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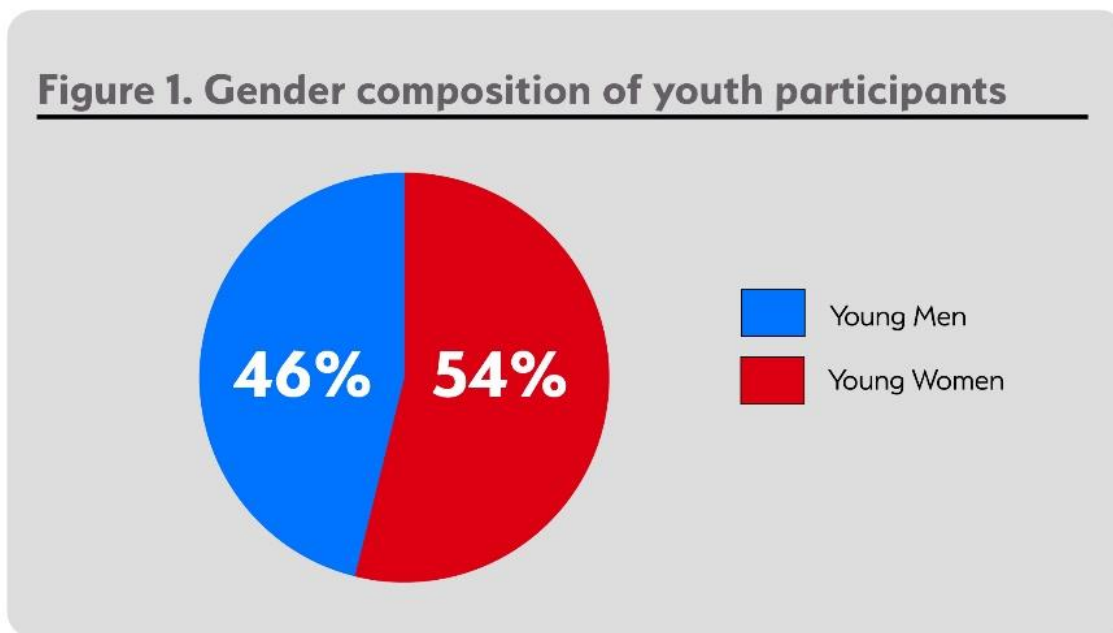
Since 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) has invested in youth leadership and youth-led organizing groups as a key component of its Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative. These youth groups have sought to support the healthy development of their members while engaging them in efforts to promote their community’s well-being. As part of a longitudinal evaluation, this report focuses on BHC-affiliated youth programming in Southwest Merced and East Merced County.¹ Located in the Central Valley, Merced is one of fourteen BHC sites in California.

This report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or “core” youth members, of seven 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 (1) Cultiva la Salud, (2) Le Grand High School’s Impact for Success, (3) Le Grand High School’s Restorative Justice League, (4) Merced Organizing Project, (5) Symple Equazion’s Youth I Can, (6) United Way’s BHC Youth Interns, and (7) We’Ced Youth Media. Some of these groups are featured in a 2014 report on BHC-affiliated youth programming in Merced.²

This report contains four main sections. First, we provide 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 while also enhancing their own well-being. Last, we briefly summarize 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 at the midpoint of the 10-year BHC initiative. It is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all youth engagement and leadership development efforts, but one view into these activities.

DESCRIPTION OF BHC YOUTH PROGRAM REGULAR PARTICIPANTS

This study draws on 81 surveys collected from young people who regularly participated in BHC youth programs in Merced. Survey participants represented 93 percent of core youth members in participating organizations. The median age of these members was 17 at the time of the study, but they ranged in age from 14 to 24 years. As shown in Figure 1, young women represented 54 percent of participants, slightly outnumbering young men. Participants were generally representative of the racial/ethnic composition of the Merced community. Approximately 82 percent identified as Latino/a, 7 percent identified as white, 6 percent as Asian-Pacific Islander, and 5 percent as African-American. Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 80 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school. Only 12 percent were raised by a parent with a bachelor's degree.



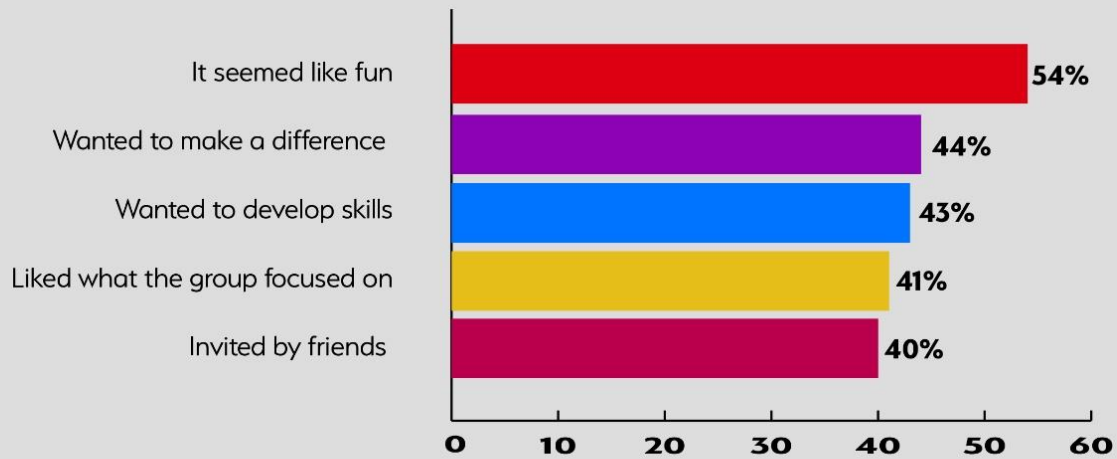
MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

Youth in Merced varied in the length of time they had been involved in their respective organizations. Most study participants—69 percent—were involved in their BHC-affiliated organization for at least one year. This suggests that, overall, BHC organizations retain many of their participants, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 10 percent had been involved between 6–11 months, and 16 percent had been involved for 6 months or less. Five percent did not specify the length of their involvement.

Youth were asked to indicate up to three reasons why they joined their BHC-affiliated youth organization. As shown in Figure 2, the most common reason chosen by youth was that their group seemed fun (59%). Youth also joined because they wanted to make a difference (44%), wanted to develop new skills (43%), liked what the group focused on (41%), and/or were invited by friends (40%).

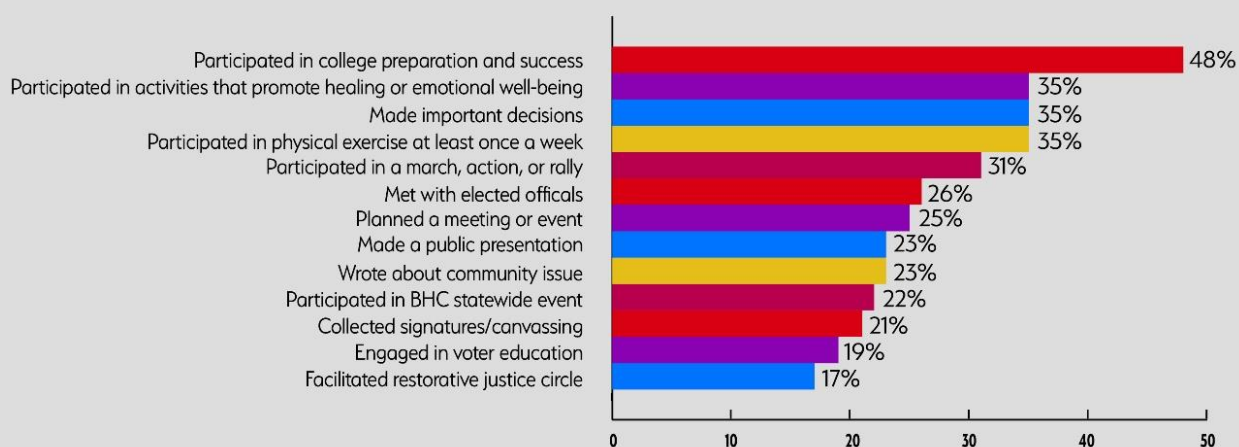
These reasons suggest that BHC organizations attract youth who are interested in helping their communities and want to invest in their own personal development. At the same time, organizations attracted members by offering a fun social environment.

Figure 2. Reason for joining BHC group



Youth also reported 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 Findings suggest that these groups provide their members with personal development and civic engagement opportunities. As shown in Figure 3, youth most commonly participated in activities related to college preparation and success (48%). Additionally, just over a third (35%) participated in activities that promote healing, made what they considered “important” decisions, and engaged in physical exercise. Some members also participated in activities that advocated for community change: they joined in a march, action, or rally (31%); met with elected officials (26%); wrote about community issues (23%); collected signatures and canvassed (21%); and talked to voters about elections (19%).

Figure 3. How youth participated in their BHC group



HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

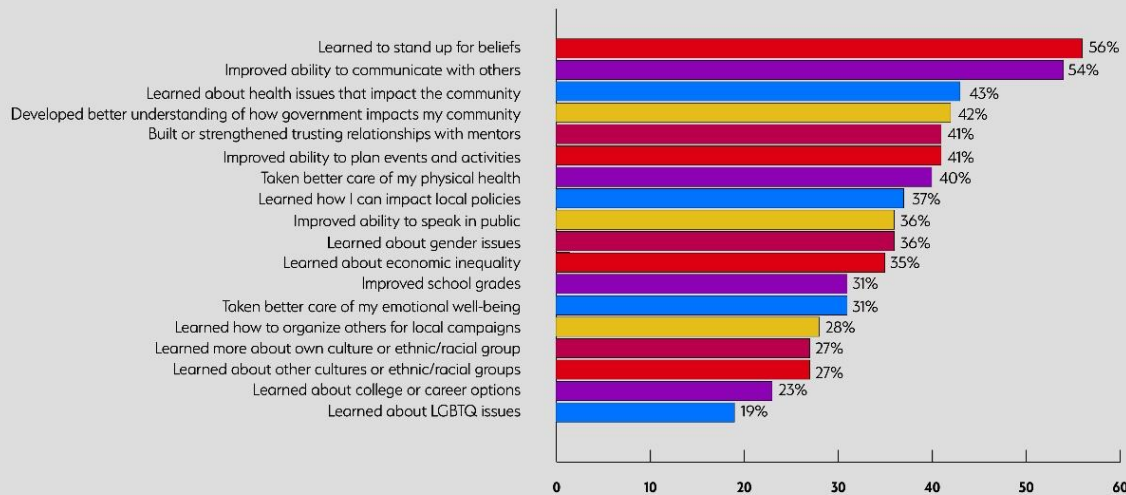
As demonstrated in earlier phases of the BHC youth program evaluation, BHC youth organizations contribute to the healthy development of youth members in various ways and to different degrees.⁴ In the survey, we asked members to rate the degree to which their group involvement impacted different aspects 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.

Survey findings suggest that youth organizations helped members develop their voice and leadership capabilities. It was common for youth to report that they significantly improved their ability to stand up for their beliefs (56%), communicate with others (54%), plan events and activities (41%), and speak in public (36%). Many also learned “a lot” about health issues that affect their community (43%), developed a better understanding of how government impacts their community (42%), and learned how they could impact local policy change (37%).

Some members indicated that they had gained more awareness about diversity and social inequality. Twenty-seven percent said that they learned about their own racial/ethnic group, with the same percentage expressing that they had also learned about other racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, 35% reported that they learned about economic inequality, and 19% learned about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues.

Participation in these organizations also had health and educational implications for group members. Notably, 40% of youth claimed that they had taken a lot better care of their physical health, and another 31% reported that they were taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being. Furthermore, 31% said they had significantly improved their grades in school, and 23% noted that they had learned a lot about college and career options.

Figure 4. 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, BHC-affiliated youth organizations sought to promote community health and well-being. Their efforts included the following:

- Safe Routes to School:** In response to the need for pedestrian safety infrastructure, youth organizations in Merced implemented the Safe Routes to Schools Campaign. Youth, alongside allies, met with county planners and engineers to assess the walkability of curbs and gutters on Lobo Avenue, a road that connects Franklin Elementary School to Joe Stefani Elementary School in Beachwood/Franklin, an unincorporated area of Merced County. This effort informed the implementation of a \$973,000 grant allocated to improve the local sidewalks to the schools.
- Increased Youth Inclusion and Programming:** Merced City is in the process of developing a Youth Council that will advise the City Council on efforts to support youth leadership and programming. Youth and their allies are advocating that Youth Council members have an authentic voice in providing input into a broad range of issues affecting young people. As part of this effort, youth have engaged in rallies, marches, strategic communications efforts, and meetings to demonstrate the need to incorporate youths’ opinions and interests on city matters. To date, the Youth Council has been formally established and youth services have been identified as a priority in the most recent Merced City budget development process.
- Youth and Community Voice in School Spending:** Youth and their adult allies have sought to offer input into the Merced City School District’s Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which determines the spending of state base and supplemental funds made available through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). To this end, they have met with elected officials, organized informational events, and encouraged community participation at LCAP meetings. Current demands around the LCAP have focused on three main themes:

 1. Making information about the LCAP accessible to the community. Youth and community members demand that LCAP related materials and activities are made available in a language that non-English speaking community members can understand. They have also sought to

ensure that LCAP gatherings occur at times that accommodate the schedules of students and their parents.

2. Creating avenues for community input into the LCAP. Youth and their adult allies seek to implement annual LCAP forums in different parts of the community to inform residents about the LCAP and obtain input and ideas on funding priorities.

3. Advocating for increases in school-based mental and behavioral health and counseling services provided for students. Youth leaders and their allies are seeking the expansion of support services that address mental and behavioral health issues that often arise from early adverse experiences and trauma.

- **Promoting Restorative Justice:** Le Grand High School students have implemented and promoted restorative practices in order to reduce suspensions and expulsions. Restorative justice aims to address the harm caused by disciplinary infractions or other conflicts. Recognizing youths' efforts in Spring 2016, State Assemblymember Adam Gray dedicated the month of March as Restorative Justice Month for all California schools. Quite notably, youth representatives and their adult allies met with President Obama's advisors in August 2016 to advocate for restorative justice programs as a national strategy for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

Since the inception of the BHC initiative, BHC youth organizations have, as a whole, developed their capacity to support the healthy development of youth and engaged them in efforts that to promote community health. Youth leadership and involvement can be key to increasing community civic engagement in the future. Their efforts could have a lasting impact on the health and well-being of youth in Merced.

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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 Chlala, Robert and Veronica Terriquez. 2014. "Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in Southwest Merced/East Merced County." Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/Merced_July2014_V6.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/>.