Expanding the Youth Leadership Pipeline

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUPS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

BY VERONICA TERRIQUEZ, NICOLE WHITE, MAY LIN, AND URIEL SERRANO

Prepared for the Weingart Foundation
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Introduction
Southern California is home to the most vibrant youth organizing sector in the United States. Often relying on foundation funding and private donations, nonprofit youth organizing groups typically recruit low-income, racially diverse, LGBTQ, and immigrant youth and engage them in collective efforts to change school, municipal, state, or federal government policies. These groups started gaining visibility in the 1990s in Los Angeles as young organizers fought to address educational, economic, and racial inequalities; immigrant rights; and environmental justice. Since then, the number of youth organizing groups has grown, not only in Los Angeles County, but in the broader Southern California region and beyond.

While youth organizing groups can boast a large range of victories that have resulted in significant community gains, they have also developed a cadre of young leaders who share a serious commitment and capacity to advance social justice as they become older.1 Today’s youth organizing groups, similar to earlier youthful civil rights organizations, are preparing young people to assume leadership roles in their communities. As evidenced by our research that includes data from a representative sample of young adults in California, low-income young people of color who participate in grassroots youth organizing during adolescence are significantly more likely than comparable peers to engage in community work, lead social justice-oriented social change efforts, and participate in the electoral process once they reach adulthood.2 Moreover, young people who participate in grassroots organizing groups disproportionately orient their families to civic and political participation. As such, youth organizing is a strategy that closely aligns with the Weingart Foundation’s Leadership for Movement Building Initiative.

This report provides the Weingart Foundation and other philanthropic organizations with recommendations for how increased investments in grassroots youth organizing groups can expand the number of young people

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being prepared to play an active role in promoting social justice in their communities. While recommendations primarily rely on findings from interview and focus group data collected from 18 youth organizations based in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino Counties, they are also informed by larger ongoing research projects on grassroots youth organizing.

This report contains three main sections. The first section briefly describes the youth organizing groups participating in this study and the research methodology. The second section describes key challenges that youth organizing groups face expanding their memberships. Finally, the third section offers recommendations on how increased investments might support youth organizing groups to expand the number of young core leaders who participate in grassroots campaigns.

**Southern California Youth Organizing Groups and Study Design**

Youth organizing groups are part of a larger Southern California movement infrastructure that expanded in response to the 1992 LA uprising and other local and statewide initiatives that undermined the civil rights of immigrants and people of color. While some youth organizing groups can trace their history to contentious organizing of the 1990s, others began engaging young people in campaign efforts more recently. Youth organizing groups in California can claim significant campaign victories, including the California Dream Act, equity-minded and LGBTQ-inclusive school and juvenile justice reforms, the closing of toxic factories and subsequent environmental clean-ups, the reduction of immigrant detentions and roundups, and increasing turnout among young voters, among many other victories.

This study focuses on 18 youth organizing groups, some of which have well-established track records and some of which are newer and have recently gained high levels of visibility. The 18 groups were selected for this study because of their effective efforts to engage adolescents and/or young adults in grassroots campaigns around pressing social justice concerns. However, not all consider themselves primarily or exclusively youth organizing groups. Some offer a range of programs for young people, including academic counseling, college preparation, participatory action research, arts and culture, wellness and healing, and legal services. Of these groups, 15 are part of larger multigenerational organizations that offer programming for older adults. Fifteen are based in Los Angeles County (although three offer programming in other counties), two are exclusively based in Orange County, and one has an office in San Bernardino County and also works in Riverside County.

To explore how philanthropy could better support the youth organizing field to increase the number of youth leaders trained and supported through programs, this study draws on interviews with executive directors or managers in all participating organizations. The research team also conducted interviews with lead youth organizers in 16 out of the 18
Interviews with management and organizers gathered data on the background and structure of the organizations, programming and staffing for member and alumni engagement, and challenges to and opportunities for expanding the number of youth helping lead grassroots organizing campaigns. After the research team conducted an initial analysis of interview data collected in fall 2017, they conducted four focus groups in early 2018 to share themes that emerged during the interviews and further explore opportunities for expanding organizational memberships.

In the pages that follow, we summarize common themes that emerged from our analysis and interpretation of findings. Research findings from multiple surveys of members and staff of youth organizing groups across the state, participant observations, and other ongoing data collection further inform our analysis.

**Building on the Strength of Youth Organizing Groups**

The youth organizing groups included in this exploratory study exhibit a range of organizational strengths. All can claim the involvement of young leaders in campaigns that seek to transform their communities and advance social justice. Almost all are deeply embedded in networks and coalitions that enhance their work and amplify their political power. Importantly, most of these groups recognize that they are working with young people who are at different stages of their emotional, academic, skill, and identity development. Moreover, groups seek to respond to the numerous challenges their young leaders face as a result of racial discrimination, residence in high-poverty communities, attendance in under-resourced schools, a broken immigration system, and/or other systemic inequalities.

To varying degrees, organizations in this study offer what we consider comprehensive programming to address members’ diverse needs and overcome challenges they often encounter. The everyday activities of these organizations typically develop members’ **basic civic skills** so that their young members are able to share their ideas with public audiences and plan activities for others. Often using popular education, organizations provide their members with **critical civics education** that teaches members to identify the structural causes of community problems, analyze social policies, and understand the experiences of diverse community members. By engaging them in collective efforts to change social policy, organizations expand young members’ **capacity to lead civic action** through meetings with decision-makers, collaboration with diverse stakeholders, collective action, and voter engagement efforts. Finally, groups vary in the extent to which they support their young members’ **personal growth and well-being** by providing them with strategies for healing from trauma, self-care, academic achievement, degree attainment, and professional growth.³


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"When we do our work, we let our young people know this isn’t just a club. This is an invitation to the larger movement, to the larger strategy, to the larger planning of what we’re trying to do. So when you leave high school, the relationship continues. We are constantly trying to develop young people to be able to make critical decision-making, to build consciousness, and to build leadership.”

*Carlos Elmo Gomez, Labor Community Strategy Center*
We contend that comprehensive programming can equip young people with a range of skills, experiences, values, and commitments that motivate them to further expand their leadership roles as they become older. Yet despite organizations’ multiple strengths, all identify challenges to growing the number of young people they can deeply engage as leaders, particularly if they seek to offer such comprehensive programming.

**Challenges to Expanding the Number of Youth Leaders**

**Staffing**

Organizations commonly reported that limited staff capacity prevents them from increasing the number of young people that can be effectively and meaningfully engaged in leading youth organization campaigns. Staff who are already working with existing core youth members often feel stretched thin, with too few staff juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. A few organizations reported having to recently abandon one or more areas of programming – such as alumni engagement, additional leadership development, or intergenerational organizing – due to limited capacity.

When staff feel overwhelmed or overworked, this can lead to burnout and staff turnover. Better resourced organizations have been able to invest in their staff, hiring extra staff people to focus on key areas, such as development, organizing, and communications, instead of relying on overloaded teams with limited training. They have been able to fund more vacation days and self-care activities for staff, which helps with retention. While staff should be commended for their extreme dedication to their youth and their organizations, increasing staff capacity will allow organizations to grow more sustainably.

**Expanding the Number of Youth Leaders Often Requires Comprehensive Programming**

Well-funded youth organizing groups are best positioned to comprehensive programming that develops members’ basic civic skills, offers them a critical civics education, expands their capacity for civic action, and attends to their personal growth and well-being. Given that the youth organizing groups in this study target young people from economically marginalized communities, offering such comprehensive programming can require significant staff time and resources. Various organizations we interviewed offer ‘wraparound services’ otherwise lacking in schools and communities, including those that support members’ academic achievement, college preparation, and well-being. As such, some organizations are wary of expanding the number of youth involved, without attending to their broader developmental needs. Thus, some organizations want to be sure they are not merely expanding, but responsibly expanding, without abandoning the key relationship building and

“We want to get as many members as we can, but we also know that one of our priorities is going deeper. Numbers are crucial to the work, but the approach to our work is really different. We’re like a family.”  
**Trina Pasumberal, UPLIFT**
“We have a challenge of wanting to grow bigger but not even having the capacity to maintain that growth. We could be so much bigger than we are, but because of our limited capacity, this is as far as we can hold essentially. For our summer training alone, we have like 100 people apply, but we can only take 50 because that's how many people will fit in this office. There's a lot of interest, especially here in Southeast LA, because no one is doing this work. But we don't have the ability to provide that space for all these people.”

Darryl Molina Sarmiento, Communities for a Better Environment

“It's hard to bring students together from different regions. Public transportation here is horrible. Sometimes students have to get their parents to drive them here two hours before our meeting starts in order to fit their schedule. Staff give students rides in our own cars, but most of us can only fit four people at a time. Figuring out this transportation piece would allow us to rebuild our base.”

Rocio Ruiz-Chen, Inland Congregations United for Change

personal investment in youth that makes their programs so strong. Many organizations noted that alumni or veteran members of organizations are often well poised to fill staffing gaps in responsible expansion, as they are already familiar with their organization’s programming and campaigns.

Regional and Summer Programming
For many youth organizations, summer and regional training programs function as an important space to invest in young members’ leadership development while advancing campaigns. These intensive training programs facilitate team building and expand both new and experienced members’ capacities to take on roles in campaigns. However, for many of the groups in this study, programs are under-funded or are already operating at full capacity.

In some cases, challenges stem from shortages in staffing to run summer programs that can serve a larger number of participants. For other groups, organizations are also hampered by inadequate space to host youth, especially during regional trainings where young people need housing. Limited funding for stipends or summer trips can further create constraints on the number of youth leaders trained. Another challenge stems from the need for longer-term capacity to follow up with summer participants to develop their leadership and skills throughout the school year, when participation can become difficult due to school and other responsibilities.

Transportation
Lack of transportation capacity limits the number of students that youth groups can serve. Young people often live far from programming sites. Taking public transportation may be cost prohibitive, take too long, and/or feel unsafe, especially when programming ends after sunset. Several organizations noted that their youth membership size is limited by the number of youth for whom rides can be provided. At least one organization noted that they cannot serve students who live far from the office because they cannot provide transportation. Providing rides can also drain staff capacity by eating up time and requiring a considerable logistical lift. Lack of transportation capacity also creates obstacles in turning out large numbers of students for certain events, such as direct actions or civic engagement efforts.

Rising Costs of Commercial Space and Housing
Many organizations cited space as a significant barrier to sustaining and expanding the number of youth leaders. For some, the size or less than ideal location of their meeting space has constrained the number of youth that can be served. A few organizations are running without a space at all – they meet in coffee shops or run programs out of churches or other borrowed spaces. A lack of a physical location that the youth can call their own prevents the youth from feeling grounded and attached to the space, which can lead to higher turnover and hinder some programming.
The rising costs of commercial space also presents serious challenges for grassroots organizing groups, as the cost of maintaining office space is a significant drain on their budget. At least one organization was forced to move out of a more ideal office into a smaller building due to budget restrictions. Additionally, increasing housing costs have pushed youth members out of the community, shrinking the base of membership and increasing transportation difficulties. Staff are also increasingly unable to afford housing costs within the communities they are working in.

**Technology**

Many organizations lack appropriate technology and technological training that could enhance their programming. Most organizations lack a well-functioning database to track youth members and alumni. Some who do have access to more sophisticated tracking software and databases lack the training to use them to their full capacity.

A few organizations are also in desperate need of computers, both for staff to use for programming and development needs and for youth to use for homework help. A few organizations stated that they need help with social media, noting that their youth are very tied into social media, but that the organization lacks the training to use these tools effectively to train and outreach to their young leaders.

**Key Recommendations**

**Support for Regional and Summer Training Programs**

Increasing organizational capacity for regional or summer training programs would help youth organizations expand the number of leaders by: enabling them to recruit more youth; developing youth leadership so that the summer participants can engage, mobilize, and organize more members throughout the school year; building capacity to set the stage for campaigns throughout the year; and expanding their volunteer base more broadly. Training programs could be supported in various ways. For example, some groups could benefit from more funding for young staff, such as alumni or advanced youth leaders, who could further develop their own leadership skills while at the same time creating new opportunities to train a larger number of new participants. Other groups seek funding for temporary space and transportation costs for short regional retreats, which could allow organizations to house and engage more youth. Other groups seek to stipend youth who go through intensive training programs and must forego other employment opportunities to participate.
Support for Transportation
Support for a sustainable transportation strategy could help organizations increase the number of core leaders involved in programming. This could take the form of reimbursements or provisions of monthly bus passes, or other forms of compensation for public transportation. Other possibilities include renting or purchasing vans, which would allow organizers to transport a large number of youth at one time. Some organizations have rented vans using corporate accounts, which provided discounts at a monthly rate. Another solution to the transportation issue could involve a business rideshare account (such as through Lyft or Uber), which would preserve organizers’ time by reducing the amount of time and logistical coordination required to ensure that students get home safely.

Support for Transitioning Youth Leaders into Staff Positions
Organizations can benefit from support for transitioning experienced youth leaders into part-time, and potentially full-time, staff positions. Support should likely include both funding for new positions and support for ongoing training for young staff. Funding staff positions for long-time members can enable organizations to continue building core youth leadership, while further expanding organizational capacity to recruit and develop leadership among the larger base. Young staff can potentially focus on supporting programming for high school students, serving as role models for younger peers in their communities.

Experienced youth leaders may also focus on developing or expanding organizing among young adults reached by civic engagement (i.e., voter outreach efforts). In particular, as younger staff, they may be well poised to reach young adults from low-income communities who are not attending four-year colleges. Community college and out-of-school young adults are among the most under-mobilized groups, yet are often interested in getting involved in efforts to address community concerns. It is worth noting that groups already mobilizing young adults in civic engagement campaigns through community colleges and other venues may be poised to expand their work to more systematically train young adults to lead grassroots organizing efforts between election cycles.

We recommend that funding be provided for training and outside support for young staff. Outside training is especially important so that young staff can expand their grassroots organizing skills and gain exposure to other models of organizing and youth development that can enrich their existing training and organizing work. Additionally, new organizers can often benefit from external support networks as they learn how to navigate their new roles as staff and, when appropriate, constructively and effectively push their organizations to grow in new ways. The growing YO! (Youth Organizing) California network, which provides training to youth organizers across the state, along with SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation) and TOLA (The Organizing and Leadership Academy), among others, offer potential sources of training and support.
Deeper investments in Orange County and Southeast Los Angeles could significantly expand the number of youth involved in grassroots organizing. Although the regions are of different scales, both have existing organizations that seek to expand the geographic reach of their current work.

Youth organizing in Orange County emerged, in part, from strong ties among undocumented youth leaders who formed their own organizations and/or who were supported by the California Endowment to expand their work in Santa Ana. While youth programming is still relatively new, Orange County is a strategic site because population shifts may facilitate support for a social justice-minded young leadership invested in building power among groups that have not historically worked together, but share common experiences of being criminalized or marginalized in various ways. Importantly, youth organizing groups in Orange County have built alliances among different constituents that acknowledge diverse identities. For example, Latinx immigrant youth have partnered closely with API, LGBTQ, and Muslim youth to create informal and formal ties to support social justice organizing. Groups in Orange County are excited about the potential of organizing a regional conference, if properly assisted, to support leadership development and movement building.

While fragmented by city boundaries and poor transportation infrastructure, Southeast Los Angeles youth often share concerns around immigrant rights, environmental justice, criminalization of youth, and disinvestment in services and programs. Multiple youth organizing groups in this region express interest in further developing the leadership capacity of young people. Groups also hope to tap into more informal existing networks of civicly-minded young adults from the region who are invested in addressing a range of social justice concerns. While resources for youth organizing currently remain limited in the Southeast, existing groups share an interest in building collaborations and capacity in the region.

Addressing rising housing and commercial space costs is a critical issue for all organizations, which struggle with displacement of youth and staff and/or finding affordable, adequately large, and reasonably located office spaces. Investing in alternative ownership models, such as 501(c)(25) organizations that can act as community land trusts, would allow some youth organizations to reduce rent costs to free up funding for operating and staff expenses. Organizations would be able to invest in themselves and build community infrastructure in the form of permanently affordable commercial and housing space. Weingart may consider supporting the exploration of alternative group ownership models that have track records of building equity and generating long-term savings.

Additional Recommendations

Regional Expansions

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Support for the High Cost of Space

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Increasing Staff Capacity

Increasing staff capacity is key for expanding the number of youth leaders in all organizations. Many organizations need more full-time staff who can help with general operations, easing the workload, and expanding programming. Some organizations expressed specific staffing needs—such as full-time organizers, development staff, or multilingual staff—though many are in need of more staffing capacity in general.

As all organizations cited limited staff capacity as a significant challenge, supporting additional staff members for organizations would allow for an increase in operational capacity, potentially leading to increases in the number of youth being serviced and the frequency and quality of programming. With an increased budget, organizations would be able to support young adult leadership development by creating more jobs for alumni, who would then go on to support the next generation of youth.

Conclusion

Youth organizing groups in Southern California have an impressive track record of fighting for policies that advance social justice. As our own and others’ research has shown, adolescents and young adults who are mobilized by these organizations develop critical leadership skills and lead impactful campaigns.4 This formative grassroots organizing experience gives young members an early start in developing important networks among their peers and older movement leaders, while exposing them to the complexities of changing policy in ways that are attentive to Southern California’s diverse populations. Based on the biographies of young civil rights activists from the 1960s and 1970s, anecdotal evidence from current movement leaders, and our own research on earlier cohorts of youth organizers, we anticipate that young people who engage in grassroots campaigns at a young age will continue organizing and leading well into adulthood.5 By supporting youth organizing groups, the Weingart Foundation will support the development of young leaders who are committed to social justice and who will continue to leave lasting imprints in the region.

### Appendix A. Description of Youth Organizing Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year founded</th>
<th>Multigenerational or Youth Only</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Main Campaign Issue Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communities for a Better Environment 1978</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA, Alameda, West Contra Costa</td>
<td>Environmental justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Californians for Justice 1996</td>
<td>Youth only</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Racial and educational justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights 1986</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA, Statewide</td>
<td>Immigrant rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Coalition 1989</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Education and racial justice, civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice 2001</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Environmental justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InnerCity Struggle 1994</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Education and health justice, civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inland Congregations United for Change 1991</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>San Bernardino Riverside</td>
<td>Education justice, civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant Youth Coalition 2011</td>
<td>Youth only</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Immigrant rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer Girls in Action 1997</td>
<td>Youth only</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Gender, racial, and economic justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean Resource Center 1983</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA, OC</td>
<td>Immigrant rights, civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA Youth Vote 2016</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Community Strategy Center 1989</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Transportation, civil rights, criminal justice reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center OC 1971</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>OC</td>
<td>LGBTQ rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience Orange County 2016</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Immigrant rights, education justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asian Community Alliance 1975</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Racial and economic justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Learning Institute 2008</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Health and educational justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPLIFT 2010</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Immigrant rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Justice Coalition 2003</td>
<td>Multigenerational</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Criminal justice reform, school-to-prison pipeline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author information:
Veronica Terriquez is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research examines civic engagement, immigrant integration, social inequality, and youth transitions to adulthood. Nicole White is an independent consultant who received a Masters in Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. May Lin is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California. Uriel Serrano is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University California, Santa Cruz.

Acknowledgements:
We thank the Weingart Foundation for supporting this research. We thank USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, Movement Strategy Center, and Kim Tabari for assisting us with focus groups for this study. We are grateful to Sue Grasso for administrative assistance and to Betania Santos for the layout and design of this report.