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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 South Kern.<sup>1</sup> Located south of Bakersfield in the Central Valley, South Kern is one of fourteen BHC sites in California.

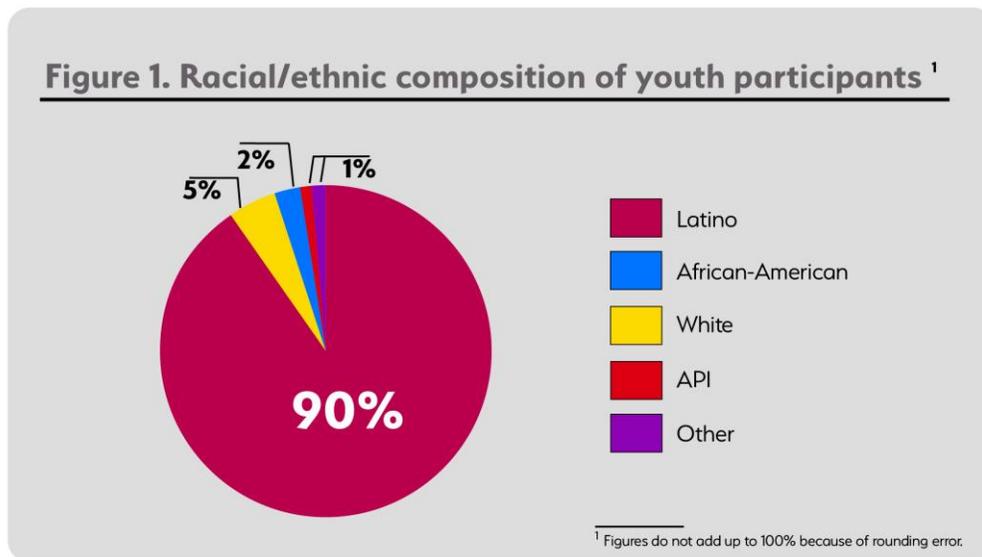
This report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or "core" youth members, of seven organizations that engage their members in grassroots organizing and advocacy, media production and the cultural arts, practices that promote healing and well-being, and other activities. These groups include (1) Bike Arvin, (2) Boys and Girls Club of Lamont, (3) California Walks, (4) Dolores Huerta Foundation<sup>2</sup>, (5) Garden Pathways, (6) Greenfield Walking Group, and (7) South Kern Sol. A few of these groups are featured in a 2014 report on BHC affiliated youth-programming in South Kern.<sup>3</sup>

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 just past the midpoint of the 10-year BHC Initiative.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF BHC YOUTH PROGRAM REGULAR PARTICIPANTS**

This study draws on 84 surveys collected from young people who regularly participated in BHC youth programs in South Kern. Survey participants represent 89 percent of core youth members in participating organizations. The average age of these members was 15.9 at the time of the study, but

they ranged in age from 13–23 years. Young men represented 63 percent of participants, outnumbering young women. Participants were generally representative of the racial/ethnic composition of the South Kern community. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 90 percent identified as Latino/a, and 5 percent identified as White. The remaining youth identified as African American (2 percent), Asian-Pacific Islander (1 percent), or another race/ethnicity (1 percent). Most youth came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 58 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school. Only seven percent were raised by a parent with a bachelor’s degree.

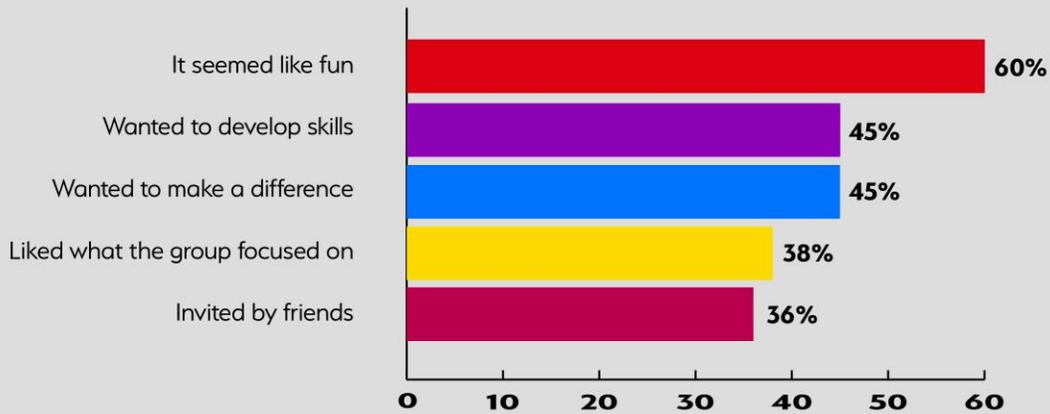


## MEMBERS’ INVOLVEMENT

Youth in South Kern varied in how long they have been involved in their organizations. Just over half of study participants—51 percent—were involved in their BHC-affiliated organization for at least a year. Of the remaining youth, 13 percent were involved for 6–11 months, 24 percent were involved for less than 6 months, and 12 percent did not specify the length of their involvement. Having a large percentage of more veteran members is likely a benefit to newer members, who can receive guidance, training, and support from their peers.

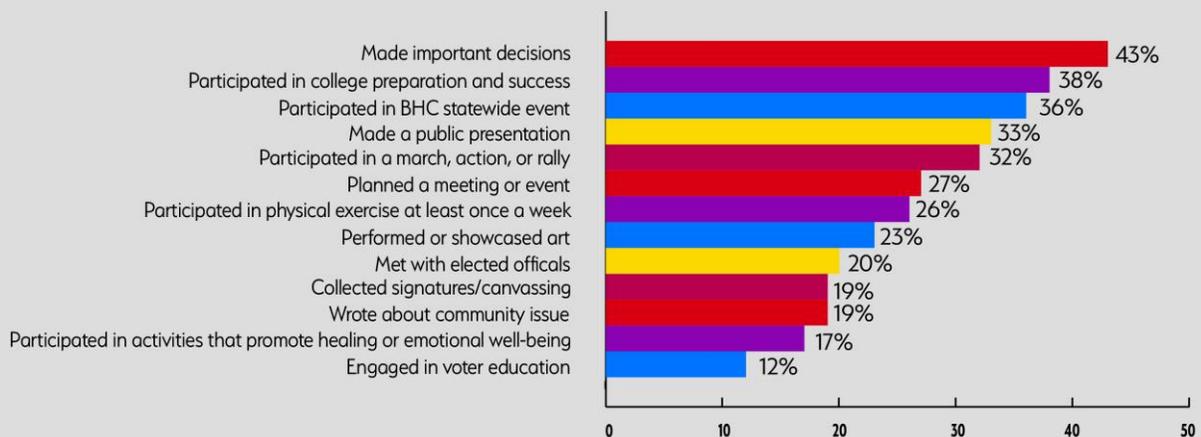
Youth were asked to list up to three reasons they joined their BHC-affiliated youth organization. As shown in Figure 2, the most common reason given was that their group seemed fun (60 percent). Many also joined because they wanted to make a difference (45 percent), they wanted to develop new skills (45 percent), they liked what the group focused on (38 percent) and/or they were invited by friends (36 percent). These findings suggest that while organizations attract members by creating an entertaining social environment, they also draw youth who are invested in their own personal development and community.

**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.<sup>4</sup> Findings suggest that these groups provide their members with civic and leadership opportunities. As shown in Figure 3, members most regularly made important decisions (43 percent) and participated in college preparation (38 percent). Additionally, 36 percent participated in a statewide BHC event. Many youth (33 percent) made a public presentation, while 27 percent planned a meeting or event. Notably, group members commonly participated in activities that promote community change: they joined in a march, action, or rally (32 percent); met with elected officials (20 percent); wrote about community issues (19 percent); collected signatures and canvassed (19 percent); and educated voters (12 percent).

**Figure 3. How youth participated in their BHC group**

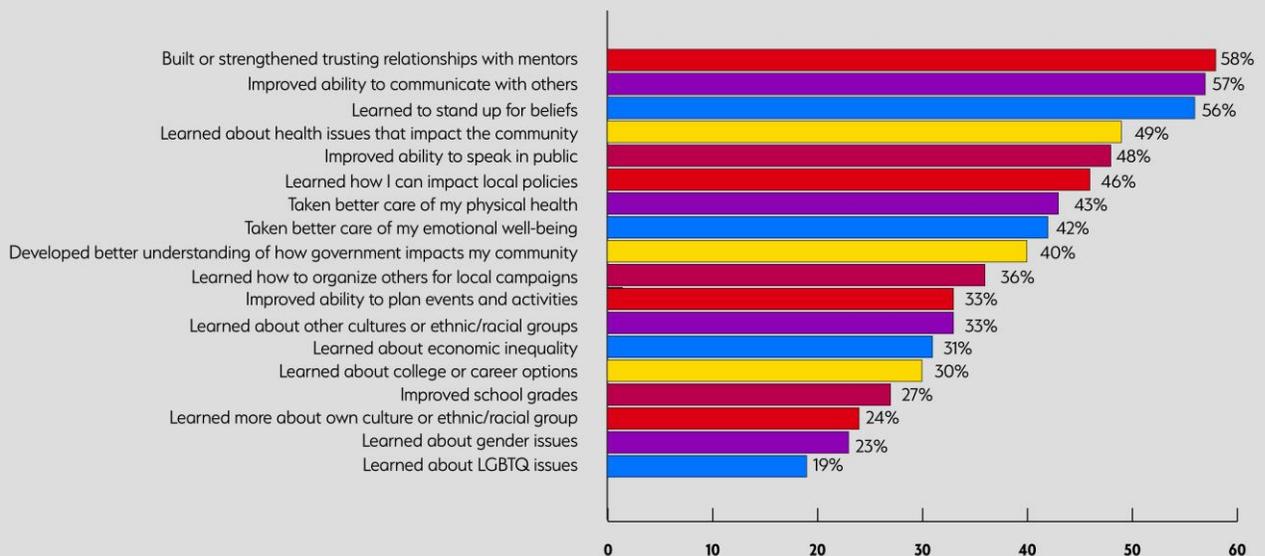


## HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

As demonstrated in earlier phases of the BHC youth program evaluation, BHC youth organizations contribute to their members' healthy development in various ways and to different degrees.<sup>5</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 youth organizations helped members develop their voice. Many youth reported that they benefited a lot when it came to improving their ability to communicate with others (57 percent), stand up for their beliefs (56 percent), and speak in public (48 percent). A significant proportion (58 percent) also reported that they built or strengthened trusting relationships with mentors. Participation also had implications for youths' health: 43 percent reported taking a lot better care of their physical health, and 42 percent reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being. Some learned about their own cultural and racial backgrounds and the diversity of the California population. As the results show, 24 percent learned about their own racial/ethnic group, while 33 percent reported learning about other racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, 19 percent learned about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues, and 31 percent reported learning about economic inequality. Importantly, many youth (46 percent) developed their capacity to impact local policy change, and 36 percent 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”**



## 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 on their community. Their work has focused on improving recreational spaces, county infrastructure, clean water access, higher education access, school spending, and LGBTQ rights.

Recreational Spaces. BHC-affiliated youth successfully advocated for funds to rebuild a skate park at DiGiorgio Park in Arvin, which will accommodate the use of skates, skateboards, bicycles, and scooters. Motivated by a lack of outdoor recreational opportunities, young group members took multiple steps to ensure their success. They collected petition signatures in the community, gave testimony at Arvin City Council meetings, and helped with the skate park's final design. The skate park is scheduled for completion in January 2017. Additionally, youth helped improve the appearance of Rexland Acres Park in Greenfield. Youth painted designs on parking blocks and assisted in painting a mural at the park. Centered on the theme of activism, the mural depicts prominent civil rights leaders and serves as a visual reminder of possibilities for social change.

County Infrastructure. Inspired by a BHC-affiliated youth's media commentary and advocacy efforts, organizations successfully pushed the County of Kern to apply for funding from the Active Transportation Program (ATP). Youth met with the Kern County Roads Department and helped collect petition signatures, letters, and surveys from Rexland residents. If the State of California approves the ATP application, the 8.5-million-dollar grant would bring much needed infrastructure to the Rexland community. Examples of these improvements include sidewalks, pathways, roads, and gutters.

Access to Clean Drinking Water. After the City of Arvin found high levels of arsenic in its water, youth pressured the Kern High School District to install water filters on existing fountains at Arvin High School. Although community organizations began providing filters across the area, the school district was initially slow to address this issue. As a result, youth spoke with school district representatives. They also published report pieces and commentaries on the South Kern Sol website and in *The Arvin Tiller* and *Lamont Reporter*, two local newspapers. In part because of these efforts, the school district began working with community stakeholders to provide Arvin High students with clean drinking water.

Access to Higher Education. With support from the BHC South Kern hub and other BHC organizations, youth demanded a satellite Bakersfield College campus in Arvin. Youth wrote commentaries, spoke during press conferences, and addressed the Kern Community College District (KCCD) trustees during board meetings. In response to these efforts and KCCD's other infrastructure needs, KCCD voted to place a 502-million-dollar bond measure on the November ballot. Included in the bond is 25 million dollars for the college facility that will serve the South Kern community. Advocates emphasize that this initiative will increase the proportion of educated residents in South Kern and help reduce poverty levels.

School Spending. After attending workshops and trainings on the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), youth became involved in budgetary processes in the Kern High School District. Youth attended multiple LCFF advisory meetings and demanded increased funding for cultural competency trainings, school counselors, classroom computers, positive behavior interventions and supports, and advanced placement classes. In addition, youth have made demands for curriculum and programs that are

inclusive of the LGBTQ community. While the results of these efforts are still uncertain, BHC youth participants have begun making their voices heard in school budgetary processes.

LGBTQ Rights. Representing diverse stakeholders in the community, the LGBTQ Roundtable has sought to inject a gender justice agenda within local community efforts and has advocated for an intersectional approach to school reforms. Youth joined this roundtable in March 2016 to ensure that their voices were incorporated into organizing and advocacy efforts. In addition to making demands regarding school spending (as noted above), the LGBTQ Roundtable turned out youth to a June 2016 school board meeting in support of district policy ensuring the rights of trans students.

## A GROWING YOUTH MOVEMENT IN SOUTH KERN

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 engage them in efforts to promote community health. Youth leaders and staff hope to build on their recent victories by further improving public spaces and expanding educational opportunities. Moving forward, these organizations aim for more equitable adult-youth partnerships while increasing support from residents and elected officials. BHC organizations will likely create a lasting influence on youth participants' well-being and leadership capacities. In turn, youth are making a mark by enhancing community well-being in South Kern.

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

<sup>2</sup> California Rural Legal Assistance supports the Dolores Huerta Foundation in running Teens 4 LGBTQ Equality, one of the Dolores Huerta Foundation's two youth programs.

<sup>3</sup> Chavez, Marylou and Veronica Terriquez. 2014. "Building Healthy Communities through Youth Programming in South Kern County." Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/SouthKern\\_July2014\\_final\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/SouthKern_July2014_final_for_web.pdf).

<sup>4</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>5</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/per/BHC-youth-leadership/>.