

# MOBILIZING YOUTH: ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN MAKING COMMUNITY CHANGE

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Youth are valuable assets to their communities; however, they are often left out of decisionmaking and go unheard. To build stronger communities and more resilient youth, NNIP Partners are taking innovative approaches to introducing youth to the power of data and ways to leverage information to advocate for the change they want in their communities. Through the examples in this brief, Partners have shown that

- building opportunities for youth to learn about data and advocacy inspire them to speak up about inequities in health, housing, and employment and introduce them to new careers;
- partnering with schools or youth programs is a great way to identify youth to work with and adds value and learning experiences to those programs; and
- visualizing the impact of an issue through the arts—film, drama, photography, and games—is a great mechanism for communicating a community's experience.

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a network of independent organizations in more than 30 cities that share a mission to ensure that all communities have access to data and the skills necessary for using information to advance equity in neighborhoods. Across the country, NNIP partners have begun working directly with youth to raise their voices and arm them with data to advocate for their communities. Advocacy efforts are better able to support their causes when they can bring data and evidence about their community's needs to the table.

Introducing youth to the value of data and the role of civic engagement benefits both the youth and their communities. People who feel as though they have control over their sociopolitical environment and feel

psychologically empowered to make changes in their communities have been found to have better health outcomes later in life, higher self-esteem, and greater senses of social cohesion and well-being. Civic engagement can build resilience in youth and increase educational attainment and income later in life (Ballard, Hoyt, and Pachucki 2019; Christens et al. 2015; Evans and Prilleltensky 2007; Youniss 2009; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, and Maton 1999).

Communities also benefit when the next generation of leaders is informed and equipped with the skills needed to shape society, lead, and vote (Flanagan and Christens 2011). Building the skills to collect, understand, and interpret data can inspire youth to think critically about issues, advocate for their communities, and pursue careers in data and change-making.

## TEACHING YOUTH ABOUT DATA FOR CHANGE

The Institute for Urban Policy Research (IUPR) at the University of Texas at Dallas and the Urban Health Collaborative (UHC) at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health in Philadelphia, both NNIP Partners, have built programs to teach young people to leverage data to advocate for community change. Each organization has partnered with local programs and organizations that serve youth to provide an opportunity for youth to learn how to advocate for their future. Both programs reach youth underrepresented in the data and research field, bringing new voices to the landscape.

**Dallas:** The Young Leaders, Strong City program started in 2014 as a one-time initiative among community members, IUPR, and several other local nonprofits. Because of the program's success, IUPR continued it at the request of the student participants. For five years, IUPR led summits that taught youth advocacy, data literacy, and analytical skills around topics of social justice to over 1,200 young people. At the summits, local experts talked about their change-making efforts and the role data has played in their work. Participants were able to think through how to take action on an issue that they were passionate about and that challenged their community. Many youth attended multiple summits, returning to present on the change-making work that they were doing with the skills developed in the program

(Galvan 2019). The equity work of a few participants is highlighted in the box.

After seven successful summits, the program has grown to become a stand-alone organization, the IF Institute, run by community partners. IUPR has shifted its work with youth to a new form under its recently launched [Dallas Urban Futures Series](#).<sup>1</sup> The Dallas Urban Futures Series is an annual convening of youth to discuss policies through an equity and sustainability lens.

### IMPACT IN DALLAS'S SCHOOLS

**Immigration:** A student at Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School participated in a racial justice youth summit and used her new knowledge and skills—along with her passion—to lobby her school to host a summit focused on immigration.

**Microaggressions:** After attending a racial justice youth summit, a group of students from Greenhill School created a photo exhibit/photoessay highlighting the microaggressions that occurred regularly at their school, in an effort to inform students, staff members, and faculty members of the unintended impact that their behaviors can have.

**Philadelphia:** In summer 2019, UHC launched its training program with Philadelphia's youth employment program, WorkReady. UHC led a six-week skill-development series for the 100, predominately black youth in WorkReady centered on health impact assessments (HIAs). HIAs have emerged as a strong participatory research tool that communities can use to assess the impact of a new policy or practice on residents and to advocate for what a

community needs to maximize its health. The series focused on training participants in the process of HIAs. Through this series, participants developed skills that could be marketable for future employment, were introduced to fields that promote the pursuit of higher education, and, most important, gained the ability to assess needs and advocate for change in their communities. Each week, the series focuses on a different phase in the HIA process: screening, scoping, assessment, recommendations, reporting, or monitoring and evaluation. Activities included brainstorming the potential health impacts of a development project in the neighborhood, searching for available data on a neighborhood from OpenDataPhilly, and practicing presenting recommendations to policymakers. UHC hopes this pilot year of the HIA training program will be followed by future cohorts of WorkReady youth participants.<sup>2</sup>

## ELEVATING YOUTH VOICES

Some NNIP Partners engage youth during the data collection and results interpretation phases to include their experiences in the research and to inform the final findings. Seattle's public health department and DataHaven in New Haven, Connecticut, are two examples of NNIP Partners that have incorporated youth voices into their

research. Each has leveraged focus groups of young people to inform their research and recommendations and to help interpret findings.

**Seattle:** During its work on the 2018/2019 Community Health Needs Assessment for King County hospitals and health systems, Public Health–Seattle & King County wanted to spotlight the youth perspective in its research on the lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. To learn about the health care experiences of LGBTQ young people, it conducted eight listening sessions with 72 youth and young adults ages 13 to 24 and combined these findings with results from the Healthy Youth Survey and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, as well as key informant interviews with LGBTQ youth advocates. The listening sessions found that the health and safety of LGBTQ young people was moderated by societal, systemic, and interpersonal factors that could either empower them to seek out needed health services or create barriers to healthy outcomes. Recommendations for health care provider behavior changes and youth education reform from the LGBTQ youth and their advocates were elevated in the 2018/19 Community Health Needs Assessment through a separate report, the LGBTQ Community Spotlight (Public Health–Seattle & King County 2019).

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*“Youth inherit a world with a lot of policies that affect them...So what we want to do is equip students with tools to analyze their world and advocate for the change they want to see.”*

–Anthony Galvan

Associate Director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas

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**New Haven:** DataHaven felt as though the youth voice was missing from a report it was preparing on the status of women and girls in the region. To incorporate the youth perspective, DataHaven expanded the focus groups it facilitated to include focus groups with students at a local middle school.<sup>3</sup> In interviews, adult stakeholders echoed the concerns that the youth had, which showed that the adults were in sync with the girls they were working to support. For example, the middle school girls in the focus group reported that they have already started to hear disparaging comments about girls, women, and feminism from their male classmates, a concern also raised by the adult stakeholders. By having both adults and youth involved in the research, the findings could be validated across the two groups.<sup>4</sup>

## ENCOURAGING YOUTH TO TAKE THE LEAD

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (2007, 5) says: “Getting youth to participate in activities and decisions that adults ultimately control is not true engagement. Authentic youth engagement requires that young people have actual authority and responsibility, as well as opportunities, to develop the skills needed to make sound decisions.” Some NNIP Partners have delved deeper into the participatory research with youth, making their ideas and decisions the center of the work.

**Minneapolis-St. Paul:** The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of

Minnesota studied disparities in eviction filing rates in Minneapolis through the Illusion of Choice project (Lewis et al. 2019). As part of this community-based participatory research project, the CURA team partnered with the youth participatory action research (YPAR) team at Juxtaposition Arts, an arts education and youth empowerment organization in North Minneapolis, to explore the experiences of people who face evictions.

CURA’s research team and Juxtaposition trained the youth-led YPAR team in qualitative research methods. The YPAR team then conducted interviews with community-based housing nonprofits, housing and social service organizations, religious and faith-based organizations, and Hennepin County emergency assistance and other county departments.

The youth then transformed the findings from the interviews into an interactive simulation called the Social Service Runaround to reflect the struggles that tenants with eviction filings experience as they try to navigate the county’s social service system.

Participants in the game attempt to complete a checklist of tasks such as “seek unemployment benefits” while operating under the constraints laid out in their randomly assigned realities—“evicted single mother,” for example.

Participants experience the “runaround” as they travel between social services, housing court, and property managers to try to complete their checklist in the allotted time.

The simulation focused on bringing to life three key themes from the youth-led interviews: (1) the dehumanization of people applying for emergency assistance, (2) the discrimination that people face during the process, and (3) the deficiencies of the federal poverty guidelines and Minnesota Family Investment Program grant program for housing assistance. YPAR youth played the roles of county housing court and emergency assistance staff members, judges, and even bus drivers.

### The Social Service Runaround



Source: Photos courtesy of Juxtaposition Arts (Lewis et al. 2019)

The YPAR team's Social Service Runaround was a highlight in CURA's widely attended eviction report release event. Community organizers,

nonprofit leaders, academics, and city and county staff members all participated in the simulation. This youth-led project communicated key findings and humanized the eviction process to key stakeholders (Lewis et al. 2019).

**Austin/Del Valle:** In 2018–19, the Youth-Led Community Health Learning Initiative (YLCHLI) brought together about 20 students in the health sciences program at Del Valle High School and 8 local health-focused organizations, including Children's Optimal Health, an NNIP Partner. Building from the Austin/Travis County Community Health Improvement Plan and spearheaded by the UTHealth School of Public Health-Austin and the SAFE Alliance's Expect Respect Program, the organizations partnered with the Del Valle community, an unincorporated area outside of Austin, to explore specific health needs and assets via the lens of youth. To better understand the Del Valle community and the health priorities of its residents, the collective created the YLCHLI. Children's Optimal Health, as a part of the collective, contributed to the design, facilitated the connection with Del Valle High School, and provided guidance on the program's implementation into the school curriculum.

The youth coinvestigators, supported by the local nonprofits, leveraged innovative research techniques—such as participatory mapping, a gallery walk to review the data, and

Photovoice—to define their community geography and character, identify assets and needs that affect residents' health, and advocate for needed change in priority areas.

The youth coinvestigators told the stories of their community through photos and narratives related to four priority health areas that they identified: (1) physical activity, (2) healthy eating, (3) mental health, and (4) access to health services. The student leaders shared their findings with community leaders through the Youth Leader Photovoice Gallery held at their high school. They also presented to the board of Children's Optimal Health. Children's Optimal Health is continuing to elevate the findings of the youth coinvestigators with broader audiences. It has created a Story Mapping project, to be launched in September 2019. This project combines data, maps, mixed media, student work, and community stories to provide an overarching view of the project and continue the discussion around health equity.

The YLCHLI is making an impact. To date, youth coinvestigators have shared their findings via four community forums, including a presentation to the steering committee of the Austin/Travis County Community Health Improvement Plan, which provides a road map for future action on health equity in the region. Through this work, the student youth coinvestigators are elevating the identity of their community, including its numerous strengths and assets, as well as promoting resident priorities, with the aim of

## YOUTH IMPACT IN AUSTIN

The youth coinvestigators identified four priority health areas for their community and explored the topics through PhotoVoice. Their findings, some of which are highlighted below, informed the Community Health Improvement Plan in the region.

### Physical Activity



"There aren't much resources for us to actually get out and do things that are active. Although we do have a lot of open land, that isn't always a reason for us to go outside."

### Mental Health



"Mental health issues like depression are a problem because it can make us feel different from others, like we are upside down and we don't fit in with society."

### Access to Health Services

"Obtaining health care is far away from our community...our community does have plenty of space for a health care facility...but the issue is there's no change being done."



**Source:** Youth-Led Community Health Learning Initiative (Levulett 2019)

enhancing community health for all (Levulett 2019).<sup>5,6</sup>

**Boston:** In 2013, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh announced a commitment to increase the amount of young people hired into summer jobs through city programs. This announcement motivated the city's Division of Youth Engagement and Employment (DYEE) to review program operations and join with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC, a longtime NNIP Partner) to form Boston's Civic Tech and Data Collaborative. Together, they succeeded in overhauling the largely manual placement processes used in the past. The collaborative created a more accessible and automated tool to facilitate job matching and to notify the youth of placement faster. MAPC staff members leveraged user-centered design to bring the main stakeholders of the program—the youth applying for summer jobs—as decisionmakers and leaders in the project.

MAPC facilitated the design process with youth who had been part of the summer jobs program in previous years. The young people reviewed and contributed to the algorithm that matched applicant interests and locations with jobs. They created youth-targeted messaging designed to be welcoming to potential participants and recommended using text messaging—rather than “old-fashioned” email—as a principal method of communication with applicants. The young people who worked on the redesign reported gaining skills and a sense of personal empowerment through the process. In 2017, the

program implemented email and text notifications for job placements.

Before the SuccessLink redesign, the DYEE would successfully place only about 3,000 youth into jobs out of the more than 8,000 who applied. In 2017, the youth acceptance rate of job placements had increased by 60 percent, by distributing more job offers, sending more immediate and accessible notifications, and matching youth with the job that would fit them best. That same year, the automated redesign saved 95 days of staff time, opening up staff to support the youth in other ways (Arena and Pettit 2018).

Youth job programs have been correlated with reductions in incarceration and premature death and increases in future income in the US, so increasing the impact of the SuccessLink program could have major benefits for Boston and its young residents (Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2016).

## BRINGING RESEARCH TO LIFE

Research findings should not be kept only in the pages of reports. By being creative and embracing alternative dissemination methods, researchers can bring the results and recommendations to people who do not often have access to the findings. One alternative way to display findings is through different art mediums. Art can communicate the emotional impact of the issues highlighted in the data far beyond what simple numbers can do. The youth and researchers in Austin used Photovoice to

connect images and narratives to the health inequities they face. The YPAR team in Minneapolis created a game to bring the distressing experience of people facing eviction to life. The Data Center in New Orleans has also used the arts to disseminate its research, elevating the personal experience of the city's youth.

**New Orleans:** In 2016, The Data Center in New Orleans partnered with the Media Arts Department at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) to have youth creatively interpret the results of the newly launched New Orleans Youth Index—a collection of indicators that give a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in the city. Eight students and alumni of NOCCA, a creative arts high school, chose an indicator that had personal meaning to them and made a film exploring the issue. The topics included children's physical activity, child homicide, economic stability, high school graduation rates, and more. Through this program, each student gained the experience of not only professionally creating a film, but also of managing the timeline and budget allotted to them by The Data Center.

One student, Phillip Youmans, explored how childhood obesity had affected his life. Bolstered by this experience, Youmans began writing and fundraising for another film. In 2019, he released [Burning Cane](#), about his experience growing up in the Southern Baptist church. *Burning Cane* was accepted to the 18th Annual Tribeca Film Festival, and Youmans became the youngest

director ever accepted and the first African-American to win the top prize.<sup>7,8</sup>

## YOUTH FILM SERIES PRODUCTIONS

*The Psychological Effects of Childhood Obesity*  
by Phillip Youmans

*Misguidance*  
by Anthony Richards

*Child Poverty in New Orleans*  
by William Nichols

*It's Possible: A True Story about Teenage Pregnancy*  
by Jeremy Russel and Myron Solomon

*Lack of High School Diplomas: and How They Affect Our Health*  
by Tevia Schroeder

*Percentage of Physical Activity*  
by Charis Johnson

*College Enrollment*  
by Helen Cressy

See the films at "[The New Orleans Youth Index: Video Series](#)," The Data Center, accessed September 5, 2019.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The examples presented in this brief are far from an exhaustive list of how NNIP Partners are advocating for and working with young people in their communities. Involving youth in data and research not only empowers the participants but also brings new insights to community issues and the potential responses. The NNIP network encourages more Partners to directly engage residents, including youth, in the various stages of their projects. The examples in this brief offer



inspiration and practical steps for Partners, and other local organizations, to support young people in shaping their communities and their futures.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Galvan, email message to author, July 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Carroll-Scott, email message to author, July 1, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Abraham, email message to author, June 28, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Josephine Ankrah, email message to the author, June 28, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The YLCHLI would like to particularly thank the Del Valle community, the spring 2019 youth coinvestigators, and all members who made this initiative possible.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Springer, email message to author, August 4, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Allison Plyer, email message to author, July 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Dave McNary, "['Burning Cane,' Wendell Pierce, Haley Bennett Win Tribeca Awards](#)," *Variety*, May 2, 2019.

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