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# Interweaving Youth Development, Community Development, and Social Change Through Youth Organizing

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**Abstract**

Community organizing groups that have built coalitions for local change over the past few decades are now involving young people as leaders in efforts to improve quality of life. The current study explores a particularly effective youth organizing initiative through review of organizational documents and collection and analysis of qualitative data. The study finds that this model for youth organizing is effective at producing impacts at multiple levels because it weaves together youth development, community development, and social change into a unified organizing cycle. The initiative encourages participants by promoting psychological empowerment, leadership development, and sociopolitical development. Simultaneously, youth organizing produces community-level impacts, including new program implementation, policy change, and institution building. Social changes include intergenerational and multicultural collaboration in the exercise of power. This interplay between youth development, community development, and social change is discussed in relation to the growing field of youth organizing and other efforts to engage youth in civil society.

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Youth organizing is a process that brings young people together to talk about the most pressing problems in their communities, conduct research on these problems and possible solutions, and follow through with social action to create community-level change. A commonly used definition of youth organizing is, "an innovative youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities" (Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing [FCYO], 2009). Youth organizing has been growing in prevalence in cities across the United States and is increasingly recognized both as a model for youth community engagement (Christens & Zeldin, in press; Watts & Flanagan, 2007) and as a strategy for encouraging positive youth development (Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, 2009). Youth organizing is distinctive when compared to other approaches that engage youth in their communities and encourage youth development.

Compared to other models for youth community engagement, there are at least four distinguishing characteristics of youth organizing initiatives. First, youth organizing initiatives concentrate on the conditions faced by young people, the systematic nature of these conditions, and the role of power in creating and maintaining these conditions (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Second, youth involved in organizing learn strategies for collaboratively harnessing their collective social power to challenge powerful people and institutions to make community-level change (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006). Third, youth involved in organizing are choosing the issues that are most important to them through a collective decision-making process rather than working with a group whose issues have been predetermined (Speer, 2008). Fourth, adults support youth involved in organizing, but youth often take the lead in decision-making processes around issue selection and strategies for achieving community-level change (Share & Stacks, 2006). In part due to these distinctive foci (power, empowerment, social justice, youth leadership), youth organizing has proven particularly effective at engaging diverse youth, particularly youth of color (Yee, 2008).

Youth organizing is also distinctive among community and organizational approaches to youth development. Similar to other approaches, youth organizing involves intergenerational cooperation and youth–adult partnerships (Kirshner, 2008; Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Yet youth

organizing is distinctive in its emphasis on facilitating youth leadership development through exploration of common interests with peers and development of understandings of social problems and processes (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Moreover, youth organizing facilitates youth development through social action processes in which youth operate as wielders and challengers of power in their local communities (Kirshner, 2006). There is some evidence that youth organizing is a particularly potent model for producing positive outcomes among participants, including interpersonal capacities (Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008). For example, a study by Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, and Lacoe (2006) compared youth organizing to identity-support approaches used by other youth development agencies. Across a sample of nine organizations, they found that organizing was more effective at promoting developmental outcomes such as leadership, community involvement, and decision making.

Youth organizing draws on a diversity of traditions of collective action. Among these is the tradition of student activism established in the 1960s in the antiwar and civil rights movements. Another important historical influence for today's youth organizing is the model of community organizing initiated in Chicago in the 1930s (Alinsky, 1946) and adopted and modified by a number of local groups in neighborhood- and faith-based coalitions (Swarts, 2008). Until recently, most faith-based community organizing initiatives were entirely composed of adult participants. These initiatives have sometimes worked on issues of particular importance to youth—such as education reform and school improvement (Snyder, 2008)—yet they have typically not involved youth in these organizing processes. This has changed recently as faith-based community organizing initiatives have sought to include youth as partners in organizing (Speer, 2008; Stalhut, 2003).

The expansion of roles available to youth in local community organizing initiatives mirrors a broader shift toward full inclusion of youth in community life (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Flanagan, 2004). The full impact of including youth in organizing processes remains to be seen, but early indications are that youth engagement is a promising strategy for strengthening community organizing initiatives (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Most previous studies of adult community organizing have considered the process as an approach for mobilization (McCarthy & Walker, 2004), revitalizing democracy (Warren, 2001), and changing policies (Shlay & Whitman, 2006). Far fewer studies have investigated the developmental, psychological, or behavioral changes among adult participants in community organizing (e.g., Gutierrez, 1995).

Studies of youth organizing, in contrast, have tended to approach the process from developmental, psychological, and educational perspectives

(e.g., Gambone et al., 2006; Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, 2009). Some studies have drawn on multiple disciplines to highlight impacts of youth engagement on youth, adults, organizations, and communities (e.g., Zeldin, Petrokubi, & Camino, 2008). This study extends the interdisciplinary literature on youth organizing by considering both individual-level developmental outcomes and community-level outcomes. Through an in-depth case study of a single youth organizing initiative, we highlight features of the youth organizing process that make it a particularly effective model for engaging youth in their communities.

## Research Context and Methods: Elevating and Detailing an Effective Youth Organizing Initiative

This study focuses on an exemplary youth organizing initiative conducted through Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC). ICUC is a 20-year-old organization that engages people in community change through faith-based institutions in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties in California. ICUC is a member of People Improving Communities Through Organizing (PICO) California, a statewide network of local organizing initiatives, and a part of the PICO National Network. There are currently more than 50 local PICO organizing initiatives with more than 1,000 member faith-based institutions in the United States (for other studies of PICO organizations, see Christens, Jones, & Speer, 2008; Speer & Hughey, 1995; Speer, Peterson, Zippay, & Christens, 2010; Wood, 1994). In addition, there are other national and regional networks using similar organizing models, including the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the Gamaliel Foundation, and the Direct Action Research and Training Center (DART). Most of these community organizing initiatives exclusively involve adults. Whereas ICUC has a long history of organizing adults, this study focuses exclusively on their more recent youth organizing efforts, which have taken place in the 5 years preceding this writing.

ICUC was selected for this study through consultation with directors of other organizations in the PICO National Network, who described the involvement of youth in ICUC's organizing as exceptional within the Network in terms of scale, duration, and community-level successes. One of the authors of this study has done a multisite longitudinal study of community organizing initiatives (Christens & Speer, in press). The other author, in addition to being a researcher, has worked as the lead ICUC youth organizer for the past 5 years. The current research was designed as a researcher–practitioner collaboration, in which external data collection was combined with data collected on site

with participants in the youth organizing project. Data collected for this study consist of archival organizational documents (e.g., internal reports, sign-in sheets from meetings, public presentations), press coverage of ICUC issue campaigns, and 20 interviews conducted by both authors with key young leaders in ICUC organizing (ages 16-20; 70% women; 90% Latino/a; several participants are part-time ICUC employees), as well as two interviews conducted with nonstaff adult supporters of the youth organizing initiative, and one former adult staff member. Participants were chosen using meeting agendas, which document the leadership roles in the organization.

The specific questions guiding this study were (1) what are the individual and community-level impacts of effective youth organizing? and (2) what are the features of the ICUC organizing process that have allowed it to achieve these impacts? A semistructured interview protocol was developed containing questions about community organizing, action research, social capital, relationships, and education. Interviews lasted between 32 and 86 min, were audio recorded, transcribed, and selectively coded according to themes identified collaboratively by both authors while reflecting on the interviews (individual impacts, community-level impacts, youth development, community development, and social change). The results are organized accordingly; first, we highlight the impacts of an effective youth organizing initiative, then we describe the features of this model that have allowed it to be effective.

## Results: Impacts on Communities, Individuals, and Relationships

Youth organizing through ICUC began in the aftermath of a tragedy—a 16-year-old girl was gunned down in a drive-by shooting in 2005. Her classmates and youth from her church were stunned by her death, and by how little it seemed to matter in a city that had more than 60 murders that year. One of the key adult supporters interviewed for this study recalls thinking that the youth in her church were "on fire to do something, and I'm afraid they're on fire to do something like an eye for an eye . . . we wanted to channel that in a more positive way." Many of the parents in the church had been involved in ICUC organizing for years. An ICUC staff member suggested that he hold a meeting with the youth to reflect on the tragedy in the context of local community conditions. The parents agreed to the meeting because other efforts to help the youth process the death of their classmate had fallen short, "We kept telling them, your faith tells you to forgive, but these kids weren't standing for that kind of a solution."

The ICUC staff member invited the youth to "break down their feelings, get it out, put it on paper, and we used a lot of paper that night." The feelings

that the youth expressed were "eye opening for the adults," who realized through this process that youth were really suffering in a way that they can't express often enough. Adults also realized that youth were limited in their opportunities to "do things to vent that or change that." Working with adult ICUC staff and volunteers, the teens organized a vigil and a rally to call on public officials to work to reduce violence. Over the next year, the youth began intentional relationship building with their peers. They were simultaneously "learning more about the issue [youth violence]" and "breaking it down into manageable pieces." ICUC youth conducted research on issues related to violence experienced by local youth and youth assets in their communities; they surveyed 7,600 of their peers in partnership with a local university in 2007 and collected 8,700 additional surveys in 2008. Youth used their analysis of the surveys to create simple research reports that highlighted the need for violence prevention programs, including job development and programs to address racial conflict. They conducted qualitative interviews with youth affected by violence. They met with principals, school board members, city officials, and politicians to learn about the way the city worked and the different perspectives on violence prevention that policy makers held.

Through their research, ICUC youth learned unsettling information about the city's approach to preventing violence and crime. In brief, the city had consistently tended toward suppression of crime through restrictions and an increased police presence. The ICUC youth leaders argued that what was lacking was a holistic approach focused on improving everyday opportunities and supports in the community. For instance, although the city's funding for police had consistently increased since the 1980s, funding for parks and libraries had been stagnant or in decline. Meanwhile, even basic conditions within schools—such as functioning school bathrooms and cafeterias—had been neglected. ICUC youth began a campaign to change the city's emphasis from cracking down on youth as criminals to providing the supports and opportunities necessary for a "pathway to hope." The organizing process employed by the ICUC youth is a variant of the PICO Model of community organizing (see Speer, Hughey, Gensheimer, & Adams-Leavitt, 1995) specifically adapted for youth through experimentation, evaluation, and refinement. Figure 1 is a representation (derived from this study) of the organizing model employed in the ICUC youth organizing initiative.

## *Community-Level Impacts*

Through a review of documents and participant interviews we identified community-level outcomes achieved through the ICUC youth organizing

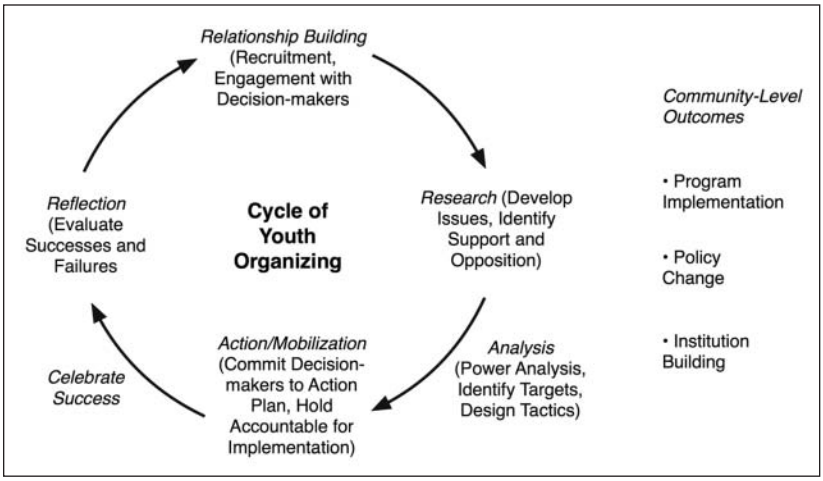


**Figure 1.** Process and community-level outcomes of ICUC youth organizing

initiative that fall into three categories: program implementation, policy change, and institution building. In terms of program implementation, news articles substantiate youth organizers' accounts of how they pushed schools to implement new antiviolence programs and got the city to establish paid summer internship programs for youth. ICUC youth have also influenced city budget allocations. They have pressured elected officials to fund schools and parks. They have worked with police to establish community policing policies and practices. Finally, and perhaps most important, they have built a respected and powerful institution. This is evident in documents of formal recognition given by local, state and federal political and civic leaders, as well as news articles and foundation support for the youth. Whereas ICUC's presence in the city precedes the youth organizing initiative, the ICUC youth organizing initiative has now established a reputation for careful research, effective tactics, and persistence. Although powerful community actors sometimes initially brushed representatives of the ICUC youth aside, they are now respected as representatives of a powerful community institution.

Moving through the organizing cycle from research to action, ICUC youth initiated a public campaign for increased city funding for youth-focused programs. They produced brief research reports based on their survey data on interracial violence and violence prevention. In a series of public meetings, they presented their results and recommendations to representatives of city

and state government. A showdown with the city council occurred in 2007 when the council refused to dedicate any of the money from a new tax to areas of youth concern, instead allocating all of the money to increased police presence and purchasing police safety equipment such as bulletproof vests. ICUC youth held public actions and eventually succeeded in securing some city funding from a different source. Some council members were rattled by this demonstration of youth power. In response to a council member who expressed doubt about her ability to understand and operate in local politics, a 17-year-old ICUC member was quoted in the paper saying, "Let me just say that you don't live our lives . . . I'll be 18 soon, and I can assure you that you won't have my vote" (Rogers, 2007). Reflecting on the youth organizing process, one of the adult supporters interviewed for this study said:

> I think ICUC has become the vehicle that has drawn them into this reality that they embrace, because it's the first time that adults are really allowing them to express themselves this way . . . so it can reach the ears of really important people, you know, political people, social people, their own teachers, their own principals, their parents.

ICUC youth established and participated in a youth council, which was composed of representatives from every high school and city district, with the intention of giving youth an opportunity to participate as partners with adults in local governance at the city level. Five of the 10 youth representatives were members of ICUC. Unlike some other successful attempts at engaging youth-in-governance (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003), the youth council in San Bernardino did not work the way that the youth organizing leaders had hoped. A young participant in both youth organizing and the youth council explained the difference in the two forms of youth community engagement, "here [at ICUC], they give us roles, they [adult partners] ask for our opinions. With [the council], yeah, they'll ask for your opinion, but they won't really take it into consideration." Consequently, the youth council was disbanded. ICUC youth are now working on a Project Labor Agreement (PLA) that would require the city to hire local, unionized workers for a percentage of their construction projects. Many of the youth have unemployed or underemployed parents or have parents who must travel to other cities to find work. The PLA would increase opportunities for the local workforce.

The community development outcomes in this study—policy change, program change, and institution building—are impressive community-level impacts for a relatively small group over a short time. Yet they are not the

types of changes at the community level that would qualify as transformative changes. Instead, they are necessary precursors to larger systems change that are sometimes called small wins (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006; Weick, 1984). Beyond the community development outcomes that youth have achieved through ICUC organizing, participants articulate the purpose of their organizing in terms of far-reaching goals for social and systems change. For instance, a youth leader said, "I think what we're trying to do is to change a system, an institution, you know, the whole thing." The large-scale and longer-term changes that youth in organizing describe include reductions in local crime and pollution, improvements in education, increased employment opportunities, and changes in city leadership. Yet they also include less tangible objectives, such as a more engaged and united local citizenry, and improved relationships between different social groups, including youth/adults and people of different races or ethnicities.

### *Impacts on Relationships*

In addition to community-level outcomes such as policy change and program implementation, the ICUC youth organizing process is altering relationships between youth participants and their peers and adults. The youth who participated in this study felt that the adults in their city generally expect too little of youth. "They have really low expectations for youth in this city." Broadly, youth in this study separate local adults into two distinct categories. One category is their partners in ICUC organizing, and the second category is "adults in power" (i.e., local decision makers). Although adults in power have tended to be dismissive of their efforts, youth see this changing through their organizing:

> It used to get a little irritating . . . we felt like they [adults in power] were condescending . . . they didn't really take us seriously . . . but we just kept meeting and meeting and meeting with them and it's changed the relationship and how they treat us.

Describing this shift, another youth leader said,

> Now they talk to us at their level. It's not like "we're talking to little children." It's like "we're talking to students that are actually concerned about what's going on, and they know what's going on, and they know what they want to see changed."

Moreover, youth described some adults in power as beginning to proactively seek interaction with youth:

> It has gone from a feeling like they're listening to us because they feel that they have to, to now that they want to just hear what we're saying, so that they can learn a little bit about what we're doing.

In contrast to "adults in power," youth describe their adult partners in organizing as unambiguously supportive and helpful. These adult supporters of youth organizing describe their support as part of a process of realization of the full potential of youth in community organizing. One parent and supporter of the youth organizing initiative said that at first

> We thought that this is something that the kids are going to have to probably work on for a while, and then they're going to move on and get distracted or feel like they don't want to do this any more. I think we thought as parents it was going to be short-lived, and it didn't turn out that way at all.

As organizing continued and the difficulty of achieving even small changes in local policies became apparent, adults wondered, "How resilient are these kids going to be? How persistent are they going to be?" Over time, repeated demonstrations of youth competence altered adults' estimation of the potential of youth as agents of community action.

Youth organizing does not just alter relationships between youth and adults but also changes relationships across social divides through multicultural and interfaith collaboration. Similar to other organizing initiatives through PICO and other broad-based organizing networks, a goal of ICUC organizing is engaging people from an array of backgrounds. A result is an organizational culture that encourages ecumenical and intercultural perspectives (Watkins, Larson, & Sullivan, 2007). All of the youth in this study expressed a desire to be part of efforts that reach across racial and ethnic lines, yet the core group is currently composed almost entirely of Latino and Spanish-speaking youth. The importance of multiculturalism was expressed in terms of beliefs of racial/ethnic equality and inclusivity. There was also recognition by youth that multiculturalism would enhance their ability to operate in the political realm. According to one participant, if they are not successful at building a multicultural group, some outsiders would see their public actions and think they represent "a bunch of Mexicans . . . just trying to help themselves, some people probably would see it like that." Some of the older youth who have spent time

trying to organize across racial and ethnic lines highlighted difficulties in building a multicultural organization.

Reflecting on attempts to involve youth from different races and ethnicities, one youth leader said, "It's just shown me how difficult it is, [but] I don't think it's people's fault that we're so divided. . . . I think through ICUC, I've learned that it's the system and the institutions that have divided us." Although youth say that many of their peers blame people of other races for violence and other disruptive behaviors, ICUC youth are more focused on systemic injustices that lead to community conditions.

> Instead of blaming each other [for community conditions and violence], it should be like, "Why do we do this?" We have to let youth know why we're in the situations that we're in, why we are where we're at, why we're screwed over, and how we could change it.

This strategy of building relationships across racial and ethnic boundaries through a focus on tangible community issues of common concern mirrors the strategies that organizing initiatives have used to build and sustain coalitions across religious and denominational lines. Faith-based organizing will often engage participants in processes of reflection on the common set of values rooted in the teachings and traditions of the faith-based institutions represented. In this way, faith plays a role in shaping the process of political mobilization (Wood, 1994). Religion, though, does not just function as an inward-focused resource for meaning making in faith-based organizing; it is also projected outward during public actions as a powerful moral rationale for the changes in local policies and practices that these organizing initiatives demand. We argue that building relationships across races, cultures, generations, and faiths represents a form of social change that is key to making youth organizing initiatives effective.

### *Impacts on Youth Development*

Concurrent with community development and social change, effective youth organizing facilitates positive developmental outcomes for the individuals who are involved. Specific outcomes that are highlighted in this study are psychological empowerment, leadership development, and sociopolitical development. Psychological empowerment has been studied as a form of self-efficacy that is specific to the sociopolitical domain (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Participants in this study express confidence that they are prepared to take leadership and work with a group to make community-level change:

organizing with ICUC has taught me how to be able to start a change . . . you know, first you have to have a lot of people, and have a plan of what you want to achieve." Participants also acquire leadership experience and alter their life goals and plans according to new understandings of their own potential: "I'm no longer in my own little world, I'm out there, I know more about the city than I would ever have known." The most distinctive youth development outcome of youth organizing is a critical awareness of social power and its impacts in local communities—a phenomenon that has been termed sociopolitical development (Watts & Guessous, 2006), which is closely related to the interactional (cognitive) component of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). For example, youth learn not to take local conditions for granted, "I learned that the schools here are a lot different than schools in other cities, and that's just not fair." Participants in youth organizing develop the kind of sophisticated understanding of power that grows most readily from direct personal experience: "community change takes time and involves having a lot of relationships with people in power."

Participants in this study believe that involvement in youth organizing allows them to build important skills. The most frequently mentioned skills were confidence and public speaking ability. Participants described their comfort speaking in front of large audiences as linked to the knowledge that they have acquired on civic and political issues. "Through organizing, I've gone from being a really shy, really quiet guy to a really opinionated, loud person." Youth also indicated that their organizing experience is altering their plans for the future. For example, one participant shared that he had intended to enlist in the military after high school but that his experiences in organizing "made me really want to keep going through school and get a degree and make a difference for everyone else." Furthermore, youth are confident that the skills and approaches to organizing that they are learning will be relevant in other contexts, "I've also developed my organizing skills, like I could probably organize the students at [my University] if I wanted to." Some youth expressed a desire to move into positions of local authority as they became older, and others indicate a preference for the model of grassroots leadership that they are practicing in their organizing, "I think it's changed me from thinking that I want to become [a decision maker] myself to letting everyone in the community make the decision."

A distinctive feature of youth organizing is that youth are involved in intentionally developing each other as leaders. According to one young participant in this study, leadership is developed among new participants first by "teaching them about what organizing is, and then we have them put those trainings into practice." For example, "If we do a training on a research

meeting . . . [newer participants put the training into practice] by taking an active part in the meeting, asking questions, and having dialogue with [decision makers], which normally doesn't happen." Indeed, research is described as a critical component of leadership development for organizing. One youth leader described the importance of research this way:

> For instance, if I were to go to talk to a principal at a high school and tell her that "I want you to do something about the bathrooms," she's not going to listen to me if it was just me going in there and telling her, but if I said, "80% of the students think this, and I've collected some stories of what students actually say, and here is some information on how other schools have dealt with the problems," and I'd have that information for her and I could tell her, "this is what I want you to do."

As youth move through the organizing cycle, they participate in evaluations of their organizing work. These evaluations involve offering feedback to each other on how they performed in their various roles. Youth leaders describe this evaluation process as a critical component of leadership development:

> One of the most important parts [of the leadership development process] is, whenever [new participants] are starting off, you give them an active part at the end, evaluating how the individual did, talking about what they did well and what they can improve on so that, 1. They feel like they are actually taking part and feeling like they're doing something to make a difference, and 2. They take it as a learning experience for the next time.

It is apparent that youth develop a sense of community—particularly the components of sense of community related to experiences of power and influence (Evans, 2007)—through their organizing work: "I feel like I belong somewhere, and I'm part of something that's important, not just to me but to other people." In contrast to the relationships built by adults in community organizing—which are often described as public, rather than private relationships (Christens, 2010)—youth in ICUC organizing have developed close bonds of friendship that they liken to a "second family." This underscores the fact that youth are building social capital through their involvement in organizing. For instance, one youth leader estimated that he has built relationships with 200 other youth across many local high schools through his involvement in organizing. Another proudly revealed that the mayor of San Bernardino

recognizes him in public and knows him by name. The social capital that youth have built has paid dividends as ICUC youth have won awards and scholarships.

In addition to becoming more confident and more engaged in their community, ICUC youth are developing a critical perspective on the systems that affect their lives, a process that has been described as sociopolitical development (Watts & Guessous, 2005). When asked how they have developed these perspectives and how they are helping others to develop them, youth emphasize the importance of showing rather than telling

> I think a lot of it is just having someone who sees it to show us, not just tell us about it, but show us . . . that there are no jobs in the city or that the city spends its money somewhere else instead of over here where there's supposed to be money.

These experiences provide similar developmental opportunities to those observed in engaging youth in participatory action research (Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Moreover, youth emphasize the importance of direct experiences of trying to change systems. An experienced youth leader described the process of developing new youth leaders:

> It's not just me showing them. It's them seeing it. It's them going down to a meeting with the school board president and having her blow us off . . . we've seen it over and over again, they're going to blow us off.

## Features That Make Youth Organizing Initiatives Effective

In this case study of a youth organizing initiative, several themes emerged that provide insights into ways that youth can be more effectively involved in their communities. The youth organizing in this study weaves together three distinct features into a single model: (1) youth leadership development, (2) community development, and (3) social change. Our observation is that this unified approach is a key to making youth organizing initiatives effective. If the focus of a youth organizing initiative is too heavily weighted toward one of these features to the detriment of another, it is unlikely to be as effective at achieving community-level and developmental impacts. There are not, however, separate organizational processes for each of these features; rather, they are threads that are woven through a single cyclical model for youth organizing. The cycle of youth organizing represented by Figure 1 is focused on community development

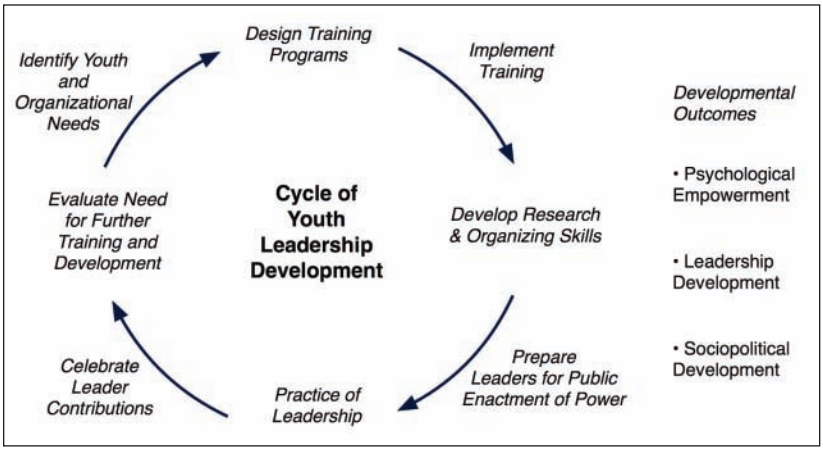


**Figure 2.** Youth Leadership Development and Outcomes of Youth Organizing

through the adoption and implementation of new programs, policy changes, and institution building. Like other studies of youth and community development (Tolman et al., 2001; Zeldin et al., 2008), we posit youth leadership development and community development through youth organizing as two sides of the same coin. Figure 2 is a representation of the youth organizing cycle employed by ICUC with a focus on youth leadership development.

## *Youth/Community Development*

There are potential and real tensions related to the need to deal with the cycles of organizing and leadership development (Figures 1 and 2) in ways that are empowering and that build leadership and develop leaders while achieving measurable policy (or other) outcomes. This tension can be heightened if short-term policy objectives of foundations or short-term research objectives of academics favor the policy cycle over the developmental cycle. If agency priorities favor the development cycle over the organizing cycle, systemic change is sacrificed for individual development. Short-term policy objectives that disregard leadership development often look more like top-down advocacy rather than community organizing because they look for systemic change without building leaders or sustainable community organizations. Drawing on observations from this case study, we suggest a focus on genuine youth participation and experiential learning through the organizing process.

The youth leaders in this study and other successful youth organizing campaigns developed as leaders through collaborative learning processes akin to what Dewey (1903) termed "direct inquiry" (p. 200). Youth in organizing alternately and collaboratively assume roles as learners, researchers, and educators of other youth and adults (Dolan, 2009) in the context of direct first-hand experience. This process of leadership and sociopolitical development occurs through experience in organizing and creates the necessary leadership for successful youth organizing campaigns. Changing systems necessarily involves changing individuals—it should come as no surprise, then, for human development and community development processes to be most efficient when intertwined (Christens, Hanlin, & Speer, 2007). Paradoxically, youth organizing (at its best) is a highly effective vehicle for youth development precisely because it is not solely focused on youth development.

## *Social Change*

Accounts of local community organizing sometimes fail to capture the more transformative aspects of these initiatives. The fact that organizing initiatives often seek relatively modest reforms of local systems causes some activists and observers to dismiss them. At the most extreme, it has been argued that organizing serves to conciliate disadvantaged populations and divert energy that might otherwise be channeled into social movements. Yet local organizing initiatives publicly demonstrate effective citizen action by diverse groups of everyday citizens. When effective, they shape local political cultures around citizen participation and change the expectations of local institutions. Involving youth in community organizing adds another dimension to the capability of organizing initiatives to promote social change by publicly demonstrating effective intergenerational collaborations. In short, we argue that youth organizing is creating social change through publicly enacting a model that involves everyday people wielding power, multicultural and interfaith collaboration, and youth–adult partnerships.

Grassroots community organizing alters the local political cultures where it takes place. It does this through public demonstrations of the possibilities of an approach to citizen politics that engages everyday people in producing community change (Keddy, 2001). Much of the activism that takes place in contemporary society is more ideologically rigid and less diverse. It is often focused on narrowly defined issues and relies on relatively passive support of consumers. It, therefore, involves less of the negotiation of different interests that characterizes community organizing (Boyte, 2003). Youth are often the least likely members of society to speak as representatives of institutions and

wield local political power. Where it is being effectively implemented, youth organizing changes public perceptions of youth, citizenship, and norms for participation in local politics (Zeldin, Petrokubi, Collura, Camino, & Skolaski, 2009). Involving youth in grassroots processes of citizen participation in local decision making has far-reaching implications for community capacity and civil society (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Saegert, 2004). The social change goals of youth organizing extend beyond particular policy changes and impacts on the institutions and individuals involved. Youth organizing produces salient public demonstrations of youth working across the most common social dividing lines: age, class, race/ethnicity, and faith. It thereby challenges public perceptions of the capacity of people to build shared understandings and collaborative relationships across these boundaries.

## Conclusion

The cycles of organizing and development in which ICUC youth are engaged are intended to transform their institutions and create community-level impacts. Yet the process involves constantly developing new capacities and critical perspectives through collaborative action and democratic participation. Effective youth organizing, therefore, can be understood as a multilevel intervention that affects both its participants (positive youth development, leadership development) and the broader community (community development). In doing so, it equips some of society's most marginal members (youth of color) to exercise political power (social change). Based on the findings from this in-depth case study of effective youth organizing, we expect that youth organizing initiatives that weave together youth development, community development, and social change will be more effective at influencing both individual and communities. It is also likely that other approaches to youth development and youth community engagement could be strengthened through intentional facilitation of interplay between human development, community development, and social change.

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