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Youth Voice Matters: Toward Healthy Youth Environments

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Patsy Eubanks Owens
Department of Environmental Design

Alyssa A. Nelson, Ph.D.
Independent Researcher

Amanda Perry, Graduate Student
Community Development Graduate Group

Kindra F. Montgomery-Block, M.P.A.
Community School Partnerships
School of Education-CRESS Center

Center for Regional Change
University of California, Davis
One Shields Ave, 1309 Hart Hall
Davis, CA 95616
530.751.8799
<http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu>

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Key Findings

Youth engagement in identifying and examining issues related to healthy communities contributes new perspectives and ideas, reinforces what other forms of research reveal, and produces powerful messages leading to direct action and sustained youth civic engagement.

Why listen to youth?

Youth perceptions of their lives and the places and relationships that shape their lives cannot be predicted by adults; youth must speak for themselves. The participatory action research (PAR) component of Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions provided youth the opportunity to present their perspectives. It took an asset-based and community cultural wealth approach that sees youth as important contributors to community decisions that affect them and their environments.

Systemic adultism -- often layered with racism, classism, homophobia and other factors -- excludes youth opinions from societal decision-making when adults think they know best do

not seek or heed youth opinions. Through the use of youth-produced media and research projects (including photography, video, digital map, poetry, and a comic book), Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions has sought to counter this trend. Media projects can especially offer youth in marginalized communities a link to current digital technologies, venues for learning, and opportunities for participatory democracy, thereby providing these youth with an avenue to power. Our media projects were carried out by 11 groups of culturally diverse and oftentimes marginalized young people in partnership with adults. The adult facilitators were co-learners and allies in this process.

What we learned

While our effort focused on collecting and presenting individual stories, we found that many similar stories were shared across communities and by youth of various ages and social identities. Four common themes arose from an analysis across the projects: Education, Support, Transportation, and Community Pride & Place. Two other issues, recreation and safety, emerged as well and warrant more detailed examination in future research.

Education. Youth—as key stakeholders in schools—asserted their right and unique ability to evaluate schools critically, and their responses raise important questions about how to incorporate youth voice and vision into improving educational institutions. Although many education-related topics were mentioned by the youth, four represent particularly compelling themes:

- *Concern for low quality of education*—inadequate curriculum, advising and preparation for college, and overall quality of teaching in their schools;
- *Desire for positive adult attitudes and relationships*—youth want to feel welcome and supported at schools and want adults to serve as positive role models



Figure 1: Participatory Action Research

- *Increased value on peer interactions*– young people want opportunities and places where they can spend unprogrammed time together
- *Craving a positive school environment*– youth develop perceptions of their school from visual cues on campus, such as evidence of (in)adequate resources and care

Support. Youth express the need for many different types of support, and they suggest formal and informal means of getting that support from various realms including home, schools, and organizations. Many of the youth media projects included references to their social systems: whom they know, to whom they have access, what they know, and what is available to them. Importantly, youth look to their peers, siblings, parents and other adults for different types of support.

Transportation. The teen years represent a time of increased independence and mobility for most youth. Our media projects and other Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions research illustrate some of the issues that youth face as they attempt to navigate their communities and the region. The availability of transportation options, either because of location, cost or safety, often restricts youth access to community services, social opportunities and civic involvement possibilities.

Community Pride & Place. The youth researchers often referred to the importance of the built and natural environments in their lives. In general, youth thought that it is important for people to feel proud of where they grow up and to believe that the community respects and values all of its residents. This pride can be a great motivator for community engagement and contributes to successful navigation of social systems and physical barriers. Feeling good about where they live also contributes to youth feeling good about themselves.



“Harmony. Two twin brothers going down the half pipe with not just a skateboard but also a scooter. Riding with harmony. [This image shows] that more people can ride together. [We need to] get over ourselves and think about others.”

Implications for Action

Mechanisms for including youth voice -- especially of the most marginalized and vulnerable young people -- must be embedded in institutional, community and regional planning and evaluation. Healthy youth environments depend on a variety of factors; youth need to be included as critical actors. This means youth play active roles in envisioning, creating, and protecting these environments, not just as occasional contributors, but as partners and leaders along with the other members of their communities. Typically-disenfranchised or marginalized youth populations should be actively encouraged and supported to participate, and adults should be provided with opportunities to learn how to be effective allies to youth. In turn, youth can be allies to adults as we all work together to unlearn adultism and other forms of oppression and to eliminate inequities that present obstacles in the quest for a healthy region for all.