



Emerging Youth Power in the Inland Empire

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Introduction

Youth organizations have long played a central role in promoting young people’s engagement in democratic processes. They can provide them with knowledge, skills, and developmental supports so that they can collectively exercise their voice and political power. Yet the civic infrastructure to support youths’ engagement in policy change and voter engagement efforts remains uneven across the state of California.

This report takes stock of emerging youth power in the Inland Empire by describing and contextualizing key youth-serving organizations. It begins with a historical overview of the two counties that make up the region (Riverside and San Bernardino), focusing on migration, exclusionary politics, and the political economy. After outlining the demographic composition of young people in the Inland Empire, we share an overview of youth programming. While the youth organizing infrastructure remains limited given the region’s population size, we note emerging patterns of youth leadership and power-building. Drawing on surveys from 12 organizations and 18 in-depth interviews with youth leaders, we discuss youths’ involvement in political campaigns, showing how these efforts develop their ability to lead ongoing civic action. Our report highlights an impressive increase in voter turnout between the 2014 and 2018 elections, and notes that youth played an important role in making sure that their peers cast their ballot in 2020. At the same time, our research demonstrates the need to continue reaching out to emerging and young voters. The conclusion highlights the importance of ongoing investments in youth programming that supports young people’s abilities to become informed participants in community change efforts. This report includes an appendix listing some recent youth-led grassroots organizing campaign victories.



The Inland Empire in Context

Located just east of Los Angeles and Orange counties, the Inland Empire (IE) is home to over 4.5 million people. The IE is one of the country's fastest growing metropolitan areas, and its regional demographics have shifted substantially over the last few decades. The IE was 73 percent white as recently as 1980. Today, the region is majority Latino, with Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders and Black residents each composing 7 percent of the population. Racial diversity, however, is not new to the region. In fact, as early as the mid-1800s, the IE has been home to a significant multiracial population (Carpio 2019). Still, the region's long history is tainted with racist violence and domination, setting the stage for growing socio-economic inequities over the years.

Beginning with the arrival of Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth century, the IE experienced multiple waves of settlement on Indigenous territories (Carpio 2019). The Spanish crown ruled from 1769 until 1821, when Mexico achieved independence and what is now the IE became part of Mexico. With the termination of the Mexican American War in 1848, the IE (along with the rest of California) became part of the United States. The discovery of gold the following year accelerated California's path to statehood in 1850, joining the republic as a "free" state less than a decade before the start of the Civil War. Despite several centuries of settler colonialism, the IE remains home to 15 federally recognized Tribal Nations (Center for Community Innovation UCR 2019; Patterson 2016).

Further displacement and exclusion of Native populations occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the IE became known as the "Citrus Belt" or the "Orange Empire." Citrus groves were the economic thrust of regional development, with IE boosters organizing dense global networks to send locally grown fruit across the world (Carpio 2019). During this period, "[c]itrus, speculative capital, and race combined to produce a regional political culture in which a white agricultural elite held political power over a highly racialized Mexican, Chicano, and Asian labor force" (De Lara 2018:115). Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, and other Asian laborers actually composed the majority of nonwhite migrants before increasing immigration restrictions on Asia such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 led agricultural employers to turn to the growing Mexican population as the primary workforce for industrial agriculture (Carpio 2019). The financial center of the citrus industry, however, was based in Los Angeles, fortifying economic linkages between Los Angeles and the IE that transformed the broader region into an economic powerhouse in the twentieth century (De Lara 2018).

A second major wave of migration to the IE occurred during World War II as Henry J. Kaiser built one of only two steel mills west of the Mississippi River in Fontana, CA, in the early 1940s. Manufacturing, railroads, and military bases drew African Americans, Asians, Latinxs, and working-class whites into the region, sometimes encountering extreme hostility (De Lara 2018). For example, in 1945, when O'Day Short, a Black refrigerator engineer, purchased a lot in a white neighborhood in Fontana, white vigilantes and sheriff's deputies urged him to relocate to the northern part of town to "avoid problems." After Short refused to move, the vigilantes set off an explosion in his home, killing his entire family. Local officials ruled the fire an accident, even though an arson investigator hired by the NAACP testified that the fire had been intentionally set (Avalos 2015). Twenty years later, in 1965, as Riverside was beginning to desegregate schools through voluntary busing, Black and Mexican American parents in the city's Eastside neighborhood organized to address the school board about the community's vast educational inequities. The night before the start of the new school year, Eastside's predominantly minority Lowell School was burned down by an arsonist (Straight 2013). In both the Short and Lowell arson cases, no arrests were

ever made. Therefore, even though the IE did not have Jim Crow segregation laws on the books, white vigilante violence and intimidation, which was either ignored or fortified by local authorities, enforced the color line in the region throughout the twentieth century. This history of white supremacy shaped the politics in the region, as well as the reception newer migrants received. For example, Juan De Lara (2018:121) describes how “the threat of racial violence during the 1980s and 1990s was so pervasive that Fontana gained reputation as KKK territory.”

New arrivals began moving into the IE in the late twentieth century during an era of deindustrialization that fueled racial resentments. Kaiser Steel shuttered its Fontana mill in 1984, and the Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino closed in 1994, generating destructive ripple effects throughout the economy and starving the region’s supportive industries (Carpio 2019). Some residents blamed the ensuing job losses on the region’s changing demographics. The white supremacist violence and intimidation, including KKK marches, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s that terrorized IE communities of color was in part a response to deindustrialization and the relative decline of the white population. This violent legacy continues to shape racial dynamics today. In 2010, two white supremacists, including the head of the state chapter of the largest neo-Nazi group in the country, made news after running for seats on a local water district and school board (Cuevas 2010). Moreover, a 2020 Anti-Defamation League report documented a rise in white supremacist propaganda in the IE, and there have been numerous incidents of high school students across the region posing with racist symbols like swastikas and the Confederate flag (Bharath 2020).



Klu Klux Kan members march through residential streets in Fontana, CA, November 28, 1981. Photo by Mike Mullen, Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library. Reprinted from De Lara (2018, page 121).

This racial hostility in the IE has occurred within the context of changing demographics and population growth. From 1980 to 2018, the white share of the population in the IE dropped from 73 percent to 31 percent, with Latinx now composing the majority of the population. The region also grew by nearly 1 million people in the first decade of the twenty-first century, due in part to the housing boom. In fact, in 2006 more than half (54 percent) of California's new homes were built in the IE (De Lara 2018:142). The region became a destination for a growing Black and Latino middle class seeking to leave Los Angeles and purchase a suburban home. Housing affordability was a major draw for all racial/ethnic groups, but the 2008 foreclosure crisis ultimately stripped many households, particularly Black and Latino ones, of the ability to build wealth through homeownership. The IE's housing market instability, coupled with the long commutes of many residents, did not thus lead to the same levels of homeownership and intergenerational wealth transmission for Black families as "the postwar suburbs did for the parents and grandparents of many whites" (Pfeiffer 2012:367).

Job growth in the region has been concentrated in low-wage retail, food, and warehouse work. Just as the IE's citrus industry had close ties with Los Angeles in the 1800s and 1900s, the region's twenty-first century's logistics industry is also interconnected with Los Angeles. The IE became a "distribution pipeline" from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to the rest of the nation as part of a regional effort to transform the broader Southern California region into "the country's largest logistics gateway for trans-pacific goods" (De Lara 2018:23). This effort has been largely successful, as one journalist explained: "If you own stuff made in China—the phone in your pocket, the shoes on your feet—chances are good that some of it passed through an Inland Empire warehouse" (Carpio 2019:24). But this "inland solution" also came with costs, especially in the form of environmental hazards produced by diesel trucks. The logistics industry needed more space than the densely populated Los Angeles could offer, seeking areas that could absorb even greater port container traffic and that did not have the same community organizing infrastructure and resources (De Lara 2018). The IE's relatively cheap land and labor served perfectly. However, as some environmental and community activists in the IE have pointed out, this "regional solution—which reduced pressure on poor communities near the ports—simply shifted the toxic burden to marginalized communities in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties" (De Lara 2018:57).

In the context of increasing poverty and precarity—driven in part by the Great Recession and now exacerbated by the pandemic—many IE cities have chosen to invest more in policing than in policies that support and incorporate residents, including young adults. By 2018, IE cities were spending over \$1 billion annually on police (Mendiola Ross 2020). The cities of Ontario and Riverside, for example, each spent over \$100 million on police in 2018, more than 3.5 times what they spent on planning, housing, and community development. Six IE cities, San Bernardino among them, devoted over 30 percent of all spending (including utility-related expenses and payments on long-term debt) to police budgets. For comparison, Oakland and Los Angeles each devoted roughly 18 percent of their total spending to police that same year. In other words, the IE cities disproportionately invest in law-enforcement-based strategies to address social issues.

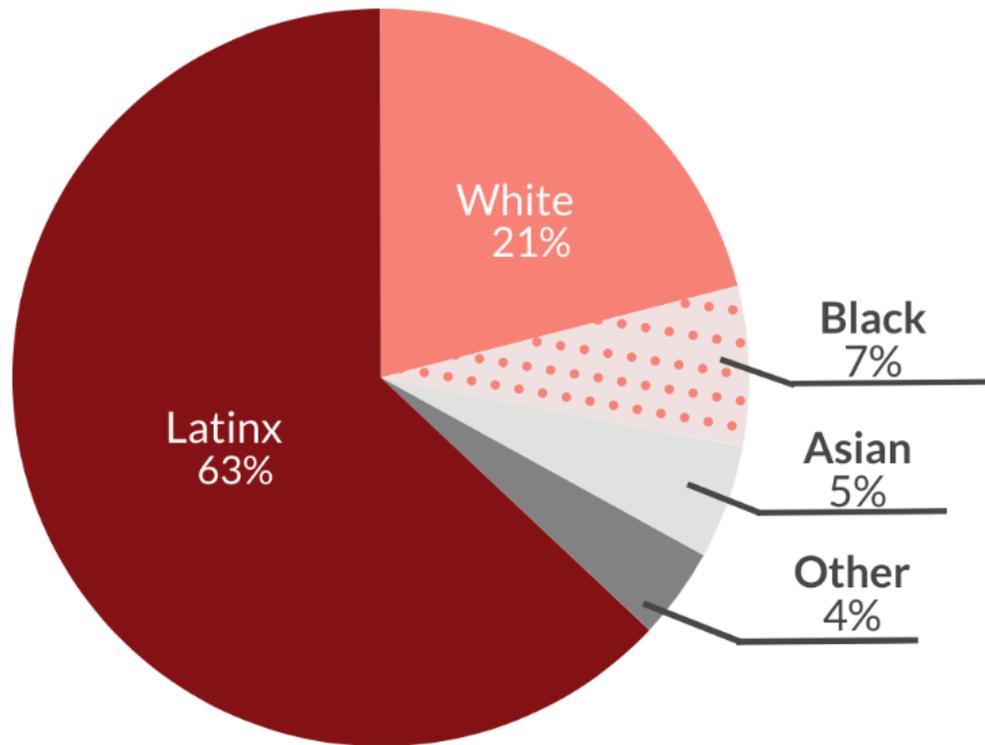
Despite the IE's challenges, its future holds great potential, and its political elite is slowly becoming more diverse. For example, in 2010, only 1 of the 10 county supervisors across the region's two counties was a person of color (De Lara 2018). In 2021, this number has risen to 3. Although there has been a modest shift in the ethnic and racial diversity of municipal elected leaders, there is still much work to be done to ensure more equitable representation and accountability, including in unincorporated areas in the region. Despite vast inequities in political participation and representation across the IE, recent indicators suggest a promising trend: voter registration and turnout has increased tremendously since 2012, particularly among youth, women, and communities of color (Center for Community Innovation UCR 2019). New philanthropic investments and civic initiatives focused on building youth power are key to sustaining this momentum and creating a more just and prosperous region.



Youth Demographics

The region's population is young and very diverse, opening up opportunities for more inclusive political and cultural change. The median age is 36, but ranges from 45 among the IE's white population to just 31 among the region's Latinx population. Well over a third (36 percent) of the population is under 25 years old. Statewide, that youth share is 32 percent, most of whom are people of color. Among IE residents under the age of 25, just under two-thirds (63 percent) identify as Latinx, while white residents make up only 21 percent of the young population. Of the remaining youth, 7 percent identify as Black, 5 percent as Asian, and 4 percent as another race.

Racial Composition of Inland Empire Residents Under Age 25

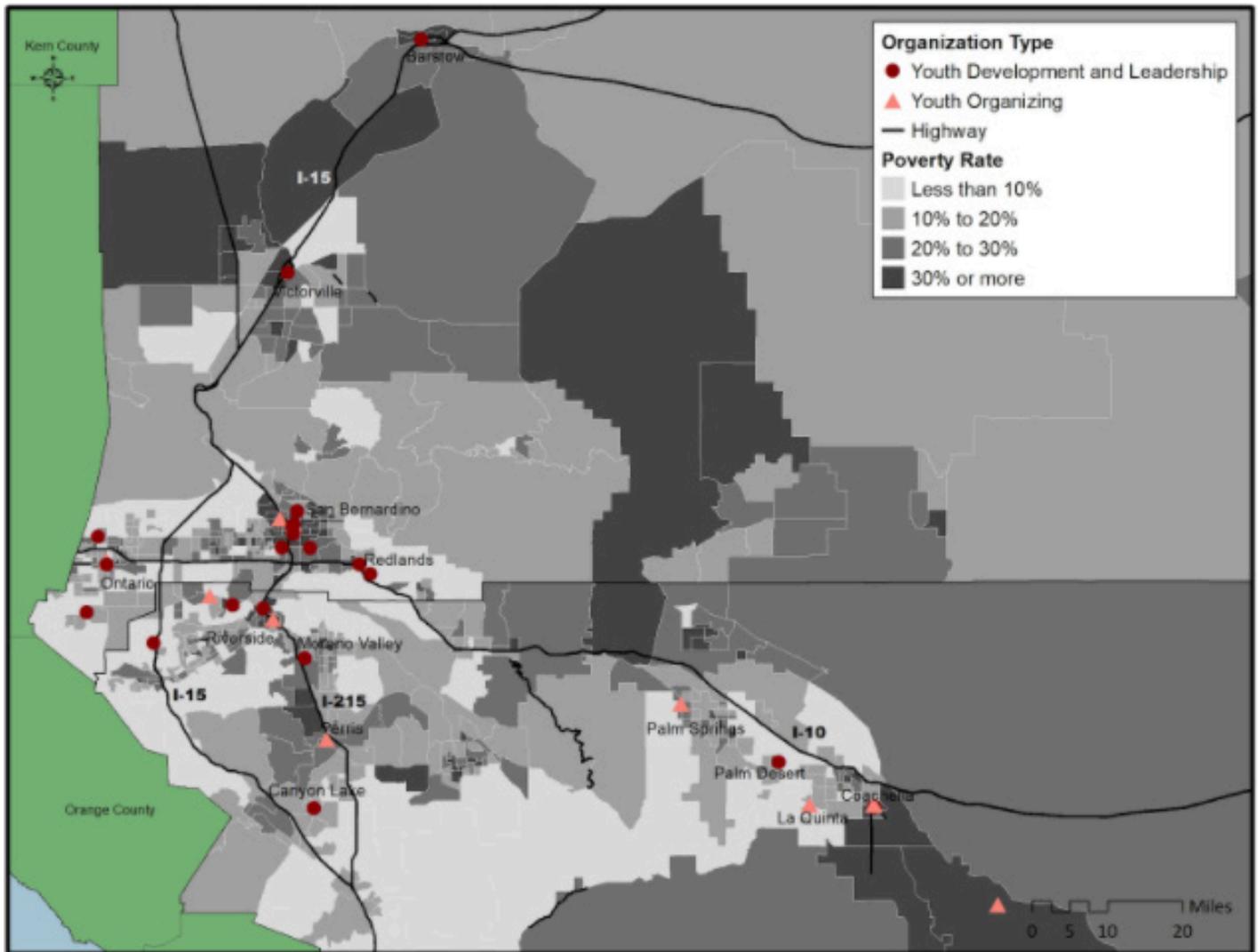


Data Source: American Community Survey, 2018

Youth-Serving Organizations in the Inland Empire

Caring, supportive environments stimulate positive neurological adaptations that help young people not only recover from setbacks but also thrive in the present (Fuhrmann, Knoll and Blakemore 2015; Guyer, Silk and Nelson 2016). Youth-serving non-profit organizations in the Inland Empire may offer such nurturing environments and educational opportunities. These organizations aim to help young people develop leadership skills and the confidence to deploy them. The below map shows the locations of 501(c)3 non-profit youth programs. It distinguishes between youth development and leadership groups, which focus on developing a range of skills and capacities, from grassroots youth organizing groups, which address policy and systems change. (Religious programs and government services are excluded.)

YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE INLAND EMPIRE



Youth Leadership and Youth Organizing Groups in the Inland Empire

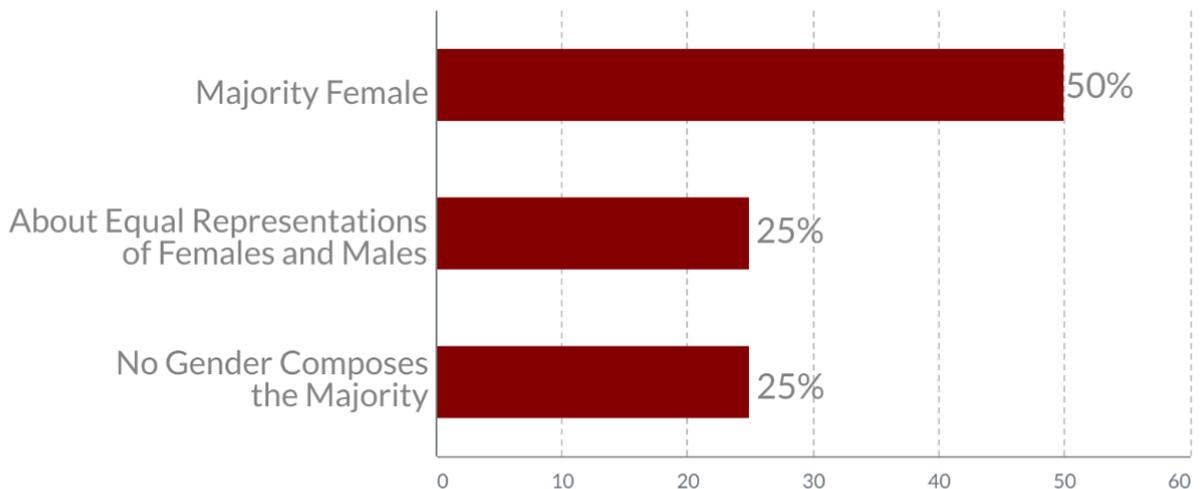
Youth-serving groups in the Inland Empire aim to support young people to achieve personal growth and improve their communities. In this report, we provide more detailed information on 12 IE youth leadership and organizing groups that participated in the 2019 Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing National Field Scan Survey. While this analysis does not represent an exhaustive list of organizations, it does provide an overview of the non-profit, youth-serving infrastructure that bolsters emerging youth power in the region. Some youth utilize skills they acquire in these organizations to participate in independent community and political work across the IE.

The groups we surveyed engage adolescents and young adults. While 9 of the 12 groups counted both adolescents and young adults among their leadership, 2 groups reported having a leadership composed exclusively of young adults, and 1 targeted only adolescents for leadership positions. In terms of the racial/ethnic composition of their leaderships, 10 reported a significant representation of Latinx leaders, 3 of Black youth leaders, 1 of Native American, and 1 of Asian-American leaders.

Women of color have a long history of participation and leadership in social change efforts. This pattern continues today, as half of the IE's groups reported that their leadership is predominantly female. The other half reported that they either had an equal representation of males and females (25 percent of groups) or that no gender made up the majority of the leadership (25 percent). None of the surveyed groups reported predominantly male leadership.

Inland Empire Youth Organizing and Leadership Groups	
Alianza CV	
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice	
Coachella Unincorporated	
Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (C.O.P.E.)	
Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC)	
Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Collective	
Kounkuey Design Initiative	
LGBT Community Center of the Desert	
MSA West (Muslim Students Association West)	
Pueblo Unido Community Development Corporation	
Raices Cultura	
Todec Legal Center	

Gender Composition of Inland Empire Youth Leaders (N=12)



Data Source: HCOM, HCAL & Enterprise Youth Program Staff Inventory 2018-2019

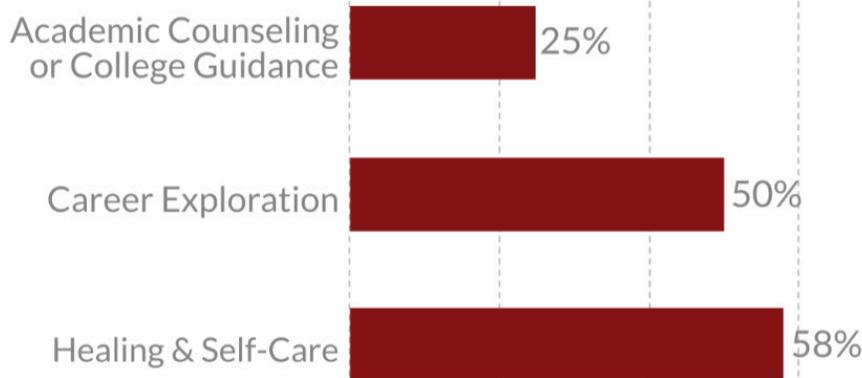
Youth Development Supports

Youth organizing and leadership groups in the Inland Empire work to support youth of color in predominantly low-income communities. Some of these groups attend to their members' personal achievements and well-being, offering services and programming that schools and other government agencies often fail to provide. The figure below shows the percentage of IE groups that offer youth development activities at least once a month.

While a quarter of groups reported that they provide their young members academic and college counseling or guidance, half noted that they regularly engage their members in exploring career options. The most common youth development activities provided by IE youth groups are healing and self-care practices, with 58 percent of groups offering such programming. These activities encompass a broad range of practices that support young people's mental health and help mitigate the impacts of trauma and stress. Some groups offer healing circles, in which youth are given a safe space to share their feelings, connect with their peers, and build meaningful relationships with others. In some cases, healing circles are used for the purpose of restorative justice, that is, to repair harms that members have experienced. Among IE groups, mindfulness practices such as meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, and aromatherapy are also common. Groups may also use creative writing exercises, such as writing poetry and lyrics or journaling. Finally, some groups also engage their members in forward stance, which is a type of tai chi that uses the mind-body connection to promote youths' well-being.

The recent pandemic underscored the importance of healing practices and self-care for these youth. Their communities were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and its economic effects. As such, youth leaders greatly appreciated safe spaces where they could attend to their mental health and continue to fight for systemic change

Youth Development and Leadership Activities Regularly Offered by Inland Empire Groups (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Field Scan Survey

“High school students here in the IE don't know what resources they have after high school. They don't know about the California Dream Act, or that each UC has an undocumented student resource center, and that a lot of Cal States have undocumented student resource centers. Information that is not being given to undocumented students is something I've learned.”

20-year-old member of
Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Coalition

“They're really good at connecting you with other opportunities that they know. This has given me the confidence to seek those opportunities.”

24-year-old member of
Coachella Unincorporated

“It's always important to make sure that you're taking care of your mental health and you take breaks, because we're kind of in a society that's constantly expecting us to produce.”

18-year-old member of
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice



Critical Civics Education

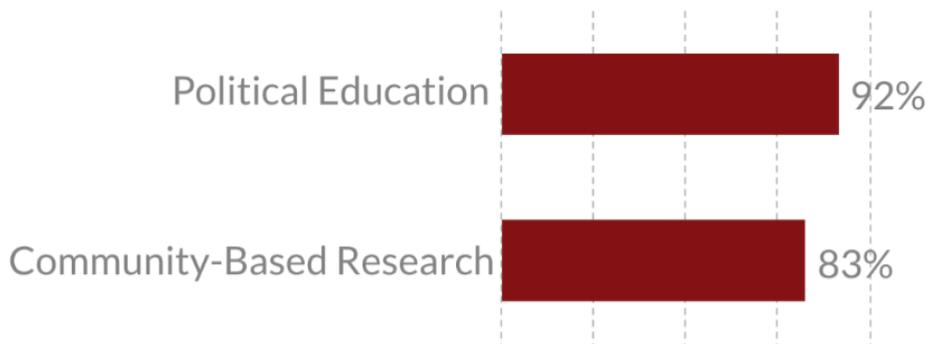
Youth organizing and leadership groups can provide their youth members a critical civics education to help them understand and engage with social issues, diversity, and their communities (Christens and Dolan 2011; Kirshner 2015; Rogers, Mediratta and Shah 2012; Watts and Flanagan 2007). This education kindles in youth a sense of pride and empowerment vital for working toward social change. Similar to other youth organizing programs across the state, the civics education provided to Inland Empire youth relies on popular education techniques that build on youths’ personal experiences.

As shown in the below figure, nearly all IE youth groups (92 percent) offer youth education on specific political, economic, and social issues. Most groups (83 percent) also provide youth with opportunities to learn community-based research techniques such as surveying their neighborhood, interviewing stakeholders, analyzing data, and examining the impact of social change initiatives.

“The main issue I’ve learned about is prison reform and issues regarding the prison population. And also I’ve learned a lot about policies and laws that I didn’t know prior to being involved with COPE. Black people make up the majority of the prison population, and that’s not okay. There’s definitely some issues in the justice system.”

20-year-old member of
Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement

Youth Development and Leadership Activities Regularly Offered by Inland Empire Groups (N=12)



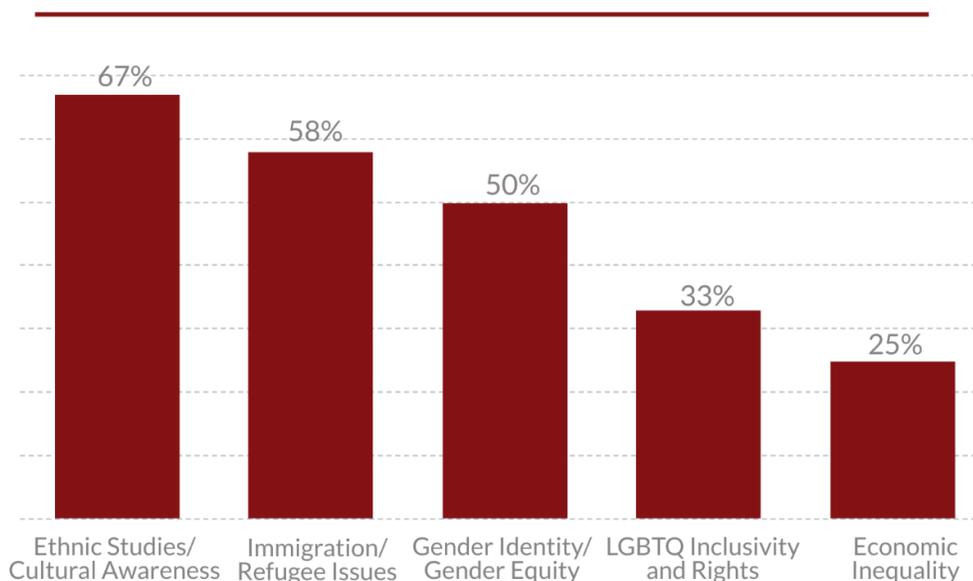
Data Source: FCYO National Field Scan Survey

To varying degrees, groups featured in this study attend to the diversity of the constituencies they serve through specific programming. As shown in the below figure, two-thirds of youth groups offer their members training on ethnic studies and cultural awareness. Over half (58 percent) provide regular training on immigration and refugee issues, which are particularly relevant for Inland Empire youth given the long history of migration to the area. Many groups also offer young people training on topics related to gender identity/equity (50 percent) and LGBTQ issues (33 percent). Finally, a quarter of IE youth groups regularly offer their youth members workshops or training on economic inequality.

“One activity that I will always remember is the privilege walk. So basically you ask a list of questions. For example, you would ask, ‘who is a citizen?’ Like that’s a privilege, and you would step forward if it applied to you. So every time you step forward, it was because you had a privilege. That activity really opened up my mind to realize how diverse our community is, how everyone is at a different place.

19-year-old member of ICUC

Trainings on Diversity and Inequality Regularly Offered by Inland Empire Youth Groups (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Survey Scan, 2019

“[Before I joined Alianza], I didn’t really feel I had a queer community. So once I was there, I realized it’s really possible to have a physical space. When I got there, the youth done surveys and stuff like that, trying to see how many queer folks there was. And there was a lot. And I was like whoa! Being involved with Alianza and in trying to organize the first pride, I saw community. I saw older folks that looked like me and they were also queer.”

23-year-old member of Alianza

Youth-Led Action in the Inland Empire

Youth organizing and leadership groups are currently engaging their members in campaigns to address health equity and social justice in the Inland Empire. While campaigns are often an uphill battle in the IE, some groups have reported some important victories, which we detail in the appendix.

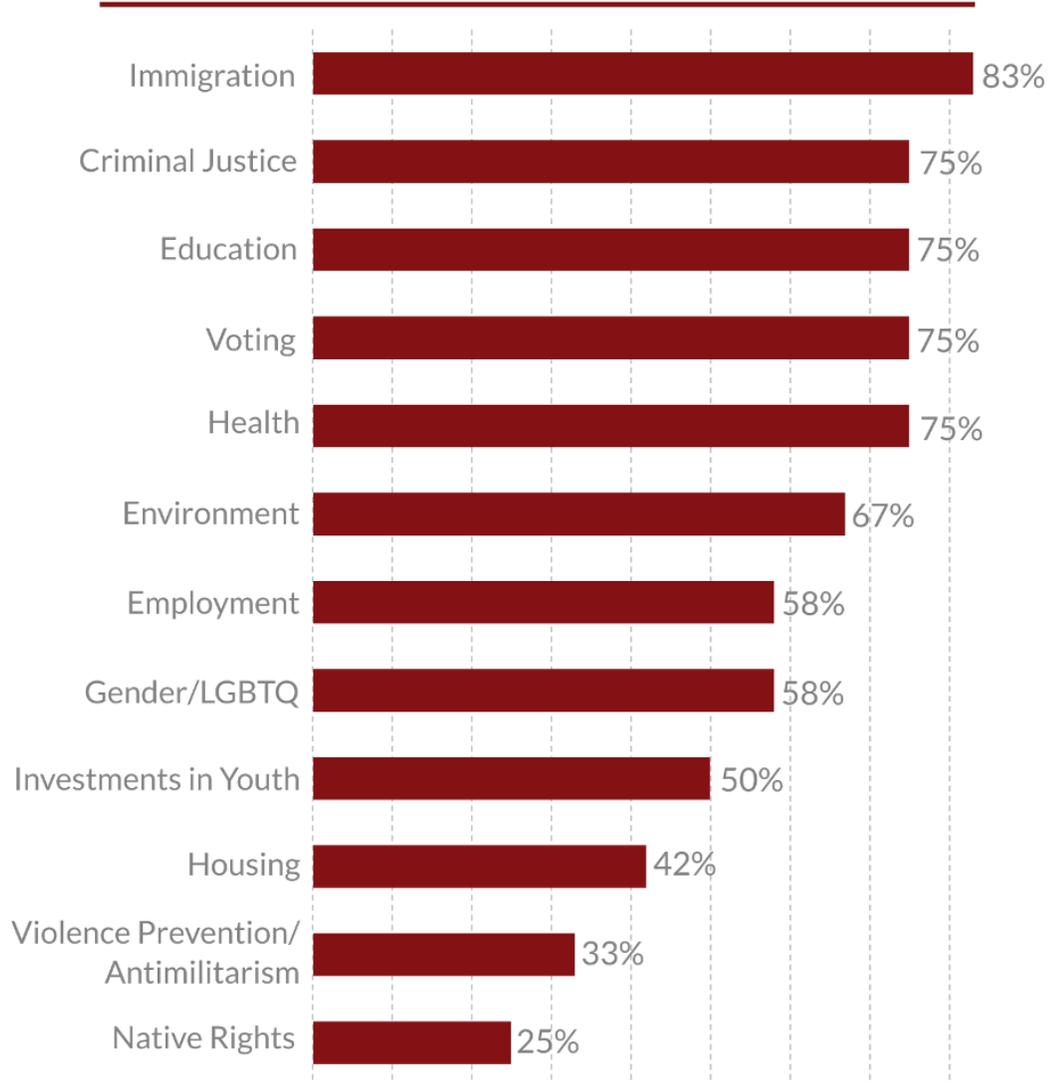
Groups engage young people across a range of issue areas. In a region that is home to many immigrant workers and their families and one of the largest ICE detention centers in the USA, immigration issues were the most commonly addressed. A few groups specifically focused on fighting deportations and detentions and on working toward federal immigration reform. Meanwhile, other groups zeroed in on immigrant access to government services or other immigrant and refugee rights issues.

As youth organization members are often still students, it may not be surprising that three-quarters of the groups spearheaded campaigns focusing on education, from K-12 issues to college access and affordability. Youth organizing groups across California were also among the education justice proponents of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), a 2013 policy signed by then-Governor Jerry Brown that provides additional funds for high-needs students and requires community input into budget priorities. While not shown in the chart, 42 percent of groups involved their members in this Local Control Accountability Plan budgetary process, at times having them attend meetings with a specific set of demands.

Half of the youth organizing groups were also working to increase government investment in programs and services for youth. The same percentage led campaigns to increase access to school-based health services, reproductive health services, recreational facilities, and other resources that enhance physical and mental health. Other priorities included advancing gender equity and/or LGBTQ rights and leading criminal justice reform campaigns. About a quarter of groups focused on environmental justice issues, including pesticide spraying, air pollution, unequal access to clean drinking water, and ever-increasing concerns around climate change. Only 15 percent of groups surveyed were leading affordable housing campaigns, but this percentage likely increased in 2020 as grassroots groups began responding to the job losses brought on by the pandemic. Coordinated efforts across the state demanded that state and local governments suspend rent for those economically affected by the crisis.

The survey results do not reflect important youth-led mutual aid efforts that occurred during the 2020 pandemic.

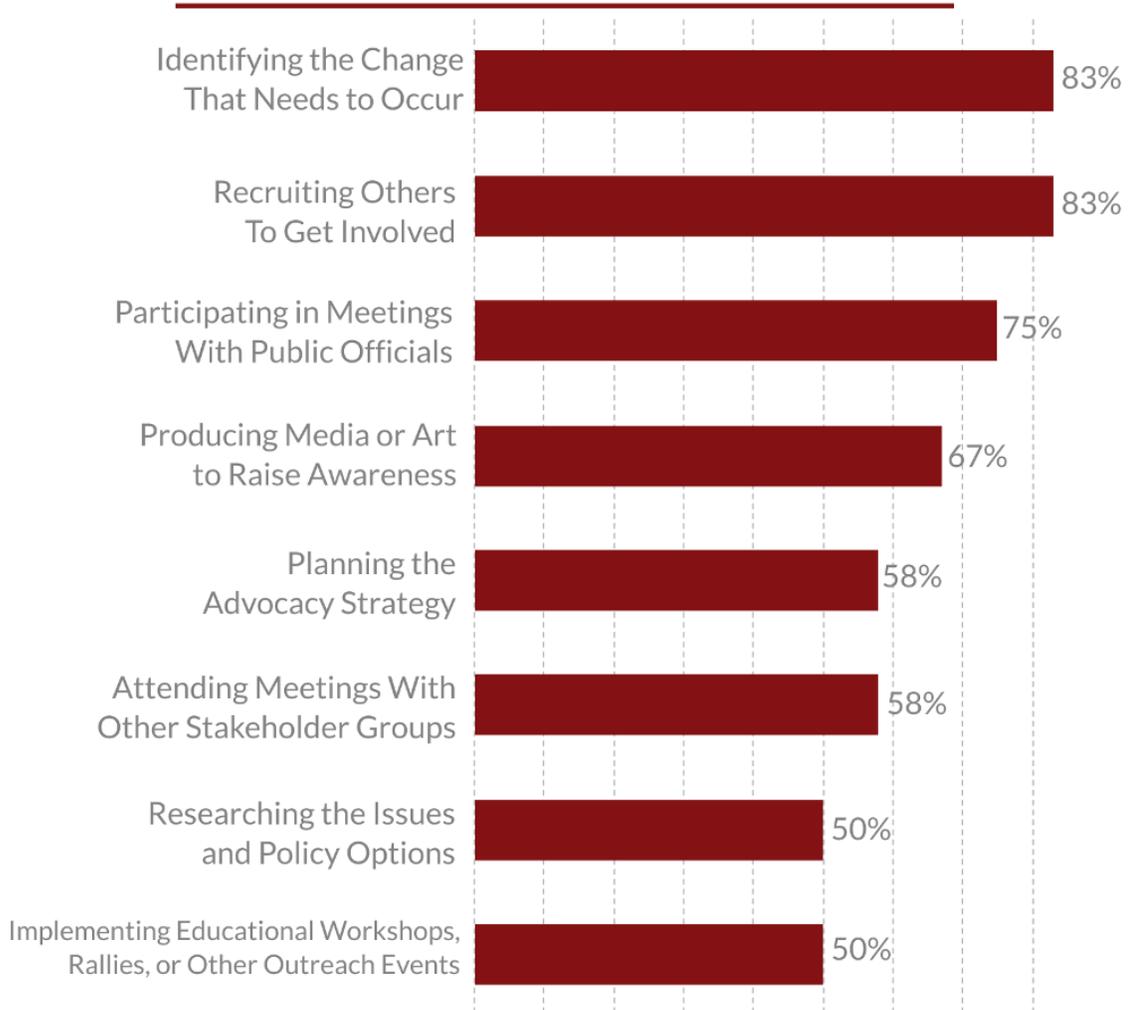
Inland Empire Groups' Organizing and Systems Change Issue Areas (N=12)



Data Source: HCOM, HCAL & Enterprise Youth Program Staff Inventory 2018-2019

Prior to the pandemic, Inland Empire youth organizing and leadership groups involved youth in a variety of roles to help effect positive change in their communities. In our surveys, we found that in 83 percent of groups, youth actively helped pinpoint the social issues in their communities that needed addressing. Most groups (83 percent) also reported that their youth members helped recruit others to get involved in organizing and activism efforts. Notably, members in three-fourths of youth groups participated in meetings with public officials, and members in 58 percent of the groups attended meetings with other stakeholders; these activities granted young people of color invaluable civic and policy experience. Youth also worked to raise awareness and educate their communities, with youth in 67 percent of groups using the media or art to get out their message and 50 percent of groups hosting workshops, rallies, or other outreach events. Finally, IE groups also engaged their members in the planning process; youth were involved in planning the advocacy strategy (58 percent) and researching issues and policy options (50 percent). In 2020, during the pandemic, youth continued organizing and connecting with community members through phone-banking and social media. For example, youth played a vital role in conducting outreach focused on the Census, mutual aid efforts, and COVID-19 educational outreach.

Inland Empire Youths' Roles in Community Change Efforts (N=12)



Data Source: HCOM, HCAL & Enterprise Youth Program Staff Inventory 2018-2019

“I feel more empowered and more proud and more confident in the way I carry myself. I’m able to communicate more with others and I’ve learned not only how to be a leader, but how to bring out the leader in other people as well.”

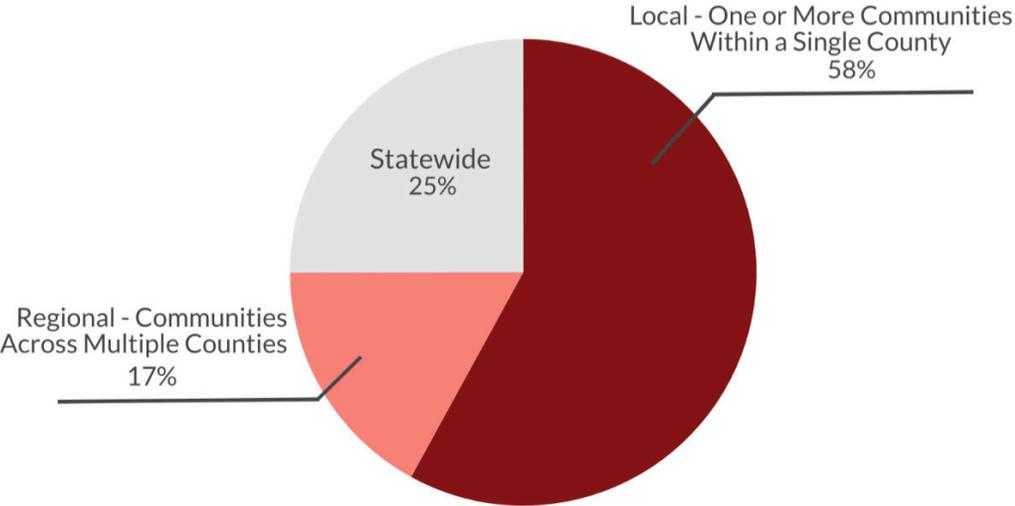
18 year-old member of Pueblo Unido

“I learned about community organizing and how to run an event.”

21-year-old member of Kounkuey Design Initiative

The 12 IE youth groups we surveyed varied in the geographic reach of their efforts. Most youth organizing and leadership groups (58 percent) focus their efforts locally within a single county. Some groups (17 percent) have a regional focus, engaging youth from communities across multiple counties. A quarter of groups engage in statewide efforts, participating in campaigns that impact California as a whole.

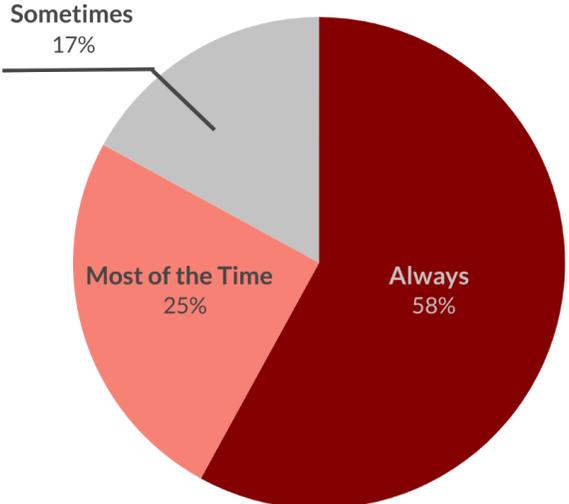
Youth Groups' Geographic Focus (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Survey Scan, 2019

Although all 12 groups surveyed identify themselves as youth groups, none limited themselves to engaging solely with young people. Indeed, intergenerational alliances are a key feature of Inland Empire groups, with youth working in collaboration with parents, adult allies, and elders build political power. Over half of IE youth groups (58 percent) reported that their campaigns always involve intergenerational alliances, meaning youth have consistent access to older mentors and allies. A quarter of groups engage in intergenerational alliances most of the time, and 17 percent work with multiple age groups some of the time.

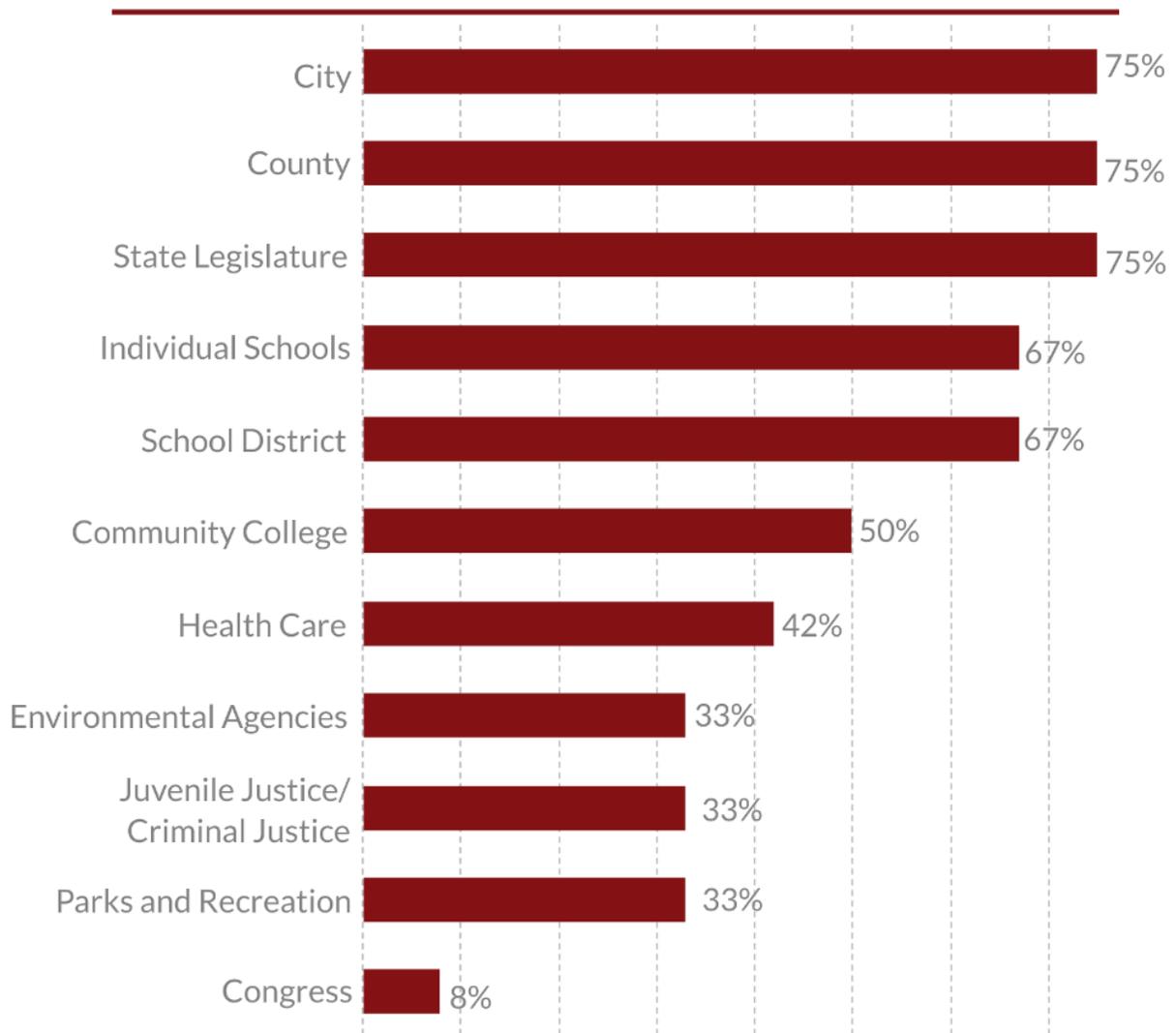
Frequency of Intergenerational Alliances in Youth Campaigns (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Survey Scan, 2019

Youth-led and intergenerational campaigns to improve local, regional, and statewide issues offer their members opportunities to work with a variety of government systems, granting young people invaluable experience and knowledge about the various branches of government, policies, and decision-making. In their advocacy efforts, three-fourths of Inland Empire youth groups targeted city governments, counties, and the state legislature. Many groups also targeted educational institutions, including individual schools (67 percent), school districts (67 percent), and community colleges (50 percent). Smaller percentages the groups featured hear targeted health care agencies, environmental agencies, criminal justice systems, parks and recreation departments, and Congress members.

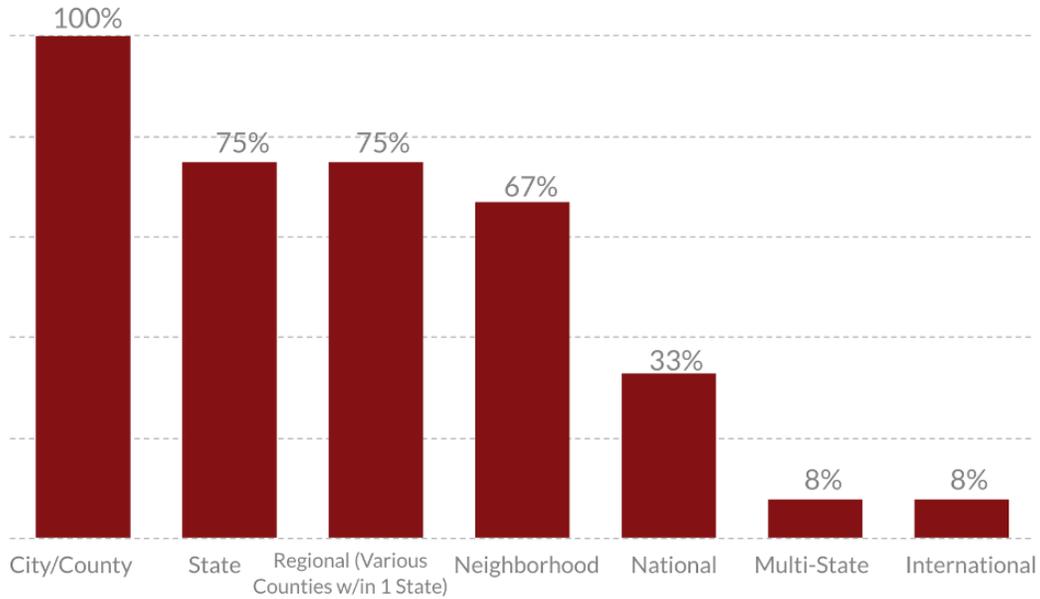
Government Systems Targeted by Inland Empire Youth-Led Campaigns (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Survey Scan, 2019

Youth groups in the Inland Empire do not operate in a silo, as all 12 surveyed groups network with other organizations to help them achieve their goals and coordinate social change work. Each youth group reported having an alliance with one or more groups within their city or county. Most reported that they also have networks at the state, regional, and neighborhood levels. A smaller proportion of groups participate in national networks (33 percent) or multi-state networks (8 percent), and 8 percent of groups engage in international alliances.

Geographic Focus of Networks and Alliances (N=12)



Data Source: FCYO National Survey Scan, 2019

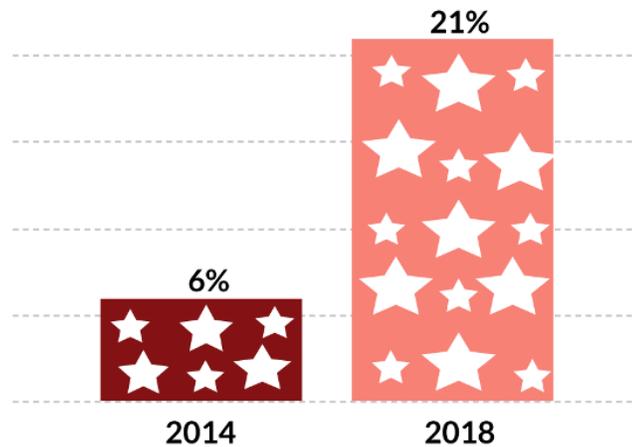
“I remember when we were first beginning they would partner us with an adult or someone that had already gone out to canvas, so they were making us go up to the person first. They showed us how it was done but then the next house it was us. It sounds bad, but it’s not because we were pretty much forced to talk, but it was good for us. . . . We would go to the people’s houses and we tell them, ‘It’s time to vote. And like, if you’re able to vote, do it for people that cannot vote and represent them.’”

19-year-old member of Alianza

Voter Engagement in the Inland Empire

Young people demonstrated an increased investment in the electoral process between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections. As shown in the below graphic, turnout among young voters aged 18-24 more than tripled (from 6 percent to 21 percent) between these two elections. This increase can be attributed to several factors, including youths' concerns about the contentious national political climate and competitive congressional races in the region. However, youth organizing groups can also be credited for contributing to this surge in turnout.

Voter turnout among 18-24-year-olds more than tripled between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections



Data sources: California Civic Engagement Project, 2014
American Community Survey and Political Data Inc, 2018

During the 2018 election, some youth organizing and civic engagement groups prepared adolescents and young adults to educate and mobilize their peers. For example, ICUC, TODEC Legal Center, COPE, and Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice engaged their youth members in voter registration, phone-banking, door-knocking, and texting voters. Some groups, including Coachella Unincorporated, conducted outreach via social media. Importantly, in 2020, some groups built on their earlier efforts and used digital media and other organizing efforts to persuade young voters and other residents to submit their ballot. Such grassroots efforts deepen young people's understanding of the implications of government elections, provide them with tools to empower their communities, and help build a more representative democracy

“Before, I was like, ‘Oh, there’s so many voters out there. What makes my vote actually count towards something?’ Through ICUC I learned that every vote counts. Especially in local elections where, by a few votes, someone can get elected.”

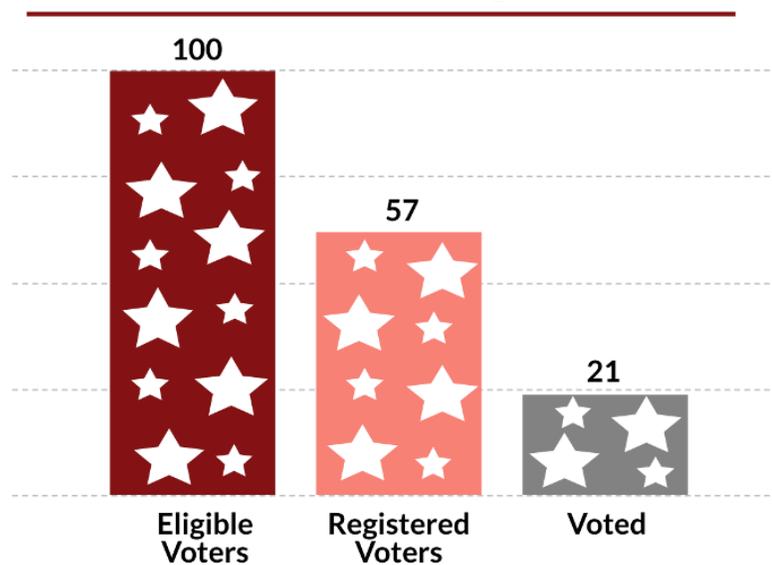
19-year-old member of ICUC

Opportunities for Increasing Turnout

Although turnout increased among young voters during the 2018 election, many young adults were still not registered or mobilized. To demonstrate the potential for growing the electorate, we share here the Civic Engagement Gap Ratio for the Inland Empire counties of Riverside and San Bernardino, which shows the proportion of voters who registered and voted as a share of US citizens in this age group. Specifically, this ratio reveals that for every 100 eligible voters aged 18-34 in the IE, 57 were registered, and only 21 turned out to vote. In other words, more than two out of five US citizens were not registered, and nearly four out of five did not exercise their right to vote. Statewide, about 27 out of every 100 eligible residents aged 18-24 cast their ballot. Therefore, the voting rate among the youngest IE eligible residents remained considerably lower than that of the whole state. Unfortunately, this pattern persisted during the 2020 election.

The Civic Engagement Gap Ratio for the Inland Empire suggests that much work remains to ensure that eligible young voters fill out and submit their voter registration forms. Additionally, this highly mobile population needs to be reminded to update their registration if they have changed residential addresses. Once registered, they will need reminders to vote via social media, phone calls, text, and community events. Communication with young voters is essential, given that voting processes have changed and may continue to change as a result of the pandemic or other emergencies. Some of the youth organizing groups in this study have demonstrated track records of registering and mobilizing young voters. They can build on this experience and expand the number of grassroots youth organizing groups and partner institutions to continue to build an informed and engaged young electorate.

**The 2018 Civic Engagement Gap Ratio
Inland Empire Voters, Aged 18-24**



Data Sources: American Community Survey, 2018 and Political Data, Inc.

Building on the Emerging Youth Power in the Inland Empire

IE youth leadership and organizing groups are helping young people develop into civic leaders attentive to the needs of their racially diverse and immigrant communities. To varying degrees, the groups featured in this report are providing their members with a critical analysis of issues affecting their communities and the guidance to become vocal participants in community affairs. Additionally, these groups are also offering their adolescent and young adult members with age-appropriate developmental supports that can help them thrive as individuals.

Yet, significant challenges remain to youths' collective abilities to hold local institutions accountable to their own and communities' needs. Youth face notable opposition to their grassroots efforts in a region where the voices of immigrants and young people of color are not always welcome or appreciated. Moreover, the IE's civic infrastructure available to support emerging youth leadership pales in comparison to that found in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and even the Central Valley.

Moving forward, we recommend ongoing financial support for grassroots youth organizing and civic engagement in the region. In addition to financing existing groups, we recommend incubating new organizations in both Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. Training and technical assistance from intermediaries like YO Cali! and Power California can enhance staff capacity, as well as deepen networks among groups so that they can develop county and regional agendas. Young people are generally eager to make a difference in their communities, and once they acquire the tools to do so, they tend to remain active participants in democratic processes. Youth organizing groups can be an avenue for promoting more equitable and inclusive institutions in the short term and decades to come.



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Appendix: Inland Empire Campaign and Milestones

Youth leadership and organizing groups offer a range of activities and events that develop members' skills, broaden their social networks, and enable them to make a difference in their communities. Some groups have multiple ongoing campaigns. Here we summarize the grassroots campaigns that have resulted in concrete policy and programmatic changes.

Restorative Justice

Since 2014, Alianza has involved parents and youth in advocating for funding restorative justice programs in the Coachella Valley Unified School District. Specifically, Alianza and their members demanded that the district's Local Control Accountability Plan set aside funding for restorative justice programming and training. Since then, the district has gradually made modest but incremental investments in such programming. By June 2019, CVUSD had committed to offering Restorative Justice at four high schools.

Higher Education

In 2019, California State University proposed an additional math/qualitative reasoning requirement for admissions. Stated to go into effect for admissions for the entering freshman class of 2027, this requirement posed a challenge for many Black and Latinx students who disproportionately attend high schools that do not provide adequate preparation in mathematics. As part of a larger grassroots coalition, COPE youth shared their opposition to the policy change at the California State University Trustee meeting in July 2019, and protested at an August 29, 2019 Cal State University Board of Trustees special hearing. There, the crowd of 50 to 60 people chanted and held signs reading, "No access! No path! Did you do the math?" Alongside protesting and addressing the Cal State University Board of Trustees, COPE also promoted community awareness about the harmful effects of this proposal on social media. As a result of persistent youth-led and community actions, the Trustees put their decision on hold until 2022, and they also agreed to conduct a year-long study to determine how the requirement could potentially impact students.

Economic Justice

IEIYC participated in the California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC) Coalition, which is made up of about 60 organizations. This campaign seeks to help people qualify to receive tax refunds even if they don't have a Social Security number. IEIYC youth supported these efforts by phone banking, garnering sign-on support for letters, and placing pressure on their state representatives. IEIYC youth also helped community members develop the narratives and messaging that were shared with representatives during legislative visits and through social media. Thanks in part to the coalition's efforts, Governor Newsom signed AB 1876 on September 18, 2020. The bill allowed noncitizen tax filers to use an ITIN (Individual Taxpayer Identification Number) to claim both CalEITC and the Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC). It is estimated that this legislation will benefit over 600,000 low-income immigrant workers and families—98% of whom are people of color and 66% of whom are women ITIN tax filers.

Environmental Justice

Youth members from CCAEJ, ICUC, and other groups have joined a broad-based coalition to advocate for the right to clean, breathable, and healthy air in the highly polluted Inland Empire. Young people have regularly shared their concerns at local community, SCAQMD (South Coast Air Quality Management District), and California Air Resource Board (CARB) meetings. Time and again, youth have pointed out the negative health impacts of pollution coming from commercial areas such as warehouses, rail yards, seaports, and airports. Youth also canvassed their neighborhoods and phonebanked to increase public awareness. After years of advocacy, in May 2018 the South Coast Air Quality Management District directed staff to develop proposed voluntary and regulatory measures to reduce emissions from the ports, warehouses, airports, rail yards, and new development. The youth and adult coalition secured a huge win on May 7, 2021, when South Coast AQMD officially adopted the indirect source rule, which required certain types of warehouses to annually take actions facilitating local and regional emissions reductions.

CCAIEJ youth have also worked with allies to specifically address air pollution caused by high volumes of truck traffic. To this end, volunteers from CCAIEJ conducted traffic research, counting more than 1,500 trucks passing by a stretch of San Bernardino Highway within a single hour. CCAIEJ youth traveled to Sacramento to voice their concerns about truck traffic and advocate for more electric trucks, in place of diesel, to promote better air quality. Youth also worked to clarify the language used in electric vehicle policies, since these policies are usually difficult for the public to understand. CCAIEJ youth and their allies were successful, as the Advanced Truck Rule was passed on June 25, 2020, by the California Air Resources Board. Aimed at significantly cutting toxic fuel emissions by 2030, the policy requires truck manufacturers to sell an increasing number of clean, zero-emission trucks in California.

Prison Reform: IEIYC joined the Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice in successfully advocating for Assembly Bill 32. Signed into Law in October 2019, the bill prevents the state from entering into or renewing contracts with for-profit prison and immigrant detention facilities after Jan. 1, 2020, and it phases out such facilities by 2028. IEIYC members played an important role by recruiting supporters to public actions, participating in press conferences, and attending virtual events. In San Bernardino, this bill will result in the closing of the Adelanto detention facility operated by the GEO group, a Florida based corporation that has faced lawsuits for alleged human rights violations.

Public Safety

In March of 2017, ICUC youth, parents, and clergy successfully pressured the San Bernardino City Council to allocate city funds toward a program run by California Partnership for Safer Communities (CPSC), which aims to prevent crime and violence without embracing punitive enforcement. Specifically, the program seeks to reduce incarceration by offering additional support for young people who have historically been caught up in the criminal justice system. The grassroots effort successfully advocated that the city redirect Measure Z funds (first available in 2007) to pay for CPSC in lieu of hiring more police officers.

Voting Rights

On September 10, 2020, ICUC youth presented the High School Voter Education Week Resolution to the Coachella Valley Unified School (CVUSD) School Board. The resolution was passed and fully supported by the board members. This resolution supports increasing pre-voter registration and registration for youth in CVUSD. Next, on September 15, 2020, ICUC youth presented a Student Voter Registration policy to the San Bernardino City Unified School District. This policy, which was the first of its kind in the region and unanimously passed, will allow high schools to operate as polling locations during elections and also includes administrative guidelines around voter education and registration.

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