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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 communities' well-being. As part of a longitudinal evaluation, this report focuses on BHC-affiliated youth programming in Santa Ana. Located in Orange County, Santa Ana is one of 14 BHC sites in California.<sup>1</sup>

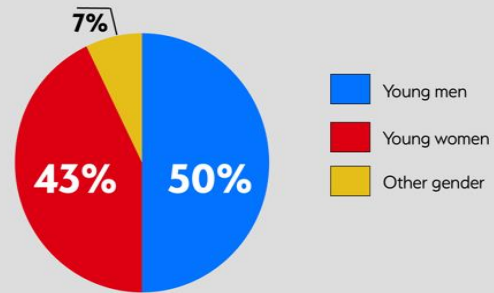
This report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or “core” youth members, of four organizations that engage their members in grassroots organizing and advocacy, media production and the cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, or other activities. These groups include: (1) Resistencia Autonomia Igualdad Liberazgo (RAIZ), (2) Santa Ana Boys and Men of Color, (3) KidWorks, and (4) The LGBT Center OC. Of these groups, KidsWorks was featured in a 2014 report on BHC affiliated youth programming in Santa Ana.<sup>2</sup>

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, 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 60 surveys collected from young people who regularly participate in BHC youth programs in Santa Ana. Survey participants represent 87% of core youth members in organizations that participated in the study. The average age of these members at the time of the survey was 17, but they ranged in age from 13 to 24 years. As shown in Figure 1, men outnumbered women, representing 50% of participants, while women represented 43% of participants. A small percentage of participants—7%—did not identify along the gender binary.

Figure 1. Gender composition of youth participants



Participants were generally representative of the racial/ethnic composition of the Santa Ana community. Approximately 73% identified as Latino/a, 7% identified as Asian-Pacific Islander, and 3% identified as African-American. The remaining 16% percent identified as white (13%) or Native American (3%).

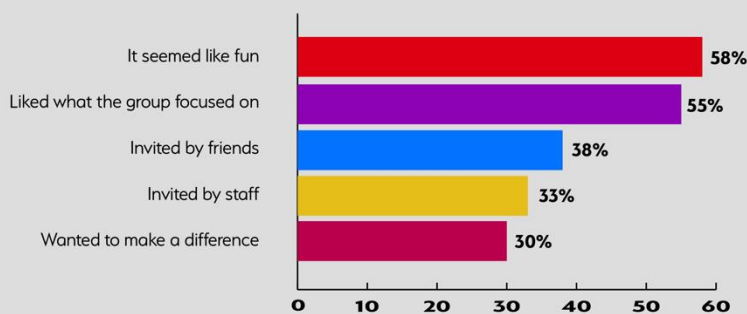
Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 72% were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school. Only 18% were raised by a parent with a bachelor's degree.

## MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

Youth in Santa Ana vary in how long they have been involved in their organizations. Quite notably, half of study participants—50%—had been involved in their BHC-affiliated organization for at least a year at the time of the survey. This suggests that overall, BHC organizations were able to retain many of their participants, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 18% had been involved 6-11 months and 25% were involved for less than 6 months.

Youth were asked to list up to three reasons why they joined their BHC-affiliated youth organization. Figure 2 lists the top reasons for joining. In Santa Ana, the most common reason given was it seemed

Figure 2. Reason for joining BHC group

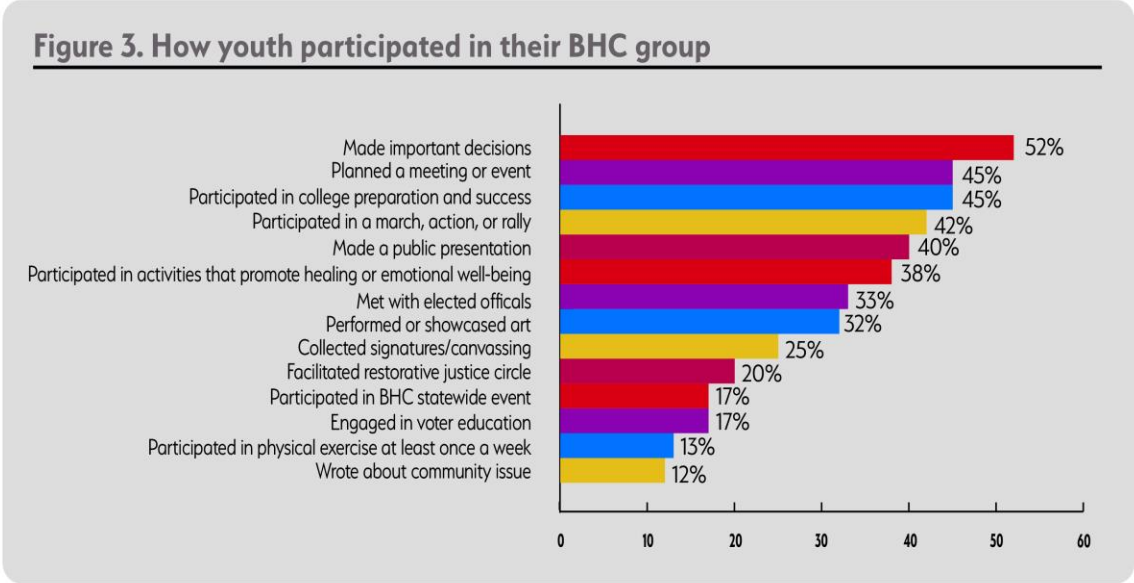


like fun (58%), suggesting that youth view their organizations as social activities. Many also joined because they liked what the organizations focused on (55%), indicating that the youth organizations' programming and missions are important for youth. Other frequently reported reasons for joining their organization include being

invited by friends (38%) or staff (33%), and wanting to make a difference (30%). This suggests that staff networks and peer-to-peer outreach are important as youth look for opportunities to become civically engaged in their communities.

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> In Santa Ana, youth most commonly claimed to make important decisions in their community (52%), as indicated in Figure 3. Youth often prepared for their post-secondary educational experiences, as 45% of members reported participating in college preparation and success activities. Youth also frequently planned meetings and events (45%); participated in a march, action, or rally (42%); and made public presentations (40%). While the focus of many BHC organizations is to engage youth in local and community concerns, the findings presented here also suggest that youth are being exposed to college preparatory activities. Moreover, youth are empowered in communities with limited resources through their roles as leaders and influencers in local campaigns and community decisions.

Other activities that youth have engaged in include making public presentations (40%), participating in activities that promote emotional well-being and healing (38%), meeting with elected officials (33%), and performing or showcasing their art (32%). Youths’ efforts to impact community change have included collecting signatures or canvassing for a campaign (25%), facilitating restorative justice circles (17%), and engaging in voter education (17%). Lastly, some youth participated in physical exercise at least once a week (13%) or wrote about the issues facing their communities (12%).



**HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT**

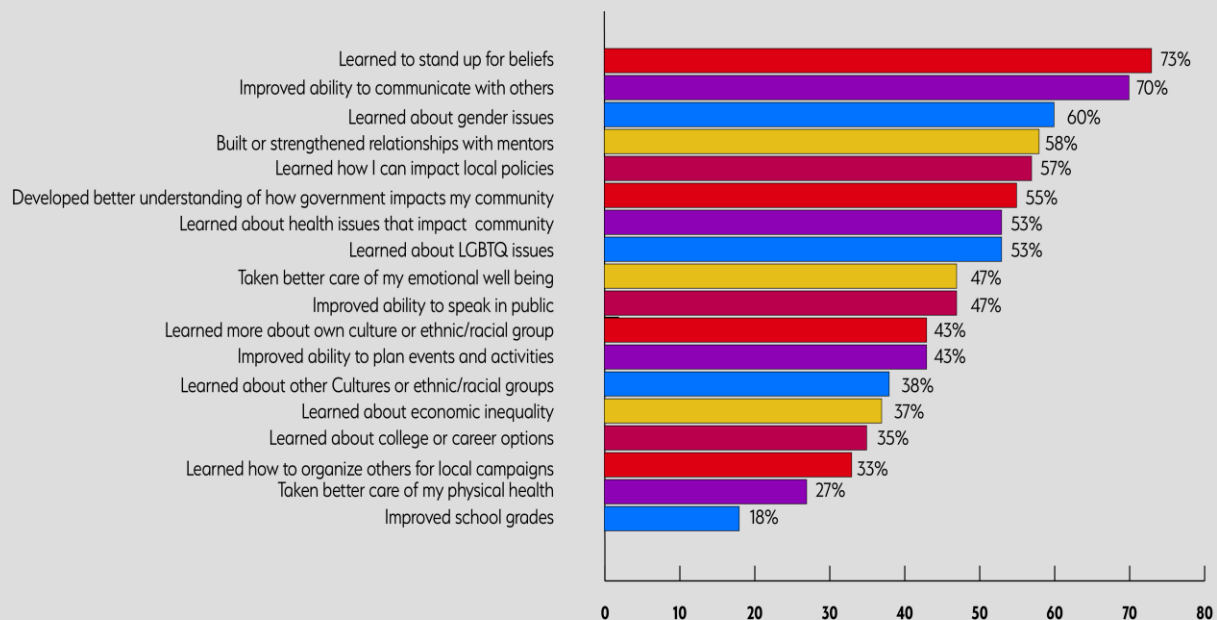
As demonstrated in earlier phases of the BHC youth program evaluation, BHC youth organizations contribute to their members’ healthy development in a variety of ways and to different degrees.<sup>4</sup> In the survey, we asked members to rate the degree to which their group involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of*

impact? Figure 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 members felt particularly empowered around self-efficacy, as 73% reported that they benefited “a lot” when it came to learning to stand up for their beliefs. A significant proportion (70%) also reported having learned “a lot” with respect to their ability to communicate with others. These findings indicate that youth are developing skills pertinent to their personal development and community involvement. Youth participation also contributed to an increased awareness of gender issues and strengthening of relationships with mentors, as 60% and 58% respectively reported this was the case. As these findings demonstrate, youth are engaging in discussions relevant to their community—and society more broadly. In addition, these organizations are equipping youth with the tools necessary for their future academic and professional pursuits by promoting their leadership qualities and providing them access to mentors.

Youth also frequently learned about their own cultural and racial backgrounds and the diversity of the California population. As results show, 43% reported learning about their own culture or ethnic/racial group, and 38% learned about other ethnic/racial groups. Additionally, 53% reported learning about LGBTQ issues, and 37% learned about economic inequality. Some youth—57%—developed their capacity to impact policy change and 33% learned how to organize others to participate in campaigns that benefit their communities.

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



Participation also had implications for members’ health and educational outcomes, as 47% percent of youth reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being and 27% percent claimed to have

taken a lot better care of their physical health. At the same time, over a third learned a lot about college and career options, and 18% significantly 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 made a positive impact within the community and across the state. Their efforts addressed the following issues:

- Implementing Inclusive Restorative Justice Practices in Schools: As a follow-up to a campaign victory in 2014, youth have advocated for the proper implementation of restorative justice programming in the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD). Restorative justice can include an approach to school discipline that aims to repair the harm caused by infractions, promote healing, and reduce out of school suspensions and expulsion. To advance their goals, young people and their allies have researched different restorative justice models, including those that aim to address trauma, draw on the strengths of students' ethnic cultures, and address the needs of diverse students, including those who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) and those with disabilities. To engage with stakeholders in the process, youth also attended public forums, met with key district stakeholders, and organized a local convening for youth. Youths' efforts contributed to a 2015 commitment of \$400,000 by SAUSD for the implementation of restorative practices by trained facilitators and the adoption of trauma and culturally informed restorative justice practices in ten high schools in the 2015-2016 school year. Additionally, SAUSD committed to expanding restorative justice in seven additional schools for the 2016-2017 school year. Ultimately, BHC-affiliated youth organizations seek the expansion of restorative justice practices districtwide, and they aim to hold the school district accountable to their commitments.
- Immigrant Rights: The deportation of immigrants can have serious negative implications for the well-being of individuals, their families, and communities. To prevent the negative and traumatic consequences of deportation, young people and their allies have sought to eliminate close collaboration between law enforcement and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). They have also advocated for closing a local immigration detention facility. While they have not met their goals to date, youth have pressured the local city council to phase out the city's contract with ICE and explore options for improving conditions in the jail.
- Health and Nutrition in Schools and the Community: Residents in Santa Ana disproportionately suffer from diabetes and obesity. To address these and other health concerns, youth in Santa Ana BHC-affiliated organizations and their allies have sought to expand access to healthy food and promote healthy eating habits in schools and their communities. As part of this effort, youth have raised awareness of how soft drinks contribute to diabetes and obesity in their communities, posting videos and memes on YouTube and Instagram. They have also demanded access to salad bars in high schools. This effort required young people to produce YouTube video campaigns and to meet with the nutritional director of SAUSD. Due in part to these efforts, salad bars have been installed in four out of nine SAUSD high school campuses, thus providing students healthier food options.

- Ethnic Studies in SAUSD and California: Santa Ana youth and their allies have fought to increase access to ethnic studies courses in schools within the district and across the state. Currently, SAUSD high schools offer ethnic studies elective courses, but advocates seek to expand course offerings in all of the district’s K-12 schools. To this end, youth have met with school board members, testified at school board meetings, and held actions and rallies. While they have not secured additional commitments for expanded ethnic studies courses within SAUSD to date, their coalitional efforts with groups across the state have resulted in a concrete victory. On September 13, 2016 Governor Jerry Brown signed AB2016, which directed the State Board of Education to adopt a model ethnic studies curriculum that could be implemented in high schools across the state.

### THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTH’S 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, given their recent campaign victories, youths’ efforts may have a lasting impact on community health and well-being in Central Santa Ana. This cohort of young people involved in BHC efforts may have paved the way for lasting youth voice in their community. As a BHC staff member explained, “Culturally there has been a big shift in the minds of adults to pay attention. Youth voices are strong, independent, and different.”

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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> Lin, May and Veronica Terriquez. 2014. “Building Healthy Communities Through Youth Programming in Santa Ana.” Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: <http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/BHC-youth-leadership/>

<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/>