

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)

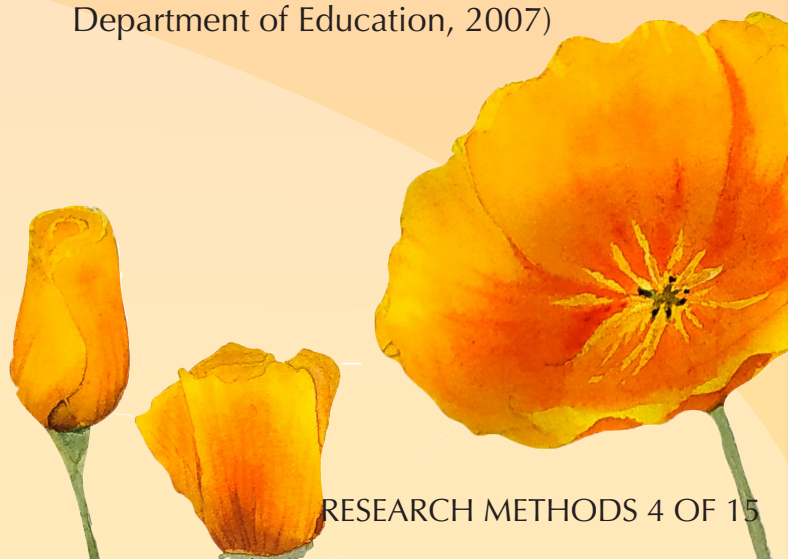
“Youth organizing groups can be characterized by three shared features. First, their campaigns are guided by social justice values aimed at developing power to change systems, institutions, or policies (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Warren et al., 2008)...

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