

ICUC'S YOUTH ORGANIZING EFFORTS IN THE INLAND EMPIRE



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AUGUST 2022



Adolescents and young adults have the potential to define social policies and exercise a voice in government elections. This is particularly the case when they receive training, support, and guidance from experienced peers and caring adults. Since 2005, the Inland Congregations United for Change has played a vital role in preparing young people to exercise civic leadership in the Inland Empire (IE) counties of Riverside and San Bernardino. ICUC is a local affiliate of Faith in Action (formerly known as the PICO National Network), an established interfaith grassroots organizing group whose principles draw from the organizing legacies of the antiwar and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as from the organizing models popularized by Saul Alinsky (Christens and Dolan 2011).

Over the years, ICUC has developed a strong track record of involving young people in efforts to shape the future of their communities. ICUC's young members learn to analyze and develop public policy. They work with elected officials, holding them accountable, and conduct outreach to residents and voters. Experiential learning is a critical component of this process. Students take on a variety of tasks (even during the COVID-19 pandemic) and often work in collaboration with ICUC's adult membership.

This report focuses on ICUC's youth programming efforts in recent years. The first section sets the organizing context by providing a brief overview of the IE.

The second section describes ICUC's youth programming and the demographic profile of its young members. The third discusses why and how youths are inspired to join ICUC, and the fourth describes youths' self-reports on their participation and how they have benefited from the program. A fifth section summarizes grassroots campaign victories. The report concludes by discussing the lasting implications of ICUC's work for young people, their families, and their communities. We hope that this report offers insights into ICUC's programming and informs other efforts to engage young people in nonpartisan grassroots and civic engagement efforts.

THE INLAND EMPIRE

Covering a vast region of over 27,000 square miles, the IE is located just east of Los Angeles and Orange counties. One of the country's fastest-growing metropolitan areas, the IE tripled in size between 1980 and 2020, growing from about 1.5 million to 4.5 million people. During this period, the racial demographics of the region also shifted. In 1980, the IE was 73 percent white (Carpio 2019); by 2020, the region was majority Latinx, with Asian American and Pacific Islander residents and Black residents each composing 7 percent of the population (author calculations of the 2020 American Community Survey). While racially diverse, the region's long history is tainted by racist violence and domination, which has

laid the groundwork for the growing socioeconomic inequalities that define the lives of many of the ICUC's young members.

As in many parts of the United States, the economy of the IE has been marked by deindustrialization and the loss of good-paying jobs. For example, Kaiser Steel shuttered its Fontana mill in 1983, and the Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino closed in 1994, generating destructive ripple effects throughout the economy and starving the region's supportive industries (Carpio 2019). Since then, job growth in the region has been concentrated in low-wage retail, food, and warehouse work. Many families must thus survive in economically precarious situations.

In general, municipalities in the IE have not invested in the civic infrastructure and the resources that young people need to thrive. Instead, many cities have chosen to invest more in policing than in policies that support and incorporate residents, including young adults. As documented by Mendiola Ross (2020), IE cities spent over \$1 billion annually on police in 2018. The city of Jurupa Valley in Riverside County, for example, spent 37 percent of its budget on policing. Meanwhile, San Bernardino devoted over 30 percent of all spending (including utility-related expenses and long-term debt payments) to police budgets, eleven times what it spent on housing and community development.

Concurrently, state and local policies have increased the criminalization of young people in the region, contributing

to the so-called school-to-prison pipeline. ICUC's youth organizing project has responded to these criminalization efforts vigorously. In fact, the youth group's first campaign in 2005 was inspired by the tragic murder of sixteen-year-old Melanie Miers and addressed the root causes of violence in the region (Christens and Dolan 2011). Since then, ICUC youth leaders, with the guidance and support of ICUC elders, have continued to organize and lead policy change efforts, to encourage informed participation in government elections, and to serve as a resource for residents in challenging times.

ICUC'S YOUTH MEMBERSHIP AND PROGRAMMING

ICUC works to prepare its young members to take leadership roles in campaigns that address community problems and educate voters. Responses from an online survey of the ICUC's youth membership conducted in 2020-22 provide a snapshot of the types of young people who are involved in the organization's training activities and campaigns. Table 1 provides some demographic information for the sixty-five young members surveyed.

ICUC largely targets adolescents in its programming. The youths who participated in 2020-22 ranged in age from fourteen to twenty-four, with an average age of seventeen. Ninety-one percent reported that they were current high school students. As is the case with many

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF ICUC'S YOUTH MEMBERSHIP, 2020-22

Sample size	65
Average age	17.3
Age group	
High school students	91%
Young adults	9%
Gender	
Male	25%
Female	72%
Nonbinary	3%
Race/Ethnicity	
Latinx/Hispanic	91%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	0%
White	5%
African American	5%
Native American	0%
Immigrant background	
From an immigrant or refugee family	69%
Not from an immigrant or refugee family	31%
Economic background	
Has low-income background	74%
Does not have a low-income background	24%
Educational background	
Has at least one parent with a BA degree	11%
Does not have at least one parent with a BA degree	89%

Source: Authors' survey of ICUC members, 2020-22.

Note: Youth membership age range was 14–24; everyone in the sample completed the survey. Because percentages in each category are rounded, they may not total 100.

youth organizing groups, women dominate ICUC's youth membership, composing 72 percent of those surveyed. Twenty-five percent identified as young men, and 3 percent identified as nonbinary.

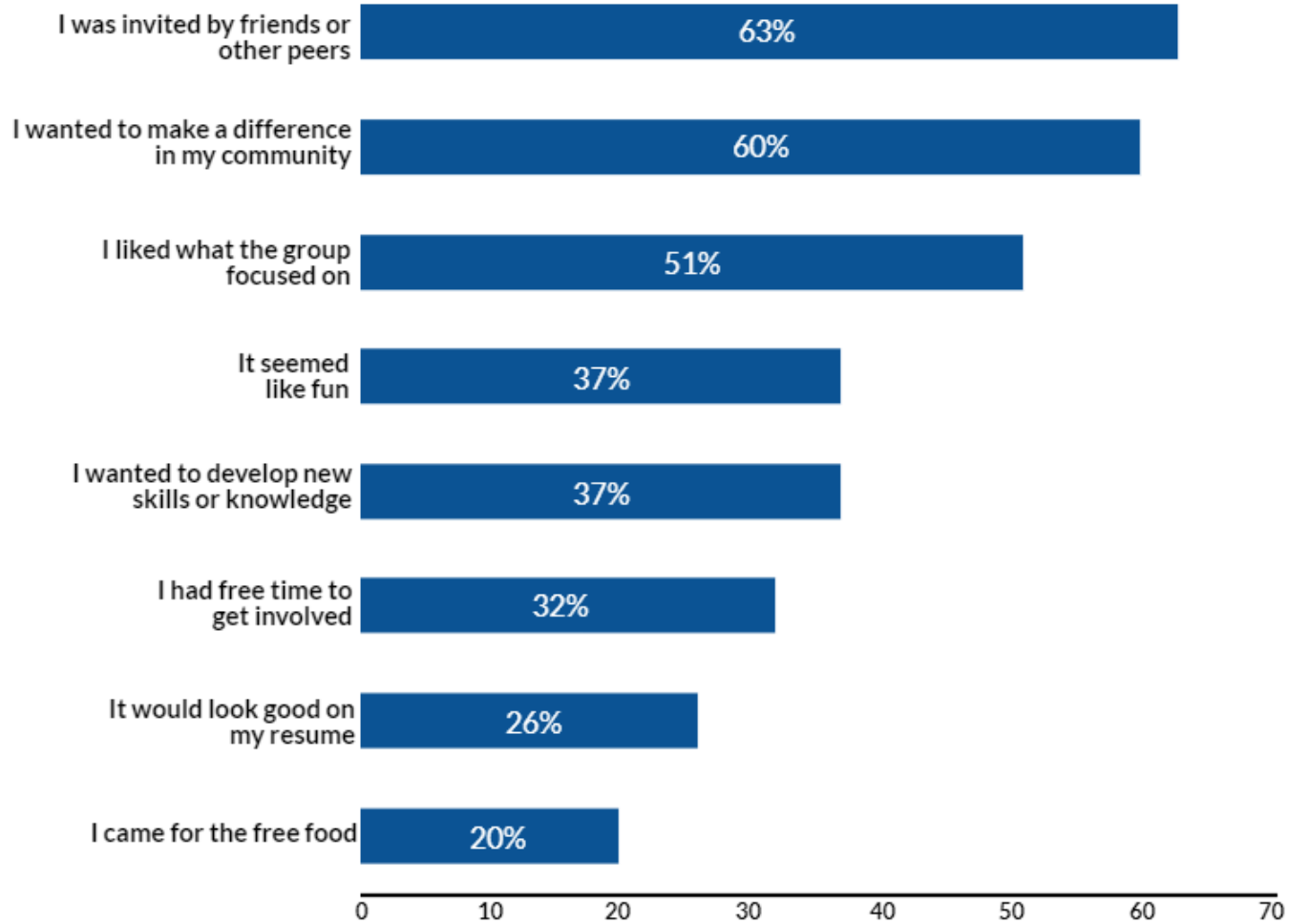
ICUC's young members include many Latinx/Hispanic students, who made up 91 percent of the group. However, the organization also involves a small number of students who identify as Black or White. Reflective of the IE's demographics, 69 percent reported being from an immigrant family, meaning that at least one of their parents was foreign-born.

Finally, ICUC targets students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Among the respondents, 74 percent were eligible for free and reduced lunches in high school. Only 11 percent were raised by at least one parent with a bachelor's degree.

MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

As part of the survey, ICUC's young members were asked to indicate up to three reasons why they joined the organization. We asked this question to understand what initially motivates young people to join a group like ICUC. Figure 1 shows the most common reasons reported. Highlighting the central importance of peer networks in grassroots organizing, 63 percent said they joined because they were recruited by friends or peers. The goals of the ICUC were also influential: 60 percent reported joining because they

FIGURE 1. YOUNG MEMBERS' REASONS FOR JOINING ICUC



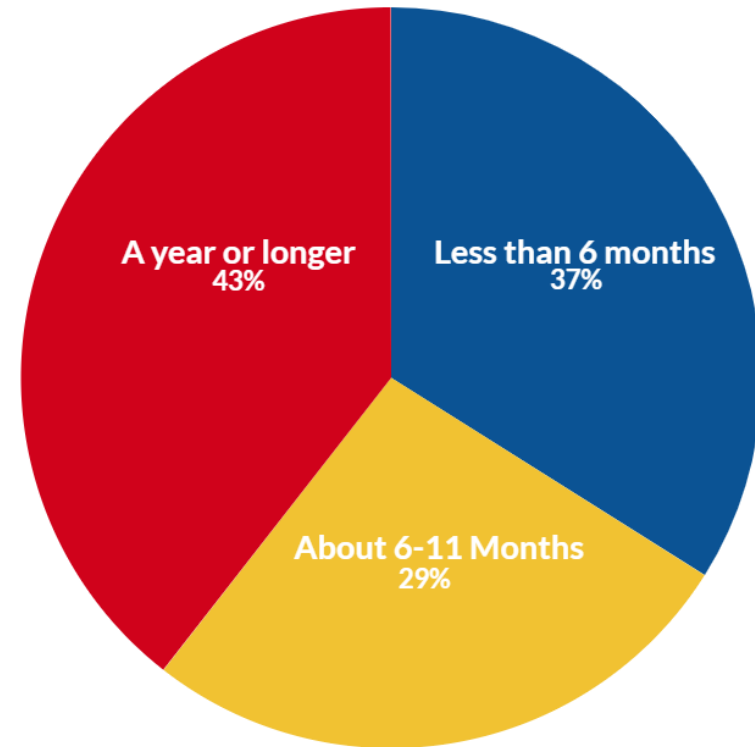
Source: Authors' survey of ICUC members, 2020-22.

wanted to make a difference, and 51 percent indicated that they liked the organization's focus. Thirty-seven percent joined because the organization seemed like fun, and the same percentage hoped to develop new skills. Some joined because they had the time, believed involvement would look good on their résumés (30 percent), or were enticed by the free food.

At the time the survey was conducted, ICUC's youth membership had a significant number of both veteran members and newer recruits. As figure 2 shows, 43 percent of the young members had been involved in the organization for one year or longer. Typically, these veterans play a leadership role in the organization and help support the training of newer members. Another 29 percent had been involved for about six to eleven months; these youths gradually take on more responsibility in running day-to-day activities and executing campaigns. Most recruits who have been members for less than six months tend to start out as observers, after which they are gradually encouraged to exercise their voice within a safe space among their peers. However, new recruits who join ICUC with some prior experience with civic engagement through school-based or other organizations tend to quickly take on an active leadership role.

ICUC's work is guided by an iterative organizing model that is based on relationship building among leaders, new recruits, and other stakeholders, as illustrated in figure 3. In this model, participants, including young people, are

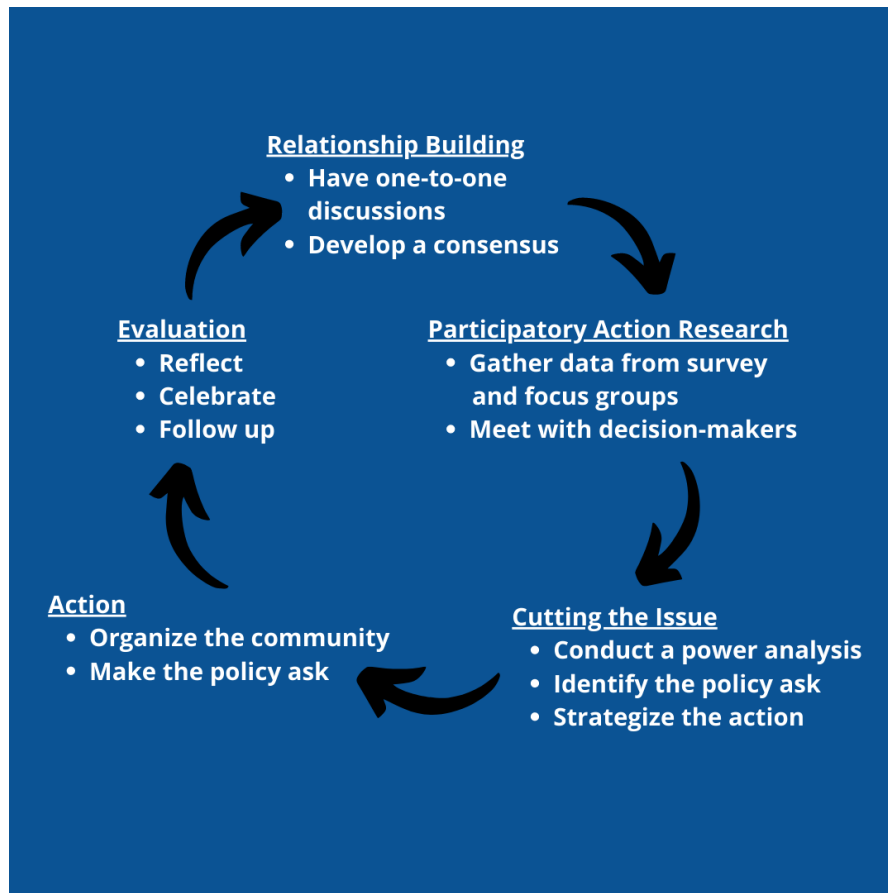
FIGURE 2. YOUNG MEMBERS' LENGTH OF TIME IN ICUC



Source: Authors' survey of ICUC members, 2020-22.

trained to have in-depth conversations with peers that will engage them in issues that are relevant to their lives. Members are prepared to steer conversations to topics that have policy implications, such as educational inequities, community violence, and immigration reform. These one-to-one discussions can be used to recruit new

FIGURE 3. ICUC’S ORGANIZING MODEL



members or develop consensus regarding the organization’s work.

ICUC members are taught to conduct research, broadly defined, so that they can make informed demands. Sometimes this involves engaging in participatory action research. Members gather data from surveys or focus groups or from talking with peers and other community members. Research can also include speaking to key decision-makers, systems leaders, and other informants so that members understand multiple sides of an issue or concern. In other instances, they conduct site visits and connect with those who have had previous success addressing community concerns.

ICUC then engages in strategy development, called “cutting the issue.” This entails conducting a power analysis to identify key allies and targets, developing a strategy for execution, and determining the specifics of the policy demand or outreach efforts.

Once they have an informed plan, ICUC members take action. They may reach out to their constituents to gain their support, register and mobilize voters, conduct broad educational outreach, or make clear demands of decision-makers at actions or rallies. They sometimes go door-to-door or participate in phone-banking to reach a large number of constituents. After completing any action, they take time to reflect on lessons learned and celebrate their

collective efforts. As they develop and execute their plan, ICUC members continue to amass collective power by pursuing relationship-building efforts.

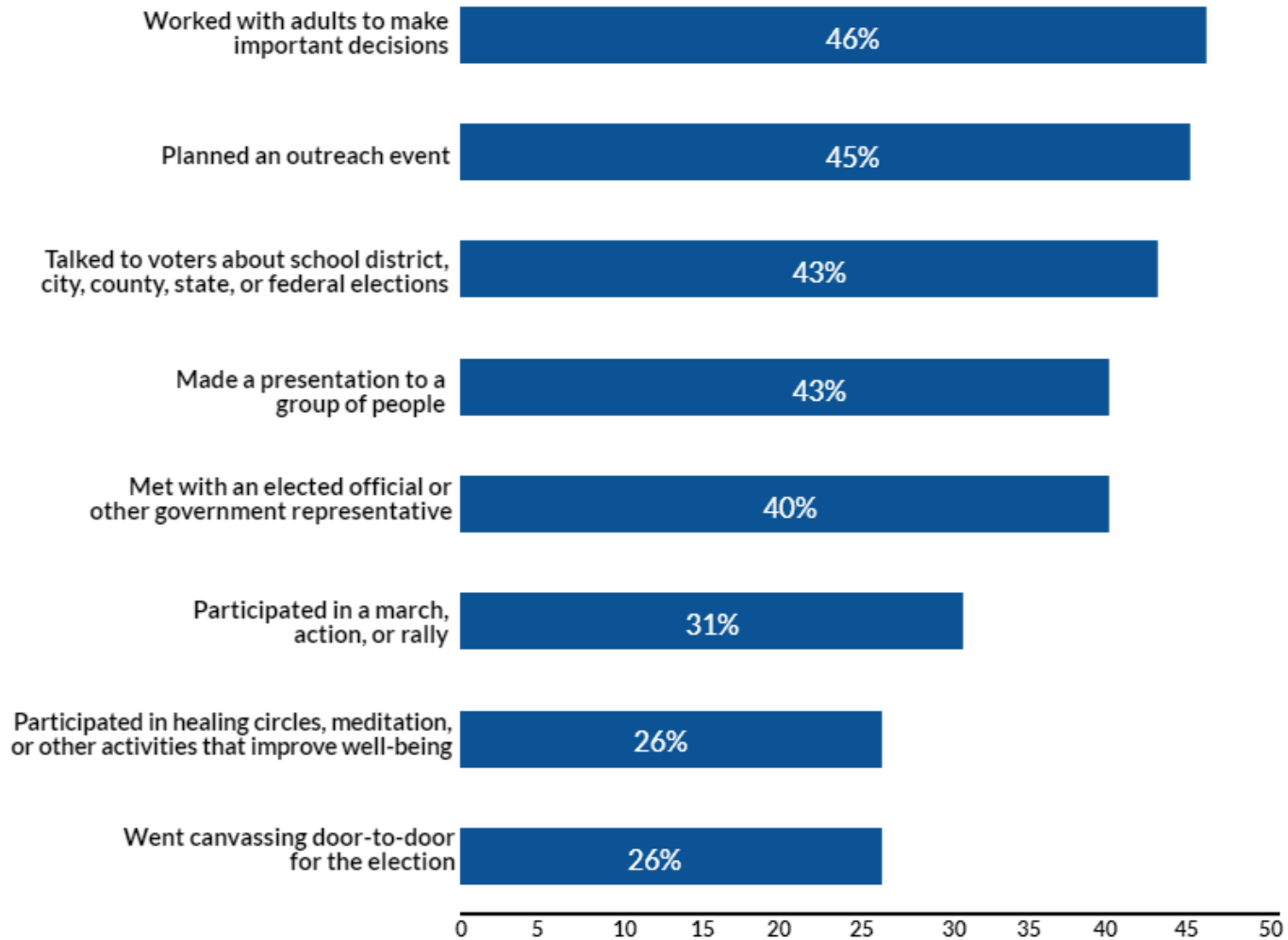
This organizing model allows ICUC's youth membership, as well as its adult membership, to engage in a wide range of activities. Young members were asked what activities they had participated in, and the list that was compiled from their responses includes many of the activities that have been reported by over 130 youth organizing and youth leadership organizations in California (Terriquez and Lopez 2016). Survey results suggest that ICUC offers meaningful opportunities that allow young members to develop their civic skills and exercise their voice. As shown in figure 4, just under half (46 percent) of young members claimed to have worked with adults to make important decisions within their organization, and 45 percent reported having planned a meeting or an event. A slightly lower percentage, 43 percent, said they talked to voters about elections, and the same percentage reported making a presentation to a group of people. Forty percent met with an elected official, and 31 percent participated in a march, action, or rally. Twenty-six percent canvassed door-to-door for a campaign, and the same percentage participated in healing circles or other activities aimed at promoting well-being. The focus on wellness was particularly important during the survey period, which was marked by the pandemic and political turbulence.

HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

The survey captured young members' involvement with campaign-related work. All ICUC members receive significant guidance in learning to take charge of meetings and convenings, communicate with adult stakeholders and decision-makers, and conduct research. Tailored workshops prepare ICUC's young members for a variety of civic tasks: requesting meetings with elected officials, creating agendas and hosting meetings with these officials, researching topics of policy interest, attending school board and city council meetings, developing a basic knowledge of local government jurisdictions, public commenting at government meetings, engaging with community leaders, and communicating with and educating voters through phone-banking. ICUC youth organizers also trained young members on the process of conducting voter registration drives online and making effective voter education presentations using virtual platforms.

Moreover, ICUC contributes to its members' healthy development in various ways and to different degrees, as evidenced by the survey findings. As part of this study, youths were asked to rate the degree to which their involvement in the group impacted different aspects of their personal development: did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact?

FIGURE 4. YOUNG MEMBER'S INVOLVEMENT IN ICUC ACTIVITIES



Source: Authors' survey of ICUC members, 2020-22.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS IN 2020-21

ICUC leaders hosted community engagement events throughout California's Inland Empire as a way of building community and encouraging an informed and active electorate.

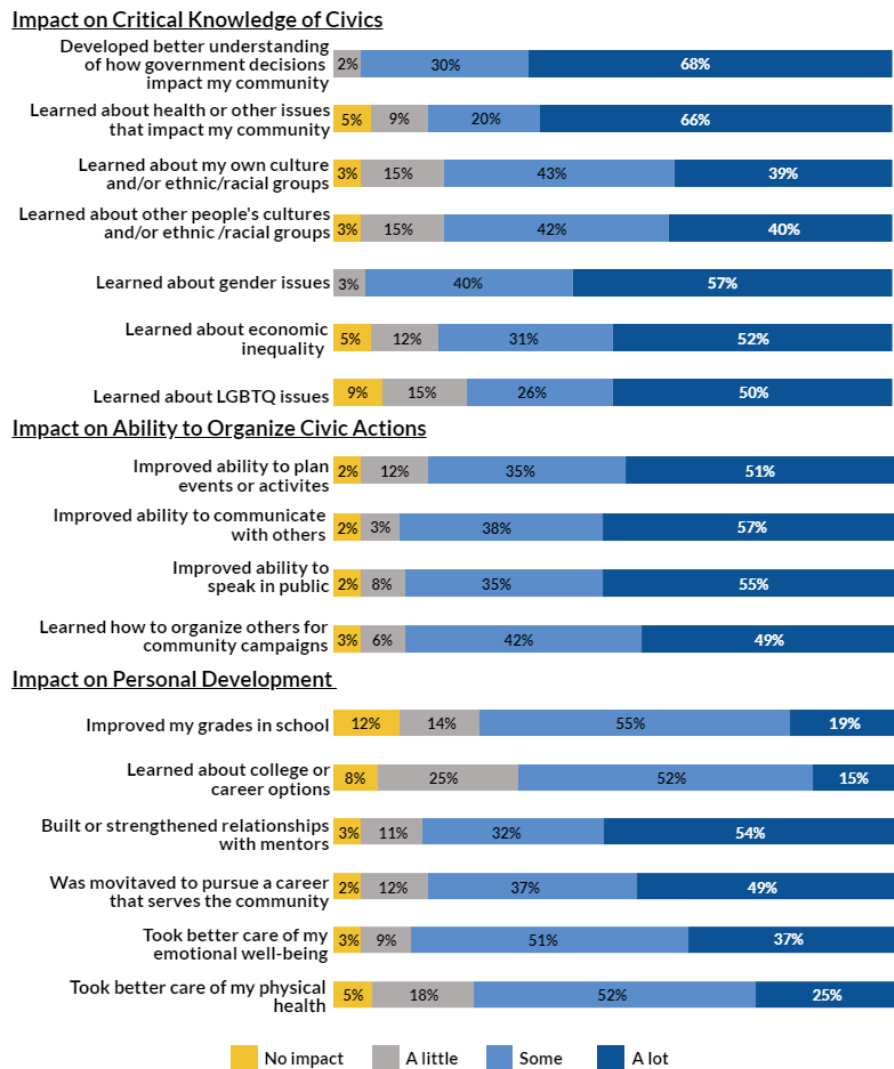
- **"Be the Goat, Engage in the Vote,"** October 2020. ICUC youth leaders hosted a virtual event in San Bernardino to engage youth in workshops that were centered around the 2020 election and provided nonpartisan educational information. Seventy youths attended.
- **Virtual Candidate Forums,** October 2020. ICUC leaders coordinated with candidates who were running for positions on the San Bernardino City Council, San Bernardino City Unified School District, Coachella Unified School District, and Coachella Valley City Council. The events gave voters the opportunity to ask questions and get information from candidates.
- **"Cast Your Vote,"** November 2020. ICUC leaders coordinated a community drive-through event in San Bernardino to promote voter registration and to encourage residents to vote.
- **ICUC Leadership Assemblies,** March 2021 and June 2021. ICUC hosted online assemblies to provide leadership training and a forum for discussing ICUC's values and recommitting to its campaigns.
- **"Nurture the Vote,"** May 2021. ICUC leaders coordinated a community event to promote voter registration in Coachella Valley.
- **ICUC Annual Meeting,** online July 2021. ICUC leaders elected board members and amended bylaws.
- **Grand Opening** of the Inland Empire Center for Community Organizing, October 2021. The center, located in San Bernardino, provides ICUC and its partners with a space for providing services and holding community meetings and other events.



Figure 5 shows the results. However, for the sake of brevity, here we mention only the percentage that reported that their involvement with ICUC had “a lot” of impact. Survey results suggest that ICUC’s programming provides young members with critical knowledge about how government works, especially at state and local levels, and that this training in civics aided their understanding of local issues and the diversity of their communities. About two-thirds of the respondents reported learning a lot about health or other community issues, and two-thirds reported that they became a lot better informed about how government decisions impact their community. When asked about their knowledge of culture and race/ethnicity, 38 percent reported learning a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group, and 40 percent said that they learned a lot about other ethnic/racial groups. The majority also learned a lot about economic inequality (57 percent) and gender issues (52 percent), and 49 percent reported that they learned a lot about LGBTQ issues.

ICUC members receive coaching on running their own meetings, speaking with peers, conducting presentations, and planning campaign-related activities. Hence, it is not

FIGURE 5. IMPACT OF ICUC ON YOUNG MEMBERS



Source: Authors’ survey of ICUC members, 2020-22.

surprising that many of the survey respondents indicated that they have acquired basic organizational skills through their involvement. Most surveyed members reported that their participation had a lot of impact on their ability to communicate with others (57 percent) and their ability to speak in public (55 percent). The majority of those surveyed also claimed to have increased their ability to plan events and activities by a lot.

ICUC members generally reported an increased capacity to take civic action, as the organization is devoted to involving members in grassroots campaigns and other civic engagement efforts. Survey results indicate that a significant majority of the young members (62 percent) learned a lot about how to impact policy and how to organize others to participate in campaigns benefitting their communities.

Many young ICUC members reported positive developmental outcomes associated with their involvement. Fifty-four percent reported a lot of growth in developing trusting relationships with mentors. Thirty-seven percent indicated that they took a lot better care of their emotional well-being, and 25 percent said they took better care of their physical health. And although ICUC does not offer programming directly connected to students' academic goals, the group does expand members' exposure to college-educated members of the community, and its activities also complement academic learning. Accordingly, 15 percent of respondents said they learned a lot

about college and career options, and 18 percent reported that they improved their school grades by a lot as a result of their involvement in ICUC. Overall, survey results demonstrate that ICUC's youth programming supports leadership development and personal growth.

ICUC'S RECENT CAMPAIGNS

Over the years, ICUC youth members have participated in campaigns addressing a range of issues, including public safety, educational inequality, immigrant rights, LGBTQ+ rights, public health, environmental justice, racial justice, and voting rights. ICUC youth are involved in all stages of campaigns and gain significant experience as they navigate the policy arena, speak with large numbers of constituents, and meet with decision-makers representing different levels of government. In recent years they have met with their congressional representatives, state legislators, county representatives, city council representatives, county board of supervisors, and school board members. As part of the process, young people learn that change happens over time and often as a result of partnerships with various stakeholders.

Since its inception, ICUC has addressed issues of violence and public safety. Part of this work is to ensure that government funds are directed toward violence prevention and resources that help young people thrive. For example, in 2017, members of ICUC—youth, adult

residents, and clergy—successfully pressured the San Bernardino City Council to allocate city funds for the adoption of a violence reduction model developed by California Partnership for Safer Communities (CPSC), an organization that seeks to reduce incarceration by offering support for young people who have historically been caught up in the criminal justice system. As a result of ICUC’s grassroots advocacy, the city allotted Measure Z funds for a contract with CPSC that covered research, training, and technical assistance to implement the model. The result was the establishment of the Violence Intervention Program (VIP), which started in January 2019. The city launched the pilot program in 2020, and in its first year, gang-motivated homicides decreased by 11 percent. Given the program’s promise, ICUC has continued to advocate for the expansion of violence prevention efforts and other investments in young people’s well-being.

ICUC’s grassroots approach encourages members to build power through coalitions with other groups. For example, ICUC youth members, alongside youth members from the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ), joined a broad-based coalition to advocate for the right to clean, healthy air in the highly polluted IE. Young people regularly shared their concerns at local community meetings and at meetings of the South Coast Air Quality Management District (South Coast AQMD) and the California Air Resource Board. Time and again, youths pointed out the negative health

impacts of the pollution originating at commercial areas such as warehouses, rail yards, seaports, and airports. To increase awareness of the problem, they canvassed their neighborhoods and reached out to residents through phone-banking. After years of ICUC advocacy, in May 2018 the South Coast AQMD developed a new proposal to reduce emissions that would consist of voluntary agreements with ports and airports and regulatory measures for warehouses, rail yards, and new development projects. The youth and adult coalition secured a huge win on May 7, 2021, when South Coast AQMD officially adopted the Warehouse Indirect Source Rule, which requires certain types of warehouses in the IE, Los Angeles County, and Orange County to take annual actions to reduce emissions. Given the severity of air quality problems and other environmental issues in the IE, ICUC has continued to engage in and support efforts that promote environmental justice in the region.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

ICUC has systematically involved their youth members in getting out the vote and conducting mass educational outreach to IE residents since 2012. For example, ICUC has conducted presentations, engaged in door-to-door canvassing, and participated in extensive phone-banking to educate residents and voters. In 2010 and 2020, young members engaged in census outreach to ensure that

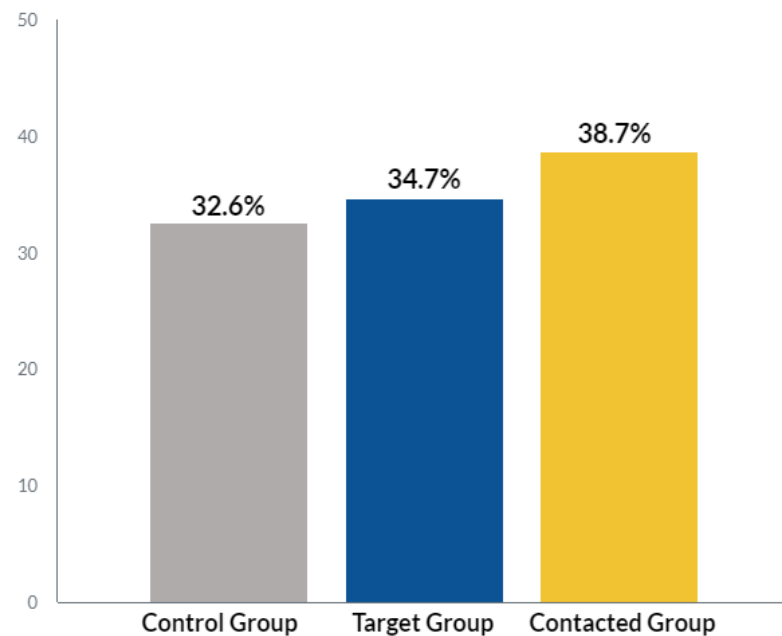
residents in their low-income and immigrant neighborhoods were counted.

ICUC’s civic engagement efforts have educated voters on a range of local measures and initiatives as well as state propositions, including Proposition 30 (The Schools and Local Public Safety Protection Act, 2012), Proposition 47 (Criminal Sentences, Misdemeanor Penalties, Initiative Statute, 2014), Proposition 55 (California Extension of the Proposition 30 Income Tax Increase Initiative, 2016), Proposition 57 (California Parole for Non-Violent Criminals and Juvenile Court Trial Requirements Initiative, 2016), and Proposition 15 (Tax on Commercial and Industrial Properties for Education and Local Government Funding Initiative, 2020). Even if ICUC’s young members cannot vote because they are under the age of eighteen or are noncitizens, they have the potential to communicate the complexities of these statewide propositions in a nonpartisan way, so that voters can make informed decisions.

Youth-led civic engagement efforts can have a measurable impact on turnout, as evidenced by research conducted following the 2018 election. Using de-identified voting records, we compared predicted voter turnout between a randomly selected “control group” of voters aged eighteen to thirty-four who were not targeted for outreach and voters of the same age who received an informative phone call. Recognizing that there were other simultaneous efforts by partisan political campaigns to get out the vote during this election season, this experiment

measured the “added value” of youth-led efforts. Our findings, presented in figure 6, show that compared to the predicted turnout for the control group, 32.6 percent, the predicted turnout for those targeted for outreach was 34.7 percent, regardless of whether an ICUC member spoke to the voter. In other words, ICUC increased overall turnout in

FIGURE 6. IMPACT OF PHONE-BANKING ON YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT IN CALIFORNIA, 2018



Source: Authors’ computations from Power California and Political Data Inc.

Note: Percentages are based on the results of ordinary least squares and two-stage least squares analyses that control for age, gender, prior voting history, Democratic Party registration, age, number of registered voters per household, voting method (poll or mail), and zip code.

target communities by an estimated 2.1 percentage points. More significant, those who were successfully reached by phone averaged a predicted turnout rate of 38.7 percent. This means that peer-initiated phone conversations resulted in an estimated 6.1 percent increase in turnout. This research suggests that when ICUC members spoke to young voters on the phone, they made a convincing case for voting. ICUC's success evidences the importance of investing in nonpartisan youth-led efforts to get out the vote among peers in young members' communities.

ICUC's civic engagement efforts also include voter registration and advocating for voting rights for youth. Specifically, young leaders have advocated for school district resolutions that reinforce state laws about nonpartisan voter registration and efforts to preregister sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds on high school campuses. For example, on September 10, 2020, ICUC youth proposed the High School Voter Education Week Resolution to the Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) school board. The resolution was passed and fully backed by the board members. This resolution supports increasing preregistration and registration for youth in CVUSD. That same month, ICUC youth leaders successfully advocated for the passage of similar resolutions in the Riverside Unified School District and the Alford Unified School District. Additionally, on September 15, 2020, ICUC youth presented a student voter registration policy to the San Bernardino City Unified School

District. This policy, which was the first of its kind in the region and was unanimously passed, allows high schools to operate as polling locations during elections and also includes administrative guidelines for voter education and registration. These efforts aim to increase the number of young people who are preregistered and who register to vote in the region. This is particularly important in the IE, where registration rates remain significantly below the state average (Terriquez and Morales 2022). As such, there is a great need to conduct voter education and registration across the IE.

THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTHS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ICUC

Since its inception in 2005, ICUC has provided meaningful opportunities for young leaders to address community concerns. Through youth-led campaigns, young people are learning how to analyze social policies, navigate government decision-making processes, and exert their voice. Because of this formative experience, young ICUC members are likely to continue seeking to improve their communities as they become older adults, serving as role models for future cohorts of young people. Many will likely pursue careers in public service. Some may even seek public office, like ICUC alum Jesse Chavez, a Highland City council member, and Benjamin Reynoso, a San Bernardino city council member.

Additionally, ICUC’s voter outreach efforts are likely to boost overall civic engagement for years to come. Given ICUC’s campaign efforts, the group is likely to have a lasting impact not only on economic and political investment in young people in the IE but also on their leadership in local governance. ICUC’s youth programming is a model for training young leaders to advance social justice and civic engagement in low-income, immigrant, and racially diverse communities.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This report would not have been possible without the assistance of ICUC staff members Rocio Aguayo, Anthony Victoria, Michael Segura, and Joslyn Santana.

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