HYHR2010-02

November 2010

Regional Matters:
Through Young People's Eyes

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Citation Information:
Erbstein, Nancy, Rebeca Burciaga, Gloria M. Rodriguez. 2010. *Regional Matters: Through Young People's Eyes*. Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions Working Paper. Center for Regional Change, UC Davis

Should regions matter to those of us concerned about youth well-being in general, and youth populations that are especially vulnerable to poor educational, economic and health trajectories in particular? If so, why and how? While a regional framework has been used to understand and address racial and socio-economic disparities in the fields of economic development (Pastor, Benner, and Matsuoka, 2009; Blackwell et al., 2007) and environmental justice (Bullard 2007), there has been limited attention to the region as a unit of analysis in fields focused more specifically on the well-being of children and youth and their pathways to adulthood.[i]

The following paper explores whether and how regions matter in promoting stronger, more equitable outcomes for young people by examining the lived experiences of sixteen young adults who attended high school in California's Capital Region and left without graduating; the paper draws in a more focused way on the experiences of four of them for illustrative purposes: Angelica, Audrey, Dao, and Sema'j[ii] (for research methods, see Appendix 1). While these young people do not comprise a fully representative sample of youth experiences of growing up and leaving high school in the area, as a group they reflect many of the demographic, geographic and experiential characteristics of youth populations that are not graduating in large numbers in this region, according to school data and interviews with fifty adult "allies" of youth characterized as "dropouts" (Breslau et al., 2010; and Benner et al., 2010). In light of the strong relationship between school persistence and healthy adult trajectories, their stories offer a powerful starting point for understanding the relationship between regions and youth disparities, enabling us to ground that understanding in the complexity of lived experience.
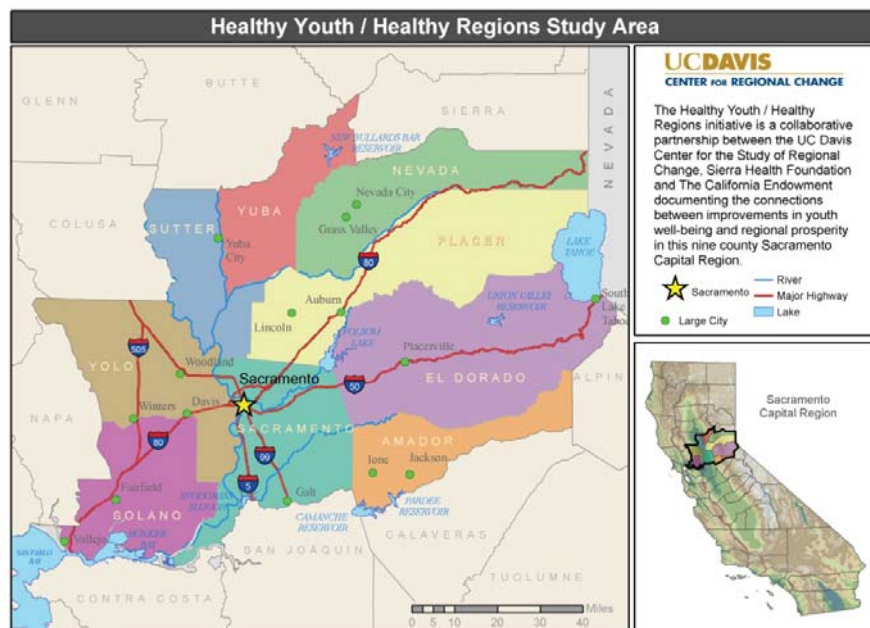
For the purpose of Healthy Youth Healthy Regions, the "Capital Region" has been defined as the area within a 60 minute drive radius from Sacramento, an approximate commute-shed; this area touches upon nine counties. However, in the context of young adult interviews, we did not explicitly define a "region," but rather asked about "the area where you live," in order to let interviewees define the physical and social geographies that were most meaningful as they were growing up. This lens draws our attention to some important, yet under-examined, elements of young people's experiences. These include

- the extent to which young people's experiences extend beyond their neighborhoods,
- the ways that individual lives are shaped by broader historical and current regional patterns of settlement and investment,
- the inability of youth-serving systems to accommodate the level of mobility experienced by some youth, disparate access to resources across regions and within the region, under-recognition of regional cultural wealth, and
- the effects of places in our region being socially defined in ways that position some young people as "belonging" and others as not.

The paper is organized in three sections. The first offers brief capsule descriptions of Angelica's, Audrey's, Dao's, and Sema'j's experiences growing up, not graduating with a regular high school diploma, and taking next steps in their lives and their formal education (please note, the testimonio counterstories of these young adults may be found in Burciaga and Erbstein, 2010). A second section explores their experiences, along with those of the other twelve participants, through a regional lens. We conclude with a set of policy and programmatic implications, as well as thoughts about the nature and utility of an evolving regional analysis of youth well-being.

Angelica, Sema'j, Audrey and Dao each, for varying and complex reasons, left high school prior to graduating; within the school data system, they would show up as "dropouts." The overall experiences of these four individuals are not intended to be representative of those of our full cohort of interviewees, nor all youth in the region, but rather to illustrate some of the variety of experiences that were shared, as well as broader cross-cutting findings regarding the region and the place of youth within it.

Angelica is an 18-year-old Latina, Native American[iii] and white woman. Her family moved from Concord, CA (just east of the San Francisco Bay Area) to Oakland, and then, as she started middle school, to an unincorporated area south of Sacramento; once in the Sacramento area, her family lived in two different places. Her father was born in Mexico and became deaf as child due to untreated ear infections. Her grandmother developed the measles when she was pregnant and her mother was born deaf. Angelica became the most fluent of her 11 siblings in American Sign Language (ASL) and served as an interpreter for her parents and other deaf family friends. In many instances, she was the only interpreter for her parents because the school districts did not provide ASL interpreters for her parents when they met with teachers. Many of her younger siblings called her "Mommy" and she played an active role in raising them and helping them with schoolwork. Her family heavily relied upon her to help. Angelica attended six different schools before her senior year and was chronically absent due to household demands. Her schoolwork suffered because of her work interpreting and caring for her siblings. Angelica tried to make up the work she missed and reported often asking her teachers for extra work to bring home. While the school gave her two choices in her senior year –attend another year or drop out – she felt directed by one of her teachers to dis-enroll from high school. Angelica immediately began to look for a job, but enrolled in the adult school to earn a GED when she realized few employers would hire people without a high school diploma. Despite sadness at leaving her siblings, at this point Angelica moved in with her godmother, because she felt her parents were not actively supportive of her. She felt optimistic about her future and hoped to one day become a certified ASL interpreter. During our last interview, she shared that she and her boyfriend had just learned they were having a baby and were looking for a place to live with another couple.

Youth Voices for Change

Sema'j is an African American male who was raised by his mother in several Sacramento County settings, including North Highlands, South Sacramento, Oak Park, and Elk Grove By the time he left high school, he had attended 10 different schools since kindergarten. Sema'j has vivid early memories of his parents fighting and his mother locking the front door by stabbing knives into the door jam. He shared that he was social in school, but in retrospect, felt he lacked guidance as no one explained the long-term importance of school. He was one of few African American students

in most of his schools and remembers being teased about his race in elementary school. He recalls teachers discussing placing him in special education in elementary school, but they neither followed through, nor told his mother. He did not feel connected to school, and in junior high and high school began cutting class to hang out with friends, spend time with his girlfriend, drink and smoke, activities which escalated when he moved into an independent study program. Sema'j had "a lot of time on [his] hands," and explained that's when he got into a lot of trouble. Most of his friends in the neighborhood where he began to spend time were involved in gangs. "I felt like I had to do it," he says as he explains his involvement was out of allegiance to them. While he remembers individual teachers encouraging him to focus on schoolwork, he also felt encouraged to leave by school staff who communicated that he would not graduate even if he passed his classes, noting, "I didn't understand how many credits you needed to have, I didn't understand none of that." Despite the challenges he faced, his sisters and mother were supportive and wanted him to do well in school. He also eventually found support in church and felt that God helped him distance himself from people and a mindset that were "holding [him] back from human success" in general, and success as an African American man in particular. Sema'j is now enrolled in a GED program through a local adult school. His family's past connection to the military has led him to think that it might be a way to achieve his goal of becoming an engineer. However, in part as a result of reflecting on his life through the testimonio interviews, he is also considering a career in teaching, with the belief that his experience would enable him to bring important perspectives to schools and youth. He is optimistic about his future.

Audrey is a 21-year-old white and Native American[iv] woman who lives with her boyfriend and two-year-old daughter in Yuba County. As a child, she endured sustained physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her mother and stepfather, who were addicted to methamphetamine. Eventually Audrey and her two younger siblings came to be in and out of foster care. From kindergarten to high school, Audrey attended at least 16 schools that she could remember, across multiple counties within and beyond the Capital Region. While Audrey highlights many ways in which the foster system has not served her and her siblings well, she also recalls with frustration the slow response of Child Protective Services and other adults to her requests for help with her family situation. Audrey said she liked to read but struggled in school. "I got into trouble a lot," she shared, and said few people knew what was going on in her home. Later in her teens she was diagnosed with schizophrenia, manic depression/bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, for which she continues treatment. Despite these challenges, she tested above grade level in a charter high school and the school promoted her a full grade, but did not credit her the year in her transcript. When she moved to another school, her transcript was incomplete and the charter school she previously attended lost her records. "They don't want to fix it themselves and I can't do nothing about it." Behind on credits, Audrey left school with an intent to get her GED, but she has struggled to find time between her job at a store and caring for her daughter, particularly in the context of transportation challenges. Audrey is deeply committed to her daughter's learning, proudly sharing that she already knows her colors, ABC's, and numbers. She is hopeful for her daughter, but when asked about her own future, Audrey shared, "I don't really dream, I just plan. I know some stuff is not possible so I don't even think about it. And I know getting my high school diploma is possible so I'm gonna go for it."

To escape the war in Laos, Dao's parents and six older siblings traveled from Laos to Thailand, to the Philippines and finally to Sacramento; her father continues to suffer from PTSD rooted in the

experience. Dao was the first in her family to be born in the United States. Her ability to communicate with her parents is limited by her lack of home language fluency. In elementary school, Dao was often the only Southeast Asian student in her predominantly African American and Latino school and was often teased about her name, her appearance, and her traditional family arrangement. Despite its reputation for gang violence, Dao lamented her large family's move from a small apartment in one part of South Sacramento to a house in an unincorporated area of South Sacramento because she felt her new home did not have the same sense of community. While the apartment complex had been the site of violence, she also had good memories of playing in open space with other children, groups of Southeast Asian parents and grandparents watching over them, and visiting with other children in their apartments; in contrast, there was no safe public space by her new home, and her family mainly stays inside. The teasing worsened as Dao struggled with acne and she began skipping school to avoid seeing her peers. When her father found out, she was repeatedly physically abused for not attending school. Child Protective Services were called to her home, but dropped the case once her father and brother explained that it was a misunderstanding. Dao said she grew apathetic about her future and her life in general and stopped attending school altogether. Eventually she attempted suicide, and began receiving counseling services. Her outlook changed when she saw a television commercial for a fashion design program and she called to obtain more information. The operator spoke with her about the importance of earning a GED and sent information about where to enroll. Dao is in the process of completing coursework for her GED, with the goal of becoming a high-end fashion designer.

The experiences of Angelica, Sema'j, Audrey and Dao highlight a variety of contexts that shape their growth and well-being, including the dynamics of home, peer networks, neighborhoods, and the formal institutions with which they interact (as well as the policy infrastructures that guide them). Their stories reflect understandings of youth development as shaped across multiple, interconnected environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). While highly localized contexts stand out as critically important, further consideration leads us to suggest that their stories are very much intertwined with the dynamics of this region over time as well. In the next sections, we further discuss the range of youth experiences and their implications for our understanding of regional supports for youth well-being.

Young adult interview protocols neither employed the language of "region" nor assumed a specific physical geographical focus. Instead, interviewees were asked to identify places they've resided, spent time, felt particularly supported or unsupported, and why and how they moved across them, in order to explore how they have experienced the area around Sacramento. In fact, interviewees never used an explicit language of "region." (See Rios et al., 2010 for a parallel point that the region's institutional leaders rarely using the term region.) They spoke of an "around here," and interconnected sites of activity, which for all young adults extended beyond their neighborhood and municipality. References to "around here" were sometimes contrasted to a "there," in some cases relatively close and relevant to daily life (e.g. the Bay Area), in others far yet still present (e.g., Laos, Mexico), and in others far yet part of an imagined future (e.g., New York City). Therefore, it is important to note that while framing our investigation and data analysis to surface multiple scales of youth experiences, and the effects of regional dynamics on that experience, "region" per se is not a framework that young adults regularly use themselves.

Youth in Focus Project

As we began to consider the experiences of Sema'j, Angelica, Audrey, and Dao with a regional geography (as defined by the study and youth experiences) in mind, several themes began to stand out: the ways that individual lives are shaped by broader historical and current regional patterns of settlement and investment, the level of mobility experienced by some youth and youth-serving systems' inability to be responsive to that, disparate access to resources across regions and within the region, under-recognition of regional cultural wealth, and the effects of places in our region being socially defined in ways that position some young people as insiders and others as outsiders.

Historical Patterns of Settlement and Investment

In isolation, as presented above, it is easy to see experiences of individual youth and their families as disconnected from broader regional patterns of settlement and investment. However, the narratives of each of these young people reflect policies, practices, and perspectives that were set in motion well beyond their families and neighborhoods, and, in some cases, before they were born. An in-depth analysis of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, but here we draw upon the description of this region's settlement patterns, political economy, social, politics over time provided by London et al. (2010), and analyses of regional patterns of employment provided by Benner et al. (2010) to demonstrate some of the ways that young people's and their families life trajectories have been shaped by the region's development over time.

For example, Sema'j's family came to live in the Sacramento area through his grandfather's association with the military, an experience common to many African Americans in the region. The family lived in one of several urban and inner-ring suburban neighborhoods in the metropolitan region that came to have relatively large concentrations of African Americans through a combination of proximity to work opportunities, housing discrimination, and the attraction of a rich community cultural life. Over time, these same communities became a locus of public and private sector disinvestment and less expensive housing options, as well as home to large concentrations of low-income families, including U.S.-born, indigenous, and immigrant families. Over the course of Sema'j's childhood and adolescence, his mother moved the family across several such communities as she sought work (having lost a job due to a military base closure) and affordable housing, and then out to the brand new suburb of Elk Grove, which attracted many families of color from Sacramento neighborhoods and the San Francisco Bay Area with the promise of suburban amenities, good schools, increased safety, and (relatively) affordable, larger homes.

Angelica's family was one of those attracted to the region earlier in this decade from the Bay Area by the promise of larger, more affordable housing. However, her father found limited living wage employment opportunities in the area as a deaf person without a high school education. As the primary wage-earner in his large family, he has maintained his job in the Bay Area and lives there during the week. It is in this context that Angelica became a primary care provider of her younger siblings.

Dao and her family are some of the many immigrants from throughout the world who have come to live in the Capital Region, fleeing war, persecution, and/or limited economic opportunity and seeking a safe, healthy, more prosperous future for family and community members. In some cases, such as that of Dao, families have been located here as part of government or private resettlement programs. In others, families have been attracted by strong ethnic, cultural, and/or home-town social networks that have developed over time, and the possibility of jobs. For example, the families of several young adult interviewees came to the Capital Region from Mexico in response to work opportunities in agriculture; while some have lived in the region for several generations, others' find themselves trapped in the immigration limbo produced by the tension between a regional political economy that depends on low cost, often unauthorized, immigrant labor, and federal policies that do not offer workers and their children a path to citizenship or legal residence. Dao's family's decision to stay in South Sacramento reflected both designated as a formal resettlement area, as well as their inability to afford a large enough house anywhere else.

 Audrey's maternal grandparents have been based in Yuba County, and this is where she is working to build a stable life with her daughter and her boyfriend. She is staying there in large part due to the help offered by her grandfather's care provider-- a safe, affordable source of childcare that is not readily available to her otherwise. However, like many people in the county, she has been unable to find work that offers a living wage. Despite overall regional economic growth and increasing numbers of jobs in suburban and previously rural areas east of Sacramento, Yuba County has actually experienced a net decrease in private sector employment since 1990 (see Benner et al., 2010).

Mobility and immobility

As noted above, "region" is not a term that was used by young adult interviewees. Yet examination of the ways in which high levels of mobility were forced upon them, as well as their expressed need for

mobility, also point to areas that extend beyond individual neighborhoods and communities, or even counties, as a setting of children, youth and family activity.

A point-in-time snapshot of our young adult interviewees would locate them in a specific neighborhood or community. However, most of the sixteen study participants experienced significant mobility within and across counties in the Capital Region throughout their childhoods and adolescence, attending on average eight schools before leaving high school. This point was echoed by one adult ally, who commented: "You know when you talk about the region piece, in terms of education here in [the city of] Sacramento; it has to be broader than Sacramento because these kids move around. There are kids who are in 8 different schools by the time they're in high school, or more. So if you look at it just on a city level, they're moving around in the county and sometimes across state lines so if you really want to find out what's going on or what's happening to these kids, you have to look broader than the city."

Youth in Focus Project

Young people's movement was driven by families, foster care, schools, and the juvenile justice system. Parents and caretakers moved to and around the region to seek employment, to find safe and affordable places to raise their children, to connect with family and community, and, in a small number of cases, to avoid legal problems. The foster care system resulted in mobility through their movement of individuals across multiple families and group homes, splitting up siblings (who in some cases sought to maintain connections across the region), and, in some cases, creating conditions that interviewees described as leading them to become runaways. Audrey's movement, for example, was driven first by her mother and stepfather's connections with methamphetamine—a major public health and law enforcement challenge in more rural areas of this region with limited economic opportunities. Her mobility increased while under the supervision of the foster care system which, organized through counties, brought her to various places in Yuba, Placer and Sacramento counties; she attended at least sixteen schools that she could remember.

School required substantial movement of some young people, as they attended high schools far from their residence in rural settings, tried to seek out schools that might be a better fit, and/or were sent to alternative/community day programs that serve a large geographic area. The juvenile justice system moved young people across counties for trials, incarceration, and substance abuse treatment programs, experiences shared in real-time by one interviewee during the course of this study.

Alongside their experiences of forced mobility, all interviewees also described the necessity, with their families as children and as they got older, of personal mobility beyond their neighborhoods and communities in order to access key resources and fulfill important obligations: social networks that embrace them, healthcare, counseling, formal and informal learning opportunities, jobs, food, medicine, childcare, entertainment/recreation, probation appointments, etc. Settings beyond their neighborhoods in some cases offered important sources of inspiration; for example, trips to the Arden Fair

Mall helped Dao, in the midst of a deep depression, imagine herself in a fashion-related career and energized her to take concrete steps in that direction. LGBTQI young adult interviewees and participatory researchers from outlying rural and suburban settings underscored the importance of connecting with the Sacramento LGBT Center for social, health, and employment resources that are unavailable to them close by (Owens et al., 2010).

Although fulfilling work, health, education, civic and social obligations and aspirations requires personal mobility, young adult interviewees and youth researchers associated with Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions highlight the multiple barriers to movement faced by young people, including a lack of after-school transportation, a lack of public transportation, public transportation that runs infrequently and/or begins late and stops early, the increasing cost of existing public transportation, unsafe public transportation and neighborhoods through which they must walk to reach it, unsafe routes for walking and biking (e.g. no sidewalks, no bike lanes), the prohibitive cost of owning a car, the prohibitive cost of fixing a car when it breaks down, and the inability, due to immigration status, to get a drivers license (see also Owens et al., 2010; Kuhns, 2010).

Youth residing in rural and unincorporated areas face particularly acute challenges, with significant consequences. For example, Audrey is currently at risk of losing her CalWorks support, because she is having difficulty meeting the requirement of working at least half time and attending school half time. While she lives in town, relatively close to work and school, her main source of affordable, safe childcare is her grandfather's caretaker. Because the bus-ride there takes almost one hour, simply bringing her daughter to and from childcare takes four hours each day. Audrey can't afford a car, which would reduce the trip to about 15 minutes. Even if she could borrow one periodically, she would be unable to drive legally at this time because she can't retrieve her license. When a CHP officer came upon her and some friends sleeping in a car, having pulled over when they got too tired to continue driving, he put a hold on their licenses and explained they would need to go to the DMV office to get them reinstated. However, Audrey had been unable to get a ride to the DMV, could not get there via public transportation, was afraid to drive illegally without her license, and to-date had been unsuccessful in her efforts to find a way to get her license reinstated via phone or mail.

Quite strikingly, interviewees suggest that many youth-serving systems are set up in ways that assume residential stability (as well as proximity and/or significant parent/caretaker mobility); they neither facilitate this residential stability and personal mobility, nor have mechanisms in place to support young people when this is not the case. For example, due to movement at the hands of her mother and then the foster care system, Audrey experienced firsthand the consequences of jurisdictional fragmentation, and limited communication across sectors. Her mother was able to avoid CPS engagement by moving across county lines in the region and re-enrolling her children in different school districts. Upon being placed in the foster care system, Audrey and her siblings experienced being placed together, placed separately, moved across counties from each other, and ultimately losing touch. In Yuba County, by age 18 Audrey was on her own, having aged out of the system. Audrey's healthcare was poorly tracked across all these moves, despite her serious mental health diagnoses; sometimes prescriptions were lost, as well as records of medications that evoked allergic reactions. Her schools did not have information about her health and family situations, and she often experienced punishment rather than support. As noted earlier, in Audrey's experience, school data systems were unable to track her academic learning and progress across these many moves; she herself was unable to travel and track down transcripts. Therefore, as a result of this movement

across jurisdictional boundaries and lack of regular communication across these sectors, as well as her limited personal mobility, Audrey experienced sustained abuse, inadequate healthcare, and lost high school credits, all of which contributed to her not having graduated from high school.

Regional Resource Disparities

The experiences of the study participants raise several points regarding access to resources that support youth and family well-being across the region. They speak to the nature of resources, the effects of limited resource access, perceived disparities in resource access, and the under-recognition of resources constructed and tapped by marginalized populations.

First, it is important to point out that the young adults did not focus solely on resources that were narrowly defined as sources of funding or income, although economic poverty was a reality for many participants and their families, and access to living wage jobs was a real need. However, their understanding and articulation of needed and missing resources was much more expansive, including complex institutional and human resources that facilitate (or if missing, hinder) positive outcomes. For example, the existence of living wage jobs is a critical aspect of an environment conducive to young people's healthy transition to adulthood; however, as Audrey and other young adult interviewees demonstrate, to take advantage of that job requires relative proximity, reliable, affordable transportation, a mailing address, physical and mental health, adequate education, prior experience or coaching on workplace expectations, basic needs (e.g. work clothing), limited "drama" amongst family and friends that might contribute to absenteeism, and for some, childcare and/or legal employment status (based on immigration status and/or a record of felonies that may compromise employability); a caring, trusted adult was a critical partner in navigating this. In every case, young adults' discussions of resources touched upon multiple sectors, including employment, education (early childcare through postsecondary), health, youth programming, transportation, the built environment, law enforcement, juvenile justice, social services, housing, faith-based organizations, libraries, and entertainment/recreation (see Rios et al., 2010 for a parallel analysis from the institutional perspective).

Each of these young adults reveals having noticed through their movement a sense of intra-regional disparities, pointing out differences in the built environment (clean streets, nice parks, even/existent sidewalks vs. not), uneven-ness in health and social services and schools, more and less violent neighborhoods, inconsistent transportation access, varying access to stores selling healthy, affordable food, unavailability of interesting, affordable activities for youth, and disparate access to employment for themselves and their caretakers (for more detailed information about patterns of disparity in the Capital Region, see Benner et al., 2010; Breslau et al., 2010; Romero & London, 2010; Geraghty, 2010; London et al., 2010). They express frustration, desire to see change, a sense of urgency for change, and anger with the lack of change and others' limited sense of urgency.

Youth Voices for Change

Youth who have moved between the Capital Region and other places also highlight perceived inter-regional disparities. For example, while Angelica's family has been able to access lower cost housing for their large family in southern Sacramento county, in coming to this region from the Bay Area they left one that has a larger deaf population and, in Angelica's experience, a greater concentration of formal and informal resources for the deaf community and their hearing and non-hearing children. Angelica's story of growing up in the Capital Region reveals a system of schools, healthcare, etc. that have limited capacity (and in some cases commitment) to explore and address in a sustained way the needs of those whose parents have disabilities, or face other challenges to their ability to care for their children. This phenomenon is compounded in Angelica's case by regional factors such as the limited networks for deaf people, lack of interpreters, transportation challenges, and the limited living-wage employment opportunities, which leads her father to maintain his Bay Area job.

While many study participants highlighted challenges associated with living in localities with high concentrations of economic poverty, violence, and under- or dis-investment, they also, along with adult allies interviewed for Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions[v], note that places which rate more highly according to many measures of well-being and offer more and better amenities and programs can prove hostile and exclusionary. For example, several young adults pointed out youth afterschool program staff that were not welcoming of some young people based on their dress and style. Others note frustration at not being allowed to attend afterschool and community-based programs by group homes/foster parents even when they did exist, and fear of participating in programs and activities due to unauthorized immigration status. LGBTQI interviewees and youth engaged in Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions participatory research, as well as adult allies, drew attention to the hostile conditions LGBTQI youth encounter in many settings, and in particular more rural and socially conservative communities (see Owens et al., 2010). In each case, interviewees linked these events to a sense of isolation and disconnection, which led them to either seek connection in less healthy venues (e.g. gangs), keep to themselves (which they also described as socially and emotionally detrimental), or risk their personal safety to get to places that felt supportive (e.g. soliciting sex to pay bus fare to the LGBT center). In other examples, teachers and students were identified as directly and indirectly playing into negative stereotypes of LGBTQI youth and youth and families from lower income backgrounds, rural outlying areas, immigrant backgrounds, and, non-dominant ethnic backgrounds.

Youth interviewees also call upon adults to recognize the powerful resources that they have tapped and constructed, countering an understanding of themselves, and places where many residents share their experiences, as devoid of resources. In some cases, they share frustration at the lack of recognition of and respect for the considerable capacity that they and others have developed individually and collectively to navigate their circumstances (see Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010 for a more in depth analysis of how youth are producing and drawing upon community cultural wealth). For example, Angelica tried many times to explain to her own and her siblings' schools the importance of using a TTY service in order to communicate with their parents, and felt like school staff did not take her seriously, despite the level of responsibility she was taking on at home and her knowledge of the deaf community. Audrey spoke of multiple painful experiences in which she tried to share information with CPS and foster parents about her younger siblings to facilitate their care, only to be rebuffed and then see circumstances play out in the negative ways she had anticipated. We heard about the power of social capital marshaled at a cross-community and even cross-county scale through ethnic networks, faith communities, youth music/cultural networks, and immigrant mobilization to create physically and emotionally safe spaces, offer needed information and support to

pursue educational and economic opportunity, and challenge youth to grow in ways that demonstrate a sense of personal and mutual responsibility. Finally, the young adults shared hopes and dreams they held for themselves, siblings, children, and their communities, despite having experienced hardships including abuse and neglect. Such hopes and dreams serve as a powerful resource that they draw upon to pursue their personal life-goals and support family, friends, and others (Owens et al., 2010).

Places of belonging (or not)

Young adult interviewees, along with adult allies, pointed out how popular understandings and representations of places within the region affect young people's sense of belonging, with sometimes negative consequences. Sema'j' provides one example of this dynamic, revealing how the social meanings associated with places affected his own actions, as well as other peoples' engagement with him.

The challenge of negotiating an identity as an African American male in a low-income household while moving across various school and neighborhood settings is a powerful subtext of Sema'j's life story. He struggled socially as the only, or one of few, African American students in a predominantly Southeast Asian elementary schools in Sacramento. While he subsequently attended schools with larger African American populations, upon starting high school in Elk Grove he was once again one of few African American students. He describes school adults as having paid little attention to his poor academic performance until he joined the basketball team and was at risk of not being able to play. He also shares the frustration of regularly dealing with peer and teacher assumptions that Elk Grove center based on his race and style of dress. In the context of these intersecting social and spatial dynamics, he felt drawn to hang out with friends in Oak Park, a predominantly lower-income, African American neighborhood where he felt a sense of belonging. When his out-of-school time increased due to enrollment in an independent study program, he became involved with a gang there, with a sense that he had to both for social reasons and physical protection. While this affiliation reinforces a dominant reputation in the region of Oak Park as gang territory, he complicates that by highlighting the ways in which this same community has offered him an alternative pathway, through his connection with church and his bible study group.

Youth In Focus Project

Sema'j' rejects normalized place reputations that position him as an outsider, initially seeking places of belonging in ways that put him at great risk, and eventually finding more healthy opportunities. Adult allies in predominantly white, middle and high income suburban communities in the region confirm that many resident low income youth and youth of color feel like outsiders in their schools and communities as they negotiate the challenge of dominant assumptions. For example, an ally in a foothill community relays the following.[VI]

Now you have to understand that our kids are from a different area. They come to [community] but are living in affordable housing. However, [community] is multimillion dollar people. The kids are already feeling secluded, they're down here and everything, and [the community's] up there. So they weren't seeking out help. They were afraid to talk to people, they don't leave this site. They will not go off property to do anything. I have to bring everything to them because they will not leave, they're secure, they're safe here. -- Adult Ally 027

When limited financial resources and/or racialized expectations limit young people's access to opportunity-laden networks, knowledge, and activities, they are further marginalized

Conversely, we heard—particularly in rural settings where high schools often serve large geographic areas-- that coming from particular communities can be cause for social exclusion while attending school in other, even neighboring communities. In northern rural parts of the region, Audrey observes a level of racism that troubles her, ranging from white supremacist gangs to the stated inability of a school that's half Latino to offer Spanish because they can't find a teacher (they offer French only). Her experiences reflect the dynamics of economically and racially bifurcated rural areas that, until recently, were shaped in large part by an agricultural political economy dependent on immigrant workers. These dynamics also play out in urban settings, as Angie shares her experience in Sacramento.

People would look at you like, 'all you know is the streets' or basically, 'all you know is how to sell drugs' or something. People look at you like that. If they know you're from a certain area or if they know you didn't finish school they automatically think you've grown up in a bad place

What results from the assumptions that become taken-for-granted over time is a set of codes that inform—perhaps even dictate—one's sense of belonging and membership in the local community. These codes need to be understood in regional, or sometimes sub-regional, contexts as they often implicitly or explicitly rely on comparison among the region's diverse settings. Youth learn these codes, play out these codes, feel the weight/power of these codes, and reap either the benefits or disadvantages of these codes. Youth and their adult allies describe frustration, fatigue, and material consequences associated with these dynamics, and their desire to have others see the positive aspects of their communities. In response to this dynamic, youth participants in "Youth Voices for Change," a West Sacramento participatory research project on strengthening community conditions for youth[vii], highlight their desire to have a sense of "community pride" and have others locally and beyond see the positive aspects of their community. Contending with these spatialized dynamics of race, socio-economic status, and immigration is painful and challenging. Yet several young adult interviewees indicate that they receive little adult assistance in surfacing, negotiating, and countering these dynamics of race, class, culture and place.

The Salience of "Region" in Shaping Youth Experience

By looking across the experiences of Angelica, Audrey, Dao, Sema'j and their twelve participating peers, we can see the region as an important context for understanding why they did not graduate from high school, and their limited access to important resources and opportunities.

Situating their stories in historical patterns of regional development reveals that their circumstances are not merely a matter of individual or family choices or neighborhood conditions, but also produced by policies, politics, and social processes that have played out at a broader scale. Patterns of immigration, in-migration, land ownership and land use, affordable housing, job growth, and job access, and transportation access have shaped who lives in our region, where they live and who lives nearby, and the types and amount of economic opportunity that are available.

Youth Voices for Change

The search for affordable housing and jobs, homelessness, and youth-serving systems such as foster care and juvenile justice required high levels of mobility of some young adults and families. Dispersed patterns of development, distances to key services and required appointments (healthcare, school, childcare, probation), and jurisdictional barriers that may limit access to healthcare and educational opportunities in greater proximity also require mobility. Yet extensive residential mobility was described as a barrier to the health, education and well-being of those who experienced it. Immobility due to the cost of transportation, limited public transportation options, and unsafe transportation options, and unsafe transportation options was a challenge for most participants as they sought to participate in the economy (Benner et al., 2010), purchase healthy food, get to pre-natal and mental health appointments (Geraghty, 2010), further their education (Breslau et al., 2010), spend time with friends and family (Romero & London, 2010), fulfill legal obligations, and find affordable and effective childcare (Kuhns, 2010).

Depending on where youth live in this region, their access to resources—in terms of amount and quality-- vary significantly (see Benner, 2010; Geraghty, 2010; Breslau et al., 2010; Romero & London, 2010 for additional analyses), yet young adult interviewees and adult allies point out that even amenity-laden settings present challenges. Conversely, there is under-recognized wealth in communities that are often viewed primarily in terms of their deficits. The regional lens also highlights under-engaged resources that exist at larger geographic scales than neighborhood (e.g. immigrant social networks, ethnic networks, and faith networks). Finally, we see how un-named, unquestioned assumptions about who belongs where in our region affect youth identity development and have material implications in ways that can to reinforce race, class, and place disparities.

The important insights revealed in the young adult narratives pose implications for both policy and program development in the future.

Listening carefully to Audrey, Angelica, Dao, Sema'j, and their peers draws attention to the region as a necessary scale of activity to promote youth well being in general, and change the odds for vulnerable populations in particular. Their experiences with respect to regional development patterns, mobility and immobility, resources, and belonging suggest at least six points that should guide regional actors in their work. Examples provided with these points are not intended to be exhaustive, and are for illustrative purposes.

Regional Development
Regional Planning and Assessment focused on Vulnerable Children, Youth and Families
The implications of the existence, quality and location of regional infrastructure- transportation, housing, jobs, parks, shopping, services-- for young people suggest that associated policy-making, planning and evaluation processes should incorporate impact assessments focused on children, youth and families. Particular emphasis should be placed on the interests, needs and resources of populations that are disproportionately affected by poor educational, economic, and health outcomes. In addition, such impact assessments should examine not only the merits of individual proposals, but their contribution to disrupting cumulative patterns of under- or dis-investment. European countries offer models of approaches and effects of pursuing such impact assessments (see, for example, Sylwander, 2001[viii] for examples from Sweden, available at www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se/). An example of a new county-level tool from Tennessee has recently been demonstrated (see Schmidt and Coffey, 2010, which will be available at http://www.firstfocus.net)

Mobility and Immobility
Institutional Data Systems to Address Mobility
Youth-serving systems and non-profits—schools, healthcare, social services, probation, foster care, CalWorks, etc.—should develop data systems and implement strategies that facilitate working with young people as they move across places. The Health Shack, an online personal health record system designed with the needs of independent and emancipated youth in mind by a team of young people and adults, is one example of a strategy that has drawn upon technology and youth knowledge in ways that acknowledge high levels of mobility and offers a tool to help young people navigate the challenge their mobility presents to their health (for more information see https://www.healthshack.info/default.aspx).

Each of these youth serving systems should simultaneously take steps to identify young people who are experiencing high levels of school and/or residential mobility, investigate causes, and work towards implementing—either themselves or in partnership with other organizations-- strategies that increase youth and family stability.

Institutional Data Systems that Support Serving Youth
Current data collection processes are primarily focused monitoring and compliance within sectors, rather than better serving young people. However, study participants' experiences suggest the importance of better using data to enable action. Greater real-time cross-sector data sharing can facilitate important and timely outreach and support—for example, notification of schools when a

child's caretaker is arrested and held or a young person enters or transfers their foster care placement to facilitate outreach/support. New and existing data systems can be built and shared in ways that enable youth-serving agencies and non-profits planning to better support for youth (e.g. including foster care placement in the new school data system (CalPADs) would enable better monitoring and support of foster youth, publicizing zipcode level data on numbers and backgrounds of youth involved in the juvenile justice system would help facilitate planning and locating of outreach and other supports)[ix]. Data on individual students' chronic absenteeism, truancy, and/or high levels of residential and/or school mobility can serve as a basis for rallying coordinated formal and informal youth support systems to understand and address root causes before students stop attending school; understanding such patterns within a school and across a district may help identify and resolve broader institutional and/or community challenges.

Youth Voices for Change

Resources
Require Responsive Approaches to Disparities in Opportunity

Efforts to bring funding into the region, and social mobilization efforts, need to focus explicitly on addressing the barriers faced by vulnerable children, youth and families, and disparities in resources and opportunities across the region's populations and places. This is consistent across the sectors of health, education, economic development, youth development and civic engagement, and community and regional planning, as well as institutional planning and investment strategies and provision of technical assistance and training. Ensuring that opportunities are created beyond Sacramento city and county is an important need.

Responses Must Account for the Complexity of Barriers to Well-being and Build on Youth, Community, and Regional Resources

Efforts to create seamless safety nets and on-ramps to opportunity-rich pathways for youth populations that are disproportionately vulnerable to poor outcomes will require coordination across sectors and multiple institutional and jurisdictional scales. Beyond youth-serving agencies and institutional leaders, young adult interviewees highlight the knowledge, networks, and commitments of adults they've come to view as allies, informal community leaders, and ethnic and faith networks as important local and regional resources for such efforts. In addition, young adults who have grown up navigating the challenges of regional inequity, resource gaps, system fragmentation, and discrimination hold critical insights regarding how to build a healthy region, and should be key partners in doing so as advisors, partners, and leaders.

One example of a direct youth-serving initiative adopting many of these principles is the "MYC-- 'Cause Youth Matter," a Sacramento-area collaborative of public agencies, grassroots non-profit organizations, healthcare providers, institutions of higher education, and individuals focused on making sure youth do not fall through the cracks by offering a one-stop shop for various supports. Current services include food, shelter/housing, help with education/ school attendance, job skills, employ-

employment help, health and mental health services, legal counseling, substance abuse help, gang prevention/intervention services, and information about various other youth programs; more supports are being added to the collaborative on an ongoing basis. The collaborative conducts intensive outreach through social networks. Case management is offered by adults with deep experience conducting street outreach.[x]

Belonging
Increase Programming and Practices that Build on Local and Regional Assets and Counter Negative Stereotypes
As a region, there is a need to find ways to foster community pride and regional connection, focus on inclusion, and break down race, class, and cultural barriers. This is a responsibility for which adults and institutions (those that serve youth and train the adults who work with our young people) must play a role. Young people in the region and beyond have proven themselves to be powerful leaders and partners.

For example, to this end, the SacTown Heroes, a youth leadership team in West Sacramento, is encouraging community leaders to focus on design of built environments (with local participation) that promote interaction, as well as creating public opportunities to celebrate the community, its history, and its people. The Catalysts for Social Justice, a Davis, CA youth team which has become a course entitled Race and Social Justice in U.S. History at Davis High School, has adopted youth-led research strategies to unpack and challenge dynamics of race, culture, power and place (see http://www.facebook.com/pages/From-The-Community-To-The-Classroom/10150095515415341 for a film documenting the process and outcomes of this activity).

Together, the experiences of these young adults draw attention to the importance of considering geographic scales beyond neighborhoods in understanding and addressing youth vulnerability in general, and inequitable opportunities and outcomes in particular. The evidence presented here poses the region–- loosely defined-- as an important focus of attention, in addition to settings such as home, the formal institutions with which children, youth and families interact and the systems that guide them, and neighborhoods and communities. Regions emerge as both contributing to the conditions of the latter settings, as well as important sites of activity and meaning-making unto themselves. As the historical dynamics and decisions of the Capital Region have shaped our present, the regional dimension of ways of thinking and associated policies and practices will continue to frame the opportunities of our future.

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Data employed for this paper include ethnographic interviews with 16 young adults and 51 adult allies of youth.

Young Adult Interviews

Ethnographic interviews, and associated photographs and maps, were conducted with 16 young adults who left, or strongly considered leaving, high school without graduating. The sample was constructed to reflect key demographics and youth experiences associated with disproportionately high dropout rates in the region according to California Department of Education data and HYHR adult ally interviewees. Participants for the study were recommended by community members and institutional representatives who were considered to be youth-allies and worked closely with young adults.

Employing the methodologies of community cultural wealth and *testimonio*, these approaches enabled us to capture life histories that focused on personal critical reflections of the participants' own life experiences. Three 2-hour *testimonio* interviews were conducted with each participant – the first focused on their experiences in the Region, the second explored their schooling and life experiences and the final interview focused on aspirations for self and community. As part of the interview process, interviewees were asked to map places that have been particularly supportive and challenging, and offered the opportunity to take photographs of key places. Participants were given a $25 gift card after each of the three interviews as honoraria.

Adult Ally Interviews

A sample of 51 adult ally interviewees was generated through a snowball sampling process, with attention to geographic spread across the region, youth populations reached, and types of institutional affiliations. In particular, we sought referrals to adults who were known as front-line youth allies and advocates—the people that youth who are grappling with challenging circumstances seek out for meaningful support and relationship. In identifying these allies, we were referred to multiple sectors, including health, social services, schools, youth-serving community-based organizations, law enforcement, workforce development, parks and recreation, faith-based organizations, and formal and informal ethnic networks.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one in all but three cases, which were group interviews. Interviewees were offered the opportunity to talk by phone or meet in person at a location of their choice; all but four interviews were conducted in person. Interviews were 1-1.5 hours and focused broadly on the following general questions.

- Who makes up the population of youth ages 16-22 that's out of school and out of work here?
- What accounts for their leaving school?
- What's in place to support school completion/healthy transition to adulthood? How accessible and effective are these resources?
- What's in place to support youth who drop out? How accessible and effective are these resources?

- Are there untapped resources to support youth in this area?
- What needs to change to help youth make healthy transitions and address disparities in outcomes?

Data Analysis

Testimonios were coded in two stages using NVivo (Version 8.0), a qualitative data coding software package. The first stage of coding focused on opportunities and barriers with respect to the well being of young adults over their life course, in the areas of education, health, employment, and civic engagement, as well as the ways in which region factored into youth experience. For the purpose of this project, we take up the metropolitan region in five intersecting ways: (1) as a physical area (London et. al. 2010), (2) as a place that is socially produced over time (Lefebvre, 1973; Massey, 2005; Gieryn, 2000), (3) as a place that is imbued with social meaning (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), (4) as a place that may offer differential structures of opportunity to different populations in different geographic settings (Briggs, 2005; Tate, 2008), (5) as a potential site of activity and action (Pastor, Benner & Matsuoka, 2009). The second pass focused exclusively on Community Cultural Wealth including, but not limited to, the forms of wealth identified by Yosso (2005), enabling an emphasis on not only resource gaps, but ways in which young people identify and produce often under-recognized resources that enable them to navigate challenging conditions and contribute to their communities.

Adult ally interviews were also coded using NVivo (Version 8.0), using a parallel coding structure to that employed during the first pass of testimonio coding, in order to facilitate comparison across the datasets.

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[i] Recent work in the field of education has focused on school segregation exploring racialized school attendance patterns, corresponding disparities in educational opportunity structures, and urban/suburban/rural opportunity (Smrekar and Goldring 2009, Orfield and Lee 2007, Wells et al 2009), and examination of the mismatch between structure of employment opportunity and educational opportunity (Tate 2008)

[ii] All names of the testimonio interview participants have been changed to safe-guard their anonymity.

[iii] Believes grandfather was officially enrolled, but does not note affiliation—she is seeking records

[iv] Grandfather identifies as having Blackfoot and Choctaw relatives

[v] For the purpose of Healthy Youth Healthy Regions, adult allies were defined as adults who have authentic, meaningful relationships with youth who have dropped out of school or considered dropping out of school. Interviews were conducted with 51 adult allies across the Sacramento region, who were identified through purposive snowball sampling strategy (see xxx for more information on methods associated with collecting and analyzing these data)

[vi] Community name is not identified to preserve the anonymity of the ally and the young people s/he referenced

[vi] Youth Voices for Change, a youth participatory action research project in West Sacramento focused on strengthening community conditions for youth, was a collaborative effort between the SacTown Heroes/West Sacramento Youth Resources Coalition and Healthy Youth Healthy Regions/UC Davis. See Owens et al for more information about the project and its findings.

[vii] Sylwander, L. (2001). Child Impact Assessments. Stockholm, Sweden: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden. Downloaded August 8, 2010.

[ix] Currently these data are available at the county level only, and can be accessed via the Haywood Burns Institute at http://www.burnsinstitute.org/state.php?custom1=California

[x] For more information about the MYC, please contact MarginalizedYouthCollaborative@gmail.com

[xi] Draft kindly provided by the authors prior to publication for review.