

# ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC CLIMATE

## COVID, Scarce Resources, and a Surge in Hate and Exclusion

The current social, political, and economic climate resulting from the extended COVID recovery and conservative political backlash have deeply stressed youth organizing groups and the youth they serve. Vulnerable communities have been hard hit by COVID, at the same time that emergency resources have dried up and the shift to remote contact has put a strain on highly relationship-dependent work. Mental and emotional health challenges, lack of resources, and increasing racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia have led to growing needs, stress, and burnout. A strong response is needed from funders and other institutional stakeholders to meet these challenges.

This section is part of the Developing Youth Power Series, based on a study of youth organizing groups in California that was conducted by the [CU Boulder Research Hub](#) between 2021 and 2024.

### What's In This Section

Youth organizing groups address three major social-political-economic challenges in their work, according to our study participants:

- Long-term emotional and mental health challenges in communities hit hard by COVID
- Lack of capacity and resources to continue to shift how relational work is done
- Significant racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia in their schools and communities

The first two issues connect deeply to society's recovery from COVID and the third is an adjustment to a significant political swing towards hate and exclusion. A different section of this report, [Understanding the Funding Context](#), talks about funding challenges.

Most California students had been back to in-person learning by spring of 2022 (Ondrasek, Edgerton, & Bland, 2021) when our first round of interviews were conducted. Yet, the pandemic was far from over, with the US hitting one million COVID deaths in May of that year (CDC Museum, 2023). By the summer of 2023, during our second round of data collection, the context for California youth organizers appeared to have shifted in meaningful ways. For example, the federal government had just declared that the COVID pandemic national emergency was over (The Associated Press, 2023). Yet the problems described by youth organizers in spring 2022 persisted through the summer of 2023. In the words of one leader,

"I agree with everything you had listed in terms of those factors and each and every one of them is still really relevant; we're in it on each one of those."

## Addressing the Long-Term Emotional and Mental Health Impacts of the COVID Pandemic on Youth and Staff

In the words of one youth leader, “We’ve noticed that . . . the pandemic is not really over.”

Study participants noted that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shape their work. Another leader explained that “as youth organizing groups, we’re just beginning to see the additional results of pandemic and the state of people’s well-being.”

Both youth members and the adult staff that support them feel burned out as they continue to work in the low-income communities of color that were hit hardest by COVID deaths, job and housing instability, and economic loss. Participants explained that now that the official pandemic emergency has ended, their organizations are understaffed and simply do not have the capacity to meet the needs of the community. In contrast, during the pandemic itself, several organizations had access to both government and philanthropic funds for impacted communities that allowed them to provide some of this support. In the words of one leader,

“I feel like during the pandemic there were a little bit more funds available. I feel like people were pouring into the organization a little bit more. . . . We almost doubled our budget.”

Leaders explained that as extra funding ends, they are left feeling like they cannot meet all the needs of the community; there are too many issues to work on, and too many families still facing financial, housing, and food insecurity. Thus, staff feel overwhelmed and burnt out.

Another leader expressed a notable lack of hope in this moment—something that is needed for engaging youth in transformative work (Garcia, 2023).

“When it comes to youth organizing . . . we’re trying to bring people together and really collectively think, transformatively [think], and really have big ideas. And the root for a lot of that [thinking] is oftentimes feeling hopeful. We don’t have a lot of folks in our communities that are feeling hopeful right now which makes it a lot more difficult to engage in that type of organizing. . . . But a lot of folks are angry and there’s a lot of anger and frustration and not as much hope. So, I think those challenges are still present.”

This leader continued by explaining that while anger and frustration can lead to immediate activism, hope is needed to sustain longer-term organizing work.

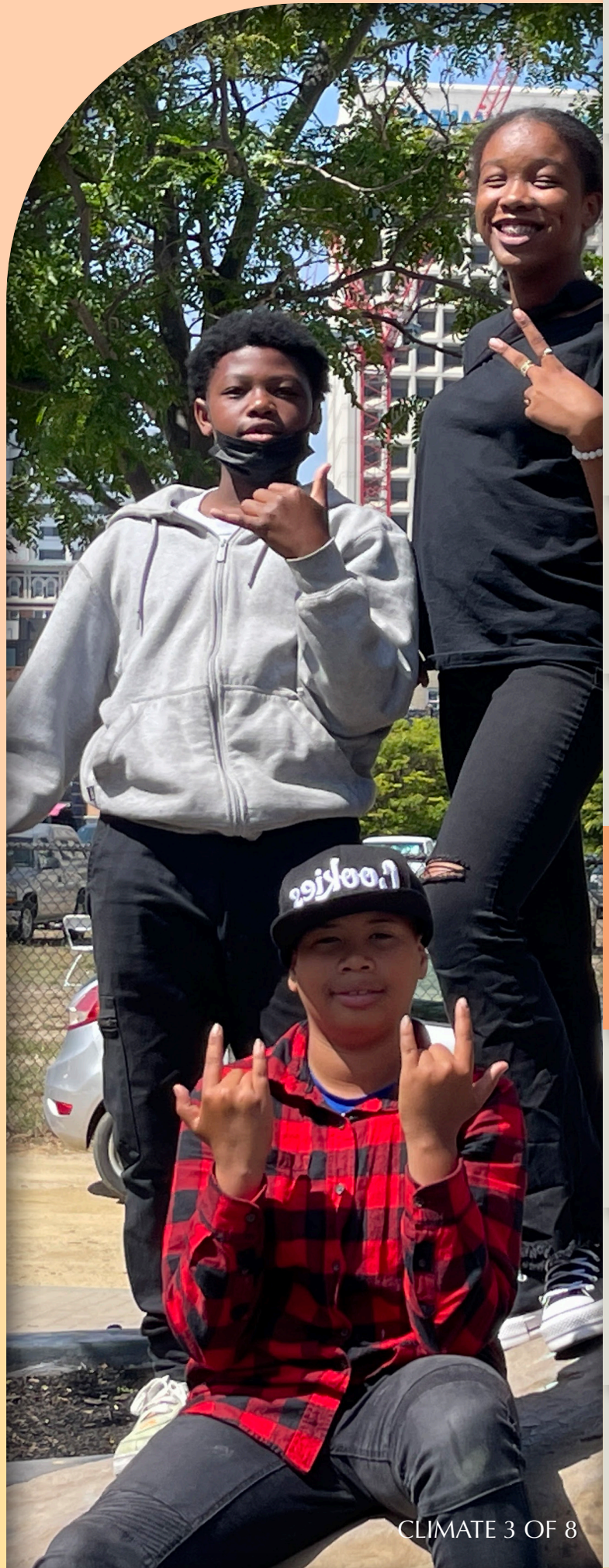




Other participants noted that the mental health of youth more generally declined during the pandemic—an observation supported by emerging research (Panchal, et al., 2023). Youth organizing and youth development leaders talked about the need to create extensive support for youth, including direct counseling by professionals and the time and space to connect with peers. Notably, one leader shared that their organization is building on the emotional healing work they have been doing as their work moves towards political action.

“I think we really did a good job of helping [youth] understand what they’re feeling and how to apply language to it and how to apply action to it.”

That and said, the continued need for increasing mental health supports for youth and their adult allies comes up as a strong recommendation to funders and is discussed in the funding section as well the section on emerging youth organizing and youth development strategies. To learn more, see sections: [Organizing for Youth Development](#) and [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#).



## Doing Relational Work Remotely

The heart of youth organizing and youth development work is building relationships with young people. During the pandemic, organizations had to move first to doing this work remotely, and then to a hybrid format. Now, they are trying to adapt to a world where meeting and relationship building has forever changed. In 2022, leaders described a lack of knowledge about digital organizing strategies and tools, the extra challenge of “staying on message” when people only interact online and have inadequate access to devices and reliable internet connections. Looking back on their experiences during the pandemic, participants in 2023 had similar reflections.

“So, with us during the pandemic, it was interesting because when we transitioned the work to online, it was very difficult to be able to keep a lot of our numbers just because the work took twice as long to be able to do. The other issue that we had was that when the transition happened, a lot of the youth and the parents were struggling with being able to have access to technology. So, we were trying to also support with that as far as contacting the schools and just trying to support our families as best as we could during that transition.”

Accessing technology both to engage with their schooling but also with their youth organizing groups was further challenging for low-income students. Another participant shared:

“There was also a lot of hesitation from a lot of our youth to use the technology. . . . They were really concerned about breaking it and having to pay for it. . . . I’ve actually had students that have had to make payments for some of the computers because the screen was cracked, and they—yes, they charged them for the computer like new, which . . . it just boggles my mind.”





Constantly changing modalities of meetings and challenges with access to reliable technology, bandwidth, and technological expertise were consistent themes in both 2022 and 2023. Youth organizing leaders in our study agreed that doing this [relational work](#) remotely is extremely challenging. Getting to know students, supporting youth learning, building community, understanding and solving the challenges facing the community, and meeting immediate needs like hunger or housing are all more complicated when people cannot meet face to face. This idea was echoed by one participant:

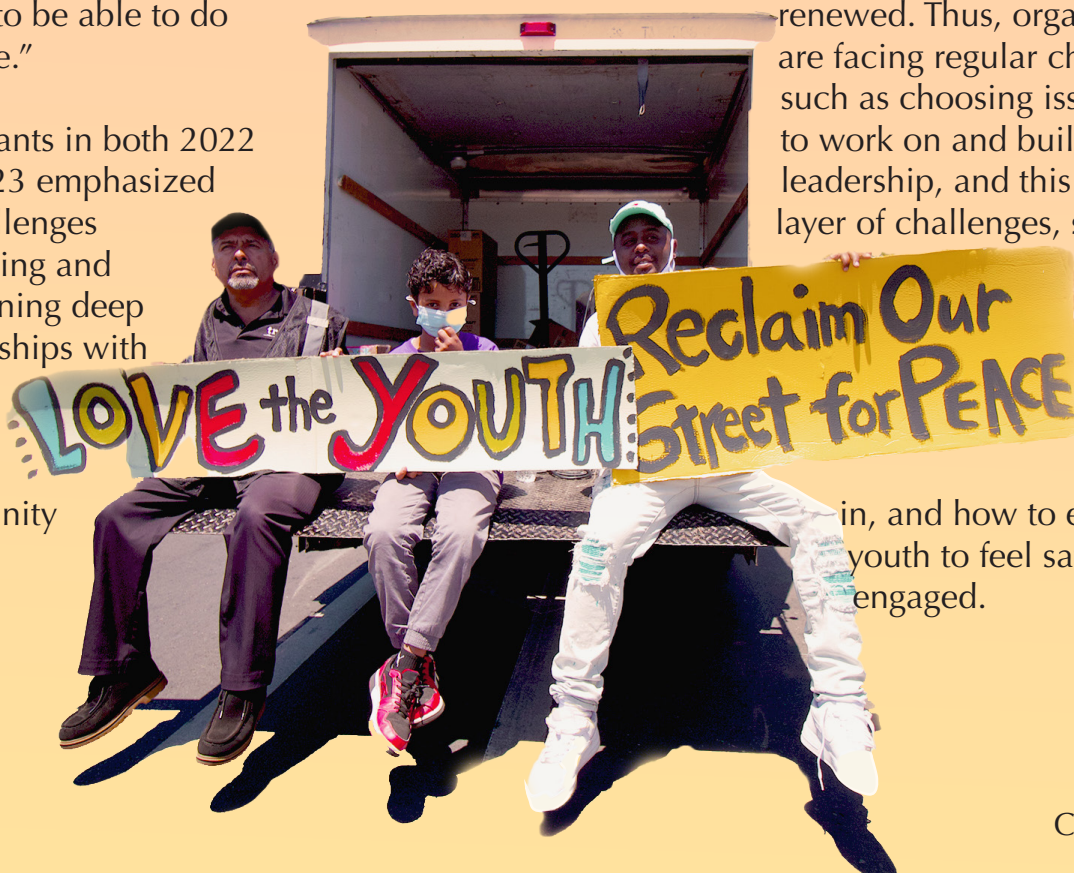
“And as far as the advocacy and the organizing component of it, it’s just really hard to build community when we’re just meeting remotely because some of the youth, also because of [internet] bandwidth capacity, unfortunately can’t always turn on their screens. And some of them—the space is for them to make friends and to know each other, and that’s just been really hard to be able to do online.”

Participants in both 2022 and 2023 emphasized the challenges of building and maintaining deep relationships with youth without the opportunity to be in person.

“It’s harder to recruit and retain young people into spaces because of all the things happening in the outside world, post-pandemic. I feel like it’s harder to kind of get that—like, where we were before to where we are now. It’s hard to bring folks in.”

Though the public health issues that made remote work necessary have passed, leaders in this study were clear that there is no simple return to the strategies and structure of their work pre-pandemic. One leader explained, “it’s just been really difficult transitioning back to in-person,” partly because some young people have left, partly because people are still “distrustful” of being safe from illness in larger groups, and partly because “most of the youth that we meet with, they still want to continue meeting but remotely.”

Another challenge mentioned by leaders is that their agreements with schools to use school meeting spaces lapsed during the pandemic and have not been renewed. Thus, organizations are facing regular challenges, such as choosing issues to work on and building leadership, and this extra layer of challenges, such as finding out where to meet, the modality to meet in, and how to enable youth to feel safe and engaged.





### Supporting Youth as They Face Significant Racism, Xenophobia, Homophobia, and Transphobia

The third social-political challenge raised by organizing leaders was navigating a shift towards hostility and exclusion in local, state, and national politics. Systemic inequality is hardly new for organizations working towards justice, but study participants noted a rise in blatant hostility as they work with youth in the current political climate. These reflections align well with media coverage that indicates a rise in hate speech and censorship against marginalized communities (UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies, 2023; Will, 2023).

The hostility was particularly evident for organizations working with youth of color, immigrant youth, and LGBTQ+ youth. In the words of one organizer,

“I think the other thing is the level of violence that we’re seeing on the campuses, in the community is really—this isn’t a surprise to anybody, but—hugely concerning and I think that it’s greatly impacting our work.”

Another organizer explained that they see the hostile political climate in, “the things that they’re saying--directly even to our youth--when they’re at Board meetings or City Council meetings.”

A third organizer explained that as a result of these attacks, youth are more deeply engaging in organizations’ meetings that focus on political action.

“I think that goes hand in hand with just how youth are feeling. They’re feeling attacked, especially a lot of our LGBTQ youth are feeling attacked, and so they’re wanting to respond.”

Another impact of the conservative backlash described by organizers is that “there’s gonna be a lot of work that needs to be done just to defend the wins we already have, not just pushing for new ones.” Consider this example from a leader in a conservative part of Southern California whose organization, is “very much embedded and invested in doing political organizing as a core function of our work to advocate for change.” They describe how the local police and land association doubled the amount they spent on local elections, out-funding all other organizations. The leader described this as, “a sign of that backlash and pushing the pendulum in the direction away from reform and towards like a, ‘Hey, in order to create safety we must invest in police first and foremost.’”



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***- Youth Organizing Leader***



### Challenges

- Youth are burdened with significant emotional and mental health impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic aftermath.
- The end of the official pandemic emergency means that many resources have dried up.
- Youth organizing staff are experiencing significant burnout from trying to meet overwhelming needs while understaffed and under resourced.
- The ubiquity of remote and hybrid interaction complicates all challenges.
- A shift towards hostility and exclusion in local, state, and national politics has made the racism, homophobia, and transphobia faced by marginalized youth more brutal than ever.
- These political shifts mean that youth organizing groups are moving from proactive campaigns like police-free schools to simply defending the campaigns they won in the past.

### Takeaways

The current social, political, and economic challenges resulting from the extended COVID recovery and conservative political backlash has placed a dire strain on youth organizing leaders and the youth they serve. Mental and emotional health challenges, burnout, lack of resources, and political hostility have combined to create overwhelming pressure on vulnerable communities.

We call on funders, government officials, and other stakeholders to support the valuable work being done by these organizations under starkly adverse conditions.

