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Critical Youth Engagement: Participatory Action Research and Organizing

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Abstract

Drawing on the intersections of youth organizing and participatory action research, this chapter explores what we are calling *critical youth engagement*, in which young people link social inquiry to collective action. Using one participatory action research project and three youth organizing projects as case studies, we propose key elements of critical youth engagement including: the recognition that youth carry knowledge and expertise, and that youth and adults can engage together in serious inquiry, the understanding that intersectionality is crucial, that research should be linked to organizing and action, and that projects and efforts should include youth leaders and adult allies. We detail our theoretical and methodological approach for youth participatory action research and we consider broad implications and consequences of this approach for social science research on youth, adults, institutions, social movements and youth policy, over time.

Keywords: participatory action research, youth engagement, youth leadership, youth organizing

Critical Youth Engagement: Participatory Action Research and Organizing

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This chapter explores *critical youth engagement*: how young people—especially those from low income and immigrant communities—understand conditions of social inequity and negotiate these stresses psychologically and politically. Further, it examines the conditions under which they decide to take up civic engagement by confronting structural injustice and human rights violations collectively. We witness critical youth engagement among low income urban youth through a youth participatory action research (YPAR) and youth organizing approach. The second half of the chapter describes and explores this methodology. We also consider what critical youth engagement and YPAR means for social research, especially for research on youth civic engagement across populations of youth from any background. We hope that our chapter provides a wide angle research agenda that can capture the theoretical and empirical wing span of critical youth engagement projects on youth, adults, institutions, social movements and youth policy, over time.

Towards a critical youth engagement

In New York City, an observer is quickly struck by the uneven distribution of *human security* across the city. Indeed a palpable sense of human insecurity characterizes low-income communities as fundamental contingencies are called into question: Will I graduate from high school if I don't pass these high stakes exams? Will my house be foreclosed? Will gentrification make us homeless? Will my mother go to prison, my dad be deported, foster care remove me? Will those who are important to me stay healthy, or alive? Will I get into college as an undocumented student? Do we have to move when my brother comes out of prison because he

can't live in public housing? Yet, as compelling as pains of insecurity, are young people's desires to mobilize for social change (Fine and Ruglis, 2009).

Our work with youth organizers and youth researchers stands in substantial contrast to much of traditional thinking about youth and civic engagement. When we consult the literatures on civic engagement, we find that youth who attend urban schools, youth of color, immigrant youth and young people living in poverty are typically score *lower* on civic engagement measures than their White, suburban peers (Flanagan et al, 2007; Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo and Lazer, 1999; Sherrod, 2005). While there is some variation in the research, (e.g. Flanagan, 2004; Marcelo, et al 2007; Torney-Purta, this volume; Sherrod et al, this volume; Smetana, Campione-Barr and Metzger, 2006), we find ourselves in substantial agreement with Rubin's (2007) analysis of general trends in the civic engagement literatures. She writes:

“Multiple studies suggest that differences in civic achievement of US students appear to be linked to racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of students being tests...For example students in ‘high poverty’ schools score lower on these measures than students in ‘low poverty’ schools, African American and Latino students score lower than their White and multiracial peers (Baldi, et al 2001; Niemi and Junn, 1998) and parents’ educational attainment is noticeably correlated with student performance...” (Rubin, 2007, p. 452, see also Torney-Purta, Barber,. & Wilkenfeld, 2007 for similar findings).

We find the empirical pattern of a “gap” in civic engagement to be quite problematic. Without careful theorizing about the lack of access, resources and opportunities to engage, the problematic indicators of engagement, and the relative lack of trust in civic institutions, it is understandable that young people of color and youth living in poverty appear more dis-engaged than their more privileged peers (Haste and Hogan, 2006). However, the existing literature on civic engagement often confuses and therefore misrepresents *lack of access* to civic engagement

opportunities as *lack of motive*. Across race and class, young people enjoy extremely uneven opportunities to participate in civic life. Relative to their more privileged counterparts, poor and working class youth of color, and immigrants, are far less likely to enjoy opportunities for meaningful involvement in civic activities and far more likely to have familial responsibilities that keep them from full participation. Low-income urban youth have fewer opportunities to build consistent and trusting relations with educators and to participate in enrichment programs and after-school activities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Thus, the severely uneven distribution of familial responsibilities, the lopsided landscape of opportunities for civic engagement, and the heavy weight of human insecurity in the lives of poor and working class youth systematically confound the findings of diminished levels of engagement. Further, what gets defined as an “engagement” activity is contoured by asymmetries in class, race and gender.

Critical Youth Engagement; A Conceptual and Political Framework

We conceptualize *critical youth engagement* as the intellectual, political, emotional and bodily space shared by three overlapping areas of social justice work with youth: youth leadership, youth organizing, and youth participatory action research (YPAR).

Figure 1. Critical Youth Engagement Conceptual Framework

[insert Figure 1]

Projects of critical youth engagement link social inquiry to collective action for youth justice, and embody five threshold commitments: The recognition:

1. that *youth carry knowledge and expertise* about conditions of their everyday lives shaped in contexts of oppression, colonization and resistance;

2. that youth and adults can engage together in *serious inquiry into the histories and contemporary conditions of injustice and struggle*,
3. that it is crucial to examine cross-sector *circuits of dispossession and pools of resistance* as they intersect across time, space, communities and bodies
4. that *research should be linked to organizing and action*,
5. that effective research teams include *youth leaders and adult allies*.

In order to better understand this framework of critical youth engagement, we will first profile four exemplar YPAR/youth organizing projects.

Grounding our work in the practice of YPAR and youth organizing

Our chapter explores the key elements of *critical youth engagement* through a close look at one youth participatory action research project and three youth organizing campaigns, respectively: Polling for Justice (PFJ) in New York City, Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in the Bronx, NY, South Central Youth Empowered Thru Action (SC-YEA) of the Community Coalition in Los Angeles, and Youth United for Change (YUC) in Philadelphia.

Situated primarily in low-income communities, these projects were built by diverse collectives of young people and adult allies. Committed to the blending of rigorous research, popular education and organizing, these projects are cultivated in educational/political spaces where young people teach and learn the skills of democracy, social inquiry and political action (see Sherrod, 2005). Dedicated to collective action, youth are in conversation with policy makers, youth organizers, researchers and practitioners within and across the fields of education, health and criminal justice. All four projects sit at the intersection of youth organizing and youth-led research. They offer a spectrum of practices for examining young people's critical beliefs and actions, and organizing sites that mobilize social action.

Polling for Justice

Recruited from youth organizations, schools, and via word of mouth, youth researchers in Polling for Justice started meeting in February 2008 as part of a PAR project to document and create policy action around youth experiences with health, education and criminal justice. Drawn from public and private high schools all over New York City, these young people are diverse by race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, educational level, religion, sexuality, gender, disability and immigration status. The forty youth, ages 14-21, are academically diverse and represent a range of educational experiences: from push-outs to Advanced Placement classes, from detention rooms to student leadership.

Nicole¹ started coming to the meetings because her friends were coming. However, after several months of being involved as a Polling for Justice youth researcher, her motivations shifted. Nicole talked about why she likes being a researcher:

Mostly (it's) about hearing about other people's issues, and like, your issues similar to theirs and to realize it's not only you that have problems, it's other people. It's just different problems. It's mainly that. And just being around people that want to try to change stuff.

The research activities of Polling for Justice are familiar: youth and adult allies spend their time writing, reading, discussing issues, building research skills, designing the survey, piloting items, doing data collection and analysis.. Polling for Justice youth researchers make a considerable commitment to the work, spending at least two hours each week on the research project. In the beginning we collaborated to determine our areas of inquiry, our research questions and to think forward toward possible actions. The project takes participation, action and research seriously. With a series of standardized

¹ At request of youth researchers in the Polling for Justice project, names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

measures of health/education/wellbeing and even more newly constructed items, the adult and youth researchers who constitute the research team set out to document the experiences of a broad cross-section of high school-age youth with education, health, safety and juvenile justice in New York City; to understand further the particular experiences of sub-populations of young people—particularly across gender, neighborhood, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and immigration status; to provide relevant data to NYC youth organizing campaigns for safe schools, college access, against high stakes testing and against police harassment of youth of color. An attempt is made to bubble up new issues that are circulating in the everyday lives of youth of color but haven't reached the policy screens. In the tradition of C.W. Mills (1959/2000) by encouraging "private troubles" to become "public issues," some of our most significant findings have resulted.

For example, as the Polling for Justice research collective discussed what we wanted to know, the conversation turned to urban youths' relations with police. In one discussion on police treatment of young people in the streets, anger at the police was close to the surface. Youth researchers told stories of being arbitrarily stopped, humiliated, disrespected and sometimes arrested with a strong sense of outrage. One African American 16-year old, male researcher complicated the discussion by saying that police treated him fairly well. His comment was supported by another young person, and the debate boiled.

Robert: I don't know, cops treat me just fine. Not all cops are bad. I pretty much trust the police. (people on the outskirts of the discussion audibly snickered.)

Cherisse: Please—I don't know what part of the city you live in, but I don't know anyone who is trusting the police.

Sarah: No, I agree with him. Cops have the power to stop a situation, like to arrest someone, and that's why they can make you feel safer.

Cherisse: The cops might have the power to arrest or whatever, but they're never there when you need them.

Timothy: Or, they're always after the wrong people.

This conversation percolated in focus groups and informal meetings across the city. In response to these varied perspectives on policing and over-policing, the research team intentionally crafted a series of items to assess young peoples' contacts with police (positive, negative, mixed) and to document the consequences, whether the contact was in school or out of school. Nearly half of the over 1000 students surveyed reported negative experiences with police in the last six months, and most of those reported two or more incidents. Looking more closely, we see that disparities in negative policing experiences exist for youth occupying nearly all categories of socially liminal spaces: Black (including African American and African Caribbean) as well as multi-racial youth experience a greater likelihood of negative experiences with police than other racial categories; boys more than girls; LGBTQ youth more than those who identify as straight; young people in the Bronx more than any borough of the city. The project continues to track the educational, economic, trust, mental health and criminal justice implications of adolescent engagement with police. The project has interviewed lawyers, judges and police about these activities; and formed alliances with youth and researchers along the Northeast corridor in order to track police harassment as a threat to the public health and well-being of youth of color.

Some of the PFJ youth researchers are also actively involved in a youth rights campaign to require city officials to publicly report the number of police-student incidents that take place inside New York City public schools. Polling for Justice survey data will complement the official Department of Education—New York City Police Department (DOE-NYPD) data and

produce findings to use in ongoing campaigns to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (Browne, 2003; Meiners, 2007). While this example illuminates the shared influence of research-action-policy on issues of safety and violence, concerns about education, criminal justice and health were expressed and interrogated in equally complex ways.

Sistas and Brothas United

Young people's desire to take control of their lives propelled the creation of Sistas and Brothas United in the Bronx, New York City, in 1999. As the youth organizing arm of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), some of the youth had participated in community rallies alongside their parents in campaigns for safer streets, affordable housing and better elementary schools. In forming SBU, young people wanted to confront an alarming situation in their high schools: only a third of students in the area met math standards, barely a fifth met English standards, and more than half were likely to drop out of school. These youth hoped that SBU would provide a structure through which they could "identify and address issues affecting youths' lives and win changes."

Jorman² stumbled upon SBU in a moment of boredom. His friend brought him to the organization on a day when youth were discussing an upcoming meeting with school safety officials. Jorman recalls telling the group: "you [can] not just meet with people in charge, and everybody there basically told me, yes we can. We in fact have a meeting scheduled in a day and that's what we're preparing for. And I was like, wow. So then that's when I wanted to do this. ...I never thought, like residents, you know, regular community people [could] just go and actually meet with politicians. I thought, we were us and they were them and that's the way it was. Until I came here.

² Names of youth from Sisters and Brothers United, Youth United for Change and South Central Youth Empowered thru Action are used with permission

Initially, SBU operated out of one of the NWBCCC's offices as a committee staffed informally by a NWBCCC housing organizer. As the number of young people at meetings grew, SBU developed into a distinct youth action group, with its own office and staff of two full-time organizers. SBU created its own decision-making structure with a youth organizing committee and board of directors, comprised entirely of youth. Youth also participated on the NWBCCC board of directors, helping to define the direction and strategy for the overall organization.

Within a few years, the organization's membership had grown to more than sixty core members, with a larger group of two hundred young people who regularly turned out for community events. Youth were involved in multiple campaigns to address problems in their schools. They led tours to introduce new principals and teachers to their Bronx neighborhoods. They met with district officials to negotiate facility improvements (such as repairing broken escalators and bathrooms) so that students could get to class on time. And they created forums for teachers and students to discuss how to improve communication and academic counseling in their schools.

As SBU grappled with how to embed the vision and principles of youth leadership into the daily life of schools, youth began to look at creating their own school. In an unusual alliance with adult educators, youth designed and won district leaders' approval for a new small high school called the Leadership Institute. According to Antoine Powell, an SBU member who was involved in the youth-led design process,

Our goal was to design a school in which SBU's three central themes of leadership, social justice and community action would be incorporated into the school environment. We not only want our members to become familiar with these concepts, we want them have these characteristics instilled in their character so they can apply them in the future. In the Leadership Institute, a leader is a person who is not only able to identify a situation in their community that may be detrimental, but also possesses the power to unite the

members of his or her community to work towards fixing the issue at hand (Carlo et al, 2005, 62).

As the local work expanded, SBU began developing relationships with other youth organizations in the city. In 2004, SBU helped found a new citywide coalition, the Urban Youth Collaborative, through which young people could take action at a citywide level and connect to other youth organizations and youth activists. Allying with researchers and policy analysts at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, SBU and UYC leaders built citywide campaigns to improve student access to academic support and college advising through the creation of student success centers. They also organized to reduce the police presence in their schools and to expand the opportunities for student voice in school decision-making.

Youth United for Change, Philadelphia, PA

In contrast with SBU, Youth United for Change (YUC) began in 1993 as a youth leadership project within a social service organization in north Philadelphia. Rebecca Rathje, a youth worker in a drug prevention program, wanted to create a program where young people could provide their perspective on school and community issues. Rathje's initial project focused on helping youth create a media project to share their ideas to reduce the dropout rate in their school. But when youth went to a school board meeting to present their ideas, board members could barely disguise their lack of interest (in fact, the board president left the room during the youths' presentation). Angry and dismayed at the experience, Rebecca and the youth turned for advice to another youth organization, Youth Force, in New York City. With mentoring and training from Youth Force and a local organizing group, the Eastern Philadelphia (now Pennsylvania) Organizing Project (EPOP), YUC re-invented itself as a youth-led organizing group.

YUC organizes high school students through youth-led school-based chapters at local high schools, with support from an adult organizer. Currently, five such chapters exist in high schools where the school principal has agreed to the organization's activities on the campus. YUC leaders meet weekly in these chapters to define and carry out school improvement campaigns. Similar to SBU's approach, YUC's organizing campaigns proceed through a cycle of:

- Recruitment through classroom presentations and passing out flyers to students in the lunchroom and outside of school before and after the school day;
- Group meetings after school to discuss issues of concern to youth;
- Outreach to assess the scope of the issue and its resonance with the larger student body through school-wide surveys and listening campaigns, often with support from teachers who facilitate access to classrooms for YUC organizers;
- Research to gather information on reform alternatives and to define a strategy for engaging school officials; and
- Presenting reform recommendations to school and district officials.

YUC chapters have won agreements from principals to implement new math curriculum and improve student access to guidance counselors. They also have won commitments from district leadership to improve buildings, and provide new resources for libraries and new computers for classrooms. When asked why she is involved in the organization, Rasheeda, a high school junior, says: “[Being involved] makes you feel better about yourself, like that you are trying to make a change in the school and it lets you know that you can do it.”

Youth leaders of the different chapters gather once a month for YUC-wide meetings at which they discuss crosscutting issues and potential campaigns, and lend support to each other's efforts. Leadership development training is integrated into these meetings, and is also provided in intensive weekend retreats and a weeklong summer institute. Facilitated by adult organizers and YUC alumni, training sessions focus on education reform strategies, but they also examine

political and economic issues, including workshops on the role of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies in promoting economic disparities, and the history of the labor movement. Like SBU, YUC has initiated or participated in district-level campaigns—to fight attempts to privatize the Philadelphia public schools, and to demand structural and policy reforms to improve the quality of education in north Philadelphia neighborhoods. These campaigns have brought visibility to YUC leaders as a force to be contended with in the city's political landscape. In 2005, for example, YUC's exposure of test-taking improprieties in a local high school resulted in the Philadelphia School District creating new standards for testing and limiting the instructional time devoted solely to test-preparation..

In 2002, after almost ten years of local organizing, YUC initiated a campaign to restructure two large high schools into campuses of small schools. By this time, participation in YUC had grown to more than one thousand membership-card carrying YUC youth leaders. YUC envisioned the creation of small autonomous schools on the campus, each with no more than 400 students, as means of substantially transforming school quality. With funds and advice from the Cross City Campaign for School Reform, YUC youth organizers and leaders traveled to Oakland, Chicago, Rhode Island, and New York City to learn about different small schools models. They reviewed literature on the effectiveness of small schools, surveyed their peers to gather design ideas, and wrote a proposal to create four new small high schools focused on themes related to college access and career preparation. Joining with another youth organization—the Philadelphia Student Union—as well as adult groups, such as EPOP, Cross City and Research for Action, YUC succeeded in winning district support for the youths' proposal in 2005. YUC is now actively monitoring the implementation of the re-design, and building community engagement in the schools.

South Central Youth Empowered Thru Action, Los Angeles, CA

In this project the experience of Marcus McKinney, a former gang member who got involved with Los Angeles' South Central Youth Empowered thru Action while in high school, is instructive. He eventually went on to become a staff member at SC-YEA. He reflected on how getting involved with SC-YEA helped him re-direct his intellectual and leadership abilities into something more productive:

[Before SC-YEA], I was part of a gang out here—I grew up around them and kind of idolized them. That is why I was reluctant to join initially, I thought it was not for me...Even though I was a gang member I did not fit the stereotype, I was always interested in school...They knew I should be doing something more productive. [SC-YEA] has helped me in that.

Training the next generation of leaders for social justice organizing was the impetus for the creation of South Central Youth Empowered thru Action. Initiated in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, SC-YEA drew its inspiration from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, promoting a vision of “Black and Brown Unity” for south Los Angeles.

SC-YEA formed in 1993 as the youth leadership and mobilization arm of the Community Coalition. Early work focused on criminal justice campaigns—mobilizing against the three strikes policy for minor felony offenses. In 1996, SC-YEA began organizing youth in local high schools as a complement to its statewide work. The first issue SC-YEA took on was the overcrowded and rundown conditions of school facilities. Armed with disposable cameras, youth documented the dilapidated conditions of their schools. With support from the Community Coalition, SC-YEA developed a list of repairs needed—using surveys and forums with youth—to gather data and discuss their ideas, and created a multimedia proposal for a needs-based process of distributing school facilities funds. Together, adults and youth mobilized parent and

community support for a school bond act. When the bond act passed, the organization successfully pressured the superintendent and school board to repair south LA schools.

As SC-YEA became more deeply involved in schools, organizers and youth began to notice data on local schools that showed that more than 60 percent of South LA high school students were dropping off of school rolls before reaching their senior year. SC-YEA released a report denouncing what they called the “disappearance” rate, which they said cut off young people’s options for the future. Worse yet, SC-YEA argued, even if students remained in school, a majority would not have the necessary coursework to gain entry into a state university. In 1999, they wrote, “only 12 percent of students graduating from South LA high schools went on to attend California’s public four-year colleges” (SC-YEA, 1999).

In December 2000, SC-YEA launched a campaign to win a policy of mandatory access to college preparatory curriculum in all Los Angeles high schools, because as one SC-YEA member explained, “some people are taking cosmetology when they should be taking math analysis or trigonometry.” To build district support for their proposal, SC-YEA worked with a broad coalition of youth groups, community organizations, and researchers from UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA) and Education Trust-West, as well as education reform groups. The coalition held rallies and press events, and met one-on-one with district leaders. Five years later, in 2005, the LA Unified School District passed a new district policy mandating college preparation for all (Hayasaki, 2005). With its allies, SC-YEA is now in the process of monitoring the implementation of college preparatory curriculum policy to hold the district leadership accountable for allocating resources, both teachers and materials, to the areas that are most in need.

Critical Youth Engagement Core Commitments

With the stories of these four youth organizing/YPAR projects in mind, we now detail the five threshold commitments to *critical youth engagement*: 1) *youth carry knowledge*, 2) *critical analysis towards critical consciousness*, 3) *youth leadership in partnership with adults*, 4) *intersectionality*, and 5) *collective action for social change*.

1. Young people as sources of knowledge and power

In critical youth engagement projects, youth are not small adults, in need of being filled up with the political wisdom of their elders. They are not lacking a real understanding of injustice or in need of remediation. Youth participatory action research and organizing are grounded in the recognition that youth hold important knowledge about their social conditions and about social change. This stance draws on deep tradition within community organizing about the right of disenfranchised members of society to participate in public life and to contribute their knowledge to the public sphere. Freire argues:

The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy. The less people are asked about what they want, about their expectations, the less democracy we have (Horton and Freire, 1990, 145-6).

Challenging traditional epistemologies in which expertise is equated with university-based researchers, or elders, in sites of critical youth engagement, multi-generational collectives of elders, adults and youth gather together to pool experience, knowledge, expertise and lines of social inquiry. Decisions about research questions, methodological approaches, and interpretations of the data are made across generations. While organizing campaigns or activist research designs may be planned by a core group of highly involved youth leaders, the focus is

always on expanding that leadership circle to bring new youth into the process and to assure that the issues tackled and the solutions proposed resonate with a broader constituency of young people. Before tackling an issue, youth organizing groups typically survey their peers or conduct focus groups to ensure that their activism is responding to the concerns most salient to young people themselves. Surveys collected by SBU, SC-YEA and YUC provided both ideas and evidence for campaigns to improve school counseling, facilities, access to rigorous curriculum.

2. A critical analysis to facilitate critical consciousness of history, privilege and power

At the heart of critical youth engagement are spaces designed for critical community education with youth, to harvest what Freire calls “critical consciousness.” (Horton and Freire, 1990). By inviting youth to unpack the historic and current role of structural forces such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism that perpetuate inequality and understanding the history of social justice movements as key to this analysis, youth develop what Watts et. al calls a “systematic perspective on their life circumstances and current events” (2003, p. 188).

Among youth organizing groups, connections to the history of youth led social movements in the U.S. are common. When youth join SC-YEA, for example, they participate in an eight-session Leadership Academy as a foundation for the educational and political work they do in their local high school organizing committees. Youth read about the civil rights, women’s and Chicano movements, with an eye towards finding the common threads between historical struggles and their own experiences. SC-YEA youth learn to plan, research, study, mobilize phone banks, and use media and grassroots theatre to effectively move campaigns forward. Critical analysis develops in tandem with a range of skills required to carry out the work of organizing, such as crafting agendas, facilitating meetings, public speaking, and mentoring peers. (Watts et al, 2003). This kind of “liberation behavior” builds confidence in the youth as they confront oppression and see the impact of their own power (Watts et al, 2003, also discussed in Wilkenfeld, et al., this volume).

3. *Youth leadership in partnership with adults*

Youth voice and youth empowerment are at the core of critical youth engagement. Youth organizing places a heavy emphasis on youth leadership. Young people take the lead in generating ideas, facilitating meetings, and making decisions. At the same time, adults are not absent. Adults actively guide and educate young people, but do so in a spirit of mutual inquiry, collaboration, and problem solving. Adults act as important allies to young people as they grapple with making informed decisions about research and social action. Adult organizers are guided by a core principle that they are not authorized to lead meetings, speak for youth, or to represent the organization in public meetings of any kind. Instead, adult organizers' roles are to help young people identify and evaluate relevant information, share knowledge and insights, role-play and rehearse, to listen and challenge. Emphasizing youth leadership, in partnership with adults, frames youth themselves as assets and actors, contributing to growth and change in adults, institutions, systems, communities and society (Zeller-Berkman, 2007).

4. *Intersectionality: analyzing and organizing across sectors of everyday life*

Critical youth engagement is grounded in the recognition that discrete 'sectors' of public life—health, criminal justice, education, housing, immigration status, economics—are not separated but woven in the lives and communities of these youth. Drawing from critical race theory Crenshaw (1995) describes critical youth engagement as focused on *structural* intersectionality, “the diverse structures that shape one’s experiences intersect to create one’s social reality” and *political* intersectionality, “the ways that those who occupy multiple subordinate identities, ... may find themselves caught between the sometimes conflicting agendas of two political constituencies to which they belong (Crenshaw 1995), or are overlooked by these movements entirely” (Cole, 2008: 444).

Young people study and organize *within and across* sectors of everyday life to demand college access, resist over-policing and agitate for good schools. They take seriously the

argument that, “Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that all oppressions work together in producing injustice.” (Collins, 2000, p. 18). Seeing, naming and understanding the raced, classed, gendered, homophobic and xenophobic policies (and milieu) that shape the life worlds of youth living in cities simultaneously creates the conditions necessary for a critical imagining of an alternative future.

5. Collective action for social change

By analyzing problems historically and structurally, through an intersectional lens, young people and adult allies are primed to develop strategies for collective action that bear witness, challenge and/or seek to change those conditions. In organizing, young people often meet with public officials to negotiate and make demands for change. In an effort to sway public policy, they are likely to sign petitions, stage protests, or hold public actions that put pressure on school administrators or public officials to shift policies. In SBU, a practice of “stepping up-stepping back” means that a youth member can attend a classroom presentation by SBU youth leaders one day, attend an education committee meeting the next, and testify before the school board the following week. SBU leaders are encouraged to see themselves as an integral part of the struggle to improve conditions in their communities. This sense of collective efficacy, of what they can accomplish together, is reinforced in the expectation that everyone present must contribute to the effort. The notion of collective efficacy—the perception of mutual trust and willingness to help community members in need—is even more powerful when we consider its positive effects on health and student academic achievement.

Critical Youth Engagement as Research Method:

Participatory Design and Methods in Polling for Justice

To appreciate how critical youth engagement shapes research methods, we will focus on the participatory design, methods and analysis of Polling for Justice, a project that has been conceptualized and implemented by all of the authors and many young (and older) collaborators. The three youth organizing projects described earlier also utilize participatory action research methods, although they use these methods within the broader conceptual frame of youth-led campaign development and action. In this second half of the paper we focus on PFJ to provide a deep look at research methodology as an element of critical youth engagement. While we have spent the first half of the piece addressing the similarities of youth organizing and youth research, it is important to note that the methodologies for organizing and research are, on the ground, quite distinct. We focus here on PFJ as a participatory youth research project linked to youth organizing.

The PFJ researchers set out to study, theoretically and empirically, what we call *circuits of dispossession* (Fine and Ruglis, 2009) and *pools of youth resistance* in New York City, the ways in which social policies, institutions and practices systematically deny youth of color key human rights across sectors (education, criminal justice and health care) and the ways in which youth mobilize to resist, negotiate and challenge collectively these very forms of dispossession. Living with rapid gentrification, intense police surveillance in communities of color; privatization of schooling, under the guise of choice, the deportation of massive numbers of immigrants, shrinkage of the supportive public sphere and expansion of the “disciplining” public sphere, we sought to investigate how urban youth experience, respond to and organize against the profoundly uneven opportunities for development across the five boroughs of New York City in three sectors: education, health care and criminal justice. PFJ is explicitly designed to gather and funnel social science evidence into organizing campaigns for youth justice – violence against

girls and women, police harassment, college access, high stakes testing, and access to comprehensive sexuality education, to name just a few. Through PFJ, we can see how critical youth engagement influences participatory action research design, method, analysis and productions.

Youth as holders of knowledge: Challenging traditional notions of expertise

In 2008, at our first gathering, more than 40 youth arrived, recruited from activist organizations, public schools, detention centers, LGBTQ youth groups, foster care, undocumented youth seeking college and elite students from private schools, joined by educators, representatives of the NYC department of adolescent health, immigrant family organizers, lawyers, youth workers, psychologists, planned parenthood researchers, geographers, psychology and education doctoral students, in the basement of the Graduate Center of CUNY.

We posed a single, simple challenge to the group: We would like to collectively design a large scale, citywide research project, creating a youth survey of standardized and home grown items and conducting a series of focus groups, to document youth experiences across various public sectors of the city. We explained that the youth and adults were recruited because of their distinct experience, knowledge and expertise and the young people and adults formed groups to pool their knowledge about prisons and their impact on youth, about foster care, immigration and deportation, homeless shelters, peer relationships, access to health education, worries about feeling safe, and concern for communities. Once groups were formed, jackets and hats came off and the groups began their work. We created a graffiti wall where youth could jot down the questions they would want to ask of other NYC teens.

We organized groups across certain experiences of urban youth: In one corner was a young man whose father was in prison, a girl worried her mother would be deported and a 9th grader fearful about gentrification, and they were designing questions about the real homeland security. In another corner, youth were reviewing standardized health items, such as the Youth

Behavior Risk Survey (YRBS) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) about sexuality, reproduction, health and nutrition. Angry about these surveillance systems asking questions that are “none of your business” and equally concerned with “risky” health behaviors without accounting for questions and issues of access, resources, opportunity (educational or otherwise), and cultural differences, we worked to understand why it would be important to track the relation of unsafe sex practices with type, quality and access to comprehensive sexuality education (versus abstinence only, or none at all), or violence in a relationship, or dropping out of school. But these workgroups also helped to stimulate critical youth-ful discussions on the meaning of “health”; societal fears of and judgments about adolescence; cultural influences on health; reified and racist perceptions of “urban” youth and youth of color; and about how health behaviors cannot be divorced from opportunity structures and the social, economic and political contexts into which one is embedded.

Down the hall, yet another group was talking about where they felt safe? At home? On the streets? In school? And, a fourth group discussed youth experience with the criminal justice system. Together they created a long check-list of contacts with police. What grew out of this was the most politically mobilized set of questions contained within the survey. In fact, nearly all of the criminal justice survey questions were developed by the youth. It became overwhelmingly evident that existing measures of youth experiences with policing in New York City failed to capture their realities.

Nesting the research within an analysis of historic and contemporary injustice

Our work was designed as a contact zone (Torre, 2005) among youth from varied communities and ethnicities; between young people and adults; advocates, practitioners and researchers from education, criminal justice and public health. Within our research team, questions of privilege, power and oppression are interrogated in community; youth experience

leads the inquiry and adult skills surround and support; expertise is democratized and the “right to research” is assumed fundamental (Appadurai, 2004). This isn’t always smooth, but creating spaces for experience, analysis, theory and design to be explored, happens in the prepared spaces of our Youth Research Camps.

Research camps are a method for building the democratic capacity of a research collective which both contains and interrogates difference and power. We begin our first session with exercises designed to strip away misconceptions about what constitutes scientific inquiry and who can engage social research, democratizing notions of knowledge and expertise. We design scavenger hunts to reveal the different insights that researchers import, for instance, how the least formally educated members of our collectives (e.g. students in special education classes) often can read between the lines., We develop exercises and activities in the traditions of critical pedagogy and popular education to extract and honor multiple perspectives – not just one designated right answer. Acknowledging many forms of intelligence is sometimes resisted by students who have been “at the top” of their schools, or privileged, or professionals who believe it is their job to teach the youth what they do not know. We spend much time helping young people explore themselves as intersectional; defined at once by culture, neighborhood, gender, class, adolescence, interest in books, music, politics, sexuality, gender, language, humor, how people treat them, how they resist and how they embody their worlds.

We read psychological theory, critical race theory and methods, newspaper articles and listen to music to ‘hear’ how youth are represented, and to search for voices of dissent, challenge and resistance; we “take” standardized scales and try out new survey questions; we learn to conduct interviews and role play focus groups; we watch films and create questions; we spend time writing, discussing issues on the streets, in their schools, homes, meeting other youth researchers from other regions; building research skills, designing the survey, piloting items, collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data; presenting findings across NYC and at

professional meetings.

We sponsored “seminars” for youth researchers and doctoral students called Statistics for the People. This is a statistical collective where everyone takes a set of questions and investigates the topic using our growing data. The collective is trained to approach their questions inductively using the philosophy and techniques of Tukey’s (1977) exploratory data analysis. And all participating researchers—both youth and adult—take on the responsibility to “train” the next generation of youth researchers on the next project that grows out of the Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design at the Graduate Center of CUNY.

Over 18 months, Polling for Justice organized a series of multi-generational research camps focused, at the beginning, on building research expertise, sharing readings on the issues, histories of injustice and political struggles of resistance, refining our research questions, specifying the design and sample, exploring intersectional analyses of qualitative and quantitative data and generating provocative ideas for products, actions, scholarly papers, testimony, white papers and performances.

Intersectionality as an element of design, methods and analysis

Drawing from Crenshaw, Anzaldua, DuBois and Cole, in our research camps we explore *structural intersectionality* – the ways in which miseducation or police harassment for instance, may trigger consequences for health disparities, days lost from school, push out and/or criminal justice involvement. As a multi-generational research collective, we also explore each of our own *political intersectionalities*, the ways in which political categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class live in our bodies and communities, affecting how people see us, the institutions we find ourselves engaged with, how we see ourselves.

Several months after these groups met, following shared readings, histories and a teenaged sense of intersectionality, the Polling for Justice Research Collective completed a 45

minutes – one hour survey, disseminated broadly across the city, on the streets and the internet. Snowball samples were launched for geographic, ethnic and social class diversity, with nodes starting in distinct public and private schools, youth organizing groups, community health clinics, a participatory action research collective of girls going through bat mitzvah, LGBT and homeless youth groups. We completed data collection, with an N of 1,000, with more than half the youth identifying as Black, Latino, Asian or Multiple-ethnicities . Because we are testing theories of critical consciousness and youth engagement, as well as documenting the landscape of opportunities for youth development across education, health care and criminal justice, the survey includes items from national standardized instruments about education (NCES and Consortium on Chicago School Reform) and health (YRBSS, AddHealth), items from Jost’s systems justification scales, psychological well being and discrimination items, Flanagan’s measures of civic engagement along with home grown questions about relations with police, items about hunger, sex, drugs, safety and understanding of injustice.

Intersectionality has deeply influenced our thinking about epistemology, design, methods and analysis. Consider, for instance, our analyses of youth-police relations. As noted above, the focus on police as an environmental stressor emerged entirely from the youth. In our early discussions and research camps, among the youth researchers and in varied focus groups, the conversations about everyday life, would often turn to confrontations with police. Both criticism of and support for police boiled over in focus groups and informal meetings across the city, filled with dissent, agitation, disagreement and ambivalence. It was clear that we would need to dedicate a section of the survey to youth relations with police.

The researchers designed, piloted and finalized a series of items to assess young peoples’ varied contacts with police: positive – e.g. have you been helped by a police officer? have you been given a second chance from a police officer? And negative – have you been called names, touched, stopped, frisked, ticketed... by a police officer, in school and out of school.

Our preliminary evidence (Figure 2), suggests that across the sample, negative police contact is an unfortunately common experience in the lives of many NYC youth. Slightly less than half (48%) of the youth who responded to our survey reported, in the last six months, having at least one negative encounter with police; 21% reported 3 or more negative encounters. Marking the full complexity, 34% of the youth reported having at least one positive interaction with police in the last six months. When focusing our attention to what happens in school, we found that 14% of the youth experienced negative interactions with police and only 6% experienced positive interactions within the last six months.

With a commitment to analyses by gender, borough, sexuality, race/ethnicity and social class, we learned that males, youth who are Black or multi-racial, those from the Bronx, as well as youth who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual are more likely to report negative encounters with police in the last six months than other demographic groups in their age cohort

To explore questions of structural intersectionality, we are investigating the educational and mental health consequences of negative police interactions (See also Ruglis, 2009). A cursory look reveals that a substantial majority of students who have dropped out or been pushed out of school report higher levels of trouble with police; same is true for those who have been suspended or expelled. Regardless of the causal sequence, we can see the shape of the problem, raising questions about the role of the NYPD in New York City public schools..

We are also interested in documenting the intersection of negative police contact and youth mental health. We have learned that negative contact with police appears to be associated, in the aggregate, with elevated depression scores (based on the CES-D (Radloff, 1977)). Taking intersectionality one step deeper, we are beginning to see racialized patterns in the mental health consequences of negative police contact. Blacks (including African Americans and African Caribbeans) and multi-racial youth are quite likely to experience negative contact with police, but Blacks and multi-ethnic youth show the lowest rates of depression in relationship to the

contact. While further analyses are needed, our concern is that in the African American community, negative contacts with police have become routinized.

Intersectional analyses allow us to speak to the policy implications of heavy police surveillance, in terms of criminal justice, but also education, mental health and youths' sense of trust in adults. These analyses also allow us to map which groups of youth in which communities, are most vulnerable to the surveillance and to the adverse consequences.

Youth leadership and adult allies

These questions of youth-police interactions originated with the concerns of young people. At the start of the project, it was this issue that youth most wanted to discuss and it has emerged, significantly, as the area in which our data are most provocative. When the preliminary evidence began to take shape, the adult researchers were outraged by the evidence of sustained patterns of negative interactions between police and young people, while the youth researchers were relatively nonplussed. The youth led the adults in the consideration of this provocative evidence. Our investigation brought us upon unexpected lines of inquiry, for example a more nuanced understanding of how police policy impacts youth experience.

We mentioned the patterns of police youth interactions to a judge in the South Bronx, who seemed unsurprised and said, simply, as if it were obvious, "overtime." When pressed, she elaborated, telling us that police pick up groups of youth after school, book them.

Judge L. explained to the young people that police get "overtime" for picking up groups of youth after school and booking them. Even if they find nothing, usually there is some evidence of "resistance" or a joint or a box cutter that will ultimately justify the stop. Students then lose time from school and develop a record. All of which has been confirmed in our data. The interview with the judge led us on the path to investigate Operation Clean Halls, whereby police have the right to patrol in the hallways of public housing and anyone caught in the halls

who “should not be there” or doesn’t have appropriate ID can be picked up and charged with trespassing. We – adults and youth - are unbraiding the policy and institutional strands of dispossession and by so doing, we are rewinding the causal tale of how so many youth of color end up entangled in the juvenile justice system, following the lead of the youth with the skills of adult researchers, lawyers and advocates.

At the intersection of social theory, youth experience, research and action

We have presented these data in a variety of venues, and have gotten calls and emails about interest in collaboration – from lawyers and researchers (and the Hong Kong Police Research Division), seeking to replicate the study. Six teams of researchers from Washington DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark and NYC are exploring a 5-city study of police harassment as a public health threat to the development of urban youth. Further, we are preparing an amicus brief on the frequency, geography, racialized distribution and consequence of police harassment of urban youth as risk factor in public health and education for use by lawyers, educators and youth who end up in court. In addition youth will be crafting youth documents (flyers, websites, performances) on youth-police relations.

And finally we are moving these data into performance. Youth researchers are being trained in Playback Theatre, a form of improvisational theatre, to prepare for a performance of the material at a variety of professional and youth organizing events. We have been deeply influenced by not only WEB DuBois’ scholarship, but also by something else of his that is little known—his pageant form. In 1913, W.E.B. DuBois produced a pageant called "The Star of Ethiopia." (DuBois, 1915). It was "a great human festival" with a cast of 1,000 African Americans using procession, story and extravagant costumes to tell a productive history of African Americans. The pageant form was designed to “teach the colored people themselves of their history and their rich emotional life.” (Du Bois, 1915, p. 230) The stage was a corrective on

the long history of “any mention of Negro blood or Negro life in America for a century has been occasion for .. a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast. ...” (Du Bois, 1924, p. 56). Du Bois used pageantry, performance, and circus theater in order to explore alternative possibilities about African American history and reality and inject them into the public imagination. Building on the DuBoisian legacy of pageants, the Polling for Justice project plans an artistic performance of our mixed methods data in order to spark new visions of, and for, adolescent engagement and ignite our audiences to participate with us in re-envisioning adolescent experience. A theatre/dance/mural/musical production "Who Cares? Youth Desire and Outrage" is a provocative representation of the Polling for Justice research study.

Critical Youth Engagement, Organizing and Participatory Action Research:

Implications for Methodology

Synthesizing the research, organizing campaigns and conceptual frameworks introduced in this chapter, in conclusion we now consider a *theory of method for critical youth engagement*, a research agenda that might capture the wide net of outcomes propelled by critical youth engagement projects. How might research be organized theoretically and methodologically to capture the psychological, social, academic, educational, and civic consequences of projects like Polling for Justice, Sistas- Brothers United, Youth United for Change and South Central Youth Empowered through Action? How might we assess the impact on youth over time and also on the adults, institutions, policy changes and mobilization of social movements?

While research on youth organizing and YPAR is relatively embryonic, what exists is encouraging. Preliminary evidence suggests that at the level of individual and collective developmental outcomes, academic persistence, civic engagement and educational aspirations over time, youth organizing and YPAR offer significant opportunities for civic engagement that bear substantial fruit in terms of varied outcomes of academic, psychological and social

wellbeing (see Cammarota and Fine, 2008 for ethnographic accounts of YPAR projects; Gambone et al 2004).

Research by the Annenberg Institute provides further evidence of how young people experience their involvement in organizing and what outcomes this form of engagement produces. In a survey of 124 core leaders involved in SBU, SC-YEA and YUC, researchers found that organizing provided a platform for engaging students in political and civic activity, and this engagement encouraged long-term plans among youth for sustained political and civic involvement. Youth in the Annenberg study reported *higher levels of political engagement* than their counterparts in a national survey by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2006). Sixty percent of youth involved in organizing, for example, stated they had participated in community problem-solving within the past year, while only 19% of the national sample had done so. In addition, more than half of the organizing sample reported planning to learn more about politics and stay involved in activism in the future, and close to forty percent reported planning to pursue a job in organizing.

We found that involvement in organizing was positively associated with a sense of *agency and youth civic and political engagement*. Involvement in organizing significantly predicted *school motivation*, above and beyond the effects of gender, age, and grades. Overall, 80% of youth in the organizing sample planned to *pursue a college education*, and 49% said they *expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree* beyond college. Compared to rates of 35% for African American youth and 29% for Latino youth in a national sample reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2004), these research findings are very encouraging.

There is, however, much more we need to learn if we are to understand how urban youth and adults engage, and yearn to engage, in civic and community problems. Reflecting on the work of PFJ, SBU, YUC, and SC-YEA, we conclude with a sketch of a research framework inspired to broaden our ideas about the empirical outcomes activated by critical youth

engagement projects. Table 1 is a research/organizing matrix that embodies the central commitments of *critical youth engagement* and invites a broad panoramic documentation of and inquiry into the wide reach of such projects. As the Annenberg research suggests, and the case studies in Cammarota and Fine (2008) describe, powerful youth organizing and youth Participatory Action Research projects have consequences well beyond the participating youth. Outcomes can be documented in the young people, over time, and also in the adults, in approaches to organizing, program governance and decision making, in institutional arrangements, in the ways that science is conducted, how social movements are organized and in the democratic, participatory re-formation of public policy.

[Insert Table 1]

Across the top of the chart are our preliminary notions of key elements of critical youth engagement that may be found at the intersection of youth leadership, youth participatory action research and youth organizing projects. These elements are offered to provoke a radical image of civic engagement opportunities rather than a 5 point check list. Along the side are levels of analysis that might be part of the research to understand the broad reach and complex consequences of critical youth engagement on youth, adults, institutions, social movements and social policy. We offer the table to signify possibilities for rich research projects that could be designed to assess the differential impact of youth research and youth activism; or the value of studying history and critical analysis of contemporary conditions. We could imagine quasi-experimental designs, across cities, with surveys and ethnographies documenting varied outcomes of YPAR and youth organizing on policy, program, youth and adults over time.

Youth organizing and YPAR projects bear substantial consequences that ripple out into waves of democratic engagement and participation, across generations, sectors and across time. There is an electricity of collective inquiry and action that spirals out from the center of these projects. It is an electricity that encourages youth to know that they have a “right to research”

(Appaduria, 2004) and an obligation to speak back and give back; that adults may be counted on as allies. Such ambitious work deserves an equally ambitious research design to capture the breadth and complexity of critical youth engagement.

Across communities and institutions, we have found YPAR and youth organizing to be strategic initiatives in which critical inquiry and youth leadership feed educational policy making. Simultaneously undertaking research and activism, the projects described in this chapter are pitched to address key policy concerns about school size, policing of urban youth, high stakes accountability, college access and school culture. Fueled by the urgency and specificity of policy reform, each project is grounded in a vision of educational justice as youth develop very specific skills of inquiry, organizing and civic engagement. Indeed, with a new Special Interest Group (SIG) at the American Educational Research Association, a stream of new books and volumes which address organizing and youth PAR (Cammara & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2009; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2009; Anyon, 2005; Fine, 2009), ironically (or predictably), at moment of national crisis, the field of critical youth engagement is flourishing. In these very difficult times, we witness in the U.S. and abroad, collectives of youth researchers and organizers, collaborating with adult allies, speaking out for human rights and educational justice for all youth, and most particularly those who are low income, youth of color, immigrant youth, indigenous youth, LGBT and youth with disabilities. We are humbled, and hopeful, that critical youth engagement marks a significant turn in academic and applied projects once designed *for* youth – now designed and led *by* youth.

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Figure 1

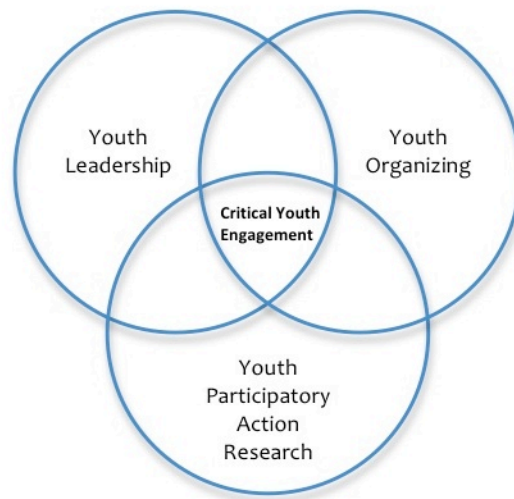


Figure 2

Youth Interaction with the Police

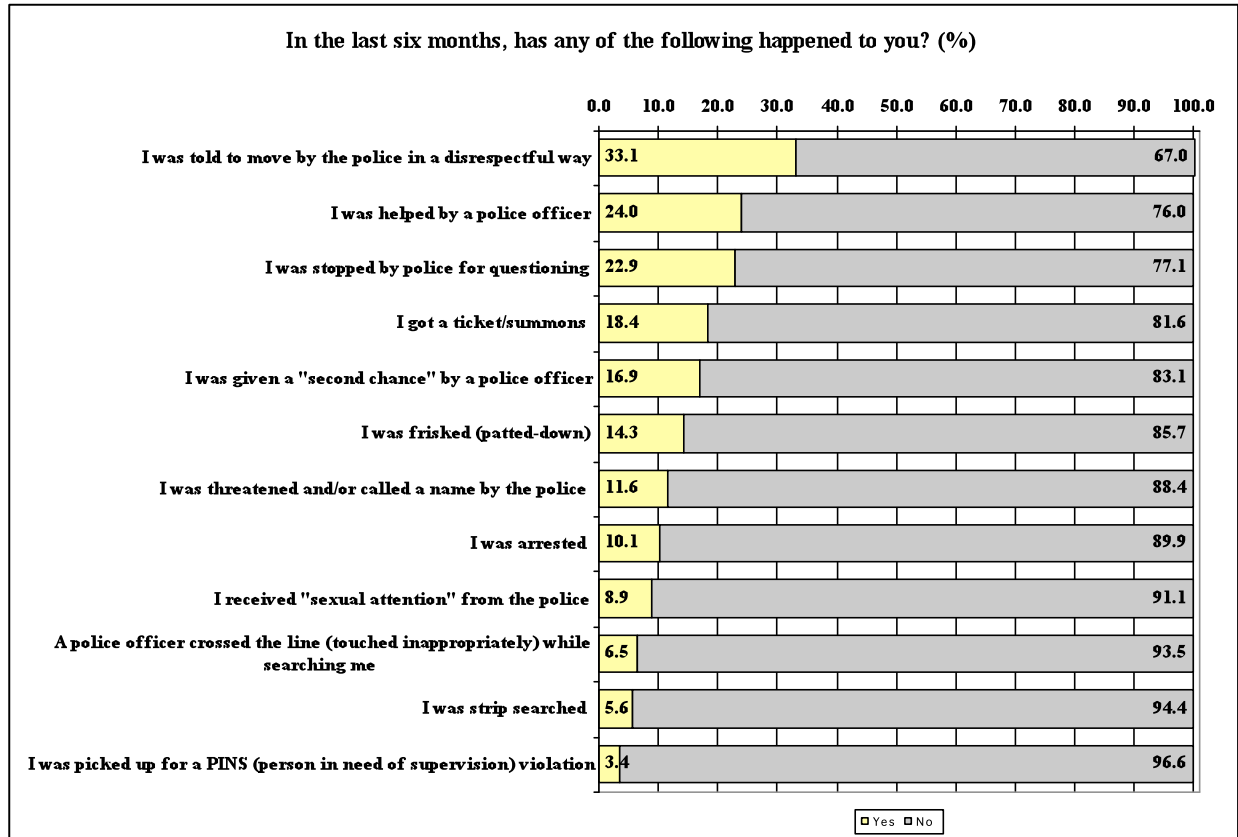


Table 1

A Research Matrix for Analyzing Critical Youth Engagement:

**Documenting access and outcomes for youth, adult allies, program governance/dynamics
and policy change**

	ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT					
		To what extent do these strategies of research/organizing cultivate, support and rely upon youth knowledge, experience and wisdom?	To what extent do these projects undertake critical inquiry of historic struggles for human rights?	How does the project study structural intersectionality and political intersectionality?	To what extent is there evidence of youth leadership in collaboration with adult allies?	What forms of action/activism are foundational to, or grow out of the project?
LEVELS OF DOCUMENTED IMPACT	Mapping a racial topography of access and opportunity					
	Documenting Individual level outcomes – youth AND adult development					
	Documenting youth outcomes over time,*					
	Program level changes**					
	Policy changes provoked or inspired by youth organizing/youth research					
	Shifts in youth alliances and networks with other youth and adults***					

	Transformations in how universities see themselves****					

* e.g. pursuit of education, sustained engagement in social change efforts, involvement with the next generation, sense of responsibility and agency for advancing social change, jobs in fields of policy making/social change

** e.g. governance, power dynamics, effects on adult allies

*** e.g. across organizations, generations and communities

**** e.g. as resources and participants in reimagining public life for the next generation