



Inspiring Youth, Growing Change

Nurturing Strong Minds for a
Healthy Community



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Report Objectives

The *Network for a Healthy California (Network)* initiated this report to learn more about the impacts, successes, and challenges of the Youth Engagement Initiative (YEI), which began in 2006. A primary goal of this report is to document changes resulting from the local projects, from the youth in the project to the built environment.

This information will also inform continuous improvements as the program evolves. While this report is not intended to be a full-scale YEI evaluation, our goal is to share ideas, lessons learned, and reflections with others who are interested in engaging youth to improve health and well-being.

This report seeks to capture an understanding of themes that can inform future health promotion and youth development work. Common patterns and unique experiences gleaned from interviews with key project staff help to tell the YEI story. The successes, challenges, and changes described begin to paint a picture of trends, impacts, and implications of this work. There is great interest in this work and in expanding this initiative. The lessons learned demonstrate that young people can be a key part of implementing solutions to our most pressing health and nutrition concerns.

A primary goal of this report is to document changes in youth eating and physical activity habits, which resulted from the local projects.

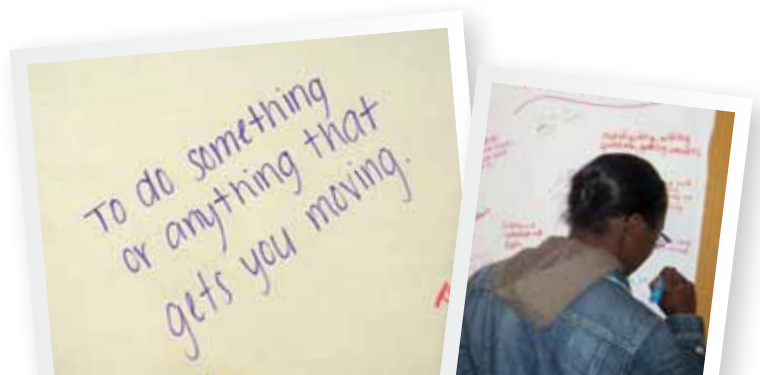
WHAT DATA INFORMED THIS REPORT?

Key informant interviews with adult allies and project coordinators from local project sites are the primary basis for the findings in this report. An independent consultant interviewed 13 adult staff from seven project sites, along with four State *Network* staff.

The YEI project sites profiled in this report were selected based on longevity and geography. Our intention was to capture impacts and lessons learned from projects with the most experience in the initiative, supplemented by reflections from a few newer sites. Projects are located in urban and rural communities throughout California. Due to logistical and resource limitations, the youth

voice is not directly represented.

During guided conversations, interview participants answered a series of questions about their experiences. We asked key informants to describe results from the youth research projects, along with their initial expectations; challenges, surprises, and lessons learned; and their hopes for the future. A complete review of program materials such as culminating reports, youth survey results, training curricula, and Internet research also informed this report.





LOCAL PROJECT SITES INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

Youth Research Teams	Project Start Year	# of Youth Leaders Involved	Grade Range	Project Coordinator	Adult Ally
CHANGE, Del Norte High School, Del Norte County	2009	15–20	9th–12th	Deborah Kravitz	Johanna Dantzman
Fresh Crew, San Lorenzo High School, Alameda County	2006	15	9th–12th	Chris Boynton	Leah Mowery
Humboldt Health, Zane Middle School, Humboldt County	2009	8–12	7th & 8th	Colleen Ogle	Marianne Hutchins
Lunch Bunch, Orange High School, Orange County	2006	10–12	9th–12th	Kat Soltanmorad	Patty Maize
SASH, Mt. View Middle School, Kern County	2006	12	7th & 8th	Yolanda Ramirez	Manuel Ramirez
Youth Team, Santiago High School, Orange County	2008	10	9th–12th	Kat Soltanmorad	Cyndie Borcoman
Youth Teams, San Bernardino, San Bernardino County	2006	14	6th–12th	Glenda Martin Robinson & Traci Burnett	Matthew Douglas

ABOUT THE NETWORK FOR A HEALTHY CALIFORNIA

The mission of the *Network* is to create innovative partnerships that empower low-income Californians to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, physical activity, and food security with the goal of preventing obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases.

Since 1997, the *Network* has led a growing statewide movement of local, state, and national partners collectively working toward improving the health status of 7 million low-income California parents and children. Multiple venues are used to facilitate

behavior change in homes, schools, worksites, and communities to create environments that support fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity.

With support from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the *Network* funds nearly 150 public and non-profit agencies. USDA requires that *Network* programs and funding target only SNAP recipients and those with similar low incomes.

What is the Youth Engagement Initiative?

The *Network* launched the Youth Engagement Initiative (YEI) in October 2006 as part of the overall goal to increase consumption of the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables and participation in daily physical activity among low-income families. During the pilot year, six youth engagement sites throughout California worked with low-resource, middle and high school youth (ages 12-18) to conduct a youth-led participatory action research (PAR) project. The projects provide youth with the opportunity to engage in leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, service learning, and strategizing skills to address and promote nutrition and/or physical activity issues. Since its inception, the YEI has expanded to 20 local project sites.

Empower youth to create community change such as installing hydration stations to provide clean drinking water, or making healthy food choices the easy choice in schools.

- Youth initiate project ideas, carry out planning, and goal setting.
- Youth drive the process and are involved in all stages of decision-making.
- Youth teach other youth.

Local projects utilize a youth-led PAR framework. PAR is an inquiry process that includes critical thinking, information gathering, analysis and logical problem solving while building networks and strengthening authentic voice to address issues that contribute to childhood obesity. The steps taken are:

1. Identify the issue or problem of greatest interest and relevance to the youth team.
2. Define what is known about that issue or problem.

THEORY, METHODS, AND FRAMEWORKS

The desire to engage youth at the center of this initiative is based on evidence from a wide variety of social learning, health promotion, popular education, and youth development theories. In this context, a “youth-led” approach is grounded in the following key principles.¹

- Youth opinions are solicited, respected, and applied.
- Youth identify their own issues, problems, and possible solutions.

3. Identify what additional information is needed to understand the issue.
4. Determine what methods and approach will be used to collect information and then work together as a team to accomplish this.
5. Use the information for education, understanding, strategic action, and/or community change.

Because community conditions, relationships, and players vary, no two PAR projects will look the same. However, by emphasizing work within marginalized



communities, this approach seeks to address the underlying causes of inequality while also finding solutions to specific community concerns.²

This is especially relevant when seeking to improve population health, because though overall mortality rates declined and life expectancy rose in the United States during the 20th century, our country nonetheless faces an increasing level of inequity in the health status and mortality of those with less material resources, particularly in communities of color.³ In California, one in every nine children, one in every three teens and over half of adults are overweight or obese. While this epidemic affects nearly all people, the rates are highest among Californians of Latino, American-Indian, African American, and Pacific Islander descent, Californians from lower-income households, and those with disabilities.⁴

Though people often think that health is about individual behavior and lifestyles, health care or developments in medical research, these represent only a small part of the strategies needed to eliminate health disparities. Instead, major advances in health status historically have resulted from broad social reforms such as labor laws that govern workplace health and safety,⁵ increases in the standard of living and improved sanitation, housing, and food safety. Health professionals, policy makers, academics, and advocates increasingly acknowledge that societal conditions play a primary role in determining people's health status, and the inequitable differences for some groups.

Obesity rates and the associated health consequences also are subject to societal forces and policy choices that shape our environment. Neighborhoods offer an abundance of cheap, low-nutrient, high calorie food but limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Research shows that rural, low-income, and minority communities generally have less access to supermarkets. Children are less likely to walk or bike to school due to distance, crime or traffic danger while unsafe parks and streets limit outdoor, active play.⁶

INITIAL HOPES AND ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The goal of the YEI was to demonstrate that Youth-led PAR is a viable approach to empowering young people and achieving environmental changes that impact health and nutrition.

The initial hopes of most local project staff interviewed for this report can be summarized into two primary desires:

1. Foster peer leadership and educate youth about nutritious and active lifestyles.
2. Empower youth to create community change such as installing hydration stations to provide clean drinking water, or making healthy food choices the easy choice in schools.