Understanding the Role, Impacts, and Challenges of Youth Civic Engagement in Shaping Policy

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Abstract

How can communities throughout California increase opportunities for youth to participate in the decision-making processes and inform policy? What can we learn from existing successful youth civic engagement groups throughout the United States (US)? What successful strategies are youth-centric organizations in the Inland Empire (IE) using to increase youth civic engagement in their communities? According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), in 2018, California fell under less than half the national rate in 5 major measurements of civic engagement. Studies show that compared to the rest of the US, California has minimal youth leadership roles in its cities and counties (CIRCLE, 2018) and has no mandated civic curriculum and training for youth on civic engagement. We analyze case studies from existing literature that detail the benefits and outcomes and illustrate the importance of the need to invest in youth civic engagement. Using quantitative research, we explore external indicators that literature points to have an influence on civic engagement throughout the US. Using qualitative analysis, we aim to investigate how organizations within the IE successfully increase youth civic engagement through their role, policies, procedures, and strategies. Our objective is to provide an illustrative analysis that details best practices for increasing youth civic engagement so that other organizations and municipalities may adopt and expand more opportunities for youth civic engagement in the IE, in similar communities across California, and beyond.

Introduction

Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights the necessity of adults asking, listening to, and considering children's opinions during decision-making processes (Assembly, 1989). Despite the fact that the US has not joined the

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UNCRC, there are quality examples in the US that have dynamic youth civic engagement traditions and have built relevant policy structures. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of youth domestically or abroad. For the purpose and nature of this paper, youth is defined as people between the ages of 12 and 29 based on the loose definitions of IE youth-centric organizations interviewed. Looking past large urban cities that most contemporary research focuses on, several youth-centric organizations in and outside of government are working to center young people in vital policy decision-making processes. Youth civic engagement is being recognized increasingly as an essential component of healthy communities and democratic cultures. From volunteering, community service, political actions like campaigning, activism such as protesting, serving on youth advisory boards or positions (e.g., youth councils, participatory planning, or budget initiatives), to organizing community members, youth civic engagement is all-encompassing and necessary.

The involvement of people in civic life and democratic processes are essential to the functioning of the American democratic system. Absent substantive participation by the general public in US systems of power, democracy is null. Gustafson et al. (2019) synthesize and highlight the state of youth participation in civic life: reviewing voting turnout statistics (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge [CYVCK], 2013; Gibson, 2001) and civic competency tests (Nation's Report Card [NRC], 2014), young people tend to have low levels of civic engagement. In addition, there is a disparity in civic participation, such that young people with lower levels of wealth and Black, Indigenous, people of color have even lower levels of civic engagement (Levinson, 2010). This disparity begins during adolescence and persists throughout adulthood (Center for the Study of Social Policy [CSSP], 2011; CYVCK, 2013; Gould et al., 2011; Kahne and Middaugh, 2008; Watts and Flanagan, 2007). It is more

pronounced in the United States than in other Western countries (Levinson, 2010). Because of the low level of civic engagement among young people, their voices are frequently ignored.

Here in the 21st-century, our governments, community-based, and faith-based organizations must be ever-evolving and meet youth where they are, not where they expect them to be. Several equity gaps in youth civic engagement disallow certain youth demographics to be a part of their communities. Addressing reliable power and internet services, as well as physical devices and platforms, is a severe equity issue known as the digital divide (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2017). Non-technical tools are just as vital as technology ones when it comes to access. To be able to use multimodal tools and be civically engaged, youth must have their basic health, nutritional, and safety needs covered. These characteristics are especially important for the most marginalized groups. This means that improving digital literacy, the access to information on how to utilize digital tools safely and productively is critical. Educational resources, awareness of online hazards, and basic reading skills should all be included in this information and be translated across languages for our diverse youth and their families. Once young people have gained fundamental abilities, they will be able to progress and fully utilize their digital skills with access to advanced education, training, platforms, and opportunities (USDOE, 2017).

The next chapters of US history will be written by our younger generations. Robust youth civic engagement can build intersectional skillsets and knowledge to not only ensure an accurate reflection of our shared story but catalyze community change. Using all available resources and tools to embed community wisdom in US systems of power to hold them accountable is an essential function of a just, inclusive, and multiracial democracy.

Literature review

This section reviews selected studies of youth organizations, programs, and collaborations into six categories with various subsections. The focus is to show what youth civic engagement is through its various forms, benefits, challenges, and successful case studies. Although our studies range throughout the US, we hope to expand opportunities to cultivate stronger youth civic engagement within California.

Defining Youth Civic Engagement

Youth civic engagement is the process of youth participating in the process and institutions that affect their everyday lives. There has been a change in the paradigm of "youth". Youth are now seen as an integral part of the citizenry but are participating at low rates. There is a growing recognition of youth being a great resource for our society through various forms of civic engagement, including social action, advocacy efforts, education, and leadership development (Checkoway et al., 1995). Youth civic engagement serves as a mechanism of inclusion that allows for collaboration between youth and adults to solve issues of shared interest and attain goals of communal benefit (Balsano, 2005). Although there are many definitions of youth civic engagement, each form of youth civic engagement holds a foundational characteristic of empowering youth to create external and internal positive change. In other words, youth civic engagement leads to external change such as changes within their community, local government, policies, procedures, and internal changes such as changes in behavior, attitude, self-esteem, and engagement. This foundational characteristic is what sets apart youth participation in general from youth civic engagement. "Youth civic engagement has been described in terms of prosocial behaviors exhibited by youth through involvement in activities that have benefit both to them and to institutions within the context through which they are supported; these institutions include

schools, local community-based organizations, and the political institutions of civil society (Lerner, 2004). Involvement in community-based service groups, school- and non-school-based sports activities, arts and literary groups, voluntary associations (e.g., houses of worship), and more formal activism, such as voting and political engagement, all represent identified indicators of civic engagement among youth" (Hauser, 2000; Minkoff, 1997; Youniss et al., 2002, as cited in Balsano, 2005).

Youth Civic Engagement as an Issue

Youth civic engagement is a prominent issue. Youth often feel discriminated against in society and feel that they have limited prospects in their schools or larger society to act as leaders. Luluquisen et al. (2006) argues that this sentiment that youth feel limited in their capacity is universal across all youth. Universal across all, but more likely to be seen in industrial countries. Youth are not granted autonomy into the most influential forums of decision-making (Zeldin et al., 2014). It is dependent on how cities and organizations can create sustainable youth organizations and programs that will increase their political engagement and leadership. Furthermore, when compared to the rest of the US, California falls short in 5 major measurements of civic engagement (CIRCLE, 2018).
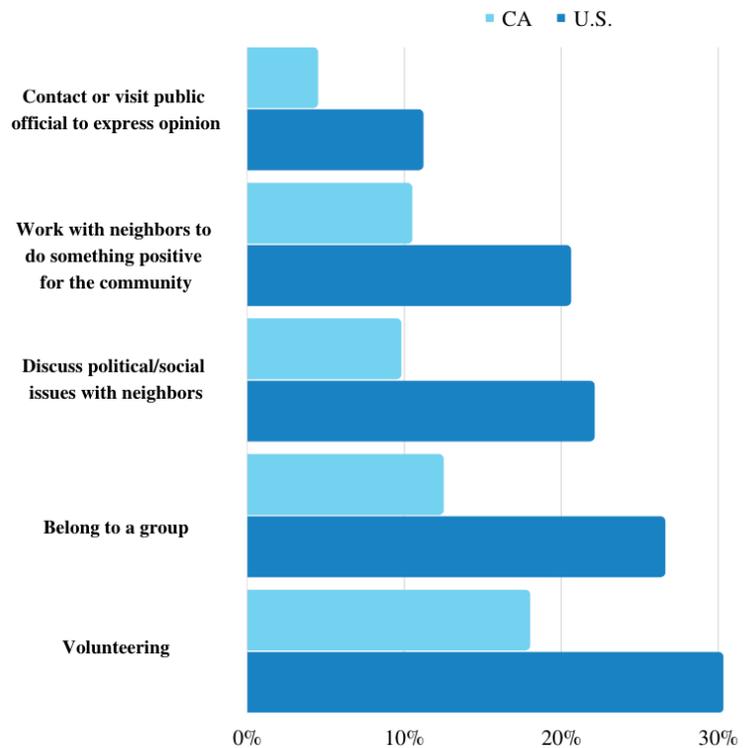

Figure 1

Figure 1 shows California's rate in the light blue bars and the national rate in the dark blue bars with youth civic engagement measurements on the y-axis and youth response percent rate on the x-axis. California falls close to or under half the national rate in volunteering, belonging to a civic engagement group, working with neighbors to do something positive for the community, discussing political/social issues with neighbors, and contacting or visiting public officials to express opinions (CIRCLE, 2018).

In a situation where an individual and society are "complementary parts of a single relationship" (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates, 1997) and where there is a functional relationship between youth civic engagement and efforts toward more civil society, youth's personal and professional development, and civic engagement is viewed as playing an essential role in "educating, organizing, and taking actions on issues of social justice" (Evans and Prilleltensky, 2005), and thus critical to the "survival of a democratic system and the protection of civil society" (Lerner, 2004, as cited in Balsano, 2005). Investing in youth civic engagement and positive youth development means investing in "the currency of a healthy community" (Roulier, 1998, as cited in Balsano, 2005). Results of the Seventeenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey show that there is a "long-term rise in chronic, debilitating sadness or hopelessness among students in all grades,…a continued high rate of suicide ideation" (Austin et al., 2020) and youth claim they feel they do not have control over the changes happening in their community.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) underscore problems in American secondary school design: most US high schools have been found to de-emphasize personal connections with adults and engage in intense evaluation and competitive ranking of students (e.g., academic tracking, try-outs for clubs and activities) just as adolescents are most sensitive to social comparisons and

need to develop a strong sense of belonging, connection, and personal identity (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Depersonalized environments are particularly destructive when students experience poverty, trauma, and discrimination without coping and resilience resources. Unless handled by solid relationships and support networks, these situations interfere with learning, disrupt relationships, and hinder youth success (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). In an effort to improve youth behavior and mental health, increase political equity, and advance the livelihoods of communities, society, schools, and governments should invest in providing rich civic engagement opportunities for youth.

Why is Youth Civic Engagement Important?

Youth civic participation is crucial for a variety of reasons. While young people are not a homogeneous group, they do share some features that have the potential to make them great civic actors, and their involvement has advantages. They have unique perspectives on local concerns, are frequently a source of fresh ideas, and can be an endless source of energy and desire for social change. Balsano (2005) claims that "civic engagement represents an important vehicle in promoting positive development among youth. Several studies on civic engagement among high school and college students have shown that civic engagement can promote experiences and behaviors that positively impact youth's personal development, social development, and their future occupational aspirations and accomplishments." Additionally, "civically engaged youth tend to have an increased sense of their own competencies, be more internally driven to get involved in prosocial activities, and have higher self-esteem. [Y]outh also were more likely than the youth who were not civically engaged to have a higher internal locus of control and to show a higher level of comfort resolving social and interpersonal issues (by getting personally involved

in controversies). As such, civic engagement has been viewed as a crucial contributor to youth's positive development" (Balsano, 2005).

It is critical that youth commit to staying civically engaged to make powerful changes in their communities. The issue often arises of how to keep youth engaged and the following the most repeated response; they seek to feel empowered. Empowerment in civics is important as it can lead to change both personally and politically (Luluquisen et al., 2006). Empowering youth should focus on youth's strengths through teaching them leadership skills relevant to the history, culture, and socio-economic context of their communities. This can have long-lasting effects on youth and their futures in the context of being and staying civically engaged. When empowered civically, they can be allies in the process of various items- community change, organizational development, and advocacy efforts (Checkoway et al., 1995). It can contribute to strong nation-building where we mobilize youth to receive the support they need to be an integral part of the citizenry to transition into the later roles of a worker, parent, and community leader (Zeldin et al., 2014).

Youth civic engagement that is led by an adult figure is impactful. Studies show when led how to be civically engaged by an adult, youth can have positive psychosocial results, strengthen academic achievement, achieve discipline, and acquire professional skills. Youth will experience positive psychosocial results such as open-mindedness, personal responsibility, social and civic competence, moral and ego development, and a sense of efficacy and self-esteem (Checkoway et al., 1995). This participation can strengthen achievement in the classroom and outside professional skills by improving their problem-solving capacity in the community that might not otherwise have been acquired by youth attempting to figure out these skills on their own. The common detractor for most failed youth civic engagement initiatives or programs is a lack of

organization or structure. It is crucial that we do not leave civic engagement up to youth with no clear pathway. Adults are a critical component in setting up our youth for success.

1. *Youth Development*

When youth are given access to significant decision-making environments, they can become valuable resources for establishing the kinds of systems that promote positive development for themselves and others. Simply, youth benefit when they actively contribute to their programs and communities (Benson et al., 2005). Positive developmental settings are stated to provide young people with the opportunity to acquire competence and connection, thus helping them flourish and contribute to their communities (Bowers et al., 2015). When everyone—individually and collectively—gets involved and takes action, our communities and democracy become more just and equitable. When a greater number of diverse young people have access to opportunities that help them develop their skills and knowledge while also empowering them to make a difference, decision-making will become more representative, and communities will benefit.

Young people develop a strong sense of belonging to their communities as well as a higher sense of agency -self-efficacy, improved academic achievement, confidence, positive peer and adult relationships, social networks, and social responsibility (Bowers et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2015). Furthermore, young people gain personal and civic abilities (leadership, problem-solving, and professional skills). Long-term youth programs and support foster positive youth-adult partnerships including activities that build civic capacity by setting expectations, posing challenges, and providing recognition, while presenting opportunities for them to use this developed knowledge and skills as community participants and leaders (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Lerner and Lerner, 2011). This youth development must

acknowledge structural inequities like poverty, racism, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, and beyond in order to enhance civic capacity building amongst youth. Using a social justice lens creates critical consciousness, social action, and solidarity amongst youth (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002).

2. *Social Capital and Community Success*

Social capital has been defined as "the link between trust, interaction, belonging and participation across groups and is linked to collective action" such as mutual aid capacity, or an individual's willingness to help or get help from their neighbors (Mata and Pendakur, 2013). Social capital and civic engagement are different in definition, but scholars claim that there is a correlation between the two. In other words, "civic engagement is a manifestation of social capital, while social capital itself is the disposition to create and maintain social networks. From this perspective, civic engagement is an observable result of social capital. Therefore, communities that have greater social capital also have greater civic engagement" (Grillo et al., 2010). Makridus and Wu (2021) succinctly note the multifaceted role social capital plays in a community's overall success through a literature review spanning several decades: Social capital has been found to develop and strengthen economies (Chetty et al., 2014; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Guiso et al., 2004), social outcomes (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Coleman, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995; Lin, 2002), overall function (Putnam, 1993; Coleman, 1990; Newton, 2001), are richer (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Bjørnskov, 2012), safer (Sampson, 1997; Buonanno et al., 2009; Wu, 2020), healthier and happier (Kawachi et al., 2008; Helliwell, 2014), less corrupt (Bjørnskov, 2003; Uslaner, 2018), and are more democratic (Newton, 1997; Paxton, 2002).

Many funding initiatives have focused on strengthening social capital and initiatives to conceptualize and operationalize "civic health" as a community characteristic. The California

Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative is a great example where a core tenet of the billion-dollar Californian investment is building up civic opportunities and spaces. Throughout 14 sites in the Golden State, youth engagement has been particularly robust. Young people are actively involved and youth organizing to promote health is becoming a distinguishing trademark of the organization. Importantly, the initiative has discovered first-hand from young people sharing their experiences—which are supported by data—that they are dealing with significant levels of stress, adversity, and trauma in their everyday lives. The breadth of toxic stress, trauma exposure, and resiliency concerns among young people of color and young people in poor white, rural communities—and their aggregate consequences on their health—represents a major "discoverable" in the BHC journey. Exposure to trauma and stress is a considerably under-recognized public health concern in this country (The California Endowment, 2016).

3. *Adult Support and Partnership*

The positive effects of youth civic engagement go beyond the advantages to individual youth. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that when adolescents and adults collaborate as partners, the culture, structure, and programming of youth groups and institutions can be strengthened (Benson et al., 2006). When youth are actively involved in decision-making processes and create intimate relationships and instrumental "partnerships" with adults, positive influences are most likely (Camino 2000; Mitra 2004; Steinberg 2001; Zeldin et al. 2005). Adults are motivated and inspired by the experience of working with youth in collaborative decision-making and action. Adults report that their organizations' quality improves when rules and procedures are changed to enable meaningful young engagement. There's also evidence that youth participation helps adults form more accurate and less stereotyped ideas of youth, as well

as increases adults' likelihood of engaging adolescents in the future. By boosting public awareness of youth issues and concerns, youth participation has an impact on community agendas. Youth civic engagement has been shown to have an impact on public policies and practices in ways that benefit youth, their schools, and their communities (Ginwright, 2005; Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNiel, 2008).

Successful Youth Civic Engagement Programs Throughout the US

We analyzed various compelling case studies throughout the literature that demonstrate the importance of youth civic engagement as they each highlight crucial communal benefits and outcomes. These case studies serve as a beginning foundation to further understanding how organizations succeed and how they differ by type, funding source, and strategies.

The Sariling Gawa Youth Council in the state of Hawai'i follows four components for successful youth leadership, "youth empowerment through building their leadership skills, fostering and strengthening peer social support and social networks among young people, promoting positive ethnic identity, and building community capacity by involving youth in civic, cultural, social, and community affairs" (Luluquisen et al., 2006). With these four components, a framework is outlined for other US communities to foster youth political engagement and leadership. It is emphasized that youth councils should be seen as a "community resource" that is developed, nurtured, and sustained through substantial leadership. We need to shift the lens regarding youth and show their true value as a resource, something that many youths lack the feeling of. This sets up a strong foundation for ongoing social change towards improving the living conditions for the whole community by mobilizing youth as active members.

Scholars claim that the state of Michigan has been known for high youth civic engagement through the use of youth councils. "[T]he Council of Michigan Foundations, with

support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, established a network of community foundations in every county statewide, each of which established a youth advisory council for involving young people in philanthropy and public work." (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2009) analyze the outcomes of three major youth councils in Michigan: Grand Rapids Mayor's Youth Council, Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills, and Southfield Youth Advisory Council. Grand Rapids Mayor's Youth Council began with a youth "advocate who argued that young people 'should be a presence at city hall'. She collaborated with a few high school students to propose an ad-hoc Mayor's Youth Council, and the mayor and city commissioners passed a resolution supporting its creation" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). As a result, youth were given a platform to "speak at council member and city hall meetings, serve on municipal committees, hold policy forums, and host an annual conference at which youth presented to local, state, and national stakeholders. Additionally, youth were able to use their experience and knowledge to inform strategic and budget planning within their city (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

The Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills began with the "institutionalization of youth participation through an ordinance to establish a youth council as part of the municipal charter" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Literature tells us that youth councils established through an ordinance are highly rare and unlikely, especially when they "receive funding as a line item in the budget and as a recipient of contributions and grants" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). The Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills hold bi-monthly meetings where Council members facilitate conversations and action items between youth and municipal government to discuss policy issues, with administrators, and with the staff of community agencies (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway,

2009). An example of a direct outcome of this youth council was the formation of an "intergenerational committee" led by youth, where stakeholders of all ages were invited to propose alternative solutions to a city ordinance that banned skateboarding. This resulted in the design and development of a skateboard park in their community (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Their efforts had led to even greater outcomes such as the development of a communitywide teen center (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Additionally, the Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills has worked to address many other youth and community-related issues such as dress code policies in the schools, recycling in city parks, and curfews in the local mall (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

Southfield's Youth Advisory Council was initiated by "Southfield's civic leaders and school officials who showed commitment to youth participation and represented young people on the school board and other municipal agencies" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Together they conducted a community assessment that was essential for promoting the involvement of youth. Their assessment demonstrated the urgency for youth civic engagement and thus received partial funds from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Council of Michigan Foundations to establish the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). "The Southfield Youth Advisory Council is an example of youth participation receiving funding from a community foundation but no formal funding through local government" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Council members work directly with youth council members to establish partnerships between city departments through the programs they sponsor. Much like the Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills, the Youth Advisory Council also worked with city officials to develop a teen center (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). The teen center is now being used by YAC members

to host an annual youth diversity summit, "which has become the largest in the area, bringing five hundred to seven hundred students from around the state to discuss institutional and policy issues for strengthening diversity. Young people plan and implement the gathering in cooperation with the city administrator, municipal representatives, and school officials" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

Best Practices

Kane et al. (2003) propose that it is not dependent if a student takes a US government course in their K-12 education, but instead, the opportunities they have to engage in practice-based civic learning. These opportunities can be given in the classroom, it is a matter of revamping our requirements in K-12 with a bigger emphasis on civic education. A two-wave panel was conducted on high school students in California and in Chicago. This two-wave panel was conducted with the intention to identify indicators of civic engagement and political engagement and measure opportunities for open discussion of societal issues and for service learning (Kane et al., 2003). The results were promising in that civic learning opportunities promoted the most civic and political engagement. Across students, discussions of current issues and service-learning opportunities promoted positive change in behavior such as voting and volunteering, committing to civically participate in their communities, and an increase in interest in politics.

A study done in 2016 analyzes the lack of educational and public spaces available for youth civic engagement (Burke et al., 2016). They utilize a critical geographical approach to rethink how educators engage with youth as they reframe the ways in which public parks, neighborhood schools, community centers, and sidewalks may be used as spaces for youth civic engagement opportunities (Burke et al., 2016). They conducted youth-led participatory action

research where "youth shared a collective focus on the value of safe spaces where they each envision a sense of community and relationships, particularly in parks that have the potential to bring diverse groups of people together in a spirit of egalitarianism" (Burke et al., 2016). Through a strategy known as photovoice, "youth reimagined parks as educational opportunity zones and side-walks as mobile, fluid educational opportunity zones" (Burke et al., 2016). "[They] sought to create a space in the Photovoice project that describes how to hear youth's voices" (Burke et al., 2016). They find that "given the opportunity, youth become cultural critics who deliberate, analyze, and critique education and educational spaces" (Burke et al., 2016). This strategy directly benefits youth living in gentrified neighborhoods by providing them with a space that is easily accessible to youth of all backgrounds. Photovoice techniques allow students to tell their stories and be civically engaged in spaces they are welcomed and comfortable in. This strategy would increase community equity by giving youth an opportunity to participate in community change and direct city efforts to adopt solutions that are cost-effective and innovative.

Civic-minded young people use whatever means and media at their disposal to carry out the essential obligations of citizenship. They develop open lines of communication on local, regional, national, and global issues and partake in lively debates with peers and city leadership online and in person. These multimodal actions are pushing the envelope for how civic engagement is defined, necessitating traditional systems to meet young people and other groups with alternative needs where they are at (Soep, 2014). Furthermore, our youth who are not involved in community-based action civics or have not been well-versed in new technology appear to be more likely to use digital tools in relatively simple ways, such as forwarding social media posts to those in their social circles. When technology skills are developed, youth learn to

and are more likely to produce, remix, and distribute original content around an issue they have learned about, leaning into their passions to spark the desired community change (Cohen et al., 2012, and Soep, 2014).

Platforms that make it simple for a community to share a quick website or edit photos, as well as learning environments that support the rhetorical skills of conversational storytelling, cultivate drawing skills to create rally posters, or craft skills to make masks and costumes, are all important. Curiosity and the conceptual capacity to superimpose popular culture onto the political realm, frequently through remixing and production, are at the heart of content worlds. This core collection of activities isn't particularly innovative. What's notable is the growing importance of hobbies as essential capacities for engaged citizenship, rather than as optional extracurricular talents (Soep, 2014). Obtaining the necessary equipment and technical knowledge to carry out these activities is considerably easier today. According to a 2019 survey by Common Sense Media, 53% of American children have their own smartphones by the age of 11. 89 percent of children have one by the age of 16 (Rideout and Robb, 2019). That's how many people carry around production and distribution platforms in their pockets at all times, not to mention those who use public libraries and schools, or borrow devices from their older peers and family members -people with higher rates of cell phone ownership. Soep (2014) points out that, however, many young folks from historically ignored and rural communities still lack easy access to high-speed connectivity and mobility, which allow them to create content at their own convenience and from wherever. In underserved school districts, there are several instances where the equipment is present but there is no curriculum that uses those resources to support higher-order thinking, critical engagement, and opportunities to apply lessons to novel situations— a set of abilities termed *critical design literacy* (Watkins, 2012).

To ensure this technology is not ignored and is leveraged, organizations are needed that explicitly and purposefully support these best practices, making them more accessible to a wider range of young people to combat the digital divide. Soep (2014) explains that adult supporters must be ready to accompany young people as they figure out where to draw their lines, both individually and collectively, as they occupy spaces where monitoring is present but not always visible, and where hypervisibility can provide security while also posing risks. These supporters must also be willing to provide ethical support and accept at least some of the risks that young people face when they take a position without much institutional safety (Gardner, 2013).

1. *Leveraging Digital Media*

In today's increasingly online world, a person's physical location no longer restricts the capacity to build relationships with anybody across borders, much alone create and nurture collaborative, diverse networked masses capable of civic action. Blogs, personal communication spaces, online polling, and the use of email listservs, and other forms of social media for political campaigns are all new arenas for political debate and activism (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). Because electronic media is becoming a more significant part of citizenship education, proper evaluation models must be devised. Murphy (2004) encourages rhetoric and communication educators to combine participatory democratic approaches to teaching civic participation in order to help students develop citizenship competencies and skills while also increasing awareness and understanding of how various forms and types of media shape political and social issues. Citizenship education study could help students better grasp the power of the media and their ability to decode political media messages (Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld, 2009). Youth empowered with all available tools in an increasingly online world will better prepare new

generations to hold power structures accountable and transform them to better fit the needs of their own communities.

2. *Effects of Civic Education Programs on Parents*

Parents should encourage academic accomplishment by actively participating in their children's homework, just as they should support citizenship education by actively involving their children in political and civic conversations and activities. The impact of KidsVoting USA on parents' political dialogues with their children was studied in two studies (McDevitt and Chaffee, 2000; McDevitt and Kiousis, 2006). During an election campaign, middle-school students and their parents were required to watch and discuss news programs together. Children and parents from lower-income families benefited the most; they learned more knowledge and paid greater attention to current events. The intervention effects were stronger at follow-up in the larger study (McDevitt and Kiousis, 2006), demonstrating that civic engagement programs can establish self-perpetuating habits of attention to news and the drive for continued political talks with family members. Too few civic intervention evaluations consider the impact on families, which is crucial for understanding how initiatives establish the conditions for their benefits to last over time and into adulthood.

Challenged Faced

Balsano (2005) finds there are clear social impediments to successful youth programs and youth civic engagement, such as a "lack of civic knowledge and skills among youth (e.g., Hart, 1992; Hart, Atkins, and Ford, 1998); a societal decrease in collective orientation (Funk, 1998); adults' negative perceptions of youth, especially urban youth (Hart et al., 1998, cited in Kenny and Gallagher, 2003); the lack of horizontal communication among youth and adult groups (Kristin, 2000); insufficient opportunities for consequential participation (Kristin, 2000); social

marginalization of certain youth (Roulier, 1998); decrease in community pride (Roulier, 1998); and a pervasive sense of hopelessness among youth (Bolland, 2003)." These scholars would agree that there are forces limiting youth participation even at the municipal level. "Local governments seem to place a higher priority on informing youth versus truly including youth in decision-making structures by valuing them as partners, and giving them power and control" (Palmy David and Buchanan, 2020, as cited in Balsano, 2005). In far too many occasions, community agencies, public officials, and adult leaders tend to view young people as "passive recipients of services rather than as competent citizens" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Scholars claim that schools are partially at fault due to the lack of quality curricula that fail to prepare youth for civic leadership (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). Additionally, adults treat youth as "inferior and disregard their potential because of their age" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). The perspective of young people as being undereducated, unsophisticated, and underskilled, lowers expectations about youth participation instead of raising them. (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

1. *Limited Democracy*

Our analysis has pointed to youth being less engaged in politics. It is argued that due to the processes of politics, youth are often discouraged from registering to vote, casting their ballot, engaging in political debates, and interacting with elected officials (Kane et al., 2003). Literature shows that youth are less engaged in politics depending on the exposure they have. A challenge for youth is that it is difficult for them to find a connection between the material in their textbooks and the real impact they can have on their communities. Youth are typically exposed to politics through some "curriculum in K-12 that focuses on textbook material and is not focused on practice-based material such as service-learning" (Kane et al., 2003).

Youth civic involvement in the twenty-first century is far from innovative and at its core necessitates creating open lines of communication for people to espouse community wisdom. A fundamental premise in involving young people - or anybody else for that matter - in community life is to ensure that programs meet them where they are, not where they wish to be. To ensure that no one is left out of civic life, developing participatory systems should emphasize intersectionality, taking into account race, class, gender, abilities, and more. Being born into privilege means that a person's environment already includes community life and power structures. Because of their far closeness to civics, intentionally marginalized communities frequently do not have the privilege of being born against the glass, meaning they are unable to observe civics in action even at the local level. That is, for individuals who are faced with a severe lack of everyday resources, there are few ways to connect with power systems. How can one participate in a community when their primary focus is on survival: food, gainful employment, health issues, and housing?

2. *Digital Divide*

In an ever-evolving age of technology with great promise in engaging our youth and the greater community, leveraging new digital tools is vital to close online and in-person equity gaps. A "digital divide" refers to disparities in the material, cultural, and cognitive resources required to utilize information and communication technologies effectively (ICT) across different socio-economic groups in society. Historically, research on digital inequality has concentrated on variations in physical access to and ownership of ICT instruments, while emphasizing that access is only one of several criteria necessary for effective technology use (OECD, 2015). The larger focus on financial resources is most likely due to the relative amount of data assessing these elements, as contrasted to data on variations in cultural and cognitive resources, such as ICT

usage norms in the community or individuals' digital skills and expertise. While older technologies become increasingly accessible to more people, new digital technologies, tools, and services are nearly always marketed exclusively to the wealthy, reinforcing the privilege of certain populations. (Hargittai and Hsieh, 2013). Given the numerous opportunities and potential that technology provides for youth civic participation, unequal distribution of material, cultural, and cognitive resources to take advantage of these opportunities perpetuate and even exacerbate existing status differences.

Generally, literacies are too often connected with skill sets taught by adults in formal educational institutions. The default hierarchical power dynamics in classrooms create a one-way discussion of knowledge-sharing where students are taught at instead of engaged with. Not regarded as co-learners dilutes the learning environment and recreates systems of oppression ever-present outside of the classroom. This subjugation detracts from a healthy learning environment that ideally should share power with youth, who are already experts of their own lived experiences. This can be seen as a form of ageism, the discrimination of an individual strictly based on their age, which stifles all those involved in the process of learning and community. Although participatory civic systems are most effective when young people and adults work together, it's important that they are youth-driven as we have come to discover in our thematic analysis of IE youth organizations.

Research Question and Design

What factors influence youth civic engagement throughout the US? What successful strategies are youth civic engagement organizations in the IE using to increase youth civic engagement in their communities? The purpose of our research is not intended to test a predefined set of specific hypotheses on the impact and challenges of youth civic engagement,

but rather to explore factors that shape youth civic engagement and how the experiences of organizations within the IE compare across organization type/role, funding sources, policies, and procedures based on a broad set of measures of youth civic engagement. We anticipate our findings to further direct research in the IE and broader California in proposing successful strategies to civically engage youth. Our research design utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methods to answer our research questions.

Quantitative Design

Our quantitative design uses exploratory data analysis using correlation tests and statistical visualizations. The goal is to analyze spatial data of youth civic engagement across the US. We aim to do this by using data provided by CIRCLE that tracks youth civic engagement in 51 states in 2018 and comparing the density of civic engagement among youth in each state. We seek to examine the relationship between key resources that states have that aid them in having high youth civic engagement. We also seek to understand the barriers of states that have low youth civic engagement. We select external variables that may affect youth civic engagement, such as quality of life, income, education, civic culture, and youth population, and test their correlation to high or low youth civic engagement using Pearson's correlations test, and heat map visualizations.

Qualitative Design

Primary data was collected from interviews with organizations within the IE. These include youth government bodies (such as youth councils and advisory boards), youth-centric programs (non-state funded), and nonprofits (state-funded). Organizations were selected based on their goals to empower youth voice through a multitude of strategies and demonstrated collaboration between youth and adults to solve issues of shared interest and attain goals of

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communal benefit. Our qualitative design uses an illustrative comparative analysis that tests the literature review to responses collected by organizations about how local youth engagement processes are functioning in the IE. We expect that the data analysis and interviews will test if the dynamics described during the literature review are present locally, specific to the IE. We hope to discover additional insights about youth engagement that have not been encountered in the literature review. We expect the value of the interviews will illustrate and localize the concepts identified from the literature review. However, even a small number of interviews that diverged from the literature-review-based hypotheses can lead to new research pathways.

Data Sources

Quantitative Data

For the quantitative portion of our project we used secondary data provided by CIRCLE (2018). We downloaded US statistics on measurements of youth civic engagement and external factors literature indicates to influence high or low youth civic engagement. We collected data at the state level with the opportunity to analyze 8 measurements of youth civic engagement, including voter turnout, belonging to a civic engagement group, working with neighbors to do something positive for the community, discussing political/social issues with neighbors, discussing political/social issues with friends or family, contacting or visiting public official to express opinion, share views about news/politics on social media, and talk with people of different backgrounds. We also collected state-level data on external factors that include: youth population, youth to adult ratio, youth in college, youth with college experience, youth with no high school, median income, income disparity, child poverty, internet access, nonprofits serving youth, and youth residential stability. There were some limitations with collecting this, for instance, data on youth ages 17 and under was not readily available and difficult to acquire due

to consent restraints. Most data is only available at a state and national level and does not collect or is not broken down by county or region. Thus making it difficult to conduct a quantitative analysis of youth civic engagement specific to the IE.

Qualitative Data

A total of 10 interviews with organizations within the IE were conducted and analyzed. Interviews consisted of 2 nonprofits, 4 youth councils/advisory boards, 1 city youth program, 2 community-based organizations, and 1 political action committee. Qualitative research requires a minimum of 15-16 interviews, thus we realize 10 interviews are not enough to create any generalizations, however, the findings are still important to highlight and compare to existing literature. A total of 20 interview questions focused on the organization's role and activities, direct outcomes/benefits of youth civic engagement in the city, policies and procedures, resources and strategies, challenges, and lessons learned (see appendix A). In order to comply with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards in the ethical conduct of research, no questions were asked about the interviewee's personal experience nor their personal opinion and personal identifiers will be kept confidential. During the interviews, we asked each organization to focus on how they are successful in increasing youth civic engagement and creating meaningful impacts through their established role. To gather data on the organization's source of funding, we asked organization coordinators to define the status of their organizations as a nonprofit, city government, grassroots, coalition, or unfunded. Interviewees were asked to describe the advantages and disadvantages of their policies and procedures. More specifically, interviewees were asked about the ways the organization's resources, partnerships, and expectations for youth influenced positive community change. In addition, interviewees are

asked about internal and external challenges that hindered their performance. Finally, interviewees were asked to describe any lessons learned.

Analytical Strategy

Quantitative Analysis

CIRCLE (2018) provides downloadable CSV files that compare all states for each youth civic engagement measurement and condition that shapes youth engagement. We downloaded all relevant CSV files for the focus of our research and combined all variables onto a single master CSV file. The master CSV file was imported into JupyterLab, an "interactive development environment for notebooks, code, and data…[that allowed us] to configure and arrange [our] workflows in data science [and] scientific computing" (Project Jupyter, 2022). In the JupyterLab interface, we converted the CSV into a standard two-dimensional data frame. We proceeded to clean our data by removing percent signs, commas, word spaces, and empty data cells. With a clean data frame, we did a Pearson's correlations test that measures the linear association between each variable. Correlations between two variables that had a value greater than a +0.5 demonstrated a moderate to high positive correlation, meaning that two variables react in the same way, increasing or decreasing together. A -0.5 demonstrated a moderate to high negative correlation, meaning that as one variable increases, the other decreases. Finally, we visualized the correlation using a heat map, a 2D correlation matrix that gives extreme colors to extreme values so they are easily visible.

Qualitative Analysis

For our qualitative research we used a thematic analysis to highlight the most successful strategies in increasing youth civic engagement. All of the interviews with youth civic engagement organizations were transcribed verbatim. After repeated analysis of all the

interviews, we were able to achieve immersion of data and gain sufficient familiarity with the contents of each transcript. We utilize a thematic approach and coding analysis to examine the research objective and questions. The central idea behind this approach is to identify patterns in the documents with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis as mentioned in Bowen (2009). To ensure consistency we applied descriptive coding techniques to all the transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). The initial codes were categorized into separate codebooks for each interview. During the second round of coding, we used the method of inductive coding and cataloged each code into general themes in accordance with our research questions, (Charmaz, 2006). These themes were reviewed again to account for inconsistencies and check if they accurately depict the entire data set. Careful analysis of the data helped to identify additional categories that were left out in the initial stage of coding. The richness of data was maintained through the use of constant comparison and a thematic approach through a coding exercise (Glaser, 1965). We organized responses by using the following codes: role, best practices, benefits, and challenges. 15 major themes emerged from each code that was consistent across each organization.

Findings

Correlations

We used Pearson's correlation test to explore correlations among youth civic engagement using statistics from CIRCLE in 2018. We visualized the

Figure 2

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correlations using heat maps that assign dark blue boxes as positive correlations whereas the white boxes show a significant negative correlation (Figure 2). A significant positive correlation between youth who belong to a civic engagement group and youth who reported working with neighbors to do something positive for the community (correlation value: 0.76). In other words, youth who belong to a civic engagement group are more likely to work with neighbors to do something positive for the community. Similarly, youth who belong to a civic engagement group are more likely to discuss political/social issues with friends and family (correlation value: 0.59), and they are also more likely to contact or visit public officials to express their opinion (correlation value: 0.66). As we anticipated, these correlations match with what the literature suggests about the benefits and outcomes of youth civic engagement. We also found that youth who work with neighbors to do something positive for the community are more likely to discuss political/social issues with their neighbors (correlation value: 0.51), more likely to discuss political/social issues with friends and family (correlation value: 0.5), and more likely to contact or visit public officials to express their opinion (correlation value: 0.5). The correlation test also demonstrates that youth who discuss political/social issues with their neighbors are more likely to discuss political/social issues with friends and family (correlation value: 0.52). Our final positive correlation shows that youth who discuss political/social issues with friends and family are more likely to contact or visit public officials to express their opinion (correlation value: 0.57). An unexpected outcome of the correlation test is that voter turnout had no significant correlation to other variables, nor did any other variables influence voter turnout. This result was surprising because literature tells us that when youth are members of a civic engagement group, they are more likely to be politically involved. We can only infer that there are greater influencers at stake that are not considered in our quantitative design.

Thematic Analysis

We asked each organization to describe how they are successful in increasing youth civic engagement and creating meaningful impacts through their role, their policies/procedures, and their strategies. We also asked each organization to describe the benefits and outcomes of youth civic engagement, their challenges, and any lessons learned. Our thematic analysis approach led us to find 15 major themes. These are our findings:

<u>Role</u>

For each organization's role, there were 4 common role themes of organizations establishing themselves as youth-led, mentors, inclusive, and advocates. First, organizations mentioned that most of their success comes from when they provide youth the opportunity to lead their peers, lead the projects, and let them decide how, when, and where they want to see positive change in their community. Organizations mentioned that when youth are told what to do and are just expected to show up, they see much less authenticity and engagement from the youth. For instance, the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) of Eastern Coachella Valley claims that there is "always a partnership with young people, [they] never assume that [they] know what young people want just because [they're] from similar communities or…have similar identities like [them], [their] team never goes into it assuming…[they are] willing to partner with youth around what programming looks like in real-time." Similarly an organization in Banning, A Better Banning (ABB), claims that they "allow youth to be leaders in identifying issues and tackling it themselves." These findings are consistent with what Kane et al. (2003) propose on the intentionality behind civic engagement. Students take the lead when there are opportunities present to engage in practice-based civic learning. Overall these responses are also correlated to

claims made by Bowers et al. (2015). These organizations are positive developmental settings that provide young people with the opportunity to acquire competence and connection.

Second, organizations claimed to see much more youth engagement when they serve as mentors for the youth. Youth should be taught, trained, and guided in forms of youth civic engagement. It makes a big difference for organizations when they prepare and teach youth how to speak at a city council meeting, how to contact their local officials, how to formally express their opinion, how to build partnerships, how to apply for grants, and how to share their knowledge and lived experiences with others. For example, the Fontana Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (FMYAC) states, "we focus on the hands-on job, customer service, phone etiquette, email, these are skills that are when it comes to volunteering…we focus more on job readiness skills, where they're out there, how to present themselves, have public speaking skills, introducing themselves on certain workshops…get their hands on building resumes, cover letters, sit down with their peers and practice interview questions for college and jobs." All 9 organizations claimed to be teaching youth how to present in city hall meetings, read agenda items, and lay out the process and conduct of city hall and council member meetings. The role of these groups as youth civic engagement mentors goes beyond what literature tells us. Although similar to what Kane et al. (2003) propose about the role of organizations as opportunity providers, these organizations exceed the expectations of a basic youth civic engagement organization by actually providing the tools to be successful both in and out of civic life. Leadership within these organizations serves as a nonhierarchical system where coordinators within the organization serve as mentors/guides and youth serve to teach other youth and the greater community.

Third, organizations claim that when they are inclusive of all youth no matter age, education, income, mobility, and ethnicity, they have higher numbers of youth members. For example, the Eastvale Youth Council (EYC), Project Super Bloom (PSB), and YLI all similarly claim that one of their primary roles is to serve as a space where youth feel free and encouraged to express themselves. Youth are much more likely to continue to engage in an organization when they feel they belong and that their opinion matters. Inclusivity is often paired with high encouragement, for example, YLI constantly reminds youth members that "[they're] great as [they] are…[they] can do this, [they] can do that…providing that space really then allows [them] to return year after year. Youth feel really comfortable. They feel included, they feel comfortable telling us personal things, like [they're] really a part of [their] youth's lives throughout the time that they're in high school. And even as they go to college they return." What is interesting about these responses is that these findings are not mentioned in the literature. Most literature focuses on support but these organizations actually make it a point to distinguish support from encouragement. Support can mean many different things (i.e. financial support, resources, transportation, food, etc.), whereas encouragement is constantly reminding youth of their potential and power. These organizations put great emphasis on modes and especially words of encouragement. This means telling youth they are important, they are valued, they are smart, they are innovative, and they can make substantial community impacts. In a world where adults doubt youth contribution in the decision-making process and are constantly told no, an organization's role as being inclusive through modes of encouragement is most crucial.

Lastly, when youth know their opinions and concerns matter in creating positive change in their community they are more likely to engage in advocacy efforts and improve not only their personal lives but also the lives of others. At this stage, youth begin to transform their thoughts

into action. Youth members of YLI are "actually working to do direct advocacy…that means advocating for more mental health resources at a bigger level outside of the school. Youth members of FMYAC are advocating to improve issues around public health, including COVID-related issues. Youth members of the Riverside Court (RC), Riverside Youth Council (RYC), and Riverside Police Explorer Program (RPEP) are currently advocating for a fair social justice system. Youth members of PSB are advocating for equitable political processes. Youth members at MoValLEARNS (MVL) are advocating for universal basic income and affordable, equitable, and attainable higher education systems. Youth members of ABB, EYC, and the Boys & Girls Club of the San Gorgonio Pass - Keystone (BGCK) are all similarly advocating to increase youth leadership roles and partnerships throughout their city. These findings are consistent with what the case studies show us in the literature review section of this report, especially the case studies from Michigan in Richards-Schuster, K., and Checkoway, B. (2009). Youth in the IE are actively working to educate others and raise awareness, all the while educating themselves and adding to their lived experiences. Most of their advocacy efforts have led to incredible benefits and outcomes which will be explained in greater detail in the next section.

Benefits and Outcomes

There were several benefits and outcomes that the youth organizations in the IE reflected upon. Three common benefits and outcomes were identified here that include empowerment, advocacy, and youth leadership. Through various programs discussed, youth are very proactive in making changes in their communities whether it is directly impacting policy or not. First, empowerment was a strong theme across all organizations. EYC shared that even though their outcomes have not been easy to directly shape policy, they are progressively making an impact

by being at the decision-making table making youth feel empowered through all interactions with the community, city government, and other youth. It was said that empowerment comes within sharing and that connectedness is a strong factor in creating these relationships. Youth members of EYC are "connected, active, and engaging with what's going on with the city. They are making a lot of connections and friendships" creating the self-efficacy needed to feel empowered in their community.

Second, all organizations shared a variety of advocacy efforts from being invited to meetings, making public comments, meeting with city officials, and even taking matters into their own hands by identifying issues, problem-solving, and tackling those issues themselves. Depending on the issues they advocated for, these organizations had different strategies per issue. The organizations EYC, ABB, and FMYAC all shared that they have similar advocacy efforts such as writing co-op-eds, hosting workshops, and talking directly with their school board on issues that were affecting primarily youth. It is important to note that they not only advocate for youth-related issues, but for their entire community. FMYAC shared that their youth members "have future goals of greater community impact in all areas not just youth-related".

Finally, being youth-led is a theme that all organizations shared that was their best outcome and goal. Many shared that without being youth-led, it was not worthwhile to their members as they all served youth. The organization, ABB, also shared that they would empower youth by encouraging all events to be youth-led. They shared that they strived for youth to be leaders in their community whether that was hosting community chats, attending a city council meeting, or even hosting a full-scale community summit- one of its kind ever in the City of Banning thanks to the youth of their community. The co-founder of ABB shared that in such an organization that works with youth, youth should be inspired to come up with ideas, events, and

recommendations for these issues they see. ABB co-founder shares, "one should collectively work with youth, it is not mandatory but is necessary when working with youth in such a program", stressing the importance of being youth-led.

Through the resources provided to youth, organizations in the IE can empower youth through collective action and capacity building, something that many stated that youth were not getting exposed to at school or at home. In fact, many of the resources provided to youth were not accessible to youth before they joined these organizations showcasing the strong impact on youth.

Challenges

Although there were many benefits discussed, there were several challenges across organizations. Three main challenges were identified across all organizations: resources, capacity, and funding. We found that all organizations struggled with resources and funding. Without resources and funding, these organizations are limited in what they can do, what events they can hold and the impacts they can make on their community. Project Super Bloom (PSB) shared that youth might already be struggling at home and with a lack of funding and resources, they aren't able to aid youth as they need. For example, PSB shared that "not all youth have access to the proper technology to use the tools the organization uses, and some youth struggled with navigating tech" and that districts were bigger than expected, so difficult to get people in certain areas that it led to exclude some young people due to the lack of transportation. A lack of resources can lead to a lack of balance within the organization that can deter functions and operations within.

Very similar to a lack of balance, many shared the conflict that they had with their local city government. The city government is a great resource and partnership to have for youth, but

very interestingly, there was a lack of support we did not anticipate. For example, EYC shared that although they have the city's name in their organization, they are independent of the city due to critical expectations they imposed on the youth council. The City had various restrictions, and the process would be much longer and more difficult to achieve due to its capacity and resources. It would be more time-consuming considering youth wanted to get started in making a difference in their community so they decided to be independent to better serve their youth. A prevalent challenge we were not expecting due to powerful partnerships with cities we studied in our literature review. Thus, we did not expect various challenges identified per the resiliency and powerful impact of these organizations.

Best Practices

The best practices of the youth-centric organizations all revolved around their policies, programs, and initiatives being youth-driven, multimodal, adaptable, equity-centered, and paired with strong adult-youth partnership. The IE organizations interviewed strongly affirmed the importance of being youth-led to ensure accountability to young people's wants and needs in the community. ABB's BFF Team Lead elaborated: "We created a youth civic leadership opportunity, Banning's Future Fellowship, to empower… to stop the brain drain in our community where young people leave and don't come back… to center youth voice… because they have been historically underrepresented in our city". The BFF Team Lead affirmed that they plan on expanding their youth programming in and outside of their organization, with strategic plans to establish a youth city council in the city to institutionalize youth leadership on a broader scale.

The youth organizations also continuously evolved their practices to best reflect their young membership's input, leaning in on multimodal technology so youth have freer range to use

contemporary tools to engage in civic life. For example, YLC heavily cited the community

impact and youth enjoyment of using photovoice, a form of storytelling that helped youth

document and raise awareness of a local social-environmental justice issue. They leveraged this

tool to mitigate transportation and financial inequities experienced by their youth: "they don't

need transportation, they don't need to go through a specific training... storytelling has been our

oldest strategy around creating change in the community because we find it really accessible to

young people". Successful programming was thoughtfully structured and goal-oriented,

applicable to the locality of youth membership, and had strong adult support. Methods like these

can help youth take control of community research processes because much storytelling through

pictures provides more flexibility and accessibility than through words. They can also help ease

the tensions that can arise when young people and adults work together on a project because they

have different levels of power (Johnson, 2008).

Organizations took a methodical approach to ensure youth were continuously active and

enthusiastic in their chosen endeavors. The adult support underscored the adults' role to not only

procure youth input but to act as mentors and guides, offering unwavering encouragement to

youth to pour into their passions and creativity in order to make their community better.

Banning's youth organization BGCK coordinator spoke further on this encouragement

component, citing "the lack of encouragement from parents" as the coordinator's increased and

vital role as a nurturer of civic participation "... Because I think they're not… seeing that it's

serious or as important as other things like sports". Most aspects of these best practices were

under the foundation of centering equity and using an intersectional lens, where the organizations

created inclusive spaces that were representative and relevant to their diverse young

membership, drawing on their lived experiences and perspectives and creating systems to address and upend systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, ability, and beyond.

Inactivity

As we conducted our initial outreach and research, we came across many youth organizations and programs that were dormant and unreachable. Various organization websites claimed they were focusing their energy on COVID-19 public health and safety initiatives and/or did not have the capacity to pivot to an online interface. We further encountered this issue as we sought contact information via the web. An interesting finding we encountered as we researched youth organizations was that many websites are outdated. We came across County websites that promoted youth civic engagement with their supervisors but the supervisors and contact information was outdated since the year 2018. We personally contacted the company of this site and the personnel was unaware that this was still posted on their website and had no idea who would be the primary contact. Although organizations are promoting civic engagement, they are not due to the lack of updated information and available staff/members. This can be discouraging when a young individual is seeking resources to get involved and encounter a roadblock very similar to how we have with our research. Barriers like this, exacerbate many other inequities youth are facing that hinder them from participating in the decision-making process.

Discussion and Major Takeaways

In our research, we explored what factors shape youth civic engagement and the experiences of youth-serving organizations within the IE. As we have come to find, this is a very prominent issue that is understudied especially in the State of California. We have seen that there have been other case studies across the US where providing youth with adequate resources and tools, youth will obtain knowledge on how to be proactive and civically engaged. If such

programs and opportunities to help youth continue to be missing, then youth may continue to deter from being politically engaged actors in our communities.

Very similarly, the research on youth civic engagement per County or City is absent. There are state-wide data, but the data does not disseminate to conduct further research or to see what areas need the most. This was one of the driving factors why our team decided to interview youth-serving organizations in the IE due to a lack of available data. The majority of research on youth civic engagement is focused on white middle-class youth, and studies of middle-class youth of color tend to focus on ones living in underserved areas. Because of this, what is known about youth who do not fall into these categories is limited, as are efforts to engage youth from a variety of different backgrounds (Chekoway and Aldana, 2013). Further, most data is restricted to larger urban counties or cities, leaving more suburban, rural, or small cities within diverse counties of the IE -Riverside and San Bernardino- invisible in quantitative data. This research initiative was fueled by this lack of coverage of historically ignored populations and communities like the IE, to help illustrate the deep community work that exists, and lay more pieces of foundation for further research.

Finally, we would like to thank each organization that is working each day to improve the lives of youth and increase their civic engagement. These organizations pride themselves, and as they should, in serving as a space where youth feel like they belong and that their voice matters. Youth civic engagement in the IE is an understudied subject, as many stakeholders are unaware of the true benefits and outcomes of investing in youth's civic development. After concluding each interview interviewees expressed support for the purpose of this research and gratitude for the opportunity to speak on the organization's efforts, strategies, and successful outcomes. Additionally, we learned that more support from the greater community and elected officials is

critical to increase youth civic engagement in the IE. All of the organizations mentioned that they learned from organizations outside the IE in communities where youth civic engagement is much more heavily prominent. Investing in youth civic engagement should be a national priority, allowing the opportunity for all organizations to learn from one another and help propel and accelerate new up-and-coming organizations.

Recommendations

Reimagining Youth Civic Engagement

Any meaningful effort of youth civic engagement must be reimagined to meet the needs of the 21st-century. Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic threw open the Overton window and had the public and private sectors alike trying and implementing policies and programs quicker than ever before, proving that changes in outdated institutions and systems is more than possible and that stagnation in our democracy is not inevitable. The advancement of technology has been especially expeditious in the 21st-century, but our systems of power have lagged behind in adopting many of these new tools to reach residences. As discussed throughout this report, youth are especially inclined to use these new digital tools as a means to communicate with their family, friends, neighbors, and greater community from their own cities and well beyond (Kahne et al. 2014). Successful policies, programs, and initiatives leverage digital technologies, such as the supercomputers in the palms of students' hands, to build up their capacity to produce, remix, and circulate meaningful content.

Youth-Designated Positions

Our findings demonstrate a strong case for investing in youth leadership positions and organizations that promote youth civic engagement. It is very clear that when youth are members of a civic engagement group, they are more likely to work with others to create positive

community change, express their opinions and concerns to public officials, and are more open to speaking on political topics. Youth-designated positions and participation can take many forms and should be designed in such a way that youth feel they belong and lead the way to create tangible change. Youth are more inclined to become civically engaged when they are in group settings, spaces such as workplaces, schools, community organizations, youth-centric organizations, faith-based institutions, where they learn about issues and how to address them, where they are asked to join an organization or attend a meeting, or where normative pressures encourage them to participate in civic affairs (Verba et al. 1995). It is strongly advised to not tokenize youth leadership positions since youth are not simply there to be just seen but to be heard. Organizations within the IE highly recommend that we ensure these youth leadership positions in and outside of institutions have power and can help hold other systems accountable.

Participatory Democracy

Community voice is not the default or normal mode of operation of the US government -especially when it comes to youth. Improved transparency and accountability are key tenants of participatory systems in a just, inclusive, and multiracial democracy. For this to happen, bureaucratic processes must change in two ways: "bureaucracy needs to be transformed to enable bureaucrats and policy experts to more directly engage citizens… Second, bureaucrats and policy experts need to transform how they administer and implement the new policies" (Wampler, 2012). The first point emphasizes an alteration in how the government receives input. As it stands, public officials and policy practitioners are structurally isolated from direct contact with residents. Without shifting this arrangement to be more public-facing, administrative processes will continue to receive inputs in silos. Building systems that necessitate direct resident feedback is the pulse of true democracies and project implementation. These changes help increase

knowledge about the work of elected officials and/or city agencies and provide a better

understanding of their neighbors and their community's particular needs (Kasdan et al., 2014).

I.   *Participatory Planning*

Participatory planning is frequently framed by planning researchers in terms of social

justice, power and authority imbalances, and the empowering of voices not generally heard in

planning circles (Bryson et al., 2013; Fainstein & Campbell, 2012). It prioritizes informing the

public about planning challenges and encourages collaboration across geographic scales and

organizations to include a wide number of individuals and diverse communities in the planning

process (Flyvbjerg et al., 2002; Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000; Quick & Feldman, 2011). In

youth-led participatory planning for municipalities, young people usually work on a specific

planning problem given to them (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; Youth-Plan Learn Act Now, 2019).

For example, how can public parks become better places to serve youth to promote their health

and well-being? Youth who participate in human-centered design (HCD) or "user-centered

design" help adults design programs or products from the "user experience" point of view.

Including youth in the participatory planning has shown to have direct benefits for youth and

increases youth civic engagement. For instance, youth members of FMYAC were invited to

participate in the planning process for their city. As a result, they were able to influence budget

allocation changes and were able to successfully allocate more funds to further support the youth

advisory council projects. Collaboration between city governments and youth brings about

positive community change as observed within the state of Michigan. In fact, including youth

voice in the planning processes is so prioritized that The Mayor's Youth Council of Farmington

and Farmington Hills actually "receive funding as a line item in the budget and as a recipient of

contributions and grants" (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009). This youth council is

frequently participating in the planning processes within their city. Their planning contributions have led to even greater outcomes within their city such as the development of a communitywide teen center, the design and development of a skateboard park, the establishment recycling policies in city parks, and the creation of curfews policies in their local mall (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

II. *Participatory Budgeting (PB)*

PB is a concept that decentralizes a portion of municipal power to residents so they have a direct say in public budget spending. This potent tool of civic engagement gives residents the agency to identify community needs, work directly with public officials to create actionable proposals that fill these gaps, and vote on where and how to allocate resource flows. In California, the City of Vallejo established PB back in 2011. PB in Vallejo has given residents a more formative and substantial role in the city's budget development. Before its launch, the city council established a 21-member Participatory Budgeting Steering Committee (PBSC), comprised of at least 14 local civic organizations and up to seven individual or at-large members. The PBSC members "coordinate and facilitate public meetings, mobilizing diverse communities, completing an initial review of proposals, and monitoring project implementation" focusing on the core principles of transparency, fairness, and inclusion (ILG, 2015). In 2014, Boston launched the first youth-led PB with a one-million-dollar investment from the city. They brought students inside city hall to hear their concerns and desires and made sure to be accountable to them. In just the first year, the youth voted to allocate $90,000 to improve technological access for Boston public high school students, $60,000 to create art walls that enlivened public spaces, and $400,000 to rehabilitate parks to make them more accessible and safer for everyone (Ausberger et al., 2016). Various other examples exist across the country of PB working and

bringing communities together in step with bureaucracy to take the necessary steps to establish the inclusive democracies needed to serve this diverse nation.

Mandated Community-Based Civics Curriculum

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) provides information on students' achievement and progress in various subjects. The NAEP generates The Nation's Report Card providing results to drive practices and improve educational policy (NAEP, n.d.). In 2010, the NAEP was no longer required to test students' knowledge of civics due to a cut in funding (The California Task Force On K-12 Civic Learning, 2014). The current situation is a crisis in both the education system and civic development. The State of California has the California Education Code which requires only one semester of US government and civics to graduate with a high school diploma (California Department of Education, n.d.). That is half a year of the four years a student spends in high school. While we know that California has made significant progress in its education system, policy changes have done little to nothing to advocate for civic learning. Other states have examined and adopted civic education policies that have been rewarding to their students' civic involvement. California's Education Code needs to be revised to have a mandated place-based civics curriculum across K-12 to provide a clear path to civic learning to be active successful members of our society. Revitalizing civic learning in California will better prepare students with the skills needed to succeed in their careers and civic life.

Notably, community-based civic curriculum like that of Generation Citizen's Action Civics have met much success in engaging youth in civic life and decision-making processes and has been adopted in several schools across the US. Action civics "is a broad term used to describe curricula and programs that go beyond traditional civics programs by combining

learning and practice" (Circle Staff, 2013). The curriculum is founded on meeting students where they are, welcoming them to use their creativity, lived experience, and perspective to bring about the systemic changes in their communities. The curriculum is inclusive and culturally responsive in nature, reflective of what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. Action civics programs foster long-term, collaborative action focusing on public policy, coalition building, and public awareness (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, Lerner et al., 2005, Levine, 2013; Rubin and Hayes, 2010).

Overcoming Financial Barriers to Youth Engagement

To be able to use multimodal tools and be civically engaged, youth must have their basic health, nutritional, and safety needs covered. Being able to afford these basic necessities acts as a precursor to civic life involvement. Here in the US, our current " tax and fiscal policies fall far short of fostering economic inclusion, social equity, and civic engagement" for all households. Instead of offering new paths for wealth-building possibilities for lower- and middle-income families, many of the most critical structural aspects of our tax code favor individuals with existing wealth (Zewde et al. 2021). This structural advantage of the wealthy provides many socio-economic advantages with the subsequent economic instability of the poor and low-income individuals acting as a precursor to poorer health, social cohesion, and even education outcomes. Youth from impoverished or lower-income households have been connected longitudinally to poor socioemotional outcomes as a result of chaotic home lives and community factors such as bad housing, community violence, and neighborhood disorganization (Evans et al. 2005). A joint research effort by PPIC and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, the California Poverty Measure (CPM) is a more robust tool that accounts for the cost of living as well as a variety of family needs and resources, including safety net benefits. The CPM indicates that the

child poverty rate in California alone is at an alarming level of 21.3%, that's approximately 1.9 million children. Without social policies like CalFresh food assistance or CalWORKS cash assistance, the Public Policy Institute of California estimates that child poverty would be at 35.3% — that's over a third of the state's child population (Bohn et al., 2021).

With child poverty the highest in California, providing adequate financial assistance to youth and their families is critical, especially for historically ignored communities that face disproportionate barriers to engaging in civic life. Some fiscal strategies found in our literature review and accompanying interviews with IE organizations are explicated below.

1. *Guaranteed Income*

Some of the key factors that dictate one's civic engagement across California and in the greater US are as follows: "educational attainment, income, zip code, race/ethnicity, age, gender, whether one is able-bodied, citizenship status, and languages spoken" (Puentes, 2021). One storied fiscal policy that has gained contemporary popularity is a guaranteed income. The typical criteria of guaranteed income programs: 1) unconditional: the credit must not be conditioned to a work requirement 2) automatic: minimal bureaucratic systems are needed to ensure low costs in upkeep and management 3) cash-based: people should have the flexibility to use benefits as they see fit 4) individualized: payments must be for each person, not by household. This social insurance policy is geared to combat social, gender, and racial inequity, supplementing the US's existing social safety net. "It would lift all households—both wage-earning and non-wage-earning—out of poverty and lift millions more to the middle class" (Zewde et al. 2021). Concurrently, there is already a bill that is being examined by California State Legislators in order to promote a better quality of life and for the deterioration of the poverty rate by implementing "CAL UBI", which is Assembly Bill 2712. CAL UBI will be the distribution of

unconditional cash allowance to the citizens of California who qualify under the program's benefit qualifications. Many factors are needed to be studied such as that of which in 2024, legislators of California will analyze the final data in which form of methods would be used to fund the program (California Government Legislature, 2020).

From our qualitative research, Moreno Valley's MVL is a slightly modified version of a guaranteed income program that provides young people with a monthly stipend of $250 with a few caveats: they attend college and periodically provide verification of enrollment, volunteer 20 hours per semester, and take an exit interview. The coordinator explained, "This is a supplemental income base. And so the idea is that they can just have a little bit of pressure alleviated so they can focus on school with that monthly income. And we don't check what they spend it on". To further ensure student success, the program provides periodic wellness check-ins, guest speakers from different industries, and acts as a hub of opportunity, connecting students with partner organizations that specialize in career assistance, mental health, or leadership opportunities.

2. *Paid Internship/Fellowship Opportunities*

Immersion in well-organized volunteering appears to offer lasting benefits for individuals and society when young people are cementing their civic identities, ideals, and engagement (Flagan and Levine, 2010). From our interviews with IE organizations, several cited structured internship or fellowship opportunities as important components of youth programming. Further, ensuring they were stipend based played a key role in mitigating equity gaps between socio-economic classes of youth. The coordinator of YLI in Eastern Coachella Valley elaborated on the importance of equitable financial support because it lessened the burden faced by the under-resourced and predominantly Latinx youth communities they serve. The coordinator

lamented, "that's something that we've learned, because initially when we were doing stipends, we were only doing stipends for young people who had completed a project… If we are claiming to be an equitable organization, then why are we valuing output over just attending a meeting… because sometimes attending a meeting and staying focused and participating is just as hard as writing a poem or doing an interview…". Reimbursing their young people for their time was seen as paramount because of the youth's vital role in the community as storytellers and cultural ambassadors. This was also mentioned by the Team Lead from BFF, "We paid Fellows a living wage… It was never really a question because the organization viewed the youth as equals". Any other arrangement would contradict the organization's proclaimed adult-youth co-partnership according to the Team Lead.

There are several large-scale organizations across the country that focus on building civic capacity such as AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps includes local and state volunteer organizations where participants across age groups -usually under 30- commit a year to service work in exchange for a modest living stipend and an educational award. By surveying 3,772 alumni, The Corporation for National and Community Service (2016) found that post-AmeriCorps respondents were more likely to engage in all community service activities inquired about in the survey than pre-AmeriCorps. Sense of community, cultural competency, and self-efficacy also improved and alumni were more likely than normal Americans to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Members felt more connected to their communities, understood problems better, had more confidence in their abilities to lead a community-based movement, and participated more in community affairs. AmeriCorps members were more likely to work in the public sector after service and reported higher life satisfaction (Friedman et al., 2016).

Limitations

This analysis should be understood in the context of some limitations. First, there is limited data on youth civic engagement, youth organizations, and youth involvement in general. We anticipate this lack of data due to the difficulty and legality when studying youth under the age of 18. Youth civic engagement is also a topic that is less studied and those studies that have been made, are not readily available to the public. We came across several publications in which we attempted to contact the authors and medium publications to access data used in their research. Unfortunately, we did encounter a lack of responses, and the responses we did get led us to no accessible data. In engaging in these publications, we saw that there was not a clear approach as to what age groups are considered youth. Some publications included youth from 16-24, others 13-29, and others started with youth from elementary grade level. Due to this, we struggled to find the age group that would be best suitable for our research

Our intended goal was to collect primary data from interviews with leaders of youth councils throughout the IE. We faced difficulties in that there was a lack of responses from our IE organizations. Over the course of six months, we conducted outreach via phone and email but had only 10 interviews from the 30 organizations that we reached out to. We determined that communication via phone and email were the most effective as all organizations had this information publicly available, but understanding, if there would be another method to get in direct contact with them, would be worth exploring. Thus, leaving the sample size to be relatively small and statistically insignificant.

Due to the time constraint of our capstone project, we were limited in interviewing youth due to the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) regulations in that we refrained from interviewing youth as we mentioned we interviewed leaders of youth organizations. Despite these limitations,

there are some strengths including the opportunity to expand on our study. Our research is one of its kind and is a topic that should be studied more considering the low rates of youth civic engagement. We hope that this project can be expanded in the future by incorporating other primary research interviewing youth and youth organizations.

Conclusion

It is clear that youth civic engagement in California is minimal and oftentimes tokenized. The Golden State can and needs to improve its levels of youth civic engagement to curtail social, environmental, racial, gender, ability, health, immigration, and socio-economic injustices. It has the capacity to increase opportunities for youth to participate in the decision-making processes and inform policy, so long as we advocate for it. There are existing successful youth civic engagement groups throughout the US that we can learn from. Despite various challenges and barriers, youth civic engagement organizations in the IE are indeed using inclusive, innovative, and inspiring strategies to increase youth civic engagement in their communities.

From these organizations in the IE, we have learned that multimodal tools and technology have the potential to alter civic life and education in the US if we allow it. It has the potential to strengthen and develop adult-youth connections, reimagine our approaches to learning and collaboration, close long-standing equity and accessibility gaps in our neighborhoods, and tailor learning experiences to meet the needs of all in our cities, big or small. Furthermore, exploration and creativity should be fostered in our k-12 and collegiate schools, adult learning centers, and the broader community. Educators and mentors should work with their pupils to learn together, exploring new information and developing new abilities. Finally, leaders in our community and educational spheres should establish a vision for developing participatory place-based learning experiences that give all youth the tools and resources they need to influence our complex

systems of democracy. We anticipate these findings to further direct research on youth civic engagement in California and beyond, increase support and investment in organizations within the IE, and overall increase opportunities for youth to participate in the decision-making processes in their communities.

Future Work: Proposed Research Suggestions

Many different tests, variations, and experiments have been left out of our research for future work due to our time constraints. We find that more and more youth civic engagement groups are developing and are just now starting their pilot programs. Any researchers who would like to continue this work should have the capacity to collect qualitative data from new up-and-coming groups, have a greater number of interviews and expand the analysis to produce generalizations that add to the literature. Additionally, future work can delve into a deeper analysis of certain questions, correlations, and propose different findings based on different methods or research designs. This research has been focused on California with an emphasis on the youth organizations in the IE, but it would be interesting to expand our research into other regions of California to see how the IE compares to the rest of California.

As we discussed in our recommendations, we hope to reimagine youth civic engagement. Although this is a recommendation we make, we hope future research can gauge the importance of how youth civic engagement has changed in the context of face-to-face engagement versus online/social media. Specifically, studying how youth want to engage now considering the online world we have access to and live in now as opposed to how studies available view civic engagement across youth. Future research should analyze and shift to how youth engage with the current trends such as using hashtags, resharing and using their social platform as a platform of engagement and advocacy and general civic life. We would like to foster new civic engagement

opportunities through the mediums our youth are most comfortable with while recognizing that major investments need to be made to make youth civic engagement a priority across growing diverse populations in the US.

Lastly, we would like to serve as a liaison in advocacy efforts for research on youth civic engagement. Current robust research on youth civic engagement is not publicly available. The research that is available is outdated and is merely at the state level. Future research should be easily accessible as this is a critical issue that is understudied across counties, rural communities, small cities, and suburbs. Unfortunately, these non-existent or scarcely available datasets limited our analysis. Developed and open-sourced existing research would have certainly had an important influence on the results obtained in the end. This study should encourage more intersectional research across race, class, gender, ability, immigration status, and beyond at both the macro and micro levels.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview questions

1. **Role**
    a. What is the organization's role in serving youth?
    b. What activities does the organization do that allow for youth to be civically engaged?
        i. How do youth participate in the decision-making processes?
    c. Which forms of youth civic engagement has helped the organization be successful in informing policy and achieving the organization's mission?
    d. Are youth engaged in policy discussions in all substantive areas, or primarily with regards to clearly "youth-related" issues?
    e. What age group does the organization serve? Within the organization, has there been different receptivity to youth under 18 in comparison to 18-26 young adults in terms of policy input?
2. **Benefits/outcomes**
    a. What are some outcomes/benefits of youth civic engagement in the city?
    b. Has youth participation in decision-making processes resulted in changes in the community? (*example: economic, social, environmental, health (well-being) impacts*)
    c. What types of policies have youth impacted/informed? (*example: resource allocation, city planning, programmatic priorities, law reform proposals, education, peer counseling, restorative justice, anti-graffiti, jobs, public health, transportation, environmental justice, etc.*)
3. **Policies and Procedures**
    a. What policies and procedures does the organization have in place to engage youth?
        i. Of the policy/policies mentioned, how does the policy work/operate? Is it mandatory? Who is in charge of ensuring that the procedure is followed? Is the youth engagement program funded separately from civic engagement programs more generally? If so, how is the youth engagement program funded?
            1. Does the organization have published guidelines for these processes and expectations (yes or no).
    b. What are the positive and/or negative impacts of the organization's civic engagement practices?
    c. What factors, if any, inhibit the enactment, implementation, or improvement of a youth engagement program? (*example: policy procedure, partnerships, resources, members, etc.*)
    d. How does the organization work with/interact with the city government? How often?

e. Are there any other policies or procedures not mentioned that you would like to elaborate on?

4. Challenges
   a. What are some of the organization's internal barriers to increasing youth civic engagement?
      i. *If needed, follow up with the following (if interviewee is unsure)*
         1. *Example: delegation, unclear goals, lack of members, organization, etc.*
      ii. *How does the organization handle disagreement with youth opinion, yet still use their perspective and take action on their recommendations?*
      iii. *How does the organization verify that they are representing the youth accurately?*
   b. What are some of the organization's external barriers to increasing youth civic engagement?
      i. *If needed, follow up with the following (if interviewee is unsure)*
         1. *Example. city policies, timing, location, online, lack of timely information from the city about upcoming policy-making processes or about the information that policy decisions are being based on (aka city fails to disseminate agendas and notify of engagement opportunities in a timely/transparent manner)*
   c. Are there any other challenges not mentioned that you would like to elaborate on?

5. Lessons Learned
   a. What can or is the organization doing differently to increase youth civic engagement?