



Developing Youth Power: ***Community Organizing and Youth Development in California***

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Suggested Citation Format:

Renée Valladares, M., D.Aguilar, V. Sinha, B. Kirshner and K. Baca. (2024). Developing Youth Power: Community Organizing and Youth Development in California. Boulder, CO: Research Hub for Youth Organizing. Retrieved [date] from <https://www.colorado.edu/education-research-hub/developing-youth-power>



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Editing: Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

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Artwork and Photographs used in this design were purchased from BAY-PEACE and created by their youth and staff. Featuring:

- “Garden of Growth Mural” a community-based art project painted by Inbal Rubin and Leslie “Dime” Lopez ([Table of Contents](#); [Youth Development pg. 3](#) & [10](#); [Expanding Support pg. 2](#))
- “Untitled” a Community based art project painted by James Delgado ([Leadership Pipeline pg. 2](#); [Insider/Outsider pg. 3](#))
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BAY-Peace offers holistic youth leadership programs where they empower Bay Area youth to transform and heal from militarism, systemic violence and intergenerational trauma.

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Focus Group Recruitment: Staff at Youth Organizing! California (YO! Cali) supported our focus group recruitment. YO! Cali is a statewide network of grassroots youth organizations dedicated to expanding the capacity of young people and organizations in California to practice transformative youth organizing, build power, and create long-term transformation in our communities. To learn more about YO! Cali and support their work go to <https://yocalifornia.org/>.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Organizing Groups Are Engaging in Systems Transformation and Youth Development in California

In this research-based series, we share findings from a multi-year study of California's youth organizing groups and how they are building sustainable movements for long-term systems transformation. These groups build on youth issues to address community-wide concerns, combining holistic youth development practices with complex social change strategies. They call on partners in philanthropy to meet this moment by providing flexible and sustainable resources and learning alongside and from the field.

California boasts a rich youth organizing ecosystem. Going back to the founding of the Black Panthers in 1966 and the LA Walkouts of 1968, youth of color in the Golden State have created new forms of political power and catalyzed movements for rights and equality. Today's youth organizers continue these traditions and take them in new directions. By prioritizing holistic youth development alongside complex social change strategies, youth organizing groups are building movements that will be sustained for the long haul.

They call on partners in philanthropy to meet this moment by offering flexible and sustainable resources and joining authentic opportunities to learn alongside and from the field.

This series shares the findings of our study of the California youth organizing ecosystem with funders, youth organizers and the broader public. Through interviews and focus groups with leaders of 34 youth organizing groups in 2022 to 2023, we learned how organizing groups prioritize young people's healing and mental health alongside leadership development and academic success.

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.



We heard about their pragmatic embrace of insider and outsider strategies, such as building community coalitions that put pressure on school boards while collaborating with school leaders to design and implement new programs. They describe creative outreach to alumni to connect high school youth to mentors and build new pathways in social justice leadership. They explained how keeping a sharp focus on a mission to create justice in their communities allows their work to span the traditional silos of education, health care, housing, and transportation.

These promising experiments in youth development and political power call for a new approach from allies in philanthropy. Emerging from the stressors of the COVID pandemic, California organizing groups are poised to level up their base-building,

leadership development, and political impact from coastal cities to inland agricultural communities. Organizers call on philanthropists to recognize the multifaceted, and often unrecognized, roles they play in communities, from mutual aid for struggling families to youth employment to holding diverse political coalitions together. They ask funders to work in partnership with their vision of long-term movement building for systemic change. They invite foundation leaders to join them in on-going, real time learning to intentionally bridge the fields of philanthropy and practice.

We share our findings by theme in **seven** interconnected sections, which can be accessed separately and in any order by clicking on the tabs to the right, or returning to the table of contents.



RESEARCH METHODS

Context

Youth organizing in California has a long history and an exceptional number of active groups. This study drew on interviews and focus groups of youth leaders to learn how the state's youth organizing groups work toward long-term systems transformation while incorporating innovative youth development practices. This study was led by the Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder (Research Hub) and funded by the Stuart Foundation. We aim to inform a broad audience of youth organizers and youth development staff along with the philanthropies and other institutional partners whose support is needed for this vital work.

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.

Research Questions

Developing Youth Power shares findings from a study conducted from late 2021 to early 2024 of youth organizing and youth development in California. We aimed to answer these research questions:

- What strategies do youth organizing groups employ for long-term change?
- How does youth development factor into organizing strategies?
- How, if at all, do youth development and organizing strategies vary by region?
- What can foundation leaders in California learn from youth organizing leaders to support long-term change in the field?



Background

This study was inspired by a previous study co-led by the Research Hub and commissioned by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), 20 Years of Youth Power: The 2020 National Youth Organizing Field Scan. That study identified 122 active youth organizing groups in California—significantly more than any other state.

“California alone is home to 39% of the organizations identified in this Field Scan. We understand the high number of organizations in California in three ways. First, California has by far the largest population of any state in the US; second, there is a long history of both youth organizing and philanthropic support for youth organizing in California; and third, the survey team is based in California and was able to leverage their relationships

Research Team

The team leading this study is housed in the Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder, and was led by Michelle Renée Valladares, Siomara Valladares, Danielle Aguilar, Vandna Sinha, Ben Kirshner and Kate Baca. Siomara Valladares served as principal investigator of this project from 2021 to 2023, leading the study design, interview collection, and analysis before turning the project over to Michelle Renée Valladares. Adam York and Kate Sommerville conducted and analyzed initial interviews, and Victor Leos assisted in focus group facilitation and data analysis.

The Research Hub for Youth Organizing, a joint initiative of the Center for

to encourage higher response rates.” (FCYO, 2020)

The co-authors of the 2020 FCYO scan and leaders at the Stuart Foundation, recognizing the importance of the California work, wanted to follow up with a new study to understand more about the current state of youth organizing in California.

A second impetus for this new study was a growing movement within philanthropy to better understand how youth organizing and youth development overlap and inform one another. Because of the size and long history of youth organizing in the state, learning from California's youth organizing groups and their youth development practices provided an opportunity to understand how a youth organizing approach to youth development can lead to long-term systems transformation nationwide.

Community Based Learning and Research (CU Engage) and the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder, supports youth organizers and their allies in using research to directly shape broader justice movements. By synthesizing existing research and co-constructing new research, we help youth organizing groups foster political power to directly shape formal and informal decision-making spaces. We co-design and co-construct resources with groups to confront inequalities in access to learning in low-income communities and communities of color. Visit the [Research Hub website](#) for more information.

Research Methods

The study was conducted in three phases.



Phase 1: Planning

The first phase, conducted from late 2021 to early 2022, involved developing a clear understanding of the study's core concepts and making sure it would be relevant to the fields of youth organizing, youth development, and philanthropy. During this phase, we reviewed academic literature, media, and strategic documents and met with colleagues at the Stuart Foundation. Our goal was to make sure our interviews, focus groups, and findings would align with the field and be useful to the youth organizers who contributed their time.

Phase 2: Interviews

The second phase of the study, conducted in 2022, consisted of interviewing leaders from 11 youth organizing groups from California. We asked participants a series of questions about their strategies and policy targets for long-term change, how youth development factors into their strategies, and their advice for leaders in philanthropy. To identify interview participants, we began with a list of 15 state and local youth organizing groups in California that were already connected with the Stuart Foundation or the Research Hub. We then used [snowball sampling](#) to reach additional participants. Interviews were conducted while organizations were still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The final group of interviewees represented statewide, Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Central Valley efforts (for more information [view the list of participating organizations here](#)).



Each interview was professionally transcribed and analyzed using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. We developed a coding schema that reflected the organization research questions and added additional codes and sub-codes during analysis. Our team worked collaboratively on coding and creating short narratives to identify the major themes from the data. We then developed a series of internal memos that highlighted our major findings. These memos were consolidated into an internal report and presentation and shared with colleagues on the Stuart Foundation team. Together the research team and philanthropic team reviewed the findings and identified areas to be studied in Phase 3.

Phase 3: Focus Groups

In 2023, focus groups were developed and conducted based on the initial findings from the 2022 interviews in collaboration with the Stuart Foundation team. To identify focus group participants, we created a list of California-based organizations that participated in the FCYO 2020 scan. We reviewed each organization to determine its alignment with our phase 1 definitions of youth organizing and youth development, narrowing our list to 62 prospective organizations. Our definition of youth organizing is based on Kirshner and Ginwright (2012)

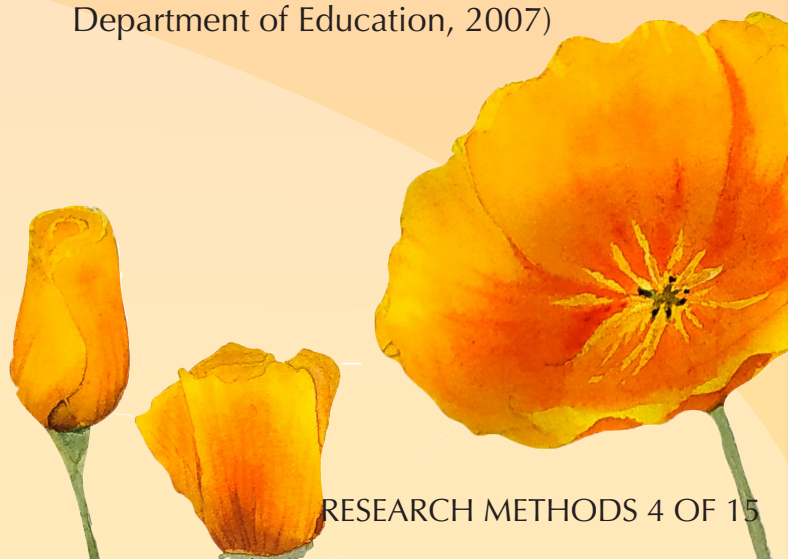
“Youth organizing groups can be characterized by three shared features. First, their campaigns are guided by social justice values aimed at developing power to change systems, institutions, or policies (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Warren et al., 2008)...

Second, organizing groups are often led by young people who focus on youth’s concerns and mobilize young people as agents of change (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002). Third, groups are often formed on the basis of shared social identities linked to experiences of discrimination or marginalization (HoSang, 2006).” (Kirshner and Ginwright 2012, pp. 289).

Twenty-nine leaders from 28 youth organizing groups participated in 12 semi-structured focus groups via Zoom, each for 50 to 60 minutes. We intentionally included youth organizing groups from wider geographical areas than in the initial 2022 study. Regions such as the broader San Diego area, the Inland Empire, and Central Valley had focus group participants, in addition to youth organizing leaders from statewide, Bay Area, and Los Angeles groups.

Our understanding of youth development is based on the model described in the US Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center (2007) fact sheet.

“Organizations using a youth development approach therefore provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person’s environment and increase his or her ability to reach these outcomes.” (US Department of Education, 2007)



Our final recruitment list reflected organizations whose online descriptions and materials aligned with these two definitions.

After a recruitment effort that generated only 6 youth organizing group responses, which was insufficient for this study, we partnered with Youth Organize! California (YO! Cali) to leverage trust networks across California youth organizing groups and incorporated a \$100 gift card as an incentive to each youth organizing leader to honor their time. YO! Cali staff also referenced our definitions of youth organizing groups and youth development groups in making their recommendations.

Each focus group was professionally transcribed and analyzed using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. We used a coding schema that reflected the findings from Phase 2 interviews and added additional codes and sub-codes when necessary. Our team worked collaboratively on coding and creating short narratives to identify a series of internal memos that highlighted our major findings. These memos were revised and consolidated into the Developing Youth Power Series.

Each section of this series highlights a different facet of California youth organizers' work to build a sustainable movement for social change in their communities. We hope that these lessons, so generously shared by the youth leaders in our study, will help other communities strengthen their own movements to build youth power. We also hope these insights will provide a map and an invitation to philanthropies and other institutional partners to better understand and support this transformative work, today and into the future.



GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

MAP OF CALIFORNIA



LIST OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
STATEWIDE					
Youth Leadership Institute	<i>Youth Leadership Institute builds communities where young people and their adult allies come together to create positive community change that promotes social justice and racial equity.</i>	Statewide: Fresno, Merced, Eastern Coachella Valley, San Francisco, Madera, San Mateo, Marin, Long Beach	1991	X	
Californians for Justice	<i>Californians for Justice is a statewide youth-powered organization fighting to improve the lives of communities of color, immigrant, low-income, LGBTQ and other marginalized communities.</i>	Statewide: San Jose, Oakland, Fresno, Long Beach	1996	X	X
Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network	<i>GSA Network is a next-generation LGBTQ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, trans and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities.</i>	Statewide	1998		X
Power California	<i>At Power California, we believe we can make California stronger if we all have an equal say in the decisions that impact our lives. But right now, the voices that are most missing from our systems of governance are young people of color and their families.</i>	Statewide	2004	X	X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance	<p><i>CIYJA creates a space for intersectional, system-impacted undocumented and refugee immigrant youth across California with an emphasis on underserved QTBIPOC communities.</i></p> <p><i>We organize through an abolitionist framework to close down detention centers and build up community power through providing holistic care, transforming communities, and cultivating leadership for liberation.</i></p>	Statewide	2011		X
California Native Vote Project	The California Native Vote Project's mission is to achieve equity and justice for Native American children, families and communities by increasing Native civic participation and power.	Statewide	2016	X	
Youth Organize California	<i>Also known as YO! Cali—we are a statewide network of grassroots youth organizations dedicated to expanding the capacity of young people and organizations in California to practice transformative youth organizing, build power, and create long-term transformation in our communities.</i>	Statewide	2017	X	

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
ACLU SoCal: Youth Liberty Squad	<i>The Youth Liberty Squad is a youth leadership program created to engage high school students to inspire them and provide them with the tools to become the next generation of social justice leaders.</i>	Southern California	2019		X
San Diego Metropolitan					
Global Action Research Center	<i>The Global ARC’s mission is to facilitate local communities and institutions in developing, sharing and scaling up sustainability solutions—locally and globally—to eradicate root causes of poverty, environmental degradation, and unhealthy living conditions.</i>	San Diego, CA	2013		X
Inland Empire					
Inland Congregations United for Change	<i>Inland Congregations United For Change is an interfaith and multi-racial organization that strives to train local leadership in our communities, schools and congregations. ICUC organizes on local, state and national levels for social, racial and economic justice in the communities we live in. We are made of working class parents and students.</i>	Inland Empire, CA	1991		X
Alianza CV	<i>To transform the socio-economic conditions of the Coachella Valley so that people in all communities have opportunities to prosper. We envision one vibrant, healthy, and thriving Coachella Valley where people have a seat at the table for decisions that affect their daily lives.</i>	Eastern Coachella Valley, CA	2010		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
Los Angeles Metropolitan					
Central American Resource Center of California-LA	<i>CARECEN empowers Central Americans and all immigrants by defending human and civil rights, working for social and economic justice and promoting cultural diversity.</i>	Los Angeles, CA	1983		X
Community Coalition	<i>Community Coalition works to help transform the social and economic conditions in South LA that foster addiction, crime, violence and poverty by building a community institution that involves thousands in creating, influencing and changing public policy.</i>	Los Angeles, CA	1990		X
Inner City Struggle	<i>Our mission is to build a powerful and an influential movement of youth and families on the Eastside of Los Angeles to promote healthy, safe and nonviolent communities. The Eastside is comprised of the communities of Boyle Heights, unincorporated East Los Angeles, El Sereno and Lincoln Heights.</i>	Eastside/Boyle Heights, CA	1994	X	
Gente Organizada	<i>Gente Organizada (Gente) is a community-led social action non-profit organization based in Pomona, CA whose mission is to organize to build intergenerational power and wellness for youth and immigrant families in Pomona.</i>	Pomona, Los Angeles County and Inland Empire, CA	2014		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
Chispa	<i>Building a powerhouse community of young, Latinx organizers in Orange County.</i>	Orange County, CA	2017		X
Central Coast					
Future Leaders of America	<i>FLA develops youth resiliency and leadership to create long-lasting systemic change by empowering and mobilizing youth leaders to advocate for policies that improve their lives and the lives of their peers and their communities.</i>	Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, CA	1982		X
Youth Alliance	<i>Youth Alliance is a launch pad for our people to dream together and take collective action that turns those dreams into real, transformative change. Our mission is to create opportunities and space for youth and families to be heard, engage, thrive, and lead.</i>	South Santa Clara and San Benito Counties, CA	1995		X
Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project	<i>To support, organize and empower the indigenous migrant communities in California's Central Coast.</i>	Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties, CA	2001		X
MILPA	<i>To cultivate Change Makers for the Next Seven Generations by creating opportunities for cultural healing, intergenerational leadership, and empowerment through community-driven decision making for healthier communities.</i>	Monterey, Santa Cruz, Yolo, and Solano Counties, CA	2013		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
Central Valley					
PRO Youth & Families	<i>To inspire, educate, and mobilize young people to build a healthier future for themselves, their families, and their communities.</i>	Greater Sacramento area, CA	1981		X
ACT for Women and Girls	<i>ACT is a reproductive justice organization building power through leadership development, community organizing, advocacy, and policy change in our communities.</i>	Tulare County	2003		X
Dolores Huerta Foundation	<i>Inspiring and organizing communities to build volunteer organizations empowered to pursue social justice.</i>	Kern, Tulare, Fresno, Antelope Valley Counties, CA	2003		X
Little Manila Rising	<i>Little Manila Rising (LMR) serves the South Stockton community, developing equitable solutions to the effects of historical marginalization, institutionalized racism, and harmful public policy.</i>	South Stockton, CA	2003		X
Hmong Innovating Politics	<i>Strengthen the political power of Hmong and Disenfranchised communities through innovating civic engagement & strategic grassroots mobilizations.</i>	Sacramento and Fresno, CA	2012		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
Faith in the Valley-Fresno	<i>As an anchor member of PICO California, our mission is to unlock the power of people to put faith into action in the public square, and to advance a movement for racial justice and health equity. We seek to build relational power, lift up a new narrative about the lives of people of color, and drive civic engagement efforts that move our community priorities forward.</i>	Fresno, Kern, Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties, CA	2016		X
LOUD for Tomorrow	<i>LOUD For Tomorrow is a grassroots youth-led organization based in Delano, California building youth power to transform our schools and communities through civic engagement, advocacy, and community healing.</i>	Delano, CA	2018	X	
BAY AREA					
East Bay					
Oakland Kids First	<i>The mission of Oakland Kids First is to increase youth voice, leadership and power to create engaging and equitable public schools where all students learn and lead.</i>	Oakland, CA	1996	X	X
Bay-Peace	<i>BAY-Peace offers holistic youth leadership programs where we empower Bay Area youth to transform and heal from militarism, systemic violence and intergenerational trauma.</i>	Bay Area, CA	2007		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
RYSE Center	<i>RYSE creates safe spaces grounded in social justice that build youth power for young people to love, learn, educate, heal, and transform lives and communities.</i>	East Bay and North Bay, CA	2008	X	X
67 Sueños	<i>67 Sueños cultivates youth organizing and power building with high school-aged youth from neighborhoods directly affected by high rates of violence, mass incarceration, and poverty. Youth use activism such as muralism, poetry, and digital media to reframe negative narratives and uplift community resilience, power, and solidarity.</i>	Oakland, CA	2010		X
Biz Stoop	<i>Our mission is to retain high opportunity youth from Oakland and streamline them into prospective career paths.</i>	Oakland, CA	2015		X

Organization/ Network	Mission	Geographic Scope	Founding Year	Interview	Focus Group
South Bay					
Youth United for Community Action	<i>Youth United for Community Action (YUCA), a grassroots community organization created, led, and run by young people of color, the majority from low-income communities, provides a safe space for young people to empower ourselves and work on environmental and social justice issues to establish positive systemic change through grassroots community organizing.</i>	East Palo Alto, CA	1994	X	X
South Bay Youth Changemakers	<i>SBYC builds Asian American youth power by developing young leaders who organize for a more just and sustainable society. We strive to transform economic and social institutions to prioritize people over profit and shape our communities according to our collective needs and values.</i>	Santa Clara County, CA	2020		X

ORGANIZING FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Established Best Practices and New Approaches

Youth organizing groups support youth development by aligning with and expanding conventional positive youth development practices. Innovative approaches include helping young people from minoritized and marginalized backgrounds develop a political voice and offering them a culturally sensitive and healing space that encourages imagination and hope.

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](#) in our study take advantage of established best practices for youth development such as promoting autonomy and decision-making, cultivating relationships and belonging, scaffolding the development of skills and competencies, and facilitating civic engagement (Dukakis, et al., 2009; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Explore SEL, n.d.). At the same time, they experiment with—and expand upon—conventional youth development strategies to attract, engage, and mentor young people from minoritized and marginalized backgrounds.

For example, our study identified two valuable innovations used by youth organizing groups to promote youth development:

- They facilitate networking and alliance-building with adults in multigenerational political coalitions and in positions of civic and education leadership.
- They offer dynamic social change spaces focused on imagination and hope (Garcia, 2023). As everyday life for economically disenfranchised youth of color in the US becomes increasingly precarious—subject to threats ranging from ICE to housing insecurity to environmental racism—youth organizers are offering developmental spaces that center young people's ingenuity and insight while offering alternative visions for how to live together.



This section highlights a combination of evidence-based youth development strategies alongside innovative practices shared by youth organizing leaders in our study. Often people think about youth organizing as a strategy for political change, but these interviews show us that youth organizing is also a powerful strategy for young people's skill development and thriving. We discuss three broad strategies identified in interviews and focus groups:

- Organizing groups scaffold young people's leadership, civic engagement, and coalition building.
- Groups offer activities and supports that respond to youths' everyday realities
- Staff model and practice critical consciousness and healing justice.

Each of these youth development strategies also provide transferrable skills and knowledge for postsecondary opportunities, including education and employment pathways. To learn more, see section: "[Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#)".

Organizing Strategies for Youth Development

Scaffolding Young People's Leadership, Civic Engagement, and Coalition Building

Youth organizing leaders shared several examples of how their organizations scaffold young people's development of leadership, civic engagement and coalition building skills. [Scaffolding](#) refers to the varied kinds of guidance that more experienced organizers provide to learners as they develop and master skills (Rogoff, 2003). Here we focus on **three** key domains for scaffolding discussed by organizers in our study.



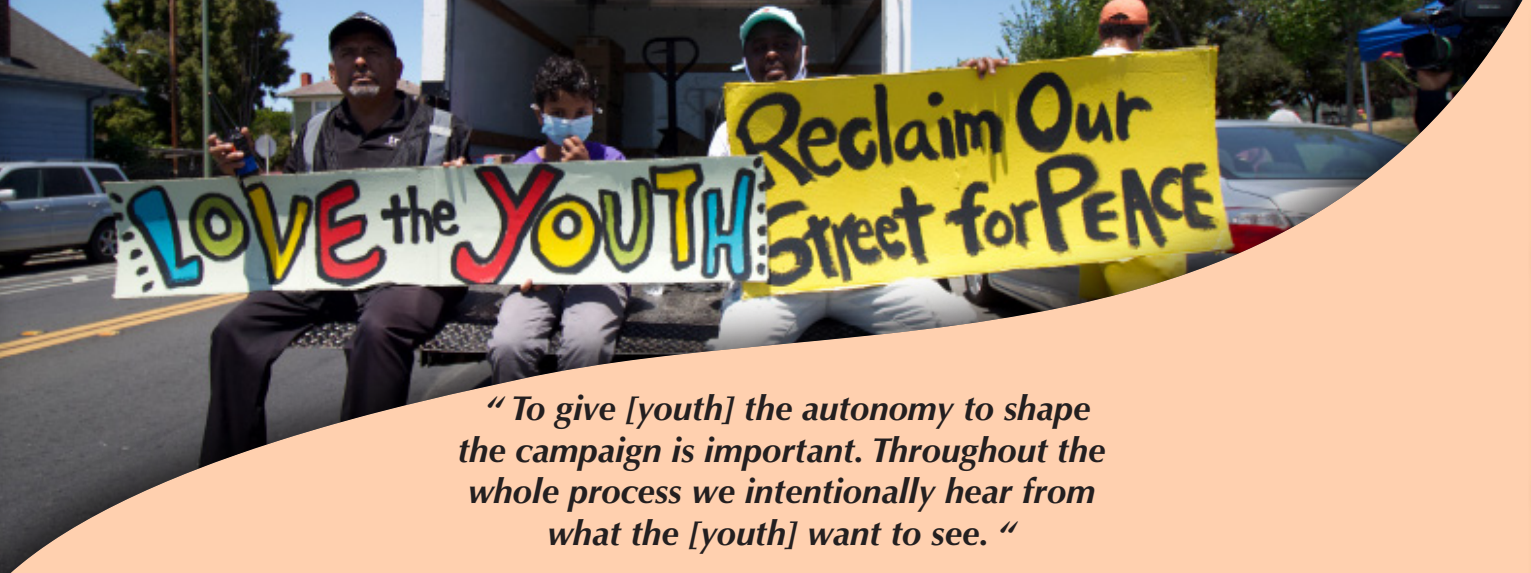
Youth experience ongoing opportunities to practice leadership.

Interviewees described a progression for young people to move into greater responsibility within youth organizing groups. Pathways are not always linear, however, and hinge on youth interest and engagement. One group shared,

“When you come in, you are a member, you’re a volunteer and you kinda can come and go as you please, you pick the days you wanna come in. . . . When you become a core member, there’s a bit more responsibility and a bit more expectation placed on you. We expect you in the office to work on campaigns and political education sessions, attend political education sessions . . . and also receive a stipend.”

Some groups also talked about extending leadership roles to running their own groups. Youth learn how to recruit new members, facilitate small groups, and set action plans. In one example, youth were responsible for starting their own chapters, which meant recruiting and facilitating a youth group with a coherent sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. A focus group participant shared,

“We offer trainings around community building and facilitation. We offer training on how to build a club, how to organize, and advocate. . . . Even in our training we scaffold [the process of] creating the club to organizing. That’s one of the main strategies we use.”



“To give [youth] the autonomy to shape the campaign is important. Throughout the whole process we intentionally hear from what the [youth] want to see.”

- Youth Organizing Leader

Young people participate in decisions about key campaign strategy and policy aims.

Youth organizing groups invite youth to contribute to decisions about key campaign strategy and policy aims. A focus group participant, for example, shared,

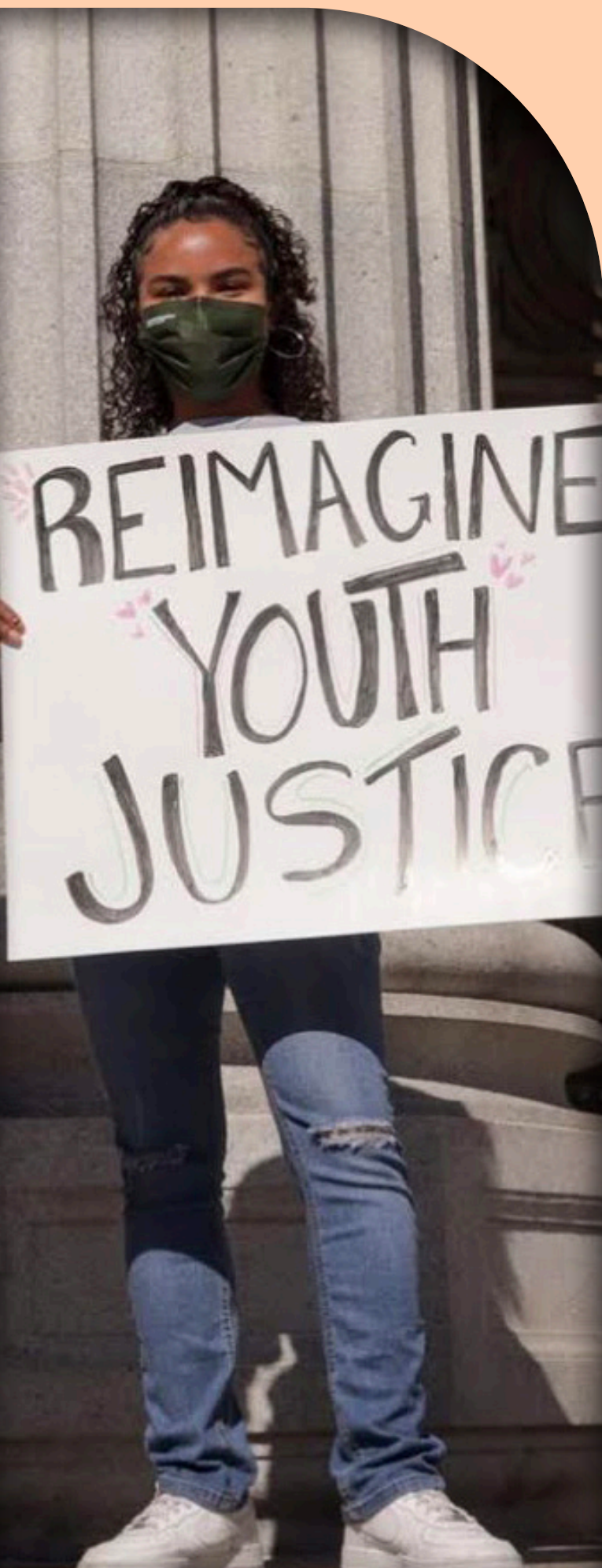
“I think that’s the most important thing because oftentimes in other spaces that are “youth-led,” it’s adults facilitating or having the final say. To give [youth] the autonomy to shape the campaign is important. Throughout the whole process we intentionally hear from what the [youth] want to see. We don’t want to create what the specific youth program events would be.”

Another participant offered something similar about the effort to ensure youth’s decision-making and choice.

“It’s about providing youth with choices and not telling ‘em where to go. . . . You’ve laid out three options. And our prediction is, this is what the consequences of those actions will be. You choose which one you want to take.”

This quote illustrates a form of scaffolding; in framing choices and possible consequences, organizers are sharing their expertise, while not imposing it on young people. This approach to supporting youth decision-making carried over to a focus on equitable relationships between youth and adults within youth organizing groups. Both interviews and focus groups indicated that promoting relationships shaped organizational approaches to scaffolding leadership learning and skill development.

“We also believe in, in fading facilitation.. over the course of the year, the adult ally is running the space less and less. So, from the beginning of the year, we’re providing opportunities for young people to lead the space, but it might start off with being icebreakers or check-in questions.... As the year goes on, they’re taking more and more of the meat and potatoes of the content of whatever we’re working on, whether it’s a campaign, whether it’s a, you know, doing participant evaluation research project, [so] that by the end of the year, it’s a lot more hands off. And then young people are really learning how to do those things.”



Youth develop sophisticated skills for building coalitions with adults and persuading adult targets.

Youth organizing members get to do something that is less common in conventional positive youth development (PYD); they can leave the relatively sheltered space of the youth organization and moving into mature interactions with adults in the city or community. As one person in our focus group said,

“We teach life skills that young people don’t learn in school. That’s . . . where we might give workshops on public speaking, reaching out to your city council members, and how to be a civically engaged person.”

We saw evidence of this in two ways. First, some of the groups invite youth members into multigenerational political coalitions with allied organizations mostly comprised of adults. This signals a shift that many youth organizing groups are adopting as they experiment with strategies for building power (Zizzamia, et al., 2023). A focus group participant described how they scaffolded this participation by offering “youth coach hubs” for young people to power-build alongside adult coalition members, ask questions about upcoming policy initiatives, and become acquainted with the coalition structure.

This smart approach avoids a “sink or swim” scenario where youth are asked to participate in poorly facilitated adult-run spaces with limited preparation. Instead, the “youth coaching hubs” prepared youth for this rigorous experience in adult coalitions through intentional practice and support.

Second, youth organizing groups also described how they scaffold young people's interactions with targets of campaigns. Rather than coalition partners, targets are those decision-makers, often elected, who have the power to make or change policies. A youth organizing and development leader shared,

"We cultivate these different opportunities and try to build their confidence through advocacy workshops. We invite different partners or have our internal staff do preparation for what [engaging in statewide level advocacy] could look like. We also do role plays on how you could carry [out] these conversations. Then [we talk about how we can] break down what the policy process looks like after we do the legislative or advocacy visits."

In some cases we saw how scaffolding was balanced with a principled commitment to young people's autonomy to speak openly with elected officials, even if it might incur blowback. A focus group participant recalled,

"We had a group of young people that went up to [the elected official] who sunk a bill. [The youth] questioned why [the elected official] was calling people to ask them to vote against it, although a staffer said the bill was not read. [The elected official] was really upset and ended up calling our ED. We were not apologetic, because at the end of the day the youth felt the need to [confront the elected official] regarding their [willingness] to accept political support from the Latino community while having an anti-vote stance on a bill [that negatively impacted the Latino community]."

These varied opportunities for leadership, civic engagement, and decision-making are central to youth development and civic health. Unlike in schools, where learning is often decontextualized and does not feel relevant to everyday life, in these spaces youth are engaging in scaffolded opportunities to practice and improve key democratic competencies (Kirshner, 2015)—a powerful form of civic education and youth development.



Drawing on a Nuanced Understanding of Youths' Everyday Realities

Leaders showed deep understanding and responsiveness to the material realities of youths' everyday experiences. Many staff come from and are still part of the same communities or have parallel lived experience as young people in the organization. Through the relationships they build with young people, staff recognize that youth have responsibilities as students and family members. Being responsive meant that staff showed sensitivity to stressors youth encounter. They also saw how mental health challenges were influenced by the political context. A participant said, for example,

"Mental health moves beyond the individual to the social and political. Working with trans and queer youth, mental health is always at the forefront of the work that we do because sometimes youth won't show up to meetings and they won't tell you why. It's not just because, 'Oh, they're just being young people' but because they're really depressed. Lawmakers are trying to get rid of them and their peers throughout the nation. How can you do organizing work or youth development? How do you feel empowered when the world is coming at you so hard all the time?"



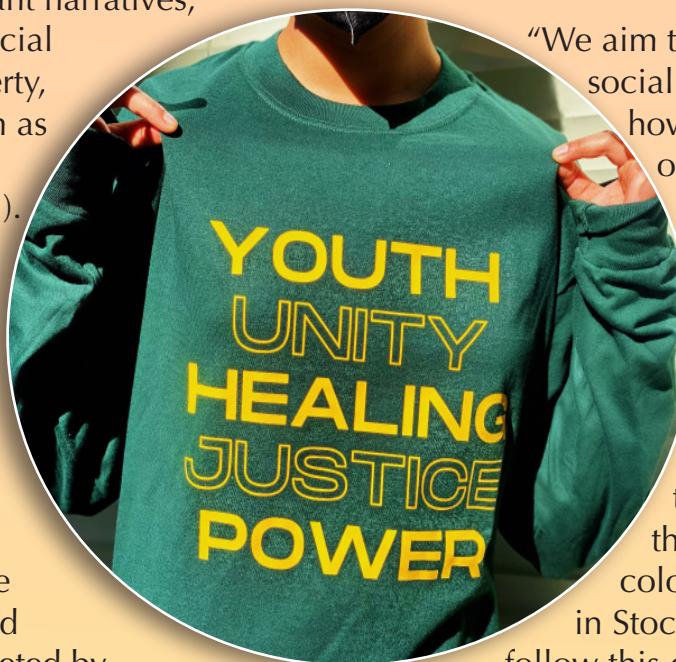
One sentiment expressed in the interviews is that participation in campaigns should feature wrap-around developmental opportunities that include a space for healing. It is not acceptable to have a one-way relationship where young people participate in campaigns but do not have opportunities to experience personal benefits. In campaigns, young people are positioned as leaders who get a chance to explore and understand root causes of problems, and to develop solutions through conversations with stakeholders and policy makers. One interview participant stated:

"It is unethical in our view, to be like, 'Hey, we need you to turn out for this. And we need you to mobilize for that.' And da, da . . . like we're trying to transform conditions, but we also feel very strongly that we have a responsibility to help you navigate the conditions as they currently exist . . . and so our youth development programming is really scaffolded around, to start with . . . work around self-realization and self-exploration and then building into relationship building and how you're learning to be vulnerable and to open up and to be self-reflective and to build across difference then building into . . . how do you participate in community?"

Cultivating and Practicing Critical Consciousness and Healing

As part of their efforts to support young people, youth organizing groups also cultivate spaces for joy and healing. Participants in the focus groups described ways in which they intentionally nurtured and modeled alternative ways of seeing the world and living together. These approaches revolved around critical consciousness and healing justice. Both of those approaches shared an explicit critique of, and effort to move beyond, white supremacy. Here we refer to “[white supremacy](#)” as an interlocking set of ideologies and practices that render Euro-American ways of being, living, and thinking as supreme, such as profit over people and/or glorification of individualism.

White supremacy not only impacts the lived experiences of marginalized communities but also, through dominant narratives, inaccurately identifies social inequalities such as poverty, heterosexism, and racism as individual shortcomings (Page & Woodland, 2023). Youth organizing groups shared frameworks and strategies that sought to combat white supremacy from its root. Their emphasis on healing represents a relatively recent shift in youth organizing practice that was also documented in a national scan completed by Valladares and colleagues (2021).



Groups emphasize the development of critical consciousness.

Youth organizing groups highlighted the role of political education and knowing one's history as foundational to working towards systemic change. For example, a focus group participant shared,

“To help our youth understand all the stuff that they're combating, they need to understand the systems that they're working in. We have our political education which we talk about some of the local histories, other campaigns locally and globally, and systems of oppression. [We talk about] all the -isms to let folks know where they stand and how they're being affected is not just a coincidence.”

Similarly, another youth organizing group shared,

“We aim to build a school-to-social justice pipeline. That's how we communicate our program. [We] try to cultivate the next generation of leaders [who will be] making change. . . . We really try to educate our community about the history of redlining and the historical trauma that our communities of color had to face and endure in Stockton. We try to really follow this quote, “No history, No self” and in turn “Know history, Know self,” understanding that knowing the history of their city, knowing the history of their ancestors and knowing the history of their people is healing. It is a part of their identity and story. It is a core piece to organizing.”

Some participants talked about the difficulties youth encountered when learning these perspectives and then navigating interactions at home or at school. Multiple youth organizing groups shared about the importance of inviting families and siblings into critical consciousness workshops and other programmatic efforts, such as healing practices. A youth organizing group, for example, shared,

“One of the things that I hear a lot in our healing circles and with our young folks in the movement is the hardest part is to bring this work home. We experience the most resistance at home. Sometimes we experience the most pain at home and the most pressure at home. This past year was the first year we did healing circles not just for youth, but also with their families. These were the most beautiful healing circles that we had ever hosted in my time. It was so transformative because even just the simple practice of learning how to communicate, how to use non-violent communication at home, can really transform the dynamic that young people experience when it comes to feeling oppression, silence, and repression at home.”

Youth organizing groups recognized systemic change cannot be fully realized without involving families as critical stakeholders.

Youth experience creative and radical approaches to healing.

In keeping with existing research on youth organizing (e.g., Sabo Flores, 2020; Valladares, et al., 2021; Watts, Kirshner, Govan, & Fernandez, 2018), participants framed their work as being tied to healing. Some linked healing to social and emotional development as a core strategy. To them, “leadership is healing and healing is leadership.” One interviewee said:

“We’re trying to develop like a measure for social, emotional kind of development. You know, a lot of young people come in with a lot of trauma, a lot of like, emotional, mental health issues and being able to develop in taking care of yourself and also being able to communicate your needs and communicate safely and effectively with other peers is super key for us... And that’s another like huge measure of leadership development for us because . . . leadership is healing and healing is leadership. You can’t have a whole bunch of hurt leaders because, you know, you’re just going to end up the cycle of trauma and cycle of abuse.”



Youth organizing leaders also framed their emphasis on healing as an effort to disrupt organizational logics and forms of human interaction that reproduce capitalism and white supremacy, such as transactional relationships and devotion to productivity at the expense of well-being. As an alternative, groups model diverse kinds of care and healing in their work together. For example, a focus group participant shared,

“[We are] learning how to identify all the ways that white supremacy has impacted our ideas of what the work has to look like and the pressures that those structural systems have put on us. [Everything] feels so urgent all the time because on the one hand it is urgent. Then on the other hand, if we’re always responding from an embodied place of urgency, we are going to burn ourselves out.”

Similarly, youth organizing leader highlighted how this perspective shaped their interactions with and expectations of young people,

“It’s about not overwhelming youth because, let’s be real, they’re already in high school. That is the roughest time in your life. Youth burn out just as much as organizers get burnt out. We need to find that balance between getting things done and also young people deserve to just be young. It’s okay to just show up to action or show up to a meeting once in a while; not everyone has to be that dedicated.”

Challenges

Within the U.S., the idea that time is money undergirds conceptualizations of productivity. For youth organizing groups who generally work with modest budgets, working towards tangible policy “wins” to fulfill a grant commitment can create a situation in which organizers are expected and/or feel pressured to work at any expense of personal and collective well-being. Pushing against capitalistic notions of productivity creates opportunities to mitigate burnout and restructure the expectations of the youth organizing field.

Takeaways

Youth organizing groups, in their descriptions of how they approach youth development, described practices that both align with and expand on conventional positive youth development.

- Their practices align with PYD commitments to cultivate youth adult relationships, youth agency and belonging, and practical skill development.
- They expand on PYD in multiple ways, and in so doing offer a model for the broader PYD field.
 - Through opportunities to organize new chapters, interact with adult political actors, and analyze systems of injustice, they enable youth to develop a political voice and participate in multigenerational social justice movements.
 - Through the culturally responsive and healing spaces they offer, young people engage in critique of the way things are while dreaming up and enacting more humane and just ways of living together. Youth organizing groups show creativity, wisdom, and ingenuity in their approaches to youth development.



CREATING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Youth Organizing to Prepare for College and Career Opportunities

Youth organizing groups have made progress in creating “leadership pipelines” that not only provide youth with strong leadership development within their organizations, but also lead to college enrollment and paid positions in the social justice movement. For these efforts to reach their full potential, funders and other stakeholders must make significant new investments.

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?

Social movement and civic capacity building can be strengthened through strong leadership pathways nurtured by youth organizing groups. A 2010 brief for funders by Shawn Ginwright explored these issues and argued for an intentional “pipeline” that would enable youth to transition into subsequent roles as organizers and community leaders. By 2021, a national scan of youth organizing reported both significant progress in this area and continued challenges related to limited infrastructure supporting leadership pathways and transitions into new movement roles (Valladares, et al., 2021).

This leadership pipeline and other forms of post-secondary support were an important theme in our study. This section shares some of the strategies organizers described:

- Youth organizing groups help prepare youth for college and career.
- Youth organizing groups develop pathways to organizing and social justice leadership.

This section also describes some of the daunting challenges to developing these pipelines mentioned by participants. A leadership pipeline calls for strong and stable funding, including budgets for staffing, but funding for this type of infrastructure is often limited.



Organizing Strategies for a Leadership Pipeline

Preparing Youth for College and Career

Although we did not ask explicitly about academic or career support, we did learn that youth organizing groups were attuned to and supportive of youth's future endeavors and cultivated opportunities for youth to meet their college and career goals. A youth organizing group leader shared:

"We created our own scholarship plan to raise funds to support those that were admitted to a community college or a four-year university. We want to incentivize that dream and [support] the professional development and career goals [youth] have for themselves."

Another organizer, in an interview, described how they provide case management and academic intervention in which youth and academic advisors work to create academic action plans aligned with the goals of each specific student. They also provide services such as weekly tutoring, financial aid workshops, study skill workshops, college tours, standardized test preparation support, college application support, and scholarship opportunities.

Some participants also mentioned that their commitment to core youth development outcomes, like helping youth access college and transition into careers, is not adequately recognized by funders and youth development agencies.

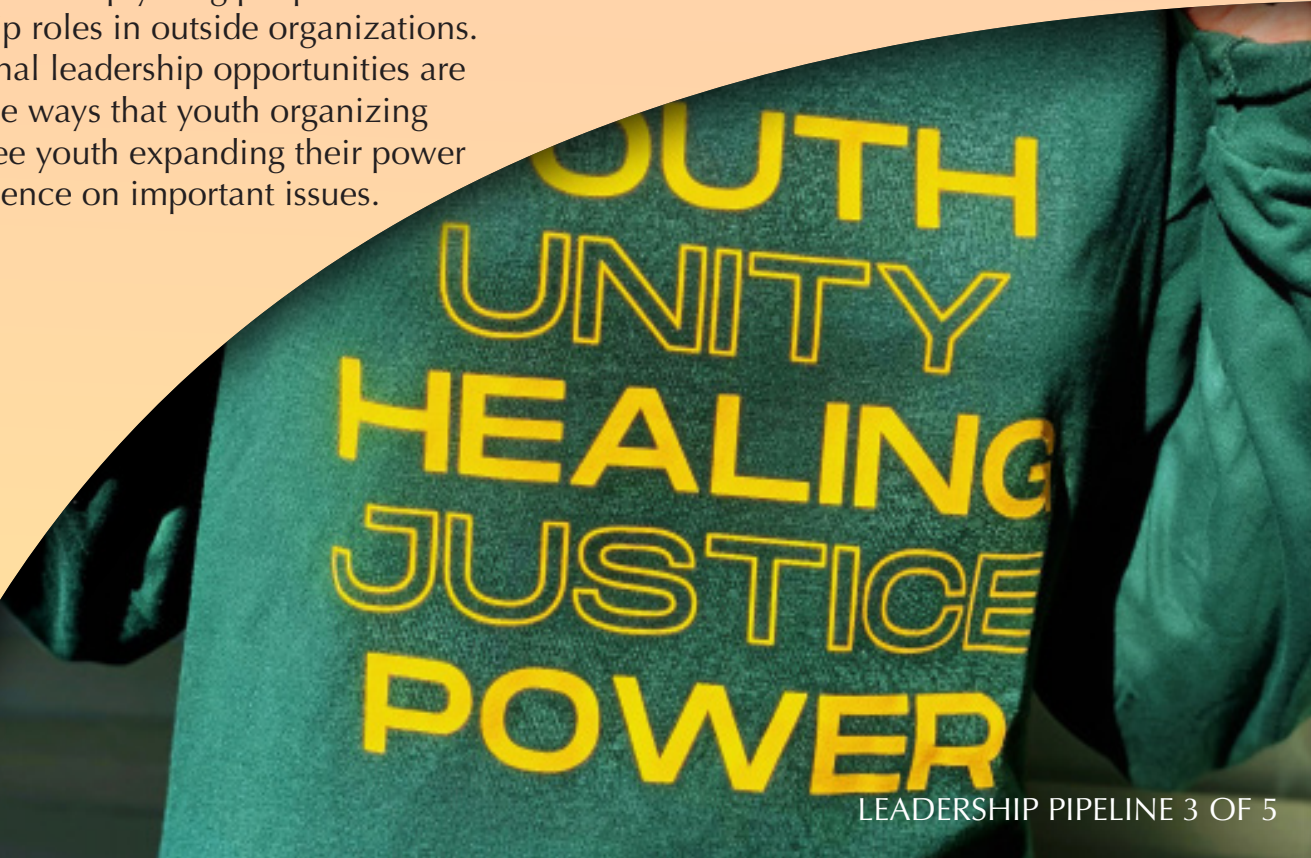
Developing Pathways to Organizing and Social Justice Leadership

Participants shared many examples of youth organizing alumni taking leadership through staff roles in the organization. Several participants described how they embodied this pathway in their own trajectories—starting in the organization as youth and continuing into their current leadership positions. For example, three participants from different organizations were organizers as high school students prior to obtaining full-time employment in the organization. They talked about organizational philosophies that intentionally fostered a leadership pipeline.

Other leadership pipeline opportunities mentioned in the focus groups and interviews included fellowships, paid summer positions, and internships for youth who were no longer within the target age-range to remain as “youth”. Interview participants also noted the desire to help young people find leadership roles in outside organizations. Transitional leadership opportunities are one of the ways that youth organizing groups see youth expanding their power and influence on important issues.

One participating leader used the term “boomerang effect” to characterize their effort to instill a strong sense of pride and local historical knowledge that would accompany young people in future endeavors and motivate them to stay connected to their communities. They challenged the dominant narrative that success meant leaving the area. The boomerang effect was fostered in three ways:

- Weekly workshops that exposed and connected youth to various career opportunities within the organization and the broader community.
- Preparing and supporting youth to translate their organizing skills in other career pathways.
- Raising historical and critical consciousness to cultivate a sense of pride in their hometown and the Filipino community’s contributions to it.



YOUTH
UNITY
HEALING
JUSTICE
POWER

Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Establishing and nourishing a leadership pipeline calls for strong and stable funding and staff infrastructure. For example, a focus group participant highlighted the tensions between providing stipends to youth and organizational capacity to establish a robust leadership pipeline.

“I know a lot of organizations are preparing youth [for] leadership and start building them up. At times it’s hard, because of our funding, to keep youth, support them through a stipend, or even hiring them. That’s something that we have seen. The main takeaway is, how do we ensure that we build our youth not just for a stipend or to hire them on as an assistant, but prepare them to one day start their own organizations?”

Another participant highlighted the inability to consider a leadership pipeline due to the challenges of obtaining funding as a new youth organizing group.

“The challenges of securing funds as a relatively new organization are real. A lot of funders want to fund organizations that have seen wins. It’s hard for new organizations to be able to secure wins when we are struggling with our capacity and resources and development work. It pushes us, and other new organizations, into a corner where we can’t do the base building work, do the leadership development, and secure that win when funders are not funding us.”

Similarly, an interviewee spoke to this goal of building stronger infrastructure for leadership and career pathways:

“I think one of those infrastructure pieces that we’re really interested in is around career pathways for young people into organizing. Not just like program side organizing, but also thinking about what are other movement roles, in terms of finance, operations, communications, development.”



Takeaways

Youth organizing groups have intentionally worked to establish transferrable skills for college and career success by cultivating accessible opportunities such as alumni mentorship and scholarships. They have also begun creating opportunities for continued full-time employment in the youth organizing sector. This means offering strong leadership development within organizations and supporting transitions into other paid positions in the social justice movement, whether as organizers, trainers, accountants, coders, or more.

These efforts are laudable and show progress in the youth organizing field. As Ginwright (2010) highlighted, and the youth organizing groups echoed, a leadership pipeline is critical for many reasons. But it cannot be established, nourished, and sustained without the support of funders who see the importance of funding staff roles that cultivate college and career transitions, and create new positions for emerging leaders. The youth organizing leadership pipeline calls for investment from all stakeholders to facilitate robust career pathways.



BALANCING SHORT-TERM GOALS WITH A LONG-TERM VISION

Multipronged Strategies for Social Change

Organizers shared complex visions for long-term social change. These visions cut across specific social issues to target systemic transformation and necessitated the use of diverse approaches to social change. Participants grounded these visions in addressing the self-identified needs, and sustaining the engagement, of the youth they serve. They saw the complexity of their approaches to social change as presenting challenges to their human and financial resources and called for opportunities for deep conversations between organizing groups, researchers, and funders about how to address these challenges and realize their visions for long-term change.

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 organizers participating in our study during the spring of 2022 indicated that their organizations have visions of long-term social change. Groups are not content with small scale political wins, such as influencing policy at the level of individual schools or school boards. Instead, they are using multiple, complementary strategies to secure long-term change. These include, for example, supporting the development of strong young leaders, organized communities, and intersectional coalitions. They are also working to hold elected representatives accountable, monitor policy implementation, engage voters, and create compelling public narratives. (See also Healey & Hinson, 2013; Terriquez & Milkman, 2021).

Organizers participating in our study in the summer of 2023 expanded on these ideas, describing their visions for long-term change. They indicated that establishing and pursuing long-term organizational visions is about more than just a shift in the temporal scale of their work. It also involves extending their work to a broader range of issues and utilizing an expanded range of social change strategies to address the complex needs of the youth they work and sustain their engagement. This section summarizes participants' discussions of the necessity of long-term visions of social change and of the complex mix of short- and long-term strategies they use to work toward those long-term visions.



Organizing Strategies for Balancing Multiple Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

Holding a Vision for Long-Term Change

Some participants spoke clearly about the importance of a long-term vision for change. For example, one participant said:

“If we’re not thinking ten years in the future, then we’re being reactive to situations. And so, how are we imagining really radicalized and really...deep futures where we’re not just reacting to the current situation? So, I think that that’s why it resonates for me because we’re kind of on the same trajectory. How are we thinking about things 10, 15 years down the line like the opposition is?”

Others focused on visions of systemic change, highlighting the goal of moving from addressing specific, localized challenges within systems to transforming the systems themselves.

“We really want to build youth power. We want them to be able to have a lever to change these conditions; we’re not just being like, “Hey, let’s just do this for a couple of minutes.” We want to create a system where we can get out of that system, you know what I mean?”

Youth organizing leaders saw their long-term visions as being intricately connected to the immediate challenges facing the youth with whom they work. One leader described the relationship between the needs and perspectives of individual youth and a long-term approach to systemic change this way:

“I think most organizing starts with trying to understand the immediate impacts of what you’re feeling, and you just start to peel back more and more layers to get to those root cause issues, and then you realize how deep in there those root cause issues are.”

Leaders we spoke with shared several strategies they use to enact their complex visions of change. These included building multigenerational alliances and organizing across interconnected political issues.

“If we’re not thinking ten years in the future, then we’re being reactive to situations.”

- Youth Organizing Leader

Building Long-Term Power through Multigenerational Alliances

Several participants echoed findings from prior research (e.g., Valladares, et al., 2021) when they noted that building youth power meant moving beyond only organizing youth to embracing multigenerational approaches to social change. One participant, for example, talked about multigenerational approaches as a growing focus for their organization.

“We often only work with young folks or try to get other young folks in our base, but... when you’re doing school stuff, too, some of your allies are teachers and admin and whatnot. And then we’re not really tapping into the parent portal or tapping into the OG grandparents and stuff who went to the same schools, who’ve had the same issues who would be like, ‘No, this is messed up. Why are we still doing this?’”

Participants talked about these multigenerational strategies as both supporting an expanded vision of systemic change and providing a means for long-term engagement of youth. Multigenerational strategies provide an expanded power base, enabling organizations to work across different aspects of an issue and to use diverse strategies in their efforts to secure long-term social change. They also provide a pathway for sustained youth engagement, offering new ways for youth to stay engaged as they move into adulthood. To learn more, see section [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#).



Recognizing the Interconnections among Social Issues

Other focus group participants noted that long-term change requires expanding beyond the youth-focused issues their organizations have historically pursued to a broader focus on addressing complex, interconnected issues. They talked about making connections between their work around public education and different forms of youth justice to climate justice, housing and food insecurity, health justice, and immigration. In discussing the reasons for this expanded focus, participants centered the needs and perspectives of the youth they worked with. For example, one participant, recalling a focus group they had carried out with newcomer youth, spoke to the range of issues that newcomer youth raised about what would make their lives better:

“They talk about what would make their life better. But we start to see that they identify the systemic issues that would make lives better for their neighbors, their siblings, their parents, the people around them, right. We start to see things relating to homelessness, to rent control, to access. Even most recently to cooling centers, sharing what conditions are like living in somewhere like Los Angeles after migrating from a new country.”

Others noted that because of their strong connections to youth, organizing groups were sometime “called on” to address more systemic problems in the community. One participant, for example, shared that the stresses faced by the families of youth organizers during the COVID-19 pandemic led them to branch out from their historical focus on education and drug prevention to take on challenges in the areas of renter’s rights, mental health, and school attendance/grading policies.

Similarly, seeing families impacted by fires and mudslides led to one group engaging in environmental justice work. A participant who worked for an organization historically focused on education justice summarized the connection succinctly, noting: “[In] Oakland, it’s big housing issues and stuff out here. Folks can’t go to school if they ain’t got no place to rest their head.” Existing research on education organizing indicates that centering the people most impacted by a problem helps with identification of the most urgent problems and development of creative, sustainable solutions (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006).



To meet their long-term visions for social change, organizers embrace multipronged approaches to organizing and use diverse strategies that they describe as being complementary. In discussing the motivation for engaging in diversified strategies, participants highlighted, for example, the ways that combining short-term, locally focused strategies with ongoing efforts for long-term change and providing direct services alongside advocacy and leadership development initiatives allowed them to address the immediate concerns of youth and to sustain their long-term participation.

Organizers we spoke with in the spring of 2022 indicated that their organizations engage in diverse social change strategies that cross the boundaries of different approaches to social change. For example, they pursue:

- Policy campaigns AND youth leadership development
- Radical dreaming AND pragmatic voter engagement
- Centering youth AND forming multigenerational coalitions
- Advancing compelling narratives in the public sphere AND offering political education for youth members

Participants in the summer of 2023 expanded on these findings, sharing examples for the complex and complementary strategies that their groups embrace including:

- Healing from trauma, political education tied into ethnic studies, community organizing, and [artivism](#) (the intersection of art and activism).
- Educating youth about their rights, and advocating for school, state, and federal policy change.
- Engaging in school board hearings alongside state and national level advocacy to address the needs of migrants.
- Advocacy and organizing to reduce the minimum age for voting in school board elections, paired with school-based campaigns for localized changes, like hiring a school crossing guard.



Leaders explained that this multipronged approach allows organizations to address the immediate needs of youth, while also advancing their long-term visions for social change. One participant highlighted the way that a diversified range of social change strategies fits into long-term visions of social change:

“We’re definitely on to do some long-term social change. There was a campaign that we were working on to make it eligible for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in their school board elections. And so we’re doing that locally, but that’s still something that’s going to be hopefully institutionalized that we can keep going on and building off of in the future. But there’s also school-based campaigns . . . it’s a combination. We want to have the young folks be able to get—achieve a win, things that are essential to them; simple things like access to restrooms all the time.”

This idea was echoed by other participants, who described how local, short-term campaigns in combination with direct service meet youth’s immediate needs and are critical to sustaining youths’ motivation and engagement in long-term change efforts. This framing of the benefits of mixing strategies was echoed in the statements of a leader whose organization was combining provision of direct services with advocacy campaigns.

“Direct services is part of keeping people in the long-term... systemic change work. And so we started advocating for dollars to support food insecurities, housing insecurities, and transportation insecurities that the young people were kind of facing day to day so they—so we can keep them in the work and keep them in community.”



Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Participants in our focus groups were clear-eyed and pragmatic in their discussion of their visions for long-term change and using multiple strategies to achieve that change. They identified and spoke movingly to the tensions and challenges in expanding the scope and complexity of their work. For example, one leader highlighted the potential that taking on multiple, interconnected issues could strain their human and financial resource bases.

“We’re going to need to expand in some form or fashion to be able to have young folks to be able to be agents in these fields too. Climate justice is going to be a thing that’s going to be coming up soon or housing, all these issues. . . . But figuring out how we can make the connections to be part of these or bring those concepts... into our organizing work without overloading us and . . . overburdening us, you know?”

Some participants pointed to participation in coalitions and collaboration with other organizations as clear strategies for mitigating overload. Yet, others pointed out tensions and risks, noting that partnerships were sometimes contentious because of underlying differences in strategic approach and organizational values. They spoke of the extra care and resources required to support youth in navigating tensions in collaborative work and to ensure their voices were heard and valued.

These tensions could be more pronounced in multigenerational campaigns; participants noted that youth organizers sometimes faced ageism, sexism, and other disempowering dynamics in these settings. The dynamics around collaboration could also be particularly complicated when organizations simultaneously applied both insider and outsider approaches. To learn more, see section: [Combining Insider and Outsider Strategies.](#)



Takeaways

Participants suggested that the use of diversified strategies in pursuit of expansive goals for long-term, systemic change grew out of attention to the needs and interests of the youth that are at the center of their work. Diverse strategies are required to address the complex systemic inequalities underlying both the immediate and long-term challenges that youth face. These include inequities across multiple systems—including housing, transportation, and food—that shape the life courses of youth and their families.

Participating leaders acknowledged the challenges involved in simultaneously pursuing multiple youth organizing strategies, but they also recognized that there could be no singular strategy to address the multifaceted needs of youth and realize long-term social change. Rather, they called for opportunities to engage in critical ongoing conversations with funders and allies about how to support the long-term, systemic, and multifaceted social change strategies they use.

A sense of opportunity and potential was clear in participants' deep engagement with each other during the focus groups, and in their calls for presentation of research findings in ways that would allow for, and

facilitate, deeper conversations between organizing groups, researchers, and funders. Many highlighted the value of online and in-person gatherings and ongoing learning communities that could provide opportunities to continue the conversation, to advocate for funding and other structural changes to better support their work, and to learn from each other how they might navigate the tensions and realize the opportunities inherent in complex, multifaceted approaches to long-term social change. To learn more, see sections: "[Understanding the California Funding Context](#) and [Support for Youth Organizing in California](#)."



COMBINING INSIDER AND OUTSIDER STRATEGIES

The Path to Transformative Justice

“Insider” youth organizing strategies build relationships with decision makers and people who exert influence over them, provide access to institutional decision-making processes, and prepare youth for future insider leadership roles. Insider approaches have traditionally been considered incompatible with “outsider” approaches that rely on collective action and leveraging of public political pressure. Combining [insider-outsider strategies](#) amplifies youth voices within insider spaces, creates pressure for change, and helps hold leaders accountable. Combining insider and outsider strategies can create tensions, but also offers a way to work toward a transformative, humanizing vision of social justice.

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 organizers participating in our study during the spring of 2022 reported the coordinated use of both insider and outsider strategies for social change. This is in keeping with emerging research, which highlights the complementary ways in which groups can make use of both strategies (Donoso, 2017; Pettinicchio, 2012; Banzak, 2010; Abers & Keck, 2009). However, it contrasts with older research and conventional youth organizing wisdom, which tends to treat organizations as using either insider strategies or outsider strategies, unable to navigate the tension between them (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

Existing literature on insider organizing strategies commonly describes activities such as lobbying, policymaking, technical analysis, and discussion forums (see, for example Wagner et. al, 2023). But organizing leaders in our study identified insider strategies that extended well beyond policy-focused efforts to include activities like running school-based youth programs in partnership with

the district or carrying out participatory design processes for new schools with students, teachers, and administrators.

Previous research on education organizing also documents the utility of outsider strategies for creating external political pressure needed for people working within systems like schools to advance equitable change (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Organizing leaders in our study used outsider strategies, such as community advocacy campaigns or ballot initiatives, in coordination with insider studies, to put political pressure on education and political systems.

In this section, we explore the complementary use of insider and outsider strategies for social change. The theme of combining diverse organizing strategies can also be seen in our sections on [long-term visions for youth organizing](#) and [funding challenges](#).

Organizers expanded on their use of insider and outsider strategies in the summer of 2023. They described the purposeful coordination of insider and outsider strategies as essential to making progress towards their long-term visions for social change. They noted that insider strategies build relationships with decision makers, gain access to decision-making and implementation processes, and prepare youth to assume insider leadership and decision-making roles in the future. However, given the ways in which youth voices are discounted or marginalized in these spaces, outsider strategies are necessary to amplify youth voices, create the pressure needed to motivate change, and hold leaders accountable.

Leaders in our study persisted in the use of both insider and outsider strategies despite resulting tensions, which sometimes threatened the viability and continuity of insider strategies. Indeed, organizers suggested that persisting in the use of both strategies, by drawing on relationships and leveraging public pressure to continue their work, was the key to navigating tensions that arose. Some suggested that the use of both insider and outsider strategies was a way to embody the transformative, humanizing approaches to social justice that were at the core of their long-term visions for social change.



Insider and Outsider Organizing Strategies


A Coordinated, Complementary Mix of Strategies

While some participating leaders pursued only insider or only outsider strategies, most indicated that they use a mix of insider and outsider strategies. In contrast to the dominant discourse, in which insider and outsider strategies are often treated as distinct, participants talked about insider and outsider strategies as being complementary and intertwined. (For prior research on combining insider-outsider strategies, see Donoso, 2017; Pettinicchio, 2012; Banzak, 2010; Abers & Keck, 2009). One participant noted:

“We do capacity building work with school districts and we do youth organizing with school districts. And sometimes the young people that are participating in the capacity-building work with our adult professionals are also the same young people that are showing up in numbers to protest at a school board meeting or something like that.”

Another participant expanded on the complementary nature of insider and outsider strategies.

“Having those relationships with folks on the inside who are the ones that are going to be responsible for implementing the new policies that we’ve kind of put in place is really important. So that we’re able to kind of collaborate . . . with them, work alongside them and holding them accountable in kind of moving the process forward. And then of course we wouldn’t have won that policy if it were not for all of the pressure that our constituents and our community members showed up in full force at meetings to do and just engaging the larger public in it.”



“Sometimes the young people that are participating in the capacity-building work... are the same young people that are showing up in numbers to protest at a school board meeting...”

- Youth Organizing Leader

The Need for Outsider Strategies to Realize Changes Sought through Insider Strategies

Participants pointed to severe constraints on the potential to create meaningful change through insider strategies alone. One focus group participant listed the many ways in which internal power structures marginalized youth.

“Youth who sit on the school board and serve as student representation, yeah, they can talk and they can participate. But they don’t even have voting power in the board meetings. So that’s another thing, it’s, like, they’re on the inside, but they’re really—they don’t have any power, you know what I mean? [She names a number of juvenile justice oriented committees.] . . . All these meetings are happening during times when youth are in school. And so there’s not a lot of space for them to be a part of that work in those conversations. . . . I feel like there’s not a lot of regard for youth agency in spaces where it’s really – these are systems for and about young people.”

Echoing findings from other research (e.g., Valladares, et al., 2021) on the importance of outsider pressure tactics for enacting policy change, participants noted that the restrictions on youth agency within insider strategies can require outsider action to motivate change. Some participants also indicated that complementary use of insider and outsider strategies was required even when (former) youth organizers were in positions of power. One participant pointed to the high-profile example of Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass, who was a youth organizer and founded a community-based social justice organization:

“Karen Bass is who she is, and she has her own political agenda. And she has to engage with City Council and the rest of the city, who might not be aligned with what we do, right? So for us, it’s like we do have to do the work with our members to be able to identify the issues and keep that – keep true to who we are in terms of what is most important to our residents, right? And then how do we push the Mayor and be able to support her in the things that we like and push back against things that we don’t like, right?”

For some youth organizing groups, the complementary use of insider and outsider strategies was not situational or temporary, but an enduring feature of their long-term social change strategies. It was seen as necessary to ensure accountability and action, even when it came to leaders with whom they had strong, longstanding relationships.



Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Participants indicated that their use of both insider and outsider strategies could cause tension, both with the people and groups they collaborated with through insider strategies and with groups focused on outsider strategies. One participant described the situation this way:

“And for people who don’t understand that kind of strategy [complementary use of insider-outsider approaches], they’re like, “Hey, I thought we were working well together. Why are you getting your young people to do this?” And then people who are all about the organizing are like, “Hey, I thought you were with us. Why are you working with the district?” You’re just like, “Well, these are two different strategies towards the same direction.” And it just — yes, it creates a lot of challenges.”

Others pointed out that tension over the combined use of insider and outsider strategies could have great costs for youth organizing groups. When tensions arose, they faced the potential of losing resources, relationships, and access to processes developed through insider strategies. Some spoke of partnerships ending over these tensions. Others talked about the loss of access to school facilities. One participant said:

“And that’s one thing that can be challenging to navigate is how do you push up against people who maybe say, “Oh, you can’t come back onto school campuses anymore,” or prevent you accessing classes for classroom presentations or whatever else it may be? There may be pushback in that way as well.”



Takeaways

Organizing groups use complementary insider and outsider strategies to navigate tensions that arise and to embody [transformative social justice](#). Participants whose organizations used complementary insider and outsider strategies saw them both as a source of tension and as the key to navigating that tension.

For example, the participant who discussed the possibility of losing access to school campuses and resources emphasized that fear should not dissuade them from radical, outside strategies. At the same time, she noted the importance of developing strong relationships with people in power, whose support they could leverage to sustain access to school facilities when tensions arose.

Some participants, going one step further, saw the coordinated use of insider and outsider approaches as embodying transformative approaches to social justice. In transformative social justice, the goals of shifting policy and practice are pursued alongside ongoing work to heal from trauma and treat each other with humanity to advance collective liberation.

The 2020 Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing scan demonstrated that this approach to youth organizing is becoming more common (Valladares, et al., 2021) and participants in our focus groups spoke powerfully to the ways in which a transformative justice approach fit with their use insider and outsider strategies (see the section on [leadership development](#) for additional discussion of transformative justice approaches).

One participant explained this perspective:

“We do the insider-outsider work in the context of retaining our own humanity. So we may actually disagree with the DA. You know what I mean? But at the same time, we understand that the DA and our local [police] officers, they’ve had to experience traumas in our communities in the same way that we have. And so, there’s an invitation there for us to heal together while being super critical and condemning of the institution that they represent, right? And so, there’s a human element to it . . . and so that’s kind of how we maintain the insider-outsider stuff . . . People try to weaponize a relationship, which means it’s not a real relationship, right? And so, I think the way we counter that is one, we always have our public narrative kind of present. There’s always an invitation to live into a greater humanity, and there’s always an invitation to actually come together, heal with us.”

From this perspective, the use of complementary insider and outsider strategies is more than just an effective means to the desired goal of long-term social change, it is a manifestation of the type of change that groups seek to create. Some scholars have referred to this as “[prefigurative politics](#)”; see, for example, Lin et al., 2016. Thus, the coordinated use of insider and outsider strategies is a means for youth organizing groups to extend the critical consciousness and healing work discussed in the section on youth development, while also increasing the effectiveness of their efforts to enact [change in programs and policies that impact youth](#).

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.”

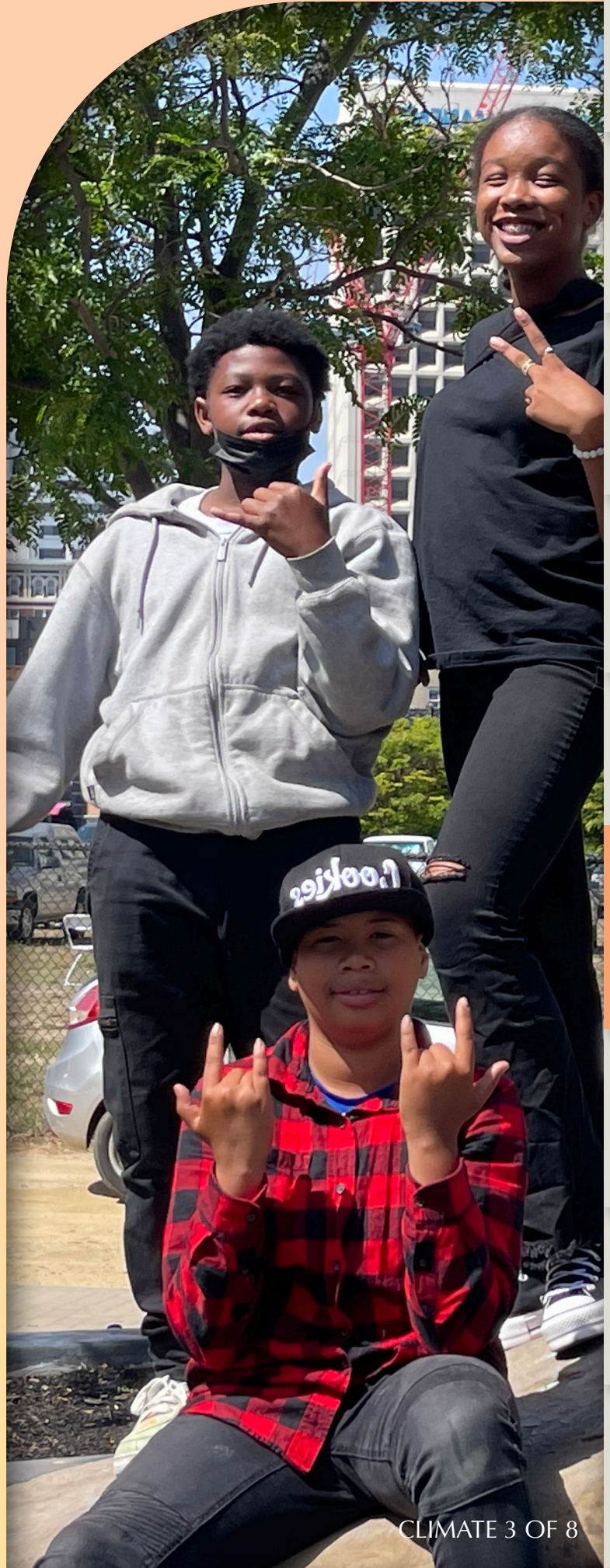
This leader continued by explaining that while anger and frustration can lead to immediate activism, hope is needed to sustain longer-term organizing work.



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:

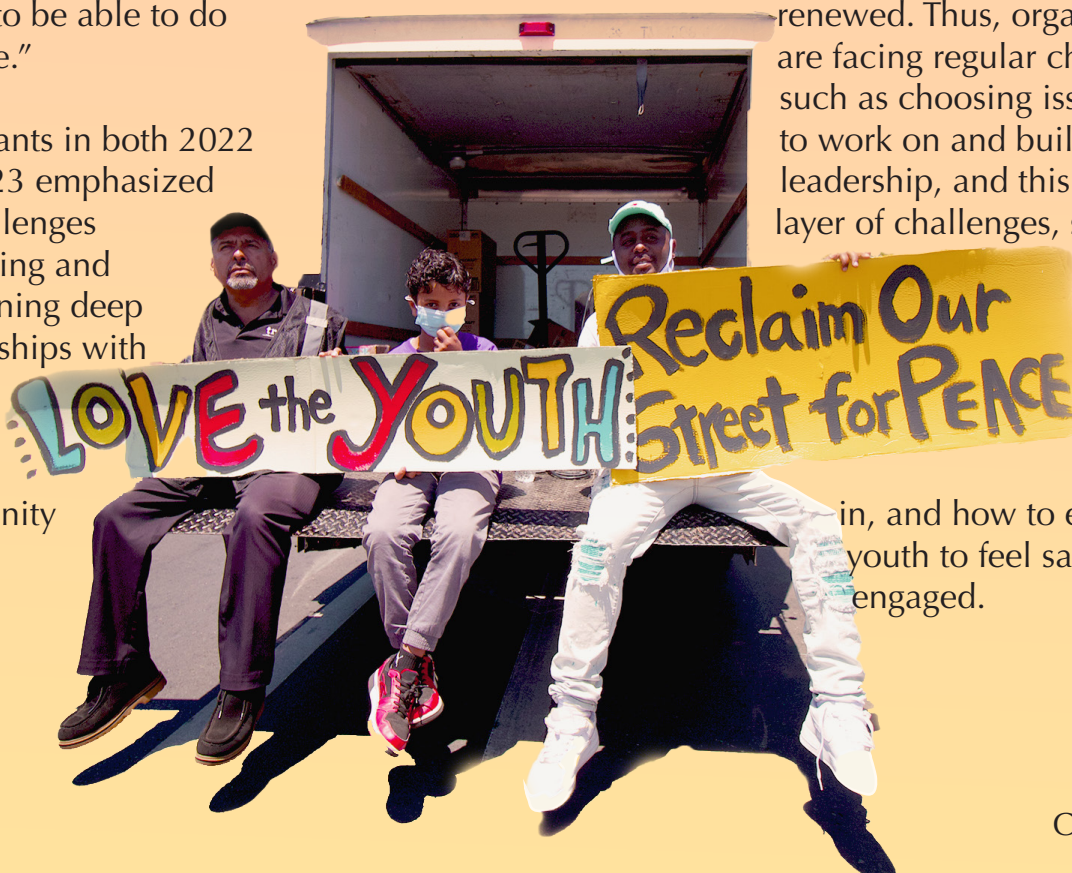
“And as far as the advocacy and the organizing component of it, it’s just really hard to build community when we’re just meeting remotely because some of the youth, also because of [internet] bandwidth capacity, unfortunately can’t always turn on their screens. And some of them—the space is for them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



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

- Youth Organizing Leader

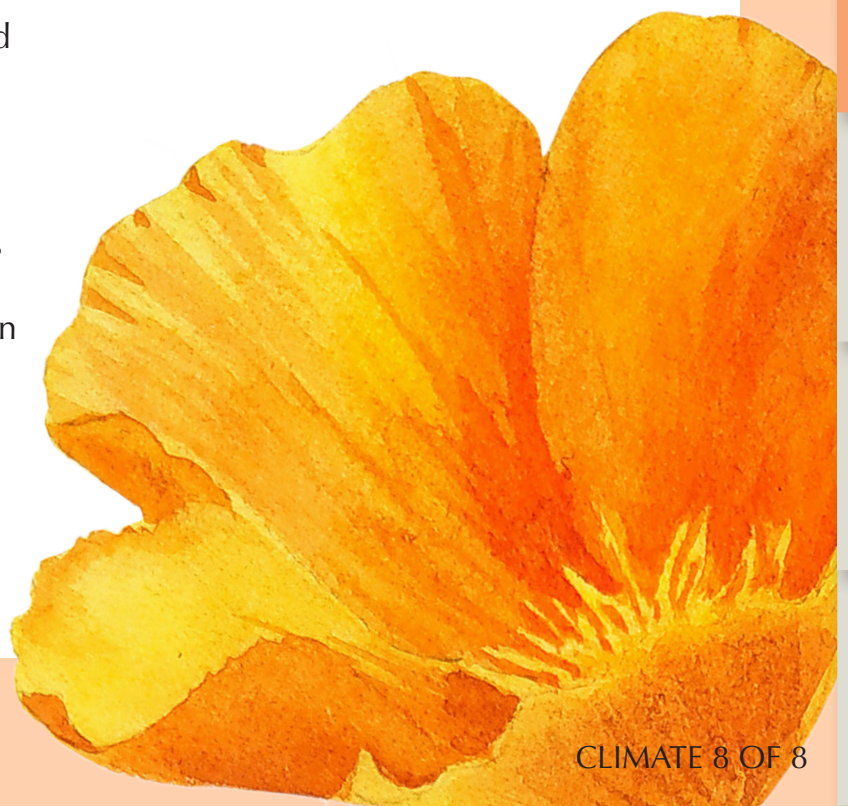
Challenges

- 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.



UNDERSTANDING THE CALIFORNIA FUNDING CONTEXT

When asked about funding challenges, California youth organizing groups described the nuances of navigating a complex philanthropic environment. Many grants come with restrictions that don't align well with youth organizing goals or strategies. Philanthropy also experiences many of the same systemic inequalities that participating groups organize against, like racism and ageism. In response some foundations are offering more flexibility in what and how they fund youth organizing groups. Interviewed leaders call for even more flexibility to develop creative solutions to systemic inequalities.

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

California has a robust number of organizations engaged in the youth organizing movement, especially when compared to other states: of the 312 youth organizing groups in the 2020 National Youth Organizing Field Scan, 39% were from California (Valladares et al., 2021). According to Valladares and colleagues (2021), the large population, extensive history of youth organizing, and culture of philanthropic support all contribute to a strong youth organizing presence there. When asked about funding challenges participants focused on the complexities of securing funding from private foundations—their primary source of funding. Our analysis identified four major challenges in the funding context for youth organizing in California:

1. There is insufficient funding to support the youth organizing field across the state.
2. The funding landscape for youth organizing, youth leadership development, and direct services in California is complicated by competing missions and theories of change.
3. While more foundations are offering flexibility in how grants are spent, key needs remain unfunded. These include: core infrastructure, living wages and benefits, youth stipends and mental health, healing justice and critical consciousness work.
4. Systemic inequalities, such as racism and ageism, are present in the California philanthropic context alongside biases in favor of funding larger, established organizations.



The experiences of participating leaders and their organizations differed based on the participant's role in their organization, professional expertise, size, and history of their organization—smaller and/or newer organizations have different experiences than larger and/or older organizations. Organizations with dedicated development staff have different experiences than organizations that do not. In presenting findings about funding, we strive to include this type of nuance in our discussion as much as possible.

This section shares funding challenges. Creative ideas for improving funding opportunities can be found in the section titled [Expanding Support for Youth Organizing in California](#).

Funding Scarcity

There was consensus among participants that it is challenging to find enough funding to support and sustain all the work youth would like to do. A feeling of scarcity dominated our conversations about funding. Participants shared the sense that funding opportunities have been decreasing recently and that available funding was not sufficient to pay living wages, provide full benefits and health care to staff, offer youth stipends, or support a culture of wellness. For example, one participant highlighted that the extra funding that appeared during a heightened Black Lives Matter moment, following the murder of George Floyd, subsequently disappeared.



“[During] the George Floyd movement, money came out of places because folks felt guilty. There was this performative activism or philanthropy. They’re just like, “Oh, this sounds like a good marketable thing. Say, ‘George Floyd.’” You know what I mean? Those are the ways that money sometimes comes in and then it goes away because it’s not hot anymore. But you’re like, ‘Damn, that funded four of our employees! What do we do now that [it’s] gone?’”

Participants remarked on a scarcity mindset in which “competition and territorialism” are present. For example, participants from larger organizations acknowledged that their organizations have an easier time securing funding because they have long-standing relationships with funders or because their organizations have dedicated development staff. A smaller organization leader acknowledged that successful development work takes time to build relationships and they need more opportunities to meet funders and cultivate relationships. One participant shared their regret that leaders feel like they must guard their relationships with funders rather than work together to lift each other up as a field.

“The inability for nonprofits to see each other as assets, like we just are put in this competitive box. It’s like you’re in a boxing ring all the time. And that will never change, unless we start to unlock some resources that allow us to not be in this [competition]. It’s really hard to see nonprofits not lift each other up in their work and not recognize that they each bring value to the space... But I think that is a challenge that as a sector we have not been able to really address.”

Youth organizing leaders identified funding scarcity as a significant obstacle to progressive social change, particularly because the status quo is vigorously funded.

“When I think it comes to the funding, our side is always going to be outspent. Whether it’s on elections. Whether it’s in the ecosystem. Our charitable nonprofits, compared to the right, our side is always going to be outspent because it seems like there are a lot more hurdles for [us to access] funding in general.”

Simply put, participants agreed that, “there is just not enough funding” to accomplish the ambitious social change goals youth organizing groups have.

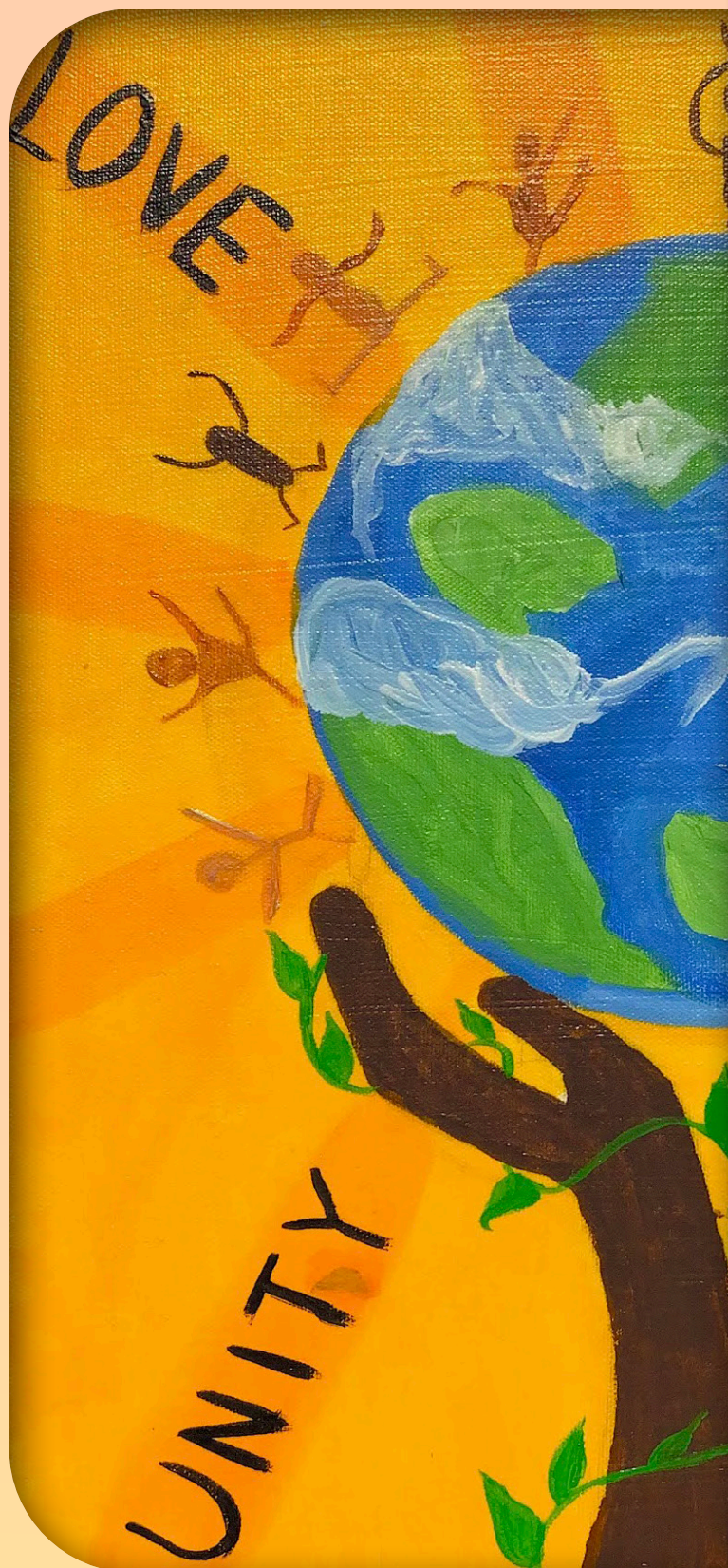


Complexities in the Funding Landscape

Participants shared that the funding landscape for youth organizing, youth leadership development, and youth direct services in California is complex including tensions around competing missions and theories of change.

Competing Missions

Participants shared that finding funding flexible enough to stay youth-led and mission focused is a challenge. A key component of youth organizing is that youth take leadership in defining the problems they see in their communities, and in envisioning and fighting for solutions. Participants, who were primarily adult staff of youth organizing groups, shared the care they take in supporting youth to use their own knowledge and experience to develop strong organizational goals and missions. Ideally, organization staff could use these goals and missions to find aligned funders to support the subsequent work. Instead, the leaders in our study describe having to reframe their work, shift priorities, or accept funding for work that does not align with their youth-developed mission to keep their organizations running. One participant explained that funding tied to a specific service or program, “does not work for us... it forces us to jump through hoops and hurdles ... so we get creative in how we use the funding, and it takes a lot of capacity.” Another shared a similar reflection, “it’s, like, we have to tailor our proposals to funder priorities and timelines.”





While other non-profits face similar challenges in staying mission focused, this challenge is particularly acute for organizations that want to keep youth ideas and priorities at the center of what they do. One participant describes this challenge.

“I think what’s hard is just in general when you’re looking for grants, right? You’re chasing grants, which most organizations do. And what ends up happening is you’re now tied to deliverables that maybe weren’t part of your original objective. So now it’s shifted the purpose of your program or the intention of your program.... We established our framework and theory of change, and now...we only accept the grants or go after the grants that already fit what we’re doing.... We are committed to the vision that we created for this youth program. So it’s hard, right, to then find the funding that fits that.”

Participants describe challenges in centering the transformative nature of youth organizing work in their proposals. In the words of one participant, “this transformative work is—we’re not going to see the change in one year, in two years. For a funder to only give us money for one year, that’s not going to really support transformative change.” Transformative long-term work takes time to develop. As another participant said, “we do need capacity to dream [up] something else outside of an agenda or narrative that is being pushed onto people.”

Competing Theories of Change

Interviewed leaders described their work as a mix of building youth political power, fostering youth leadership development, and providing direct services to youth. Some organizers framed this as a strategic, intentional, and useful combination of activities. Others saw it as being driven by funding considerations and expressed frustration that it was easier to get funding for youth services or youth leadership development than to build youth political power. For example, one participant shared, “we’ve had to dilute our politics and apply for funding sources that aren’t necessarily aligned with our politics. So, [we’re] trying to shift the framing of our work to be more around youth services or youth advocacy when the work that we do is about organizing.”

This participant also explained that it is easier to fund leadership development over organizing.

“We’ve seen that shift over the years. We’ve been around for a couple of decades, and our organization has evolved because of the lack of base building funding that we’ve been able to secure. And so it’s gone to youth services and then to reincorporate advocacy in it, and then we have to message it as youth leadership development, which it all is. But bottom line is we’re organizing to build power and create systems change that is informed and led by young people. And it’s just incredibly difficult—it has been traditionally and historically [difficult]—to secure those funds on an ongoing and substantial way.”

Another participant explained that the preference for funding youth services over youth organizing is about ageism.

“There’s also this, a cuteness factor, about young folks. So, folks are like, “Oh, yes, we’ll give you money to develop your kids. We keep them in school, after school, we keep them safe.” But when you’re like, “Hey, we’re trying to build power: social power, political power,” they’re like, “Hey, hold on. We can’t fund that!””



However, there was not universal agreement among participants. Another participant shared that, in their experience, it was easier to fund policy-focused work than youth development.

“Even before COVID, funders were only funding if you pushed policy. And I think it’s not the policy that we should be focused on.... I think for us it’s building that leadership development of youth [that] is important. When you want to get youth interested, engaged, and also... cast a wide audience... you must also provide all these other [services] such as, trauma healing. Because a lot of us go through that. Even myself, when I was a youngster here, the political education was essential and the art too....How can you have a movement or even push a campaign or a policy without even having artists behind you and standing back? Because that’s what is fun. All the poets, artists, and graffiti [were] fueling the movement to grow and expand. So, I really want to emphasize being open. It’s not just policy that should be pushed. It should be inclusive of all.”

Some of the organizations in our study also have 501(c)4 tax status that allows them to work explicitly on political activities. Participants from these organizations described the additional funding from political organizing in election years as both an opportunity and a tension. They describe this funding for political organizing as an additional resource to work towards their equity missions by helping place aligned leaders in office. Yet they are also clear that political funding is also limited and “has to be spent a certain way.”



Different Regional Opportunities

Finally, the issue of regional preferences in funding also came up in our study. For example, this organizer described the preference of funding youth services in Orange County.

“And so what you see in Orange County is you have a very healthy and a very active family foundation ecosystem that started forming in the 70’s, 80’s but that is still very much focused on this idea of philanthropy as charity and of philanthropy as, ‘We’re going to fund services, we’re going to fund boys and girls clubs, we’re going to fund food banks.’ And so, they haven’t caught on to, ‘We’re going to fund organizing’.”

Together there is no singular or simple description of the landscape of funding for youth organizing in California.

The participants we spoke with have differing perspectives that reflect their experiences. As we outline in our section, [Expanding Support for Youth Organizing in California](#), participants suggest creating opportunities for different organizations to come together with each other and with foundation leaders to better bridge these tensions and challenges.

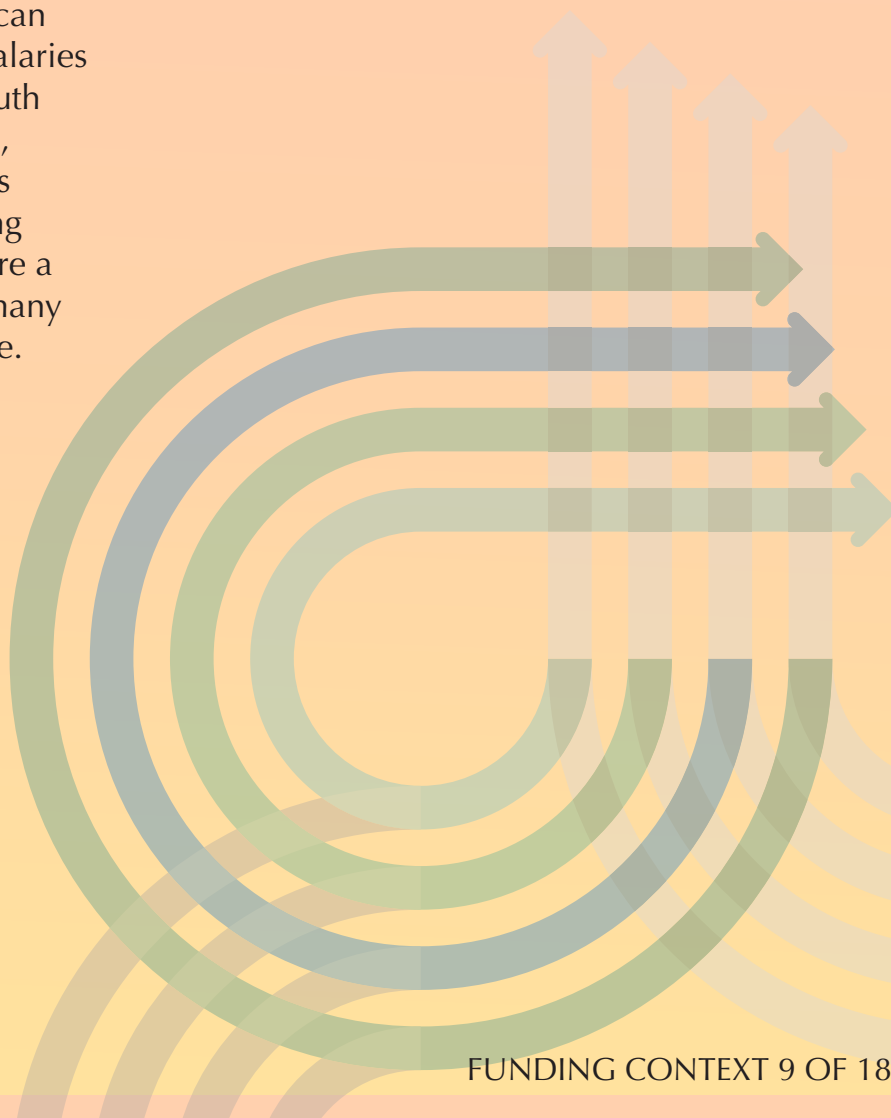


Flexibility is Needed to Address Youth Development and Long-term Visions of Social Change.

While more foundations allow for flexibility in how grants are spent, others do not. Our participants explained that lack of flexibility across their grants means that organizations have challenges funding their core infrastructure, living wages and benefits, youth stipends and mental health, healing justice and critical consciousness work. Other sections of this report [[Organizing for Youth Development](#), [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#), [Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#)] describe how youth organizing groups understand that changing inequality in society also includes changing their own organizational structures and processes to advance equity internally. This can include strategies like increasing salaries and benefits for staff, providing youth stipends, supporting youth in crisis, or implementing wellness practices across an organization. Developing and enacting these strategies require a level of flexibility in funding that many organizations do not currently have.

One participant explained that some philanthropists are now allowing organizations to fully define their work and how funding will be spent.

“What I am noticing and what I’m hearing from consultants that are more involved, is that there are a lot of philanthropists out there that are now shifting to this idea of, ‘Okay, if I give you \$250,000, tell me how you’re going to spend it’. And then you get to write how you’re going to spend it... That’s great if...that’s the strategy that’s coming more from the philanthropists.”



Flexible funding supports youth organizing groups' ability to meet the needs of young organizers and to employ multiple strategies in pursuit of long-term change [which we discuss in our section on [Balancing Short-term Goals with a Long-term Vision](#)]. While this increasing flexibility was mentioned by the participant above, most participants indicated that their funding comes with significant limitations and restrictions that interfered with their ability to fully realize organizational goals and values. One participant shared,

"We contradict ourselves by saying, 'Let's give the youth the power. Let's give them [the chance] to use their voices.' But then [funders] gave us funding with restrictions [that are] very particular in what areas they would like us to be working on. Which we're not going to say no [to the funding]. We [are] always going to be creative to mold our programs. But still there are restrictions there. When you are working with vulnerable populations or communities who have been disadvantaged for many years, you find all kinds of challenges, right? Which you might be thinking about something right now. But you don't know what you're going to find tomorrow."



Our participants spoke of youth and youth organizing leaders' proximity to and unique perspectives on the challenges facing their communities. They noted that removing funding restrictions allows youth leaders the space to address emerging concerns, apply creative solutions and prioritize the most pressing issues. Participants advocated for funding that supports multiple strategies to address immediate youth and community needs, while also advancing goals for long-term change. To learn more, check out the [Balancing Short-term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#) section.

Participants also reflected on the humanizing aspects of unrestricted funds. One participant explained that while foundations and public grants sometimes do not allow specific expenses, like food at meetings, their organization considers providing food at community meetings as "meeting basic human needs." Another participant explained that it is helpful to consider funding flexibility alongside the unique challenges that youth in low-income communities of color face.

"A lot of the young people we work with are socioeconomically disenfranchised. And so in order to get them to stay in the work, we had to be ready to respond to immediate needs that they had.... And so we had to challenge philanthropy, like, no, direct services is part of keeping people in the long-term... systemic change work. And so we started advocating for dollars to support food insecurities, housing insecurities, and transportation insecurities that the young people were kind of facing day to day so they – so we—can keep them in the work and keep them in community."



A different participant explained the impact of having funds that allow them to directly support their youth.

"I have been able to [get] support for unrestricted funds. [For example, we gave] money to a youth whose parents died, and they needed to send their body [home]. Two of our youth lost a sister, a mom, and a dad....So we made a decision to give them some money as humanitarian assistance. To support those two youth to [have], maybe a month or two months in rent. They don't need to worry [about rent] while they're looking at how they're going to continue with their lives. So, yeah, unrestricted funds help a lot."

As we explain in both the section on the [Leadership Pipeline](#) and the sections on Goals/Vision, youth organizers leaders saw the benefit of this direct support as extending well beyond an immediate crisis. Helping students and their families through a crisis means a young person can stay engaged with the organization and with school—both of which help their long-term development as leaders and helps prevent turnover across the field. Our previous research also documents that restricting funding can contribute to staff and youth organizer turnover which in turn impacts the community organizing leadership pipeline (Valladares et.al. 2021).

Participants stressed the need for strong, core funding to sustain their multifaceted work. They identified foundations' limitations on indirect cost as a key funding challenge. In the words of this participant, "My biggest pet peeve in the whole world, is indirect cost." The participant continued, noting that foundations,

"just want to pay for direct [costs and services], but they do not want to pay for the actual expenses of an organization. For us to accept only 10% indirect, no business on planet earth can function like that. [Nor] that would be acceptable."

Participants described not being able to use grant funds to pay for core organizational needs like office space, living wages and full benefits for support staff, and office supplies like current computer and high-speed internet. At times the issue arose in connection with the idea of limited indirect funds, but it also arose as an issue of overall funding scarcity.



Humanizing Compensation for Staff and Youth

Adult staff of youth organizing groups are very aware that in order to effectively confront social inequality in their organizing work, they must avoid reproducing that inequality in their own organizations. In the words of one participant, “How are we going to comfortably have our organizer advocating for a living wage, advocating for healthcare, if we ourselves are not able to provide those things?” This participant called for foundation leaders to join community organizations in making, “a commitment to bringing salaries up across the board within the nonprofit ecosystem.” Similarly, another participant said, “we need funders to fully invest in the well-being of our movement leaders and our youth leaders”. When looking across our study, well-being for staff included living wages, full health care (including mental health, dental, and vision), retirement benefits and vacation, family and medical leave.

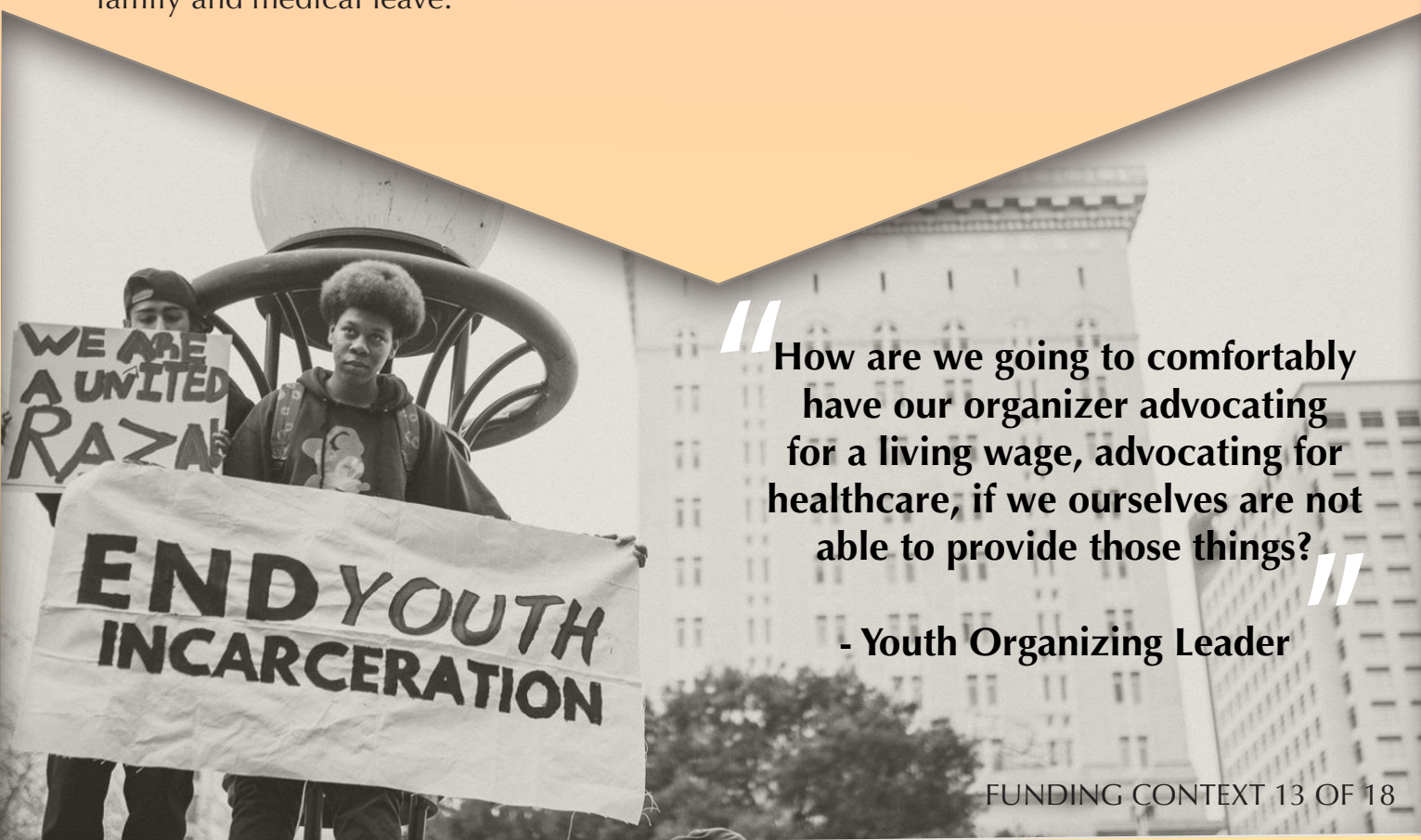
Participants also expressed the need for funders to help create youth stipends or fellowships. Though prior research documents diverse perspectives about paying youth across the youth organizing field (see the discussion in Valladares et.al.2021), participants in this study consistently expressed support for the idea of financial compensation for youth and noted the lack of funding to do so.

The quote below summarizes the idea well.

“I would very much like to create those opportunities where we’re investing back to our youth leaders and are able to have them come in as interns or come in as one of the youth organizers and be able to support the work that we’re doing. But it comes back to the funding and there’s just not enough of it.”

“How are we going to comfortably have our organizer advocating for a living wage, advocating for healthcare, if we ourselves are not able to provide those things?”

- Youth Organizing Leader



Funding Healing Justice and Critical Consciousness

As we explain in our section on Youth Development, leaders in our study call for funding that would support healing justice and critical consciousness within their organizations. Participants shared how they are intentionally creating new models of working and living together to counter the pressures and stresses of working against inequality and white supremacy. Youth organizers are developing new ways to heal from the daily trauma, inequality and injustice they experience while also fighting for systemic policy changes that address the same issues. One participant describes it this way,

“Let’s assume that most people come into this work traumatized, right? That’s what drives us here is our own experiences of harm and urgently needing to fix situations that are damaging us, right? And so we can’t teach young people a different way to do it unless we’re really holding ourselves accountable to some of that change. So yes, doing things like somatic coaching, trying to plan organization-wide rest weeks where everybody is taking a week off, so nobody’s coming back from a week off with a mountain of emails or Slack messages or whatever.”

Organizations talked about the importance of having funding for internal holistic wellness practices, professional development training and wellness benefits. A youth-led organization leader shared how they have used funding to navigate these issues,

“I’ve also added in line items for mental health therapy, restorative justice and conflict resolution work [for the organization] too because of how heavy it is to navigate the work [we do]. Conflicts arise internally, and we’re seeing a lot of our movement suffer right now because we weren’t ready to deal with some of these conflicts. We didn’t have things in place. We didn’t have budgets to take the load off of one or two people doing everything for [conflict] resolution. It’s just not fair, you need to resource folks.”

Across our study, participants shared a belief that part of changing society is also changing the way they work as an organization. Disrupting busy schedules, addressing conflicts as they arise, acknowledging the emotional toll of working on upsetting issues should be considered part of the work that youth organizing groups are funded to do. Another participant explained,

“It’s not all about just meetings and meetings and creating strategies and tactics and building the campaigns. We have to also invest on retreats, on hiking in open spaces. It all takes resources. It takes money. We have to be able to provide transportation. We have to be able to pay overtime to our employees who are leading these activities. We have to feed these youth, and we must provide a hotel room for these youth sometimes.”

As one leader explained, “funds to create a culture of wellness should be standard in any youth organizing grant that’s seeking campaigns or system change work. [Funding for mental health and restorative justice] always needs to be there.”

[Funding for mental health and restorative justice] always needs to be there.



Systemic Inequality Impacts Funding Too

Systemic inequalities like racism and ageism are present in the California philanthropic context alongside biases toward funding larger, established, youth serving (versus youth organizing) work.

Bias in favor of larger established organizations

Organizations shared their perceptions that funding criteria and decisions favor more established organizations, who have long-standing relationships with foundation leaders. One participant explained that “funding practices leave smaller, less established grassroots organizations at a disadvantage, despite the change and innovation that these organizations bring to their work and communities.” Another participant compared the funding process to the Hunger Games, where organizations get rewarded for sticking around.

“I always joke with my friend that it’s like the Hunger Games of like, “Hey, maybe I’ll give you \$5,000. Maybe I’ll give you \$20,000. If you’re still around in two to three years we can talk about \$75,000 to \$100,000.” It’s like that. It feels like that. Our first year, second year budget was made up of a lot of small grants.”

One of the structural challenges faced by smaller organizations is that they do not have dedicated development staff to write grant proposals. Leaders in smaller or less-established groups found themselves having to take on the role of grant writing on top of the responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions; this put additional burden on already taxed organizational infrastructures. One participant shared, “Oftentimes [applications] can take thousands of dollars in paying grant writers to complete [the application], only to get rejected.” One leader shared a potential solution to this problem. They explained that one of the foundations they applied to provided, “a technical assistant consultant at no cost to us. It was just an extra service, but it meant that we had the support.” This issue is discussed further in our section on [Expanding Support for Youth Organizing in California](#).



Racism and Ageism

Not unexpected, social inequalities—specifically racism and ageism—are also part of the funding context for youth organizing groups. This participant emphasized the way racism can play out in the grant making process.

“A few things come to top of mind. One of them is to be, to be very blunt and forthcoming, just straight up racism, implicit racism. There are very well-intentioned folks that sometimes don’t recognize that a lot of their funding goes to white-led organizations, much bigger organizations. There’s not that trust there that, people of color will manage the money as well.”

A different participant shared the intersections of regional politics and being a people of color-led organization.

“Organizations like ours in the Central Valley or Central Coast that are traditionally under-resourced and also led by people of color – philanthropy only gives 1% to Latinx-led organizations. One percent! We have historic underinvestment which has resulted in our [lack of] capacity. Equity [in funding] is doubling the investment, not giving us the same access to everybody else in urban areas or other bigger organizations. It’s doubling, tripling that investment, and allowing us to really dive deep into what it is that we need to [ensure] capacity for the work and the people that are doing it.”

Ageism was another concern that participants described as a barrier to accessing funds. One participant shared that some funders are less comfortable funding organizations with younger leaders. Another participant shared that “Funders are underestimating what ageism is and how it shows up”. This participant continued to explain that funders and other allies need to go beyond a performative invitation to young people to join a decision making space, to really understanding that youth need to be at the center of decision making.



Challenges

This section summarizes four major challenges youth organizing groups face as they work to fund and sustain their work:

- State-wide and organizationally there is not enough funding for youth organizing
- Youth organizing groups engage in multiple kinds of work, but grant criteria often force them to choose between staying focused on their mission and program priorities or being flexible enough to secure funding.
- Youth organizing groups need more funding and more flexibility to enact creative social justice aligned solutions within their organizations.
- Systemic inequalities bias funding opportunities in favor of larger, more established organizations.

Takeaways

Youth organizing groups are ambitious, creative and eager to enact equitable systemic changes while also developing the next generation of leaders. Unfortunately, insufficient funding for the field and at the organizational level, combined with inflexible funding restrictions, force them to temper their bold agendas. Fortunately, the youth organizing leaders in this study also offered several innovative solutions to these challenges which can be found in the section titled [Expanding Support for Youth Organizing in California](#).



EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING IN CALIFORNIA

Youth Organizers' Challenge to Funders

California youth organizers call on funders to commit to broader, deeper, more flexible, and longer-term support to address the unique challenges youth and communities of color face in their organizing and youth development work. They ask funders to invest in youth, recognize their creativity and expertise, and share some power and control. They recommend building new spaces for funders and organizers to learn together and advance new creative strategies in partnership. community and in real time.

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

California youth organizers had powerful advice for funders about how to better support their organizing work and the broader youth organizing field. We've summarized this advice into 5 major recommendations. These recommendations emphasize greater and more flexible funding that recognizes youths as experts, supports organizational needs, sustains the work over the long timeline required by the fight for social justice, and centers the unique challenges youth and communities of color face in their organizing and youth development work.

Youth organizers recognized that funders have a long history of building sustained relationships with their grantees and value regular communication between organizations and funders. They also believe that funders need a more nuanced understanding of youth organizing. They ask foundation leaders to join them in the broader struggle for justice by advancing diversity in their own organizations and by creating and humbly joining an ongoing learning community where the youth organizing field and its funding allies can learn and grow together.



Recommendations to Funders from the Field

Across our study, there were five central recommendations from organizers to funders:

1. Provide flexible and deeper investments to enable youth organizing groups to creatively meet the needs of their communities.
2. Increase funding amounts and grant timelines to match the long arc of justice.
3. Increase development capacity across the field.
4. Create opportunities for youth organizing leaders to build reciprocal ongoing relationships with philanthropy staff.
5. Diversify the people who work in philanthropy and the places and spaces philanthropy funds.



1. Provide flexible and deeper investments to enable youth organizing groups to creatively meet the needs of their communities.

Youth organizing groups are creating new strategies for what it means to be healthy and to work. Grounded in their commitments to justice, they are considering living wages, full benefits, mental health care, organizational restorative justice practices, and wellness in how they work. They recommended that funders consider how these creative youth organizing and youth development strategies can serve as lessons to the broader nonprofit sector.

Participants suggested that foundations should allow grantees to redefine indirect rates, general operating expenses, and allowable costs (food for youth, youth stipends, living wages, full benefits) for their youth organizing grantees. They emphasized the need for greater flexibility to allow for funding youth stipends, food or rent support, and other material needs of their community members.

Youth organizing groups also need flexibility to fund a wide variety of functions: basic organizational capacity, running short-term campaigns, long-term base building, sustaining youth development programs, building a leadership pipeline, and meeting the immediate material needs of youth. Leaders understand these different strategies as all part of their mission—yet they often find that grants force them to prioritize one aspect of their work over others. They are looking for flexibility to integrate and move between these different strategies. This flexibility also builds on the creativity young people bring to their work.

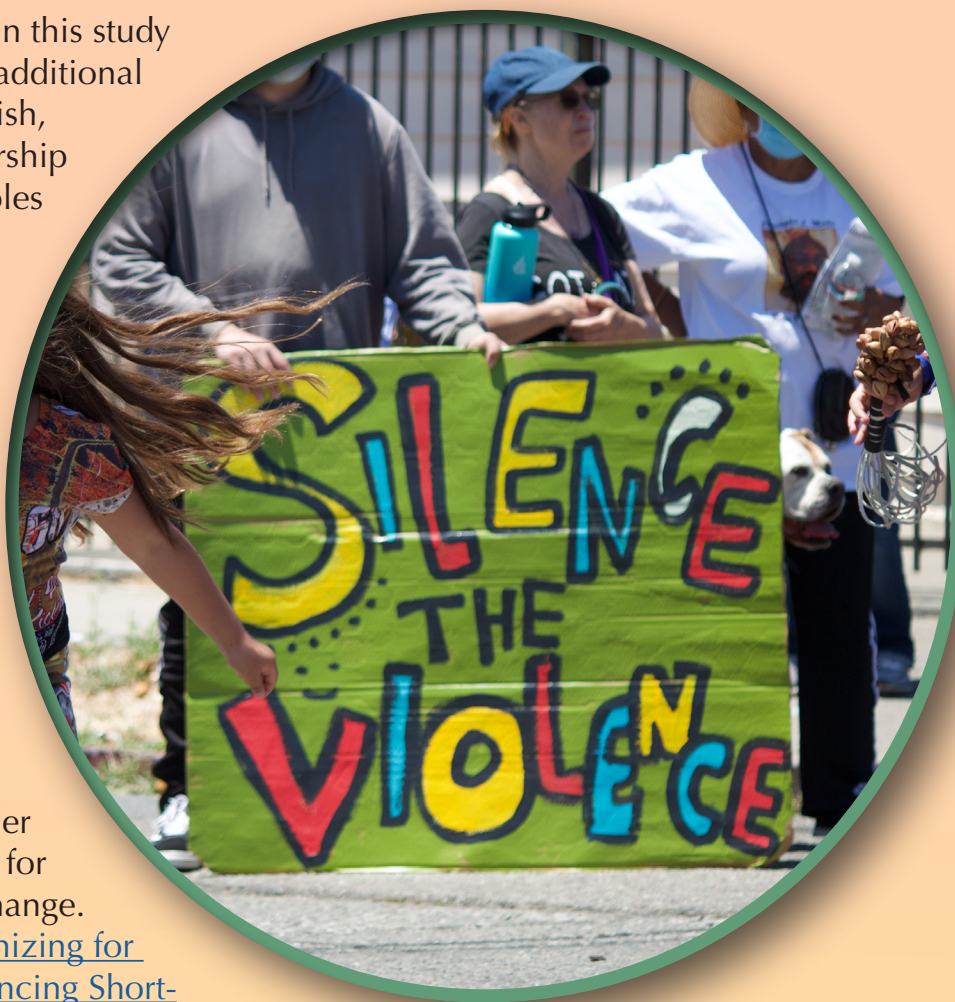
“Youth are very creative. And when we put funding that is very restricted, they’re not able to explore other creative forms to advocate for their community because they’re restricted with that funding. And so I think more funding that is open and that they can trust and give control and power to the youth to use in their own manner is something that I think will be a demand for me.”

“Youth are very creative. And when we put funding that is very restricted, they’re not able to explore other creative forms to advocate for their community because they’re restricted with that funding.”

- Youth Organizing Leader

The young people engaged in the work of youth organizing bring integral knowledge and recommendations for the future that should be centered in the broader field of people fighting for social changes. Participants asked funders to reflect on how they can engage young people more centrally in planning and decision-making about how to build and support the field.

Youth organizing leaders in this study emphasized the need for additional funding to establish, nourish, and sustain a youth leadership pipeline that funds staff roles to cultivate college and career transitions, as well as the creation of new positions for emerging leaders. Youth organizing has long been a space for creative and innovative strategies for base-building and policy wins. Our participants suggested that funders invest in youth and consider the youth as educators who can teach funders and other adult allies new strategies for working towards social change. To learn more, read [Organizing for Youth Development](#), [Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#) and [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#).



2. Increase funding amounts and grant timelines to match the long arc of justice.

Youth organizing leaders highlighted that organizing for social justice requires both immediate action and staying focused on their long-term mission, and it is vital for funding to match these dual commitments. Participants want to apply for larger, multi-year grants that allow them to balance their long-term missions, organizational health, and short-term deliverables. Long-term grants allow organizations to develop multi-year youth development strategies, or multi-stage policy campaigns that require building power. Larger multi-year grants also support organizational sustainability and the creative innovation mentioned in Recommendation 1.

As one participant explained, long-term investments allow youth organizing groups to address the dynamic nature of working with young people in a constantly changing world.

“I think also that... understanding and shifts...may need to be made in regards to the outline of the grant or the funding. There’s always things that can come up or shifts that happen. So just understanding that youth organizing is, it’s like its own thing. It’s its own being. It’s alive. It’s all a thing, and that thing shifts and changes. And so a demand would be the understanding that this is not a stagnant type of work, but that our work shifts. And so what the needs are for our community, or what we initially agreed upon, upon a grant, any funding, can also shift.”

Organizations, like the political and social landscape they work in, are dynamic. Our participants recommend providing longer-term funding that allows organizers to meet those changing needs. To learn more, read [Organizing for Youth Development](#), [Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#) and [Combining Insider and Outsider Strategies](#).

4. Create opportunities for youth organizing leaders to build reciprocal ongoing relationships with philanthropy staff.

Funder and organization community of practice

Youth organizing leaders in California recommend creating an ongoing learning community where leaders from foundations and from the youth organizing field could engage in genuine, reciprocal learning. Such a space would allow learning to happen in all directions—among funders, among youth organizers, and between the two communities. An ongoing learning community would also center the reality that working with youth and working in the struggle for social justice are extremely dynamic and evolving. The hope is that such a space would support the field and philanthropy in advancing new creative strategies in community and in real time.

A learning community could also create the space for program officers to develop a “more nuanced understanding of youth organizing,” as described by one participant:

“I think for funders to think about how are they funding, not just to reach their deliverables, but . . . to understand why we do the youth organizing, why we do the base building. And how is their funding helping us keep our community engaged, involved? How is their funding uplifting the struggles and also the assets and leadership of our community, and specifically youth?”

One participant explained that it would be critical for funders—not just youth organizers—to come to a learning space, “prepared, ready to commit to things so that we don’t walk away empty.” This means engaging with youth organizers with intellectual humility, trust, and sharing control and power. One participant offered this explanation:

“We don’t bring all of this to say that “we want this,” and then funders are like, “Okay. We hear you.” But you hear us and what? So having space for us to maybe not only to share but to get to a space of what are next steps, what are commitments that we can—that y’all are willing to let us know that we can anticipate these things or know that we will see these things in the future.”



Leaders felt that to effectively serve youth organizing, they should be building on their relationship with funders to create pathways where the interests of both the foundation and the organization are being met. A community of practice to learn from one another also includes being accountable to each other. One organizer emphasized how this knowledge sharing is deeply important to the health of the youth organizing field.

“Building that political relationship with funders is really important. And I think for me my demand for funders is that they also organize within their foundations to continue sharing their learnings of how they’re understanding youth organizing, because there is a limit if we can only move one funder, one program officer. I think there is so much more work to do to organize philanthropy and to really resource this field, and I think it’s not enough for youth or funders and program officers to just learn. I think they need to do that organizing within their institutions, within philanthropy to build—bring in more money—and also move other funders who historically have not even thought about youth organizing.”

A learning space can help the field and philanthropy learn in real time, but also can create a space to expand the number of foundations and program officers that understand the unique and valuable role of youth organizing in the overall struggle for justice.

To learn more read [Addressing the Social, Political and Economic Climate](#) and [Understanding the California Funding Context](#).



“ I think they need to do that organizing within their institutions, within philanthropy to build—bring in more money—and also move other funders who historically have not even thought about youth organizing. ”

- Youth Organizing Leader

5. Diversify the people who work in philanthropy and the places and spaces philanthropy funds.

Participants called for increased demographic and geographic diversity in philanthropy, while also recognizing the challenges that foundations—like most organizations—face in achieving diversity in their board members and program staff in a world that is systemically unequal. Yet, participants were still clear that “funders need to do organizing within their own organizations.”

One youth organizer described the difference organizers feel when they work with program officers from communities that face similar challenges:

“I think there needs to be more generational wisdom on their board and within their staff and also people of color in—just in different areas of the work and with lived experience or regional, rural, immigration, whatever it is. . . . There just needs to be more diversity within the foundation staff and board itself. I see that as really limiting kind of the priorities and the strategies for how they lead the work or make those investments.”

This organizer recognized that while program officers may be able to conceptualize the communities they work with, that is not the same as having lived experiences.

A different participant noted that foundations could bring diversity to California grantmaking if they “decentralize decision-making power and empower community funding boards made up of impacted people that make decisions in terms of who gets grants and how much and when.”

Participants also expressed the need to diversify the kind of youth organizing groups that receive grants. Participants in both well-established, well-funded Los Angeles and Bay Area groups and those working outside the large metro areas or in smaller or newer organizations agreed on this need.

“There needs to be a focus, an intentional focus on supporting and resourcing youth organizing in specific, either regions that are systemically and historically under-resourced and organizations that have been systemically and historically under-resourced and really providing deeper and longer-term investment for those organizations or regions.”

Participants were clear that funding a diverse youth organizing movement across California requires attention to diversity across race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, local political climate, region, as well as organizational age, size, mission, and strategies. To learn more read [Addressing the Social, Political and Economic Climate](#) and [Understanding the California Funding Context](#).

LOVE

PEACE



UNITY

HEALING

Julia

GLOSSARY

Artivism: The intersection of art and activism. (See section: "[Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#)")

Boomerang effect: Instills a strong sense of pride and local historical knowledge to accompany young people in future endeavors and motivate them to stay connected to their communities, as opposed to the mainstream narrative that success means leaving the community. (See section: "[Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#)")

Insider-outsider strategy: A both/and approach combining both insider and outsider strategies that rejects outmoded binaries and seeks to resolve the tensions created and move toward long-term transformative justice. (See section: "[Combining Insider & Outsider Strategies](#)")

Insider strategy: Working for change by participating in established power structures and decision-making processes and building relationships with institutional power holders such as elected officials, school and district officials, and police. (See section: "[Combining Insider & Outsider Strategies](#)")

Outsider strategy: Working for change by generating and leveraging public awareness and political pressure from outside established power structures, through collective action such as community advocacy initiatives, ballot initiatives, and protests. (See section: "[Combining Insider & Outsider Strategies](#)")

Prefigurative politics: A social justice strategy in which groups experiment with being the change they wish to see in the world' by embodying the types of relationships and organization that seek to bring about in the larger society. (See section: "[Combining Insider & Outsider Strategies](#)")

Relational Work: Youth organizing and youth development work to build personal relationships that support young people and foster trust and engagement, usually done in-person; more difficult to do remotely. (See section: "[Addressing the Social, Political, and Economic Climate](#)")

Scaffolding: the varied kinds of guidance that more experienced organizers provide to learners as they develop and master skills. (See section: "[Organizing for Youth Development](#)")

School-to-justice pipeline: Provides knowledge and skills that are common for youth organizing groups such as raising political consciousness and fostering an awareness for political and social change. (See section: "[Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#)")

Snowball sampling: A method for recruiting new participants in a research study by asking current participants to recommend other potential subjects. (See section: [“Research Methods”](#))

Transformative social justice: An approach in which the goals of shifting policy and practice are pursued alongside ongoing work to heal from trauma and treat each other with humanity to advance collective liberation. (See section: [“Combining Insider & Outsider Strategies”](#))

White Supremacy: an interlocking set of ideologies and practices that render Euro-American ways of being, living and thinking as supreme, such as profit over people and/or glorification of individualism. (See section: [“Organizing for Youth Development”](#))

Youth development organization: From the US Department of Education 2007, “Organizations using a youth development approach therefore provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person’s environment and increase his or her ability to reach these outcomes.” (See section: [“Research Methods”](#))

Youth organizing groups: From Kirshner and Ginwright 2012, “Youth organizing groups can be characterized by three shared features. First, their campaigns are guided by social justice values aimed at developing power to change systems, institutions, or policies (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Warren et al., 2008)...Second, organizing groups are often led by young people who focus on youth’s concerns and mobilize young people as agents of change (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002). Third, groups are often formed on the basis of shared social identities linked to experiences of discrimination or marginalization (HoSang, 2006).” (See section [“Research Methods”](#))

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