

# 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.



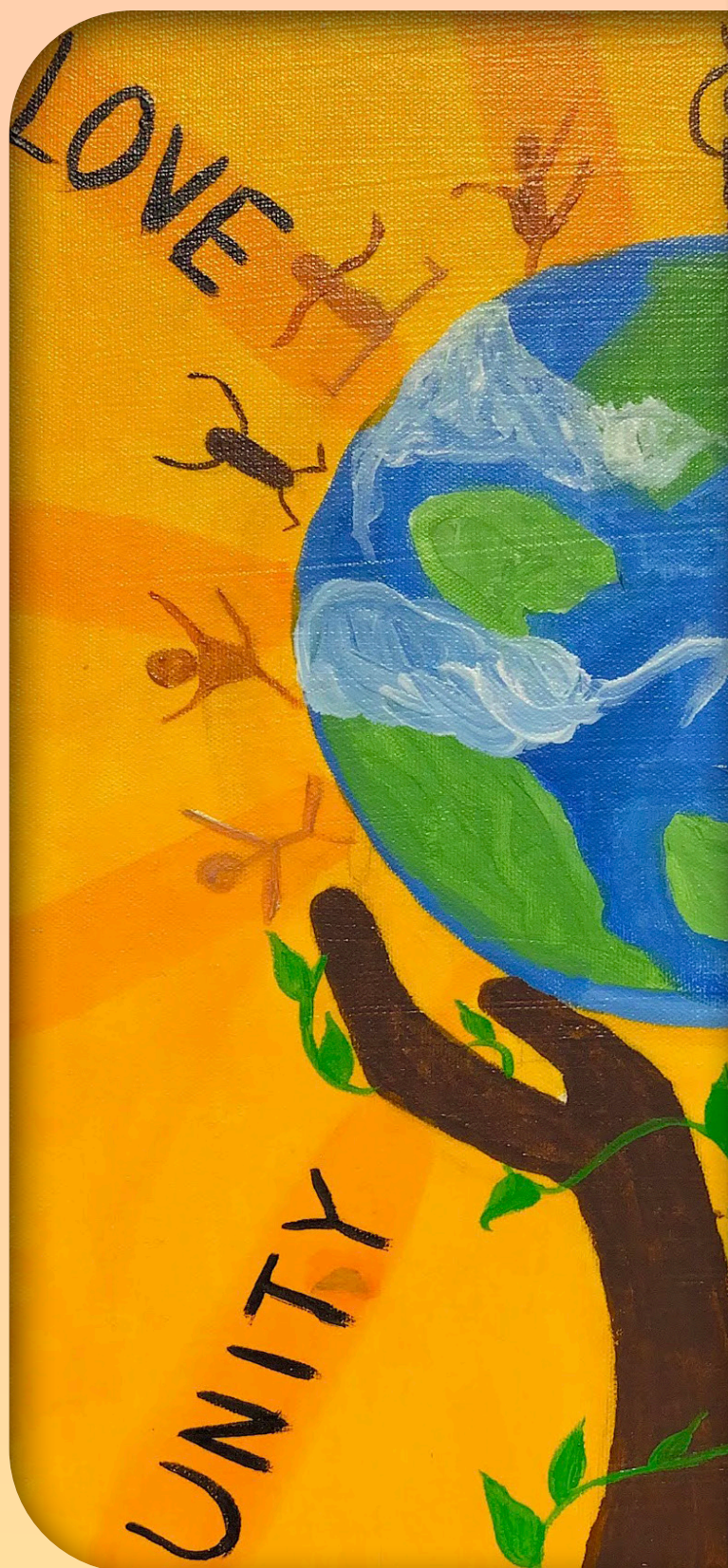


## Complexities in the Funding Landscape

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.



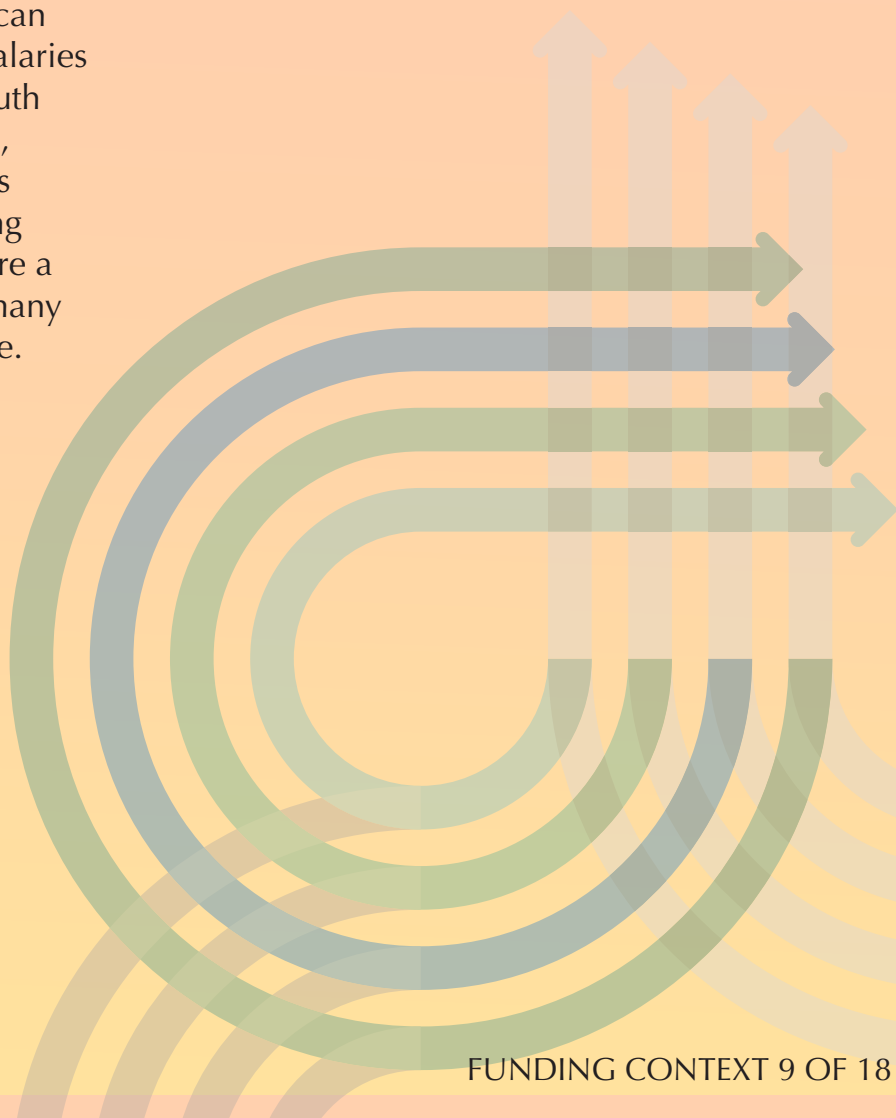


## Flexibility is Needed to Address Youth Development and Long-term Visions of Social Change.

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.

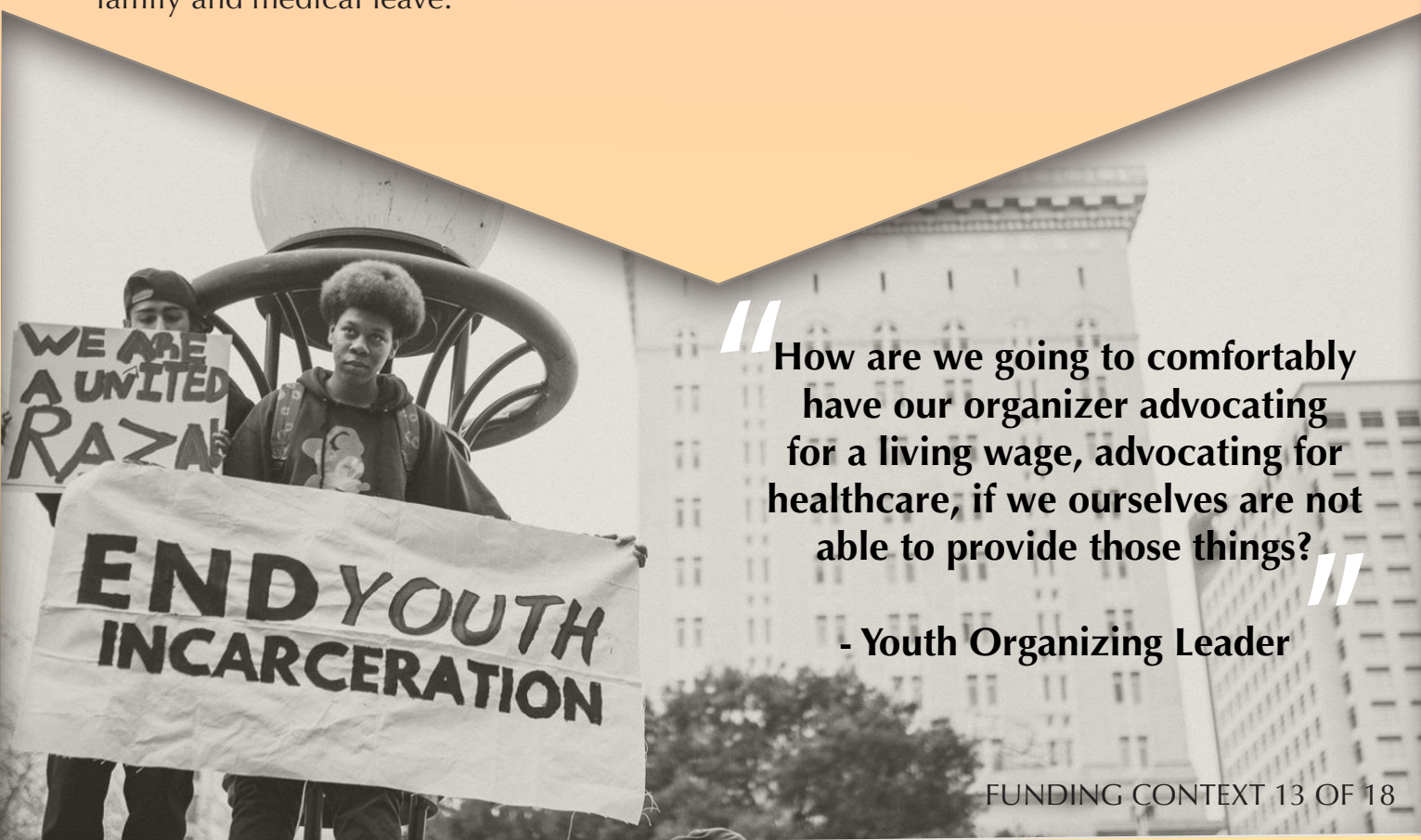
Participants also expressed the need for funders to help create youth stipends or fellowships. Though prior research documents diverse perspectives about paying youth across the youth organizing field (see the discussion in Valladares et.al.2021), participants in this study consistently expressed support 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](#).

