



Youth Development Amidst COVID-19: Innovations and Adaptations

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Youth Forward would like to thank the authors and researchers of this report: Audrey Jordan, Melissa Mendes Campos and Shiree Teng.

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Introduction

In November and December 2020, Youth Forward contracted with a research team led by Audrey Jordan to conduct a brief survey and a set of key informant interviews in order to identify how youth-serving organizations are coping and adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organizations that participated in the survey and interviews are grantees of the California Community Reinvestment Grants Program and Elevate Youth California, two grant programs funded by state cannabis tax revenues and Proposition 64. On January 21st, 2021, Youth Forward and the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color held a **webinar** to present the findings from the research and to engage a panel of leaders in the youth development and youth organizing fields in discussion regarding the findings. The panel included the following leaders:

- Marcus Strother, MENTOR California
- Ashley Rojas, Fresno Barrios Unidos
- Antonio Delfino, California Health Collaborative
- George Galvis, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice

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This report summarizes findings from the survey, the interviews and the panel discussion, with the following headlines:

- Youth serving organizations have been **remarkably adaptive and innovative** under extraordinary circumstances, and staff broadly exhibited a “can-do” attitude
- **Youth engagement continued**, for some even increased, although it was significantly challenged by the pandemic
- As a result of the pandemic, youth organizations have had to **grow their ability to serve youth virtually**, using various forms of technology. Going forward, many organizations will continue to use these tools post-pandemic and will likely support youth both in-person and virtually in the future.
- While the pandemic has taken a drastic toll on youth, particularly in the area of mental health, it has also taken a toll on youth workers. Leaders of youth-serving organizations have had to institute **new practices and policies to support the health and well-being of their staff and volunteers**, to lessen stress and prevent and/or reduce burnout to the extent possible.
- Leaders of youth-serving organizations made progress when they **turned to the leadership of young people** to figure how to best adapt to the new context and to develop innovations.
- Organizations benefitted when they **formed partnerships** with others and sought to leverage one another’s resources.
- During this time and going forward, funders need to take into account the necessity of funding technology and training in technology to enable organizations to serve youth virtually. Many low-income youth lack the hardware, software and training necessary to participate in virtual youth programming. **Organizations should include technology and training in future grant requests.**

Next Steps

From the survey research, interviews and panel discussion, it has become clear that there is a thirst within the youth development field to explore the impact of the pandemic on youth and on the field, and to share emerging practices that are developing in response to the pandemic. The youth development field is undergoing significant changes and will look different post-pandemic. These changes have important implications for funders, including the state agencies that manage Prop 64 grant programs, as well as youth-serving organizations. As a next step, Youth Forward intends to identify ways to continue to support the field and welcomes feedback and ideas regarding next steps from those reviewing this research and from those would like to engage in a process going forward.

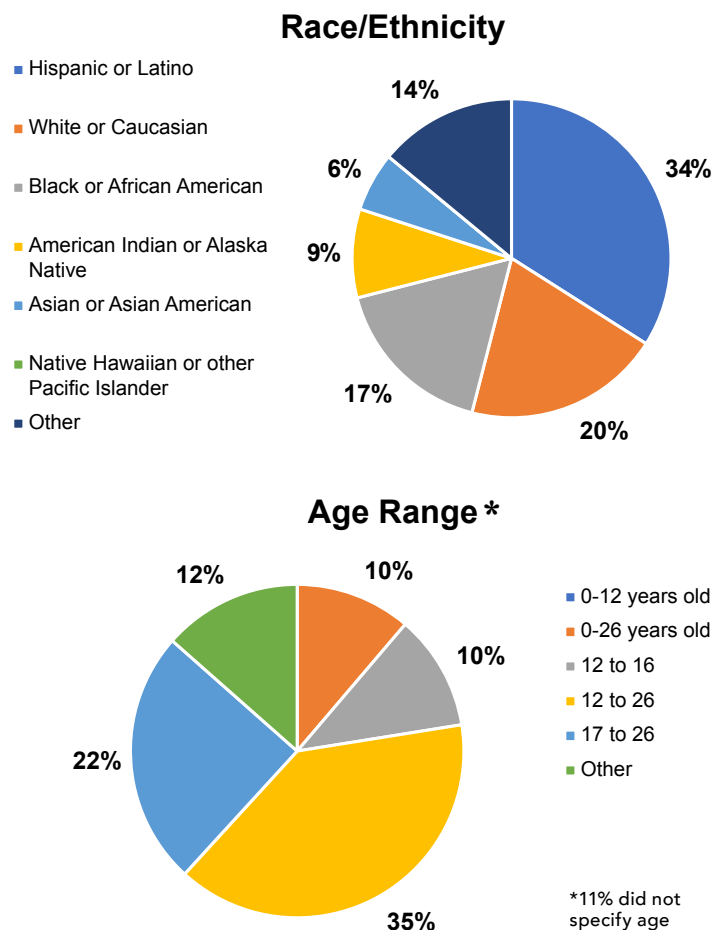
Background

This research focused on how Prop 64 grantees in the youth development field in California are adapting to the new reality under COVID-19. An online survey was sent in November 2020 to 117 respondents and 40 completed it (for a 34% response rate). Phone interviews were conducted in December 2020 with 9 key informants to supplement what was learned from the survey.

Demographics of the 40 survey respondents reveals:

- **55% identified as Elevate Youth grantees;**
- **45% identified as California Community Reinvestment Grants grantees**
- **82% identified themselves as an LGBTQI serving organization**
- **72% serve primarily urban communities; 18% serve primarily rural areas; 10% responded “other”**

Youth Served Demographics



The findings from survey responses are summarized from four categories of questions:

1. **Impact of Pandemic on Services and Supports**
2. **What Was Most Helpful in Responding to Impact**
3. **What Will Be Continued Post-Pandemic**
4. **Key Learnings**

1. Impact of Pandemic on Services and Supports

Of several service and support areas listed, most survey respondents cited **challenges in the areas of: being able to meet with participants (95%); outreach and engagement efforts (85%); relationship building (85%); access to basic needs and MH services (74% and 76%, respectively)**. Staff not being able to be in the same physical space with youth was challenging and felt by over three-fourths of youth-serving organizations surveyed in these areas, and to a lesser degree, other services/support areas (e.g., mentoring; health or legal services).

As the following quotes from survey comments reveal, organizations adapted to the impact of the pandemic by improving their competencies using virtual platforms, supporting youth basic needs, including technology needs, and relying on referrals to community partners when necessary:

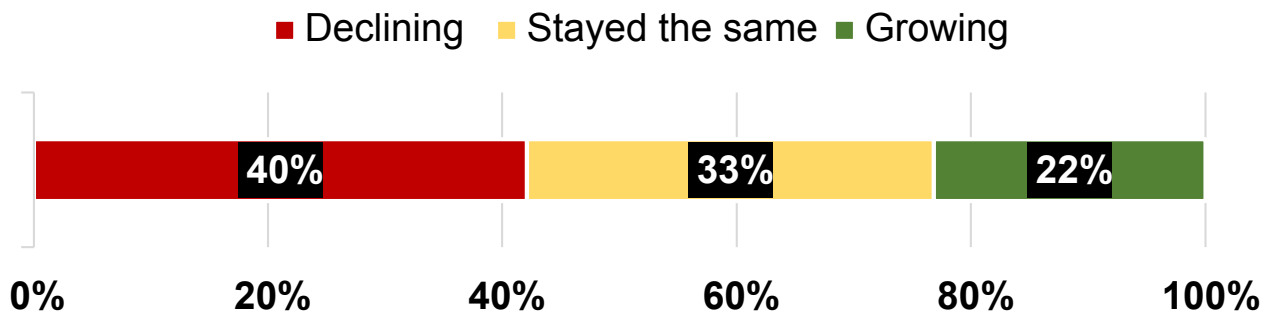
“We have increased usage of virtual convenings and social media to connect with partners and youth participants.”

“We have had to institute social distancing measures during street outreach, which can make young people feel more isolated, so we have learned to do it better... We also have had to provide more food and supplies as many other partner agencies have stopped providing outreach services.”

“...looking for internships that happen remotely or are with essential service providers so our young people have real-world experience, even as the world continues to change.”

“We continue to refer young people and families to community resources available to support their mental health.”

When asked about the impact on numbers of youth participating, survey respondents said that as a result of the pandemic, youth participation was:



2. What Was Most Helpful in Responding to Impact

Survey respondents described ways that technology, additional funding and people (i.e., staff, partners, youth participants) enhanced their organization's ability to survive if not improve services and supports in the midst of the pandemic. Examples of these helpful ways included: Increased use of social media, phone calls, text messaging; redirecting funding and raising additional funds to meet youths' immediate needs; ensuring that youth care packages were provided; engaging family to help engage the youth. Other consequences of the pandemic that proved helpful were that other agencies have had to close resulting in youth serving organizations seeing more clients/participants, and finding that transportation was not as much an issue as it would be if they were meeting in-person.

Respondents were especially grateful that staff were typically "all-in", and that more youth leaders/alums pitched in to help. Also partners in the schools stepped-up, e.g., faculty advisors and school administrators.

“We had to get PPE, put policies in place, train staff, make decisions about managing staff, help staff with childcare, follow all the labor laws—it was a lot!”

“We sought and relied much more on feedback from young people re: our programs and supports.”



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3. What Will Be Continued Post-Pandemic

Not surprisingly, more use of virtual programming is a definite, combined with in-person meetings and activities. There will be the need to provide support to youth with technology tools (e.g., Chrome tablets) and internet access, and translating curriculum for use in virtual space and in other languages will also be necessary. Also, the use of emergency stipends and meeting basic needs will continue.

Interestingly, the pandemic gave the opportunity to scrutinize whether meetings with funders or other partners necessarily need to happen in-person or through videoconferencing. Moreover, the possibilities grew for doing more evaluation through online assessments of programs and youth experiences, and conducting more virtual wellness drop-ins and virtual chats with youth will probably become routine.

4. Key Learnings

The “silver-lining” of the pandemic arises from a kind of adaptability that comes with crisis. Improvements were made in use of technology for meetings, service provision that would not have otherwise occurred. Innovations in and continued commitment to community engagement, with youth in more of a leadership role happened, and new ways of partnering with other organizations (e.g., schools, mental health providers) became necessary pathways for mutual success.



“We have benefited greatly from setting a culture of innovation prior to the pandemic. Staff were already used to moving through ambiguity, testing, and pivoting and it took the whole agency team to make the adjustment we needed to make.”

“I don’t want transactional relationships, but transformative ones. I want to put more energy into the people who are standing with us and putting in the work.... Those are the people I want to partner with.”

More sobering learning came from survey comments: the overwhelming needs of youth and their families for basic supports such as food and housing that were exacerbated by the pandemic and will have impact for a long time to come; the outsized mental health impact of the pandemic; the essential service and support that these youth serving organizations are in their communities—they are “islands in the midst of the storms” as one respondent put it.

“We have had to increase our work to meet the basic needs of the young people we work with...internet access, technology tools, emergency stipends, food, and immediate mental health and healing support, referring more to therapeutic services when we need to.”

“Definitely focus on mental health and supporting our youth. I have been attending the CPI training and they are great. Coping strategies would be great as well.”

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What Supports Would be Most Helpful

Given the changed reality, there are several supports that would be most beneficial for continued resilience and success: funding to support acquisition of the latest virtual apps and technology (in multiple languages), and training to maximize their use; better and more availability of Wi-Fi and broadband internet; training in engaging youth and adapting advocacy and organizing work to virtual space; cross-sector partnerships to address cross-sector needs. Not surprisingly, these organizations also recommend asking the youth and families themselves what services and supports they need to be empowered with knowledge and tools in the pandemic’s current environment and in the aftermath. There must be a focus on community defined practices to address the disproportionate impact on communities of color of COVID-19 and the uprisings that simultaneously occurred as well. These organizations are clear that the elevation of the strength of culture is foundationally healing for the communities, and it is upon this strength they will build.

“We’re shifting to try and integrate with other provider partners who are engaged with [some of our most vulnerable] populations in different service sectors.”

“Listening to and learning from our youth—following their lead rather than feeling like we have to have the answers.”

Interviews and Panel Discussion

In addition to the surveys, key informant interviews were subsequently conducted, and these findings were all presented in a webinar entitled **Youth Development in the Era of COVID-19** in the Cannabis, Equity & Racial Justice Virtual Convening series on January 21, 2021. Although the interviews and panel discussion underscored the survey findings, there were additional, important insights.

The interviews of key informants echoed the new reality that virtual engagements are here to stay. With additional investments in technology supports to youth, trainings to optimize use of current platforms and apps for staff and youth, and more access to wifi and broadband for youth and families, youth serving organizations will likely improve services and supports with a hybrid approach (i.e., some technology, some in-person where possible and preferred).

“Just handing out laptops doesn’t make youth proficient in using them. The healing work needed (shame in not knowing how) alongside the skill development...deepening capacity for understanding and utilization.”

“Community work is deeply relational and about sharing space and breaking bread and spending time together. We are renovating our building to create outdoor space, which is a massive undertaking.”

“Whenever we do come back on site there will be components of our virtual work that will continue: telehealth (counseling, therapy), virtual participation of youth from across the country. In some ways it’s expanding the points of engagement/entry.”

“One thing that may change is I used to have a crazy travel itinerary! It’s really funder driven, I was flying all over the country, for things like a one-hour presentation. The resources wasted...the impact on my health, my family, and my sacred work in the community...not to mention the climate. There MAY be times it makes sense for us to convene, like a multi-day conference, but not for an hour. I’m going to be more strategic.”



Interviews also emphasized the essential role youth serving organizations play in their communities as one of few trusted sources for youth engagement, and the welcome “calling” this appears to be for staff. However, interviewees also cautioned that much more is being asked of these organizations, and concerns about staff and youth burnout are high. There is also concern that funders better respond to the new reality. They can do so by providing more genuine flexibility in funding to support innovation in youth programming and system change rather than seeming stuck in traditional direct service and/or top-down education frames.

“Very recently, with the deep burnout, folks just need opportunities to socialize, connect. It’s just an exhausting time to be a human! Folks aren’t getting their time outside of work, normal social networks or selfcare activities to fall back on.”

“...in some ways, the challenges are what the challenges have always been: dehumanization and pathologization of our black and brown youth and communities. And while our institutions are beginning to better understand determinants of health, they continue to focus interventions on behavioral change.”

The panel discussion after the presentation of findings on January 21 was rich with important reflections. The overwhelming impact of the uprisings and the fight for racial justice (led by the passion and constructively-directed rage of youth themselves), combined with the need and opportunity for funders in partnerships and coalitions that engage young people in the broader systemic fight for racial justice and social change, came through loudly and clearly:

“I’m watching CNN and getting depressed because we’re constantly being berated with you know images of black and brown bodies being dehumanized and seen as disposable and police murdering us with impunity, feeling sort of this sense of helplessness. It was our young people who hit the streets 15 000 strong - it was youth led out here in Oakland some of our young people marched beautifully they marched powerfully and they marched peacefully ... we continued to engage in non-violent direct action with our young people. It was youth led, adult supported, and elder guided and we leveraged our main resource - the young people - to really translate their righteous rage into substantive policy demands and systems change.”

“Loneliness has been a pandemic for us for much longer than Covid 19. Youth development advocates mentoring those folks that are on the streets doing work every day are a solution strategy to be able to combat loneliness to be able to love on our young people in a way that makes sure that they feel supported... mentoring is more important than ever and if anybody can help us to be able to get into a place where we can get lawmakers to better understand that particularly here in the state of California, let’s work together and make that happen.”



Conclusion

The COVID-19 Pandemic had a significant impact upon youth-serving organizations as revealed in survey responses, interviews, and the subsequent panel discussion. However, the resiliency, credibility and innovativeness of a majority of Prop 64 grantees helped them meet the challenges, and in some cases take away adaptations (e.g., strategic use of virtual convenings) that will remain long after the pandemic has gone. No less important was the impact of the uprisings for anti-Black racism and police reform, which will be long lasting. In all responses (i.e., survey, interviews and panel presentations), staff of these organizations trumpeted their enhanced appreciation of youth leadership and partnership as a key to success. And although the extraordinary competence, wisdom and passion of the staff of these organizations shines through, much is being required of these organizations; therefore supporting them to combat burnout of staff and youth will be critical for their sustainability.

Survey respondents and interviewees know that their best teachers, along with the youth themselves, are their peers. **To that end, it is important to note one final exhortation they all communicated—invest in more space, time and tools for them to learn from and with each other.**

“I would look at having youth to be co-chairs to build out future convenings.”

“It would be great to hear what others are doing to adjust to the pandemic.”

“We look forward to hearing the techniques and strategies used by other partners to engage youth in organizing activities, while doing virtual work.”

“We look forward to learning from others about their programs and how they have combatted zoom fatigue. We are also looking forward to networking with other organizations who service tribal communities, so we can learn from each other and support each other in our endeavors.”

“A major challenge has been implementing the program in the youth detention facilities...it would be helpful to engage in a dialog about promising approaches being utilized to serve systems impacted, or incarcerated youth.”

Questions or feedback regarding this paper and/or next steps? Please contact Jim Keddy at Youth Forward, jim@youth-forward.org.

All photos from partner organization social media