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Youth Voice Matters:
Toward Healthy Youth Environments

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

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This paper explores what constitutes "healthy youth environments" by sharing findings from a set of youth-led research and media projects conducted in four of the nine counties in the Capital Region. The projects were carried out by 11 groups of young people in partnership with adults from the Healthy Youth / Healthy Regions study's Participatory Action Research (PAR) Team. The youth participants investigated issues they face in their lives as individuals and as groups, documented supports and hindrances to their development and pursued ways to take action. The youth perspectives collected in this effort provide an on-the-ground assessment of issues and concerns as well as illustrate and inform the findings that are revealed through other Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions research techniques. Importantly, these youth perspectives serve as a foundation for change at multiple decision-making levels. In this paper we draw from both the processes and the findings of the youth research and media projects in order to make a case for the importance of gathering youth perspectives, engaging youth in creating and sharing knowledge, and promoting youth involvement in civic discussions and decision-making. [1]

Attention is given to illuminating how youth can positively transform their communities in spite of systemic adultism, and how subpopulations of youth that are particularly marginalized, such as youth of color, and low income, immigrant, homeless, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth play a vital role in that transformation. Because of the nature of intersecting, multiple identities for individuals and groups, the need to advocate for youth empowerment (as a counter to adultism) parallels other forms of resistance to identity discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and other identities. Youth research and media projects are presented as tools for empowerment and ways for youth to take action to improve their own communities.

We begin by laying out the intent of the PAR Team's role in the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study, giving some general background information on participatory action research (PAR) methodologies, including the use of photography and video. A discussion of the concept "social media capital" (Montgomery-Block, 2010) frames the description of the multiple projects and the choice to employ digital media in these projects. In addition to describing the youth projects' processes and findings, we highlight the variety of media and other products created by the youth as part of their projects: photography and written reflections, videos, a comic book, and an online map. These products and processes comprise the dataset for this paper and were made available to the entire Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions team for integration throughout the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study. We then summarize key findings from across the youth projects, with particular emphasis on four emergent themes: I. Education, II. Support, III. Transportation, and IV. Community Pride. We conclude with implications and recommendations for applying and incorporating youth voice, envisioning and understanding youth environments, and sustaining youth voice. Further efforts will include an online regional Youth Story Map that displays the work of these groups of youth and invites other youth to add to the map, a youth media ambassador program to promote youth-led media production, additional youth media forums in the Capital Region, and a guidebook on how to conduct these types of projects with youth.

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[1]   This paper has been written by adults from the PAR Team who worked with the youth projects and the larger Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study.

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The intent of the participatory action research (PAR) component of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions project was four-fold: 1) to gather, document and address youth perspectives on the conditions of their lives (i.e., to use PAR as a method of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study); 2) to engage youth in creating and sharing their own knowledge about these conditions (i.e., to facilitate youth-led participatory action research, YPAR); 3) to promote youth involvement in civic discussions and decisions throughout the region; and 4) to experiment with and promote the use of digital media in order to strengthen social media capital among the participating youth. (See Figure 1.) This report primarily focuses on the youth stories, opinions and perspectives. We have incorporated some findings from the youth-engagement processes undertaken and the strategies used to involve youth in community discourse; however, the extent of the understanding and impact of these project foci are not elaborated upon. A more thorough examination of these aspects of the project will be included in the forthcoming *Youth Voices for Change Guidebook.*
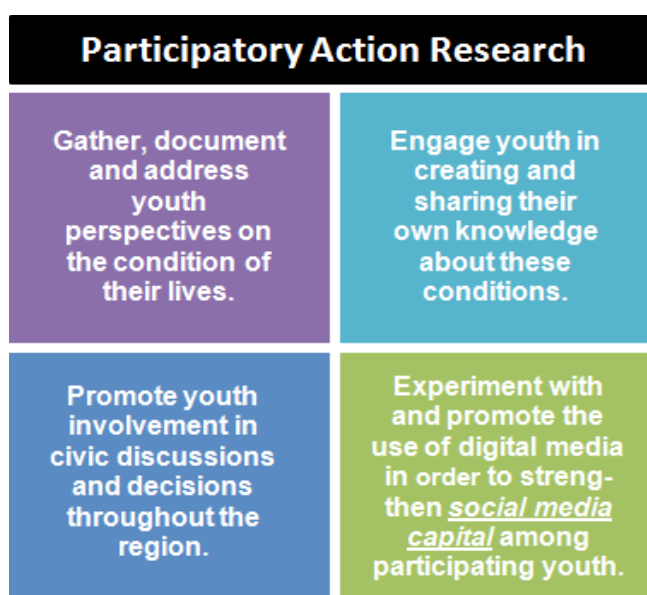

Figure 1: Project Intent

Gather diverse youth views and opinions. As defined by Wadsworth (1998), the PAR method is a process that allows relevant parties to actively examine their collective situation so that it can be changed or improved. Academic researchers from diverse disciplines utilize a variety of PAR methodological approaches (that go by a variety of names that we group together here as "participatory action research"), but several essential components identified by Israel et al. (2008, p.4) remain the same throughout, including "a commitment to conducting research that shares power with and engages community partners in the research process and that benefits the communities involved." PAR is also used beyond academia by groups and communities themselves (cf., Youth In Focus, 2002). This continuum of participatory approaches includes at least two defining traditions with differing political priorities; one maintains a social reform agenda centered around changing from within organizations, while another more radical approach emphasizes a fundamental questioning of larger systemic structures (Wilmsen, 2008). PAR can be used to "connect people, participation and place to the wider politics of social and environmental transformation" (Kindon

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et al, 2007, p. 3); "With greater attention to space and scale…, the local is understood as intimately connected to the global, regional, national, household and personal."

Following the PAR goals outlined by Bradbury and Reason (2003) of creating new forms of understanding and working towards practical outcomes, university researchers, youth development professionals and a media artist in this Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study engaged diverse groups of young people from several communities in the Capital Region. To access and uplift diverse voices, the PAR Team specifically aimed to include youth who are often otherwise marginalized and to create a diverse set of groups overall.

<u>Engage and empower youth.</u> Youth-led participatory action research has been described as research conducted by or with youth rather than merely on youth (Youth In Focus, 2002; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Sánchez, Lomelí-Loibl, & Nelson, 2009). An objective of this PAR effort was for the youth participants to be creators of the community knowledge while the adult facilitators were co-learners and allies in the process. Although adults from the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study framed the initial, broad questions (i.e., "What are the experiences and perspectives of young people in the Capital Region?"), the PAR Team sought a process whereby the youth would guide the direction of inquiry, the interpretation of findings, and recommendations for action. As suggested by O'Donoghue, Kirshner and McLauglin (2002), we pursued a research design in which youth were true partners in the research rather than passive spectators or recipients. One benefit of this type of approach includes building a foundation for future civic engagement and encouraging more comprehensive involvement of youth. Hart (1997) describes the importance of building this civic responsibility in youth: "Only through direct participation can children develop a genuine appreciation of democracy and a sense of their own competence and responsibility to participate" (p. 3). (See also Romero, London, & Erbstein, 2010; Rios et al., 2010)

<u>Promote youth voice.</u> The third explicit intent of the PAR effort was to create a sustainable mechanism for obtaining youth perspectives and to promote listening to youth voices throughout the region. Researchers have shown that the intentional formation of ongoing youth empowerment roles is important (Mitra, 2009). In addition to "showing by example," this effort seeks to establish and promote a method for youth to describe, document, discuss and direct future action in their communities. Youth perceptions of their lives, where they live and their relationships cannot be predicted by adults; youth must speak for themselves. This study takes an asset-based and community cultural wealth approach that sees youth as important actors in their communities. (See also Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010; Rios et al., 2010.)

The findings of this study show that many youth are concerned about issues that may be either surprising or familiar to adults and that youth want to be able to share their opinions. In addition, this project seeks to go beyond a stagnant picture of youth opinions to a dynamic and sustainable approach of interweaving youth viewpoints with community decision-making. The effort seeks both to develop methods to promote youth engagement and to develop ongoing and diverse mechanisms by which youth knowledge and opinions inform policy and planning in the region. In addition to encouraging youth to speak about the things they know and care about, we assert that delivery of youth concerns to adult decision makers should be authentic; that is, the message and the delivery method should be true to the skills, ideas and desires of the youth.

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Strengthen Social Media Capital through Youth Media. In an effort to engage youth and to be responsive to their skills and interests, we relied heavily upon digital media methods to record and share their opinions and ideas. Other research has shown that digital technologies can be used as tools for crossing borders that make it possible to reveal, generate or bridge lines of power and ownership between youth and adults and the institutions in which they participate (Goldman, Booker & McDermott, 2008). The PAR Team's youth projects utilized digital media as a participatory action research tool, drawing upon the methods of user- or visitor-employed photography (Cherem, 1974; Zeisel, 1980; Sanoff, 1991), photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), Participatory Video (White, 2003; Lunch & Lunch, 2006), and youth media (ross, 2001).

REACH Youth Media Project

Youth Voices for Change Project

User-employed photography emerged in the 1970s as a means to document perceptions of on-site visitors to tourist destinations and is currently used in many types of environment and behavior research (Taylor, et al., 1990). Photovoice "entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change, in their own communities" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). The explicit goals of photovoice are analogous to those of our project:

> (a) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (b) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues…, and (c) to reach policy makers and people who can be mobilized for change (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000, p. 82).

Similarly, Participatory Video is "a tool for positive social change, it is a means of empowerment for the marginalised and it is a process that encourages individuals and communities to take control of their destinies" (Lunch & Lunch, 2006, p. 4).

> Participatory Video is a set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film. The idea behind this is that making a video is easy and accessible, and is a great way of bringing people together to explore issues, voice concerns or simply to be creative and tell stories. This process can be very empowering, enabling a group or community to take action to solve their own problems and also to communicate their needs and ideas to decision-makers and/or other groups and communities. As such, PV can be a highly effective tool to engage and mobilise marginalised people and to help them implement their own forms of sustainable development based on local needs (Lunch & Lunch, 2006, p. 10).

In other words, people's ability to make a positive impact on their communities depends in part on their access to social networks, to power, and to the tools they need for action. In marginalized

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communities (such as the community of youth in general, as well as marginalized subpopulations of youth), use of social media can help prioritize community change issues overlooked by others.

> The ideal of developing, refining and amplifying the voice of each person is at the heart of the work of youth media organizations. The concept of voice is especially critical for youth who may be socially marginalized or disenfranchised from the conventional avenues of opportunity. The rationale behind youth media is to support youth to tell the tales of their own lives, cultures and communities in order to bring forth the voices that may have been silenced or usurped by others. There is also a certain justice in the skillful use of media tools by young people, since mainstream media has a penchant for ignoring, stereotyping and misrepresenting the young of each generation. By exploring their ability to articulate their concerns and desires, youth can move on to a position of agency where the conditions of the world as they know it can be explored and actively addressed. As their voices become more sophisticated through experience, their own unique choices and chances increase (Tyner, in ross, 2001, p. vii).

Through our experience on this project and building on the concept of "social capital" (Putnam, 2000), Montgomery-Block (2010) coined the term "*social media capital*" to describe *people's ability to access and use contemporary digital media technologies to self-identify issues related to systems of oppression, and to seek influential community support to create awareness and change*. The ability of young people to analyze power dynamics in family, school and community relationships is a critical component to positive social development. "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (Heilburn, 1998, p. 18). In many upper and middle class communities the ability to understand power and its relation to decision-making strengthens generational connections to wealth, social capital, democracy and civic engagement. In low-income or marginalized communities, however, support for developing this power is often not immediately evident and a lack of power traditions undermines positive civic engagement and strong connections to democracy.

Youth 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.

> Through such experiences, students learn how to use the technologies, but they also learn to understand the power relationships, to be critical about the assumptions, to speak the language (i.e., to use the discourse of the organizing systems), and generally, how to get things done. In these learning environments, identity and agency are thus intertwined (Goldman, Booker & McDermott, 2008, p. 186).

Like social capital, social media capital is a means to influence change. "Community social capital is predicated on the idea of self-determination for community residents to bring about desired community change" (Ginwright, Cammorota&Noguera, 2005, p. 24). Social media is indigenous to its producer(s) and the community from which it comes. It has the potential to bring about awareness and social action upon community-specific issues. In addition, youth efforts are often closely linked with community-based organizations and intergenerational partnerships; these relationships can play an influential role in soliciting community support that transcends boundaries of age, gender, religion, race, ethnicity, and so on.

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Figure 2: Map of Youth PAR Project Sites

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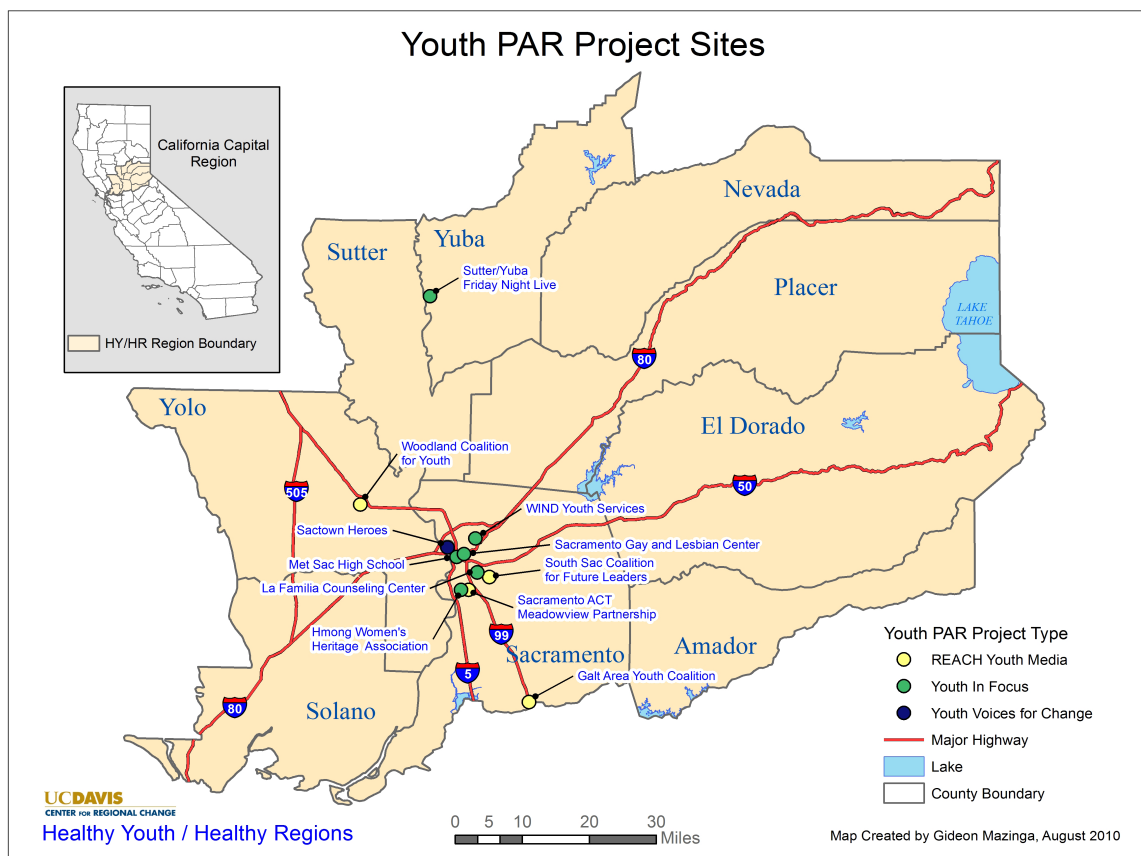Patsy Eubanks Owens, Alyssa A. Nelson, Amanda Perry, and Kindra F. Montgomery-Block

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The PAR Team component of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study consists of three primary endeavors, or sub-teams: Youth Voices for Change, REACH Youth Media Project, and Youth In Focus. All three sub-teams used youth-produced media techniques to gather and share youth perspectives with the broader community, to increase community awareness, and to gain and influence adult support for change. (See map in Figure 2 and table in Figure 3.) More detailed information on these projects can be found in the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions methodology paper (Romero, 2010).

A total of approximately 75 youth, ages 11 to 22, were involved in gathering and sharing stories through the 11 youth research and media projects. The youth participants came from culturally and ethnically diverse urban communities and small towns; the majority of youth are also from low-income families. Many are disenfranchised or marginalized because of their access to equipment or technology and/or because of their social identity (race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, primary language, national origin, immigration or citizenship status, etc.).[2] The participants were recruited in partnership with community-based organizations that hosted each project, with specific attention to gathering a diverse set of groups and individuals in order to convey the multiple stories and a regional story of youth in the Capital Region. Incentives were offered to encourage participation and consistency. The Youth Voices for Change and the Youth In Focus photo project participants who completed their project got to keep digital cameras; participants in the REACH Media project received stipends or other incentives such as gift cards. Youth and their organizations were also assured acknowledgment and credit for their work when cited or incorporated into the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study and into any other academic publications and presentations.[3]

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[2]   The youth participants in these projects were not selected in connection with any other parts of the larger Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study, such as in the testimonios. Although participants in these youth projects may resemble other youth participants in the broader Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study, those described and quoted here should not be assumed to be the same participants as elsewhere, and no conclusions about individual participants are intended to be drawn.

[3]   The youth-created products are included in the References, Section B.

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PAR Sub-Team	Site (Location)*	Project Name (type)	Partici-pants (#)	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity**
REACH Youth Media Project	Galt Area Youth Coalition	Small City, Big Problem: What Would You Do About It? (Video)	4	15-18	3F, 1M	1 African American; 3 Latino Americans
REACH Youth Media Project	Sacramento ACT Meadowview Partnership	Lack of Role Models in Our Community (Video)	2	15-16	2F, 3M	2 Latino Americans
REACH Youth Media Project	South Sacramento Coalition for Future Leaders	Education Depletion: Rising Up & Taking Action (Video)	2	17-19	1F, 1M	1 African American; 1 Hmong
REACH Youth Media Project	Woodland Coalition for Youth	Open Your Eyes: Teen Pregnancy (Video)	5	15-18	2F, 3M	5 Latino Americans
Youth In Focus	Hmong Women's Heritage Association (South Sacramento)	Voice Thru Photos (Photos)	4	15-17	1F, 3M	4 Hmong
Youth In Focus	La Familia Counseling Center (South Sacramento)	Gifted Young Ladies (Photos)	3	17	3F	1 African American; 2 Puerto Rican; 1 Chicana/o; 2 European American
Youth In Focus	Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center	Rainbow 916: A Sacramento LGBTQ Youth Narrative (Needs Assessment, Video)	25	13-22	10F, 12M, 2 Trans, 1 Intersex	5 Latina/o; 4 African American; 2 Asian/Asian American; 1 Native American; 10 European American; 3 Multiracial/Multiethnic
Youth In Focus	Sutter/Yuba Friday Night Live (Marysville)	Youth Memories (Photos)	4	12-16	2F, 2M	3 Latino/a; 2 European American
Youth In Focus	The Met Sacramento Charter High School	One Day at a Time: The Making of the Resource Room (Needs Assessment, Video)	5	15-17	3F, 2M	1 African American; 1 East Indian; 3 European American; 1 Latino/a
Youth In Focus	WIND Youth Services (Sacramento/Del Paso Heights)	Eyes of the Youth (PhotoVoice)	4	19-21	2F, 2M	3 African American; 1 East Asian
Youth Voices for Change	Sactown Heroes - West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition	Youth Voices for Change (Mixed Media: Photos, Video, Google Map, Comic Book)	17	11-19	2F, 15M	7 African American; 7 White; 6 Native American; 3 Latino; 2 Portuguese; 1 Chicano/Latino, 1 Pacific Islander

*Sites listed are the meeting locations; some groups drew members from a wider geographical area than others.
** Numbers represent the total of each racial or ethnic group; respondents were able to indicate multiple groups.
Each project was conducted by a group of young people that was sometimes in flux, and some of the demographic information was estimated and/or collected differently at each site.

Figure 3: Youth Participants in Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions Participatory Action Research Projects

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Together, the Youth In Focus, REACH Youth Media, and Youth Voices for Change projects provide an ample set of youth-generated findings and recommendations that reflect many shared assets, needs and ideas for youth in the region and for the region as a whole.

Although the PAR Team's effort focused on collecting individual stories, we found that many similar stories were shared across communities and by youth of various ages and social identities. Because of the nature of this research, we cannot analyze differences between or among genders, ages, locations or other sub-categories. This report presents the young people's collective story, but does not attempt to ascribe this story necessarily to all youth. This section does, however, draw out some elements from the media projects that speak to the causes of disparities and challenges to well-being. Four themes appear to be common to the youth comments collected in the 11 youth participatory action research and media projects, which we have labeled as: I. Education, II. Support, III. Transportation, and IV. Community Pride & Place. Recreation and safety are also touched upon.

Youth Voices for Change

I. Education. Schools play an important part in the daily lives of youth and as such were frequently talked about by the participants in our study. (See also Erbstein et al., 2010 and Rios et al., 2010.) Youth—as symbolic owners of schools—asserted their right and special ability to evaluate schools critically, and their responses raise important questions about how to incorporate youth voice and vision in school institutions. Discussions were primarily centered on school-based education, therefore the results reported here focus on those educational settings. Although many topics were raised by the youth, for the purposes of this report we focus on four: (a) quality of education, (b) adult attitudes and relationships, (c) peer interactions and (d) school climate.

(a) Concern for low quality of education – Many youth expressed frustration that the focus on "No Child Left Behind" has had a negative impact on curriculum. For example, elective classes in many school districts are no longer offered. In addition, youth thought there was inadequate advising and preparation for college. Many thought that all high school students should graduate with the prerequisites and therefore the option of attending college. Lastly, some of the youth questioned the quality of teaching in their schools.

> There was a beginning to phase out certain elective classes such as architecture at JFK [and] less funding for sports. Elective classes are necessary to gain life … skills and personal skills…elective options allow students to discover themselves.[4]

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[4] RVS 35:51 & 36:19. Note: These codes following quotations refer to the originating youth project and either the video time mark or the photograph – (YV = Youth Voices for Change, RV = REACH Video, YIF = Youth In Focus). Any misspellings and other typos in quotations have been changed for publication.

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(b) Desire for positive adult attitudes and relationships – Many youth thought there was an underlying attitude of distrust (and possibly dislike) of students among school staff. The youth want to feel welcome and supported at schools and thought the adults need to serve as positive role models. In general, youth are looking for respect, fairness and equity at their schools, and they talk about how education is valued in their families.

> My parents did not have the opportunity to go to school... even though we have had a lot of problems…I have a lot of pressure on me they have always supported me to pursue higher education… without their support I would not be inspired to work hard.[5]

(c) Importance of peer interactions not valued enough – School is the primary place where youth get to see their friends; therefore, they would like for the school to acknowledge and support their need to talk to friends. Young people want opportunities and places where they can spend unprogrammed time together. Problems between and among youth—particularly among various groups of youth—such as bullying and general safety concerns were also mentioned. Students at the Met Sacramento High School shared their reasoning for creating an on-campus resource room, capturing the following statement in an interview:

> I really wanted [other students] to know that there was a place for them to go, so that, ya know, if they have a problem and they didn't want to talk about, they could find help in another way. Also just to be able to sit and relax. [6]

(d) Craving a positive school climate – "A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society" (Cohen, et al., 2009,p. 180). Youth develop perceptions of their school environment from cues on campus, such as adult attitudes. Those cues also include evidence of adequate resources (such as books in good condition and appropriate furnishings), care and quality of school buildings and grounds, nutritious and good quality food, and the valuing of diverse cultures (one's own and others). This interviewee in the Meadowview REACH video shared how she gets cultural and family support for her learning goals:

> My sisters from the start encouraged me to be in programs… because I had to stick with them I had to do what they did…They were very involved in programs that's why I am in Hmong Women's Heritage – and I am a part of the Eternal Growth group it gives you the opportunities to become better leaders.[7]

II. Support. Youth express the need for many different types of support, and suggest formal and informal means of getting that support (See also Erbstein et al. 2010; Breslau et al. 2010). Youth comments relating to the support that they find in their communities were evident in many different contexts and are touched upon in the previous discussions on schools. However, a more focused

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[5]   RVM 17:09

[6]   YIF/MET 1:55

[7]   RVM 16:15

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examination is warranted to answer these questions: where do youth find (or not find) support, who provides it and what types of support are valued?

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. [8]

YIF: Youth Memories

Support or lack of support occurs in the various realms of youths' lives. Home, schools and organizations were settings mentioned by the youth. In several instances, youth talked about the support they received at after-school programs. These programs were created with the explicit intent of providing youth with some type of assistance or just a place to go. Youth perceived these programs as helping them to reach their goals. Schools, on the other hand, were not perceived as very supportive places by the youth. Many thought that large class sizes prevented the teachers from providing individual attention.

I think schools are a positive place for learning but mostly negative because kids aren't really supported at schools. [9]

Social networks are important to the everyday lives of youth. 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. The responses include connections to other youth, adults and persons of similar backgrounds (cultural, sexual identity, recreational interests), degrees of access to information, support and activities, and the youth role in civic discourse. The REACH Meadowview documentary included interviews of adult supporters of youth, who said:

The consequences of the lack of positive role models is a huge contribution to youth making the wrong decisions such as joining gangs, consuming drugs, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. [10]

Youth Voices for Change

From being a youth activist promoting and advocating for youth needs… and understanding how the community does need to focus on the youth and help nurture us

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[8] YIF/Youth Memories
[9] YV/Google Map
[10] RVM 13:39

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into successful adults, I do feel like I am a good role model for the youth.[11]

Many young people thought that the community should nurture youth and try to show other young people that they are not alone. This opinion is supported by the findings of others (see for example, MacDonald & Marsh, 2001), and in youth-led projects such as the Met Sacramento High School resource room project quoted above.

Many people are in positions to provide support to youth. Parents, siblings, friends, teachers and other adults were mentioned by youth. In particular, parents and siblings provided positive support for the youth – "they are there from the beginning" and "they stick with you even when you make bad choices" were sentiments shared by youth. We also heard about positive influences of siblings either through examples of their behavior or by their encouragement. Youth voiced a desire for more opportunities for peer support. Unfortunately, we heard many negative comments regarding support from teachers. One young person felt that teachers often exaggerate problems and are not always truthful with parents. Other adults in the community, particularly those associated with youth programs were perceived as very support-ive.

Youth Voices for Change

…Another person is John, he's the owner of the Teen Center, and I thank him cuz if he didn't make this teen center I would be nowhere… Before I didn't have anything to do in my life, just stay home, hang out with my friends.[12]

Community centers offer positive activities that may lower youth participation in dangerous activities, and supportive people and places may help prevent isolation that may lead to suicide. (See also Geraghty, 2010.)

In addition to helping us understand where youth find support and who provides it, these PAR projects contribute to understanding of the types of supports that are important to youth (see also del Valle, Bravo & Lopez, 2009). Youth look to their peers, siblings, parents and other adults for different types of support. Peer support is needed because it includes empathy that is not provided by other sources. Youth want to be able to share with others who understand and have (recently) experienced similar situations. Non-judgmental support is needed from adults: typically non-parent, non-school adults. Youth value having an older person they can talk to who will listen and not criticize or lecture. Youth also value parents who provide unconditional support, inspiration and encouragement. One note of concern voiced in many of the projects is that "different" youth, for example LGBTQI youth, are not supported and in many cases not accepted.

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[11]   RVM 19:10

[12]   YV/Google Map

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We have teachers that still are doing outwardly anti-LGBT things to students. Making students uncomfortable, harassing and bullying students, and allowing other students to do that.[13]

Similarly, participants in the Youth In Focus photo projects decried the realities of poverty, racism, and "hate" in general. Many of the PAR Teams' projects highlighted the mistreatment of homeless populations and the dire, seemingly-overlooked needs for many forms of support for homeless youth, such as transportation.
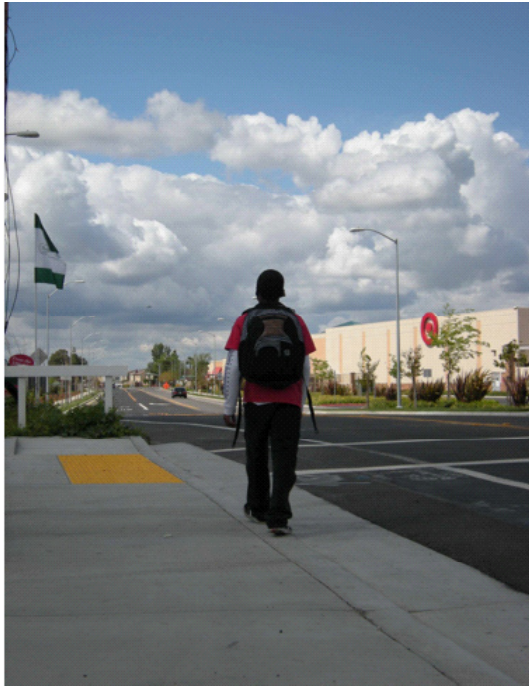
Youth Voices for Change

III. Transportation. The teen years represent a time of increased independence and mobility for most youth (see also Kuhns, 2010; Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010). The stories presented by the youth illustrate some of the issues that youth face as they embark on navigating this new freedom and responsibility. These issues include their concerns regarding cost, convenience and availability of transportation options, the safety of routes and modes of travel, and the quality of their experience. Availability of transportation also directly affects youths' access to employment, civic engagement activities and resources such as health care.

Many youth described their frustration with a lack of transportation options particularly relating to public buses. Youth in small communities, homeless youth, and LGBTQI youth noted the need to get to other communities for both leisure pursuits and group support. An adult interviewee in the Rainbow 916 video explained:

A lot of [our kids] have to lie about where they're going. And it's out of basic necessity… 'I need to be around other LGBT people to feel semi-sane.'…They'll do anything to get here, and it shouldn't be that way.[14]

The bus system provides adequate coverage to many but not all of the places youth want to go, yet the schedules provide only hourly or peak-time service. The youth often have a tight schedule to get between school and another activity, and if the bus schedule does not align with theirs, they have to find another mode of travel. In addition, if a transfer between buses is required, the time to get somewhere is even greater. The cost to ride the bus also makes it prohibitive for many youth.

Transportation in West Sacramento is really slow…if you miss a bus then you have to wait like a whole 'nother hour to catch another one that goes to the same place.[15]

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[13]   YIF/Rainbow916 18:58

[14]   IF/Rainbow916 8:11

[15]   YV/Google Map

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Safety related to their primary transportation modes (walking, biking and skateboarding) was a prominent concern for many youth. Most bike and walking routes follow heavily used traffic routes and dedicated bike lanes are limited. Youth have to ride along existing roadways and often this means sharing the road with large trucks and fast traffic. This experience is very intimidating and potentially dangerous. (See also Kuhns, 2010; Geraghty, 2010).

YIF: Eyes of the Youth

"Many people rely on transportation in order to get around places. However with tough time as gas prices being high and public transportations getting strict by adding or changing rules and cutting services times as great effect on young and every adult so much. In this picture it talks about a young youth who had to ask for change just so that he could get home safe and himself warm since it was cold and raining."[16]

 Lastly, the quality of their transportation experience was inportant to the youth. Whether describing their long wait for a bus, bicycling on city streets or walking in their neighborhoods, the youth voiced a desire to enjoy their experience. For many of the young people, walking in their community can be an unpleasant experience. Like with bicycling, they often travel along the same routes as the cars and do not like the noise and fumes. In addition, the sidewalks are frequently in disrepair, narrow or missing. Since taking the bus can take a long time and bicycling can be dangerous, youth often walk great distances. In addition, many youth elect to walk instead of bicycle; as they get older their perception is that biking is less "cool." Some youth thought a pedestrian and biking system to link where people live to where they want to go would be beneficial. In addition, they suggested walking routes to allow access to the natural areas around the community so that everyone could experience the recreational and restorative benefits of walking.
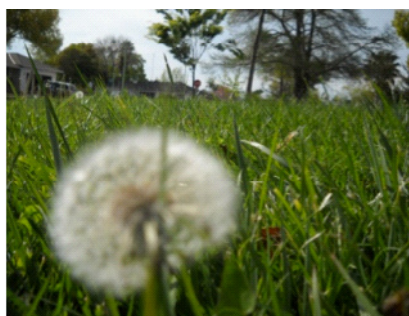
IV. Community Pride and Place. The youth participating in our studies often mentioned the built environment, or place. These places, including both their positive and negative aspects, provide some indication of the role the physical environment plays in the daily lives of young people and in their overall perception of where they live. (See also Erbstein et al., 2010; Rios et al., 2010.) This is perhaps more important than it might appear on face value; pride can be and often is a terrific motivator for both youth and adults, and shared pride in community, or the desire to make a community a place that all be proud of, is one common bond that can link people who might otherwise not see eye to eye. In general, the youth thought that it is important for people to feel proud of where they grow up and live, and to believe that the community respects and values its residents. Community upkeep and appearance, opportunities for being with nature and protecting nature, opportunities for participation, feeling like youth belong, and the availability of community services were all raised and contribute to a young person's sense of community pride.

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[16]	YIF/Eyes of Youth

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Community cultural wealth also plays a major role in community pride and place (see for example, Yosso, 2005). Many of the young people we worked with spoke about the explicit connection between where they live and the ability to successfully navigate social systems and physical places despite the social barriers that may exist (see also London et al., 2010; Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010). Youth find pride and value in the shared cultural geography that makes up their neighborhoods. This wealth supports the ability of diverse youth to come together across divisions based on socio-economic status, ethnicity, race or heritage; these youth are able to connect because they view their community as a place where "we are from," giving them access, empowerment, and community knowledge that is unique to them.

The young people overwhelmingly wanted their communities to look nice. The youth drew connections between how clean and well maintained a place was to how much the civic leaders care about its residents, how much the residents care about where they live, and how safe a place appeared. The upkeep of a place provides a signal to youth that adults have invested time and effort to making the community safe and nice. Unkempt alleyways, parks and school grounds are disliked by youth. Garbage and poor maintenance are not only unattractive, but they make places seem infrequently used by others and unsafe. Natural spaces in urban and rural areas were pinpointed as having importance. The following two quotations from photo captions express these sentiments.

Nature come within the earth and it will always stay with us and live on forever; This exists because of the beauty of life; This can educate people that nature is beautiful and we should go green.[17]

People dumping in the wrong place polluting the water, killing the fish. People being unkept and not following what is right.[18]

YIF: Voice Thru Photos

Youth also spoke about opportunities they have had for participating in community improvements and events (see also Romero, London, & Erbstein, 2010). They value and enjoy the times they have been involved in hands-on efforts to beautify and improve their communities. Along with these place-based improvement projects, the youth would like to see more opportunities to join with other community members in celebration. They enjoy meeting other people in the community and just having fun. Several youth commented that there are not enough community-based events that are just for the purpose of celebrating a special holiday or event in the community's history.

> *The Senior Center is a place that the Sactown Heroes changed and it's a safer place for the seniors to hang out in, and it's like a little garden, and I think they really liked it.* [19]

Community pride for the youth is evidenced by the availability of community services. In particular, addressing the needs of the community's homeless population is of great concern to the youth. The

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[17]   YIF/HWHA/GER, photo caption
[18]   YIF/HWHA/GER, photo caption
[19]   YV/Google Map

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repeated designation of homelessness as an issue by youth other than the homeless youth themselves demonstrates how youth extend the concept of "support" beyond their own needs. They see homeless people and evidence of their activities throughout the community. The youth want to make sure that the unique needs of this group are being met.

> *…there is a lot of homeless people…, but not all homeless people are bad, they just need somewhere to live, like a shelter. And not many shelters are near here, so there needs to be more shelters for homeless people in this town.*[20]

Homeless youth from WIND Youth Services elaborated on the many needs of youth like themselves, from transportation, to healthcare, to education and more. One of these youth participants took a picture of a tree in bloom to symbolize how important beauty was to him as a person who spends much time outdoors, and how the city should put more effort into creating and maintaining beautiful spaces.

YIF: Eyes of the Youth

Finally, youth described ambivalent perceptions of law enforcement. Although most youth recognize that the police provide an admirable service to the community and many have had positive and supportive interactions with the police, they think it is important to also be aware of the interactions that are negative and unsupportive. Some youth feel that racial profiling is a common practice and that some persons are treated unfairly. The perception of a difference in treatment of various populations is basis for hurt and a diminished sense of pride.

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[20]   YV/Google Map

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The youth-generated data, analysis, findings and recommendations demonstrate the importance of gathering youth perspectives, engaging youth in creating and sharing knowledge, and promoting youth involvement in civic discussions and decision-making. (See also Romero & London, 2010.) Together, they make the case for applying and incorporating youth voice, envisioning and understanding youth environments, and sustaining youth voice.

Applying and Incorporating Youth Voice
Youth involvement can have a powerful and lasting impact not only for the youth participants, but for the entire community. An implication of the PAR Team's work is that youth voice should become a well-integrated component of public decision making throughout the region. To be the most powerful and successful, youth involvement should grow out of the youth's understanding of a situation (Hart, 1997), as opposed to a tokenistic approach. Youth should be given authentic and meaningful roles if their contributions are to truly have impact.

In addition, these experiences have the potential to contribute to more positive development among youth. When youth take on leadership roles, they begin to see themselves as contributing members of society as they increase social and emotional well-being. While contributing to the community, youth gain skills, talents, and habits of success (Post & Little, 2005).

This study illustrates how and why the most marginalized youth and disenfranchised communities should be engaged to assure that everyone affected has a say. It also shows that youth-led media projects can play an innovative and effective role in engaging youth in progressive social change initiatives as well as launching improvements to their built environment. Social media capital, as discussed in this paper, can be fostered as one effective means of support.

> *I learned that if we all get together and set a goal we can do something really good in our community.*[21]

In marginalized communities, use of social media can help prioritize community change issues overlooked by others, as the closing narration of the Woodland "Open Your Eyes" documentary illustrates:

> *Through this documentary we have learned that many solutions can be found at home in order to reduce teen pregnancy in our community. Every adult must join our effort and increase communication. Practice your morals and your values and promote awareness… Seeing hearing, and speaking the truth will strengthen the connection among us all.*[22]

Envisioning and Understanding Youth Environments
The key findings of our research point to the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the role of the built environment in a young person's healthy development. Evidence of the importance

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[21]   RVG 11:32
[22]   RVW 1:08:05

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of the physical environment to a person's health is increasing (Frumkin, Frank & Jackson, 2004). The place where a person lives and spends time can contribute to their physical, psychological/emotional, and social well-being (see Figure 4). This research supports the growing understanding of how the built environment influences the development of youth and how youth can influence the improvement and creation of supportive places.

Figure 4: A Model of Healthy Youth Development (created by Patsy Eubanks Owens, from ongoing research)

Built environments provide the settings for youth to develop their competence, connection, compassion, character, and confidence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2005; Little, 1993; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Places where youth engage with their peers provide opportunities for developing their self-identify and creating positive bonds with others. Likewise, community-gathering places provide opportunities for developmental growth in areas such as gaining respect for societal rules. In addition, the state of the built environment can either encourage or discourage activity and thereby negatively affect the physical health of its residents.

The physical environment also sends signals regarding the commitment of community leaders, the importance of its residents, and the image or reputation of the community to its youth. As shown in our findings on community pride, youth need to see the literal evidence that community leaders are investing in the physical appearance and upkeep of the built environment.

Our research begins to provide some evidence as to a lack of understanding of the broad role of the physical environment on healthy outcomes for youth (and the population at large). It also provides direction as to the types of environments and improvements that can lead more supportive and responsive places.

Sustaining Youth Voice

One objective of the PAR Team was to establish a mechanism for youth to continue to share their opinions and concerns with each other, with adults, and with civic leaders. We have pursued this objective through the development of a regional Youth Story Map, an ongoing media forum and ambassador program, and a Youth Voices Guidebook.

The web-based map developed by the Sactown Heroes (ross, Schmidt & Owens, 2009) provides a model for collecting and sharing youth viewpoints throughout the region. We intend to develop a regional Youth Story Map that other youth and youth groups can contribute to on an ongoing basis. The regional Youth Story Map will enable youth to generate, share and access information, and will provide a resource for decision makers. To ensure longevity of the map and a way to moderate content, we are working with Healthy City to create a youth-friendly, interactive website to display
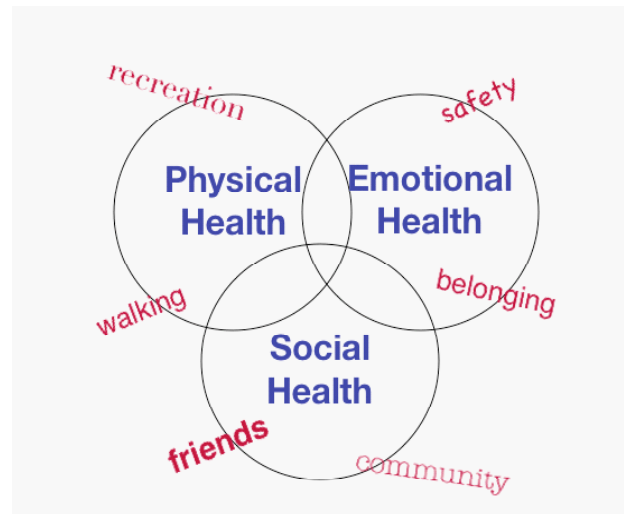
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existing and future youth media.[23]

In collaboration with multiple community partners, we helped produce a regional youth media forum, held at the KCRA Channel 3 studio in Sacramento in May 2010.[24] The goals of the forum were to showcase and support a regional effort for youth-led community change through social media,

Youth Media Forum for Social Change

establish a regional network of youth and adults that can share and create advocacy tools for community change through social media, and connect youth-led community issues identified in the media forum to current regional equity research. Participation was solicited through a public call for submissions, whereby projects were selected for inclusion in the event; two PAR Team youth projects (the Woodland REACH video and the Youth Voices for Change map) were featured along with nine other youth media projects from the region. Plans for future, ongoing forums are in the works. In conjunction with the forum, we see an opportunity to develop a youth media ambassador program in which experienced youth would train and encourage other youth to join the youth media movement.

Finally, the PAR Team is producing a Youth Voices Guidebook (Owens & Perry, forthcoming). The guidebook and an accompanying video will be a resource for anyone looking to capture and share youth stories, particularly those interested in creating change in their community. The guidebook presents a way to conduct youth-led processes with adult support, and includes strategies for engaging youth, working with community partners and incorporating media into research. It will highlight stories gathered, media produced and lessons learned from the Youth Voices for Change and other PAR Team projects.

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[23]   Healthy City is an organization with the purpose of "improving the ability of communities and organizations in the Sacramento region to use data and mapping tools in planning and advocacy efforts" (Healthy City, 2010).

[24]   http://capitalregion-socialmedia4change.ning.com/

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Two other issues, recreation and safety, emerged from the youth projects and warrant more detailed examination. While connected to the other themes discussed above, such as support and place, we suggest further youth-led research to elaborate upon these areas.

SP has big jumps
We have fun at the skate park
Leave before it's dark

Youth Voices for Change

Many youth talked about their individual recreational pursuits as well as the recreational opportunities available to them. These recreation-centered activities provide youth with opportunities to socialize with their friends, have fun and get exercise. Youth voiced a desire to have more opportunities to participate in affordable and convenient recreation. Along with natural settings, community parks are an obvious location for youth to engage in recreational activities, however, most parks have no recreational facilities that are designed for adolescents, other than an occasional skateboard park with specialized users. Typical parks often do not allow adolescents to use play structures, although teens periodically still enjoy swinging, sliding and climbing. In addition, for older youth desired recreation settings may not be the typical park or playfield. Many youth find recreation in commercial settings such walking at the mall with friends or going to a movie.

As noted earlier, we received indications from the youth that safety was a concern for most. Their concerns focused on both actual safety and perceived safety. Issues of safety were evident in a range of settings including their school, home, neighborhood and more. Our research did not focus on or uncover the extent or detailed nature of safety concerns, but we learned enough to want to ask more questions.

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Conclusion

Additional and subsequent youth-led projects in the Capital Region, and cross-analysis of their findings, would likely provide fruitful recommendations and actions, especially because more individuals and groups would be contributing their unique stories, and because needs and assets may change over time. Healthy youth environments depend on a variety of factors, some of which have been presented here. Most importantly, youth need to be included as critical actors –envisioning, creating, and protecting these environments— not just as occasional contributors, but as partners and leaders along with the other members of their communities. Youth participatory action research and digital media can be effective ways to identify community assets and needs and to make recommendations for improvement. Mechanisms for including youth voice must be embedded in institutional, community and regional planning and evaluation. 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 to create a healthy region for all.

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