Urban Youth Programs in America

A STUDY OF YOUTH, COMMUNITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
CONDUCTED FOR THE FORD FOUNDATION

Sharon E. Sutton in collaboration with
Susan P. Kemp, Lorraine Gutiérrez, and Susan Saegert

Mission Statement

CEEDS is a culturally diverse, interdisciplinary group of faculty at the University of Washington's College of Architecture and Urban Planning that seeks to enhance learning and community well-being through participatory research and design processes. Drawing upon faculty from the university's professional, social science, and humanities programs, we strive to engage in transformative partnerships with K-12 schools, industry, and grassroots community organizations. We are especially interested in partnerships that see the need for creating physical space as an opportunity to envision organizational change. Our overarching goal is to use participative processes to establish democratic learning communities—in the university and beyond—while also sparking theory-building and policy-making nationally on this topic. Through collaborative teaching, research, and service, we aspire to bring about systemic change in communities, especially those serving children and families with limited access and untapped talents.

Our work reflects a belief that:

- Respectful relationships among people and with nature can enhance the human spirit, imagination, and intellect;
- Engagement with cultural and esthetic artifacts and activities are fundamental to individual and community development;
- All individuals and communities have the ability—and responsibility—to shape their own surroundings;
- Joy is a vital component of learning and community well-being.

Urban Youth Programs in America

A STUDY OF YOUTH, COMMUNITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE CONDUCTED FOR THE FORD FOUNDATION

Sharon E. Sutton in collaboration
with Susan P. Kemp, Lorraine Gutiérrez, and Susan Saegert

To Order: Additional copies of *Urban Youth Programs in America* can be obtained from:

Center for Environment Education and Design Studies
College of Architecture and Urban Planning
208P Gould Hall, Box 355720
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195-5720
email: sesut@u.washington.edu

Published in the United States of America in 2006 by the University of Washington.
Publication supported in part by the Department of Architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Suggested Citation: Sutton, S.E., Kemp, S.P., Gutiérrez, L., & Saegert, S. (2006). *Urban youth programs in America: a study of youth, community, and social justice conducted for the Ford Foundation.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary i

Introduction v

Chapter 1: Community-based Programs in Toxic Urban Contexts 1

Chapter 2: Guiding Principles of Program Practice 13

Chapter 3: Justice-oriented Program Content 25

Chapter 4: Social Change Outcomes for Youth and Communities 35

Chapter 5: Effect of Funding and Philosophy on Program Characteristics 41

Chapter 6: Advancing an Agenda of Transformative Youth Programs 67

References 77

Appendices

- A. Research Methods for Three Studies 83
- B. Telephone Survey Protocol 86
- C. Program Descriptions 95
- D. Location of the Study Population 104
- E. Youth Development Philosophy Matrix 107


CITY YEAR
CIT YR

Executive Summary

This country urgently needs social institutions that view urban youth not as problem-laden clients, but as individuals capable of struggling to eradicate the inequities in their lives and communities. Our study examined programs that explicitly seek to address that need, and which thus represent a small slice of the vast array of drop-in and structured out-of-school programs for youth. It serves low-income and minority youth, ages 12 to 28, who live in oppressive urban conditions and often assume adult responsibilities as teens. Despite these circumstances, the program directors in our study reported that, given appropriate opportunities, the young people they work with succeed in shaping their own development and that of their communities. Our purpose was to identify the characteristics that account for the success of these programs. In so doing, we hope to inspire many more such initiatives, and to help transform the negative stereotypes of urban youth within the dominant theoretical frameworks that guide youth programming.

To identify programs with outstanding track records in justice work, we accepted programs only by referral, specifying that they be community-based, serve low-income or minority communities, be at least one year old, include a community service component, and describe themselves as committed to social justice. These criteria placed the programs surveyed toward the forward-looking side of the youth development continuum, eliminating sports organizations and short-term activities such as summer camps. Because we wanted to have somewhat comparable geographic contexts, we also limited our research to programs located in metropolitan areas with a population of at least 1 million for densely, and 500,000 for sparsely, settled states. The resulting study population encompassed 88 programs, 90% of them grassroots organizations.

Conducted over a 29-month period by a four-site team of 24 junior and senior scholars, along with support staff, our research encompassed three studies: (1) a set of exploratory focus groups with constituents from 2 programs (paid and volunteer staff, youth, parents or guardians, and adult community members); (2) telephone surveys with the directors of all 88 programs; and (3) open-ended telephone and face-to-face interviews with constituents from 6 programs. In all, 198 youth and adults participated in the study. A mixed-methods research design included qualitative and quantitative analyses of open-ended focus group responses, closed- and open-ended survey responses, and open-ended interview responses. The quantitative survey analyses constitute the centerpiece of our report, with open-ended data illustrating our results.

Investigating Program Characteristics

Rather than evaluate the programs or attempt to assess their best practices, we used aggregate data to chart their defining characteristics onto a conceptual map. These characteristics fall into four categories: the *context* in which programs operate, the *principles* that guide their work, the *content* of their curricula, and their *self-reported outcomes*. Our report provides empirical evidence of a pattern of relationships among these characteristics that yield more *transformative programs*, defined as those that seek to engage low-income and minority youth in understanding and redressing the unjust conditions that hinder their development.

The first category of variables that we investigated —*program context*—includes organizatioal structure and external urban context. The structure of the programs we surveyed reflects characteristics that the literature identifies as essential to effective youth-centered grassroots organizations: longevity, proven success in attracting older youth, sustained social interactions, a sense of group solidarity, deep roots in local communities, and committed—even if not formally trained —staff and volunteers. Even though most grassroots organizations rate their funding as insufficient, most program directors in our study describe their own resources as adequate or good, and also mention strong relationships with other organizations and social networks. They consider young people themselves an asset—as individuals who bring such attributes as assertiveness, determination, compassion, intelligence, humor, self-awareness, and open-mindedness to their programs, fundamentally sustaining both the mission of organizations and staff commitment.

Nevertheless, our investigation revealed the challenging external contexts in which these programs operate. Most are located in either larger or smaller metropolitan areas, rather than in mid-sized ones —areas with greater poverty and unemployment, higher school dropout rates, fewer owner-occupied homes, older housing, and fewer Caucasians. When asked to rate safety, physical infrastructure, social relations, and neighborhood attachment in their communities on a 0–2 scale, program directors rated safety the lowest, noting as problems street crime, gang activity, assault with weapons, and police misconduct; they ranked physical infrastructure somewhat higher, referring to the poor condition of buildings and schools, displacement, and lack of transportation and convenience stores; they rated social relations and neighborhood attachment most favorably.

The second category of variables we investigated —*program principles*—includes definitions of social justice, youth development philosophies, and approaches to youth participation. In their social justice definitions, program directors placed greatest emphasis upon having equal opportunities and a say in decision-making, while assigning less importance to developing skills, preventing risks, and strengthening individual identities. Thus, for program directors, social justice means, first and foremost, creating a society where young people have equal opportunities and a voice in decision-making, a process that provides the context for positive youth development. In portraying their youth development philosophies through mission statements and survey responses, program directors positioned their organizations at the far end of a continuum ranging from prevention to transformation. At the same time, they described approaches to youth participation that promote a variety of youth/adult relationships.

The third category—*program content*—includes the pedagogies, activities, and opportunities these programs offer. An analysis of their pedagogies revealed that, although they do not score very high on social critique, those that do engage in social critique were significantly more likely to embody transformative youth development philosophies. Civic activism was the most prevalent program activity—a not surprising finding given the study population's social justice orientation. Finally, an analysis of the justice-oriented opportunities considered for this research revealed that one larger group of context-centered programs was likelier to provide in a fairly even-handed way all of the opportunities, while another smaller group of person-centered programs was likelier to offer more opportunities for developing identities and fewer for understanding and participating in the neighborhood. Still, all the programs provide youth with an impressive array of opportunities.

The fourth category—*self-reported outcomes*—commonly understood as the benchmarks youth should attain to reach a healthy adulthood, required a redefinition of the concept "outcome." We propose a radically different notion that acknowledges the oppressive conditions in low-income urban communities and the fact that many youth in these communities already assume adult responsibilities. We assert that youth program activities are not simply

a *means* to youth development, but that they generate results—products—that are *ends* in themselves. We therefore considered as program outcomes the immediate individual and collective successes, no matter how transitory, that youth participants experience. In a country lacking the social will to address low-income urban conditions, we contend that the potential for change lies within the community through coalitions, alliances, and collaborative projects undertaken by adults and youth alike. From this perspective, the notion of outcomes shifts from a conventional youth-only paradigm to one that inseparably links youth development with community development. An analysis of outcomes reported by program constituents who participated in the open-ended interviews revealed the richness of programs' contributions to youth and community development, with active participation and social contribution topping the list.

Assessing Significant Relationships among Program Characteristics

In investigating the relationships among these four sets of variables, we found two significant clusters that derive from transformative youth development philosophies and funding sources. The strongest cluster of relationships centers around transformative philosophies and involves 19 variables. A transformative philosophy was most likely to apply in programs with either 50–100 or more than 300 participants —those more often located in deteriorated neighborhoods that still offer a sense of safety. Even though all the programs surveyed exist within a network of organizational relationships, those with transformative philosophies were significantly more likely to have developed such relationships themselves. They also embodied specific principles: their visions of social justice were likelier to emphasize equal opportunities but less likely to emphasize identity awareness, and their visions of youth participation were likelier to encompass multiple adult/youth interactions. Their program contents not only proved significantly more likely to emphasize social critique but also to provide opportunities that help youth understand and participate in their communities, acquire communal behaviors, and become agents of change. Not surprisingly, these more transformative programs were significantly likelier to produce social contribution outcomes, albeit not the community-building outcomes we initially hoped for, which would have indicated a stronger community change focus than that associated with social contribution. Perhaps even these more transformative programs are likelier to engage youth in activism and leadership *within* programs than *outside* them, in the community at large.

The second cluster of relationships centers around primary sources of funding and involves 14 variables. Foundation-funded programs were likelier to be located in smaller metropolitan areas with all the census data indicators of poverty; they not only provide opportunities for youth to understand and participate in their communities, but also engage young people in making a social contribution as activists and leaders. Such programs were also more likely to be newer and larger, but do not necessarily operate on larger budgets or with more staff. They do, however, report more adult leadership in comparison to that found in programs clustering around transformative philosophies, perhaps because many serve large groups of young people with fewer resources and therefore lack time for the process work involved in nurturing youth leadership. It is worth noting that the cluster around foundation grants intersects to some degree with the cluster around transformative philosophy, because foundations were significantly likelier to support programs with such philosophies. Governments were significantly less likely to support programs with transformative philosophies and, along with individuals, were likelier to support older programs in larger metropolitan areas with fewer symptoms of poverty.

Thus, our analysis revealed two partially overlapping clusters of variables around transformative youth development philosophies and primary source of funding, which together affect practically all the significant relationships we found within each of the four components of the conceptual map. Although the characteristics of transformative programs do not entirely align with those of foundation-funded programs, foundations emerged as the primary enablers of the most forward-looking programs surveyed.

A Conceptual Map of Transformative Youth Development Programs

At the outset of our study, we located program principles (social justice definitions, youth development philosophies, and approaches to youth participation) at the center of a conceptual map, as the component that we expected would most affect program content, context, and outcomes. The significant

relationships that emerged from the analyses, however, led us to locate transformative philosophies and source of funding at the center, as defining factors in program operation. These two factors affect all the significant relationships we discovered within categories, with the exception of neighborhood attachment, which relates to program directors' residence and not to one of our central features.

The most transformative programs in our study clearly have a vital role to play in connecting youth to their communities. Besides advancing youth development, such connectedness can enable young people and their adult allies to improve challenging urban conditions. To multiply these programs, a sea-change is required in the way youth program designers, evaluators, and funders think about low-income and minority youth, and thus in how they think about the programs that can effectively support their development. Such a change would allow for a more fruitful deployment of resources currently invested in programs that fail to engage low-income and minority youth, especially older youth.

Reflecting upon how to catalyze this new approach we asked ourselves: (1) How can justice-oriented youth development advocates—researchers, practitioners, philanthropists, parents, young people—organize to change prevailing popular and scholarly notions of low-income and minority youth? (2) How can this community of advocates mobilize the media to publicize the accomplishments of low-income and minority youth? (3) How can more foundations be convinced to fund community-based, justice-oriented youth programs? (4) What would make local and national governments less conservative in their funding parameters? (5) How can the corporate community be convinced to fund community-based, justice-oriented youth programs? (6) Finally, how can the programs themselves more intentionally frame guiding principles that reflect their everyday practices and vice versa?

Recommendations

We propose that:

1. **Youth justice advocates organize to change public opinion.** Coalitions of advocates—including youth—might speak in a collective voice to articulate a transformative youth agenda; influence public policy; influence media depictions of youth; and lobby to shift public funds away from treatment-oriented youth programming, so as to free up more—and more locally responsive—funding for transformative youth programming.
2. **Funders engage in a dialogue with grantees.** So that program constituents are not simply reacting to predetermined guidelines handed down by the philanthropic community, but proactively helping to shape them, funders might sponsor community forums and panels to encourage dialogue on funding guidelines; organize community events to recognize the accomplishments of youth unrelated to any specific funding initiatives; invite youth justice advocates—including youth—to collaborate on writing RFPs; and include support for program staff capacity-building and for formative program evaluations.
3. **Youth programs create more compelling narratives**. A stronger narrative of an alternative model for youth development, with a coherent vision of their organizations, would clarify to funders what programs believe in and practice, and also what youth accomplish in the here-and-now to improve themselves and the deplorable conditions in their communities. A coherent message would clarify to the business community—now missing-in-action as funders—how these programs can contribute to their bottom line by preparing independent, culturally diverse critical thinkers and doers for the workforce.
4. **Researchers conduct large studies of justice-oriented programs that build and test theory.** Such research might employ youth as ethnographers in the programs and communities under study. This strategy would be a cost-effective way not only to access a youth perspective through participant observation, face-to-face interviews, and other *in situ* methods, but also to create a national team of young low-income and minority scholars. Needless to say, longitudinal studies are needed—a major challenge because: (a) even short-term research and evaluation of grassroots justice-oriented programs lack funding, (b) funders would need to accept creative research methods for assessing program outcomes, especially community achievements, and (c) high-end development is rapidly displacing and dispersing low-income urban populations.

We see these recommendations—youth justice advocates changing public opinion, funders engaging in a dialogue with grantees, programs creating more compelling narratives, and researchers conducting

large studies that build and test theory—as entirely interdependent, each necessary to the accomplishment of the others. By presenting empirical evidence drawn from the beliefs, practices, and accomplishments of a select group of youth programs, we hope to inspire a multi-faceted approach that will pave the way toward greater acceptance of a context-centered approach to youth development.

Senior Research Team

Sharon E. Sutton, PhD, FAIA, Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Adjunct Professor of Social Work, and Director of CEEDS (Center for Environment Education and Design Studies) at the University of Washington. She served as the principal investigator and lead on West Coast data collection.

Susan P. Kemp, PhD, Associate Professor of Social Work and Faculty Affiliate in CEEDS at the University of Washington. She served as a co-principal investigator and primary author of the youth development philosophy matrix.

Lorraine Gutiérrez, PhD, Professor of Social Work and Psychology, and Faculty Associate in American Culture at the University of Michigan. She served as a co-principal investigator and lead on Midwest data collection.

Susan Saegert, PhD, Professor of Environmental Psychology and Director of the Center for Human Environments at City University of New York. She served as a co-principal investigator and lead on East Coast data collection.

Michael K. Conn PhD, Director of the Girl Scout Research Institute at Girl Scouts of the USA headquarters in New York City. He served as a research consultant.

Jeffrey Hou, PhD, Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture and Faculty Affiliate in CEEDS at the University of Washington. He served as a community practice consultant.

Monica Oxford, PhD, Research Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Washington. She served as the statistician.