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 JOURNAL OF  
**ADOLESCENT  
 HEALTH**


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Adolescent health brief

## Engaging Youth in Improving Their Food and Physical Activity Environments

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*Samuels and Associates, Oakland, California**Article history:* Received May 4, 2010; Accepted September 14, 2010*Keywords:* Youth; Empowerment; Leadership; Public policy; Physical activity; Social conditions; Obesity prevention; Focus groups; Community; Low income population

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** To understand factors that build youth leadership through the Healthy Eating, Active Communities Program.

**Methods:** In Fall 2007, six focus groups were conducted with 36 youth.

**Results:** Leadership capacity was facilitated through teamwork, community assessments, and policy work.

**Conclusion:** Youth gained leadership confidence while successfully advocating for community-level change.

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Youth engagement in community-based childhood obesity prevention interventions is an essential strategy. However, methods to engage youth effectively, particularly low-income multiethnic youth, as advocates and leaders for healthier communities are required [1–4]. From 2005 to 2010, The California Endowment's Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) program has worked in six low-income communities of California to prevent childhood obesity [5]. Each HEAC program engaged youth to become leaders to advocate for and participate in policy and environmental change centered on improving access to food and physical activity. With an adult mentor, youth-driven strategies were developed to address the most pressing changes needed in their respective communities. This article describes youth's: (1) perceptions of their food and physical activity environments; (2) involvement in community and policy change activities; and (3) leadership development.

### Methods

Six focus groups were conducted in the Fall of 2007 in each HEAC community (Table 1). Of the 36 participants, 50% were Latino and/or Hispanic, 67% were women, and 92% were high school students (three were recent graduates). This study was approved by the University of California at Berkeley Committee

for the Protection of Human Subjects; signed consent was obtained from the youth and their parents.

The duration of the sessions averaged 60 minutes and were facilitated by a trained moderator and co-moderator. All sessions were audio-recorded and detailed field notes were taken. Participants received a healthy snack and a \$20 gift voucher.

Data analysis was conducted in a systematic and verifiable manner [6]. Themes were identified and coded by applying content analyses. Related codes were then linked to capture broad views. A second reviewer independently identified themes and codes to control potential bias. There was a high level of concordance between the reviewers.

### Results

#### *Perceptions of food and physical activity environments*

Easy availability of unhealthy food (i.e., pizza and/or nachos) and candy and/or sodas in vending machines, short lunch periods, and poor role modeling by teachers in schools and in after-school programs were cited as factors that discouraged healthy eating. Fast-food restaurants, gas station convenience stores, liquor stores, and food vendors and/or carts near their schools also discouraged healthy eating because of easy access to unhealthy food:

“In my neighborhood you can find a liquor store on every corner. There's no grocery stores to just buy fresh fruit.”

In schools and after school programs, youth described more factors that encouraged rather than discouraged physical activ-

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**Table 1**  
HEAC youth focus group participants, by site, gender, ethnicity, age group

HEAC community	Gender		Ethnicity				Age group		Total youth
	Female	Male	Latino	Asian	White	African American	Middle	High	
Baldwin Park	5		1	4				5	5
Chula Vista	4	4	8					8 <sup>a</sup>	8
Los Angeles	6		3			3		6	6
Oakland	3	4	3	3		1		7	7
Santa Ana	3		3				3		3
Shasta	3	4			7			7	7
Total	24	12	18	7	7	4	3	33	36

<sup>a</sup> Three youth were high school graduates.

ity. Overall, youth said that they were offered a wide variety of activities, such as hiking clubs, dancing, fishing, and competitive sports such as basketball, baseball, and soccer.

However, some youth noted that their schools lacked facilities and after-school activities and said that they were not required to be active during physical education class (P.E.):

“In P.E. you really don’t do anything. You basically get points for being dressed and being outside on time – that’s pretty much it.”

Additionally, lack of places to play; safety concerns related to violence, gangs, and drug use; and traffic safety issues such as lack of street lights, narrow sidewalks, and poor bikeability discouraged activity in neighborhoods.

#### *Involvement in community and policy change activities*

HEAC youth were active in a variety of community- and school-wide obesity prevention projects, such as health fairs and walk-to-school day (Table 2). Youth helped to identify healthier school food options and to secure facilities (i.e., basketball half-court) and equipment (i.e., dance dance revolution) to increase physical activity. Youth were also involved in media work (e.g., created a documentary of fresh produce availability in the community) and taught nutrition to their peers.

Youth conducted community assessments, such as walkability audits, photovoice, and school mapping projects, which increased their awareness of the need for improvements in their communities:

“This project made me more aware and passionate about changing what’s in our community.”

Regarding policy work, youth helped shape their school wellness policies and had opportunities to talk with local and state legislators. Youth in one community collaborated successfully with their local government on a moratorium against drive-through fast-food restaurants. Overall, through policy work, youth believed that they gained confidence and a great sense of pride because their voices were heard:

“It’ll give me experience for the future – to change the community, it gives me pride and dignity.”

#### *Building leadership confidence*

Youth developed leadership confidence through various activities. For example, activities involving teamwork helped youth to develop decision-making and consensus-building skills, and allowed them to build camaraderie among their peers. Their experience in public speaking was important in developing research, or-

ganization, and writing skills. Youth felt a sense of accomplishment and validation from sharing their opinions, having their voices heard, and being acknowledged for their work; these feelings enhanced their confidence to advocate for changes in their communities. Several youth participated in a statewide leadership program which provided training in leadership and environmental and/or policy change strategies and an opportunity to network with their

**Table 2**  
HEAC youth leaders obesity prevention activities and projects

Category of activity	Types of activities and projects
Community/school events	Walk to school day Block party—teen center party with contests and prizes, promotion of healthy eating, distribution of health information Triathlon competition Healthy for life program Run-a-thon fundraiser Nutrition olympics Bowling night Marathon Helped the community with healthy eating, trash pick up, safety
Assessment/research	Health fairs—distributed flyers Walkability audit—assessed sidewalk safety Photovoice—took pictures of good/bad aspects of the community School mapping project
Policy work	Surveyed students about food preferences Committee meeting on the wellness policy Policy committee—talked to legislators about views on certain bills Worked with city council to eliminate drive-through restaurants to encourage walking
Create new facilities/resources	Created “half court,” fixed quad/garden area Wrote grant to get dance dance revolution interactive video game
Media work	League of dreams—a new gym Internet/radio program on youth radio Where’s my 5-a-day documentary—assessed fruit and vegetables in various stores in the community
Nutrition education	Taught kids and parents about healthy eating/cooking at summer camp Worked with people at gym—planned workouts and gave advice on healthy eating
Leadership/training	Participated in youth leadership conference in Sacramento
Improve school food	Worked to get healthier food and increase variety for schools

peers on a statewide level, which allowed them to share their concerns and feel supported by one another.

## Discussion

Youth in this study reported factors that influenced healthy eating and physical activity, which are consistent with previous research [7,8]. Although focus group methodology does not allow for generalizability, these findings might inform future efforts on building youth leadership capacity. First, creating multiple opportunities for youth to share experiences and build camaraderie among their peers might help build their confidence as leaders because peer relations and friendships play important roles in the emotional development of youth [9]. Conducting community assessments deepens the awareness of youth regarding issues faced by their communities, which can lead to a greater connection to their community. These community assessment findings can then be used to create a dialog with policymakers, thereby giving youth an opportunity to voice their concerns and build relationships with key stakeholders. Youth can have a strong influence in policy work, as shown by their success in engaging policy makers in environmental change. Developing a strong connection with their community and an enhanced sense of ownership might strengthen youth leadership capacity [2]. Although gender-specific and cultural aspects of youth engagement were not explored, further research in this area is warranted. Future evaluation will continue to investigate the effect of youth leadership in their communities.

## Acknowledgments

The Samuels and Associates team is grateful to the many contributors who were involved in this research. First, they

thank the vibrant youth leaders who provided them with their uncensored opinions and thoughtful insight. They are grateful to Ruth Manzano and Janet Quezada, their moderators, whose efficiency and diligence in conducting the focus groups were essential in collecting quality data. They are grateful to the HEAC youth coordinators and staff who handled the focus group logistics, and to the reviewers of the focus group guide who helped to ensure the quality and cultural sensitivity of this research. They thank the California Endowment for funding this important research and for their commitment to improving the social and environmental conditions that affect the health of children and families.

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