitated restorative justice circles (14%). Lastly, some youth conducted voter education (17%) and collecting signatures or canvassed (11%). Survey results suggest that BHC-affiliated youth organizations provided youth with a variety of opportunities for leadership and self-development.

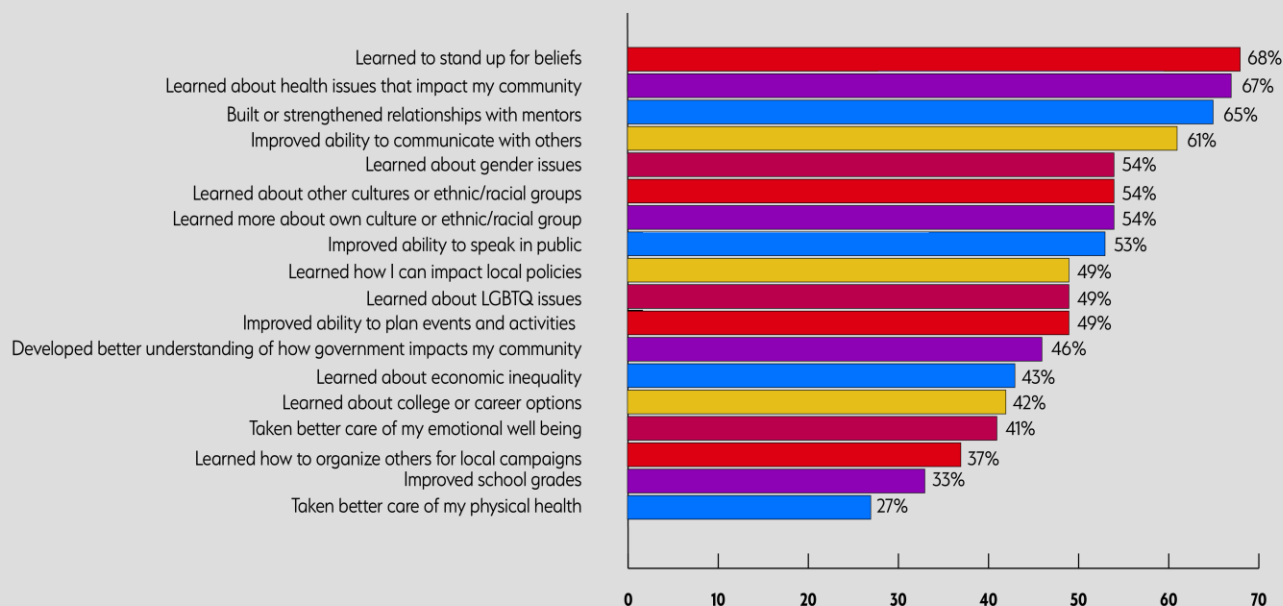
Figure 3. How youth participated in their BHC group



HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

As demonstrated in earlier phases of the BHC youth program evaluation, BHC youth organizations contributed to their members’ healthy development in a variety of ways and to different degrees.⁴ 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.

Figure 4. The degree to which BHC impacts its members: Percent responding “a lot”



Survey findings suggest that members felt particularly empowered around advocating for change: 68% reported that they benefited a lot when it came to standing up for their beliefs. A significant proportion (67%) also reported learning a lot more about health issues impacting their community, while 49% learned a lot on how to impact local policies. Relatedly, 37% learned about how to organize others for campaigns. Participation also enabled many to build or strengthen relationship with mentors (65%), and also improved their ability to communicate with others (61%).

Youth frequently learned about their own cultural and racial backgrounds and the diversity of California’s population. As results show in Figure 4, 54% reported learning a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group, while 54% learned a lot about other ethnic/racial groups. Additionally, 49% reported learning a lot about LGBTQ issues and 43% learned a lot about economic inequality.

Participation also had implications for youths' health: 36% percent reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being and 35% percent reported taking a lot better care of their physical health. Importantly, many youth learned about college and career options, and a third improved their grades in school.

COLLECTIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

In addition to supporting the healthy development of members, most BHC-affiliated youth organizations collectively had a positive impact at the community and state level. Their efforts included the following:

- Youth Voice in Decision-Making and Mainstream Media: BHC-affiliated youth participate in the Fresno City Council Youth Commission which involves 16 high school students and community college students in advising policy decisions impacting youth. This City Council Youth Commission was created by the city council as a result of advocacy efforts by youth and their adult allies. Fresno BHC-affiliated youth also participate in the Fresno Police Department's Youth Advisory Council which meets monthly to advise the Police Chief Jerry Dyer on police-community relationships. Additionally, fifteen BHC-affiliated youth participate in the ABC30 Youth Advisory Council sponsored by the local station, KFSN-TV. The goal of the council is to help ABC30 better understand the issues important to Fresno youth.
- Education Funding: As part of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) process, BHC-affiliated youth are active in shaping Fresno Unified School District's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) funding priorities. In their efforts to advocate for more funding that targets English-learners, foster-youth, and low-income students, BHC-affiliated youth have attended school board meetings, built relationships with important stakeholders, and organized other students to participate in support of their efforts. Youth and their adult allies organized the first ever LCAP student convening, during which Fresno high school students offered recommendations for the LCAP. This convening contributed to the Formal LCAP Student Committee, which is made up of youth representatives who meet bimonthly to provide feedback on the Fresno Unified LCAP. Additionally, youths' efforts contributed to the allocation of funding for six restorative practices counselors who will be placed throughout Fresno Unified in 2017-2018. In collaboration with BHC organizations, the Formal LCAP Student Committee will conduct action research to assess the implementation of new restorative practices.
- Access to Recreational Space: Fresno BHC-affiliated youth are engaged in the statewide public land use #Parks4All campaign which seeks to address the shortage of green space and improve the parks system throughout Fresno. As part of this effort, young leaders pushed the Fresno City Council to update the Parks Master Plan, which has been overdue since 1989. This effort resulted in the City of Fresno committing \$450,000 to support and address the disparity of parks between North and South Fresno. Further, the Fresno City Council Youth Commission has been invited to provide input in the City of Fresno Parks Master Plan. In a related effort in Southeast Fresno, youth have sought to make Romain Park more accessible to youth and families. To compensate for the city's current lack of funding for parks, youth themselves

have repainted Romain Park’s recreation room, installed flower beds for a community garden, and organized the grand opening of a skate park. In September, the city completed significant renovations to the Romain Park basketball courts thanks in large part to youth advocacy.

- **Health Care Access:** Some Fresno youth have been involved in the statewide #Health4All campaign to increase health care access for undocumented immigrants who are excluded from the federal Affordable Health Care Act. In a collaborative effort involving elected officials, media outlets, and community-based and health advocate organizations, Fresno BHC-affiliated young leaders demanded the passage of Senate Bill (SB) 10. In June 2016, Governor Brown signed SB-10 into law, effectively making California the first state to provide health care access regardless of legal status.

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 CSS Fresno.

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¹ For a list of publications related to the BHC youth program evaluation visit: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-leadership/>

² Hernandez, Miriam, Robert Chala, and Veronica Terriquez. 2014. *Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in Central, Southeast, and Southwest Fresno*. Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/Fresno_July2014_07.pdf

³ 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

⁴ 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/>