IMPACT SAC | STUDENT VOICES

2023

ABOUT STUDENT VOICES

On March 30, 2023, more than 100 young people and dozens of local leaders and decision makers, including elected officials, law enforcement, public health professionals, and community service providers, came together for Student Voices, an empowerment project of Impact Sac. Student Voices is designed to engage Sacramento-area students with lived experience as "teen experts" and connect them to people of influence who collectively have the resources to enact, in partnership with youth, positive solutions to teen health, safety, and wellness issues. This report provides a qualitative summary of the insights, inspirations, and priorities lifted up by young people themselves through small group discussions about what it takes to create healthier and safer environments. Discussions were facilitated by researchers from the UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program with the goal of building youth power to identify and direct the activities and services necessary for young people, families, and communities to thrive.

About Impact Sac

Impact Sac is a youth empowerment organization in Sacramento whose mission is to connect people to power. For more information, visit: https://impactsac.org

About the UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program

The **UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program (VPRP)** is a multi-disciplinary program of research and policy development focused on the causes, consequences, and prevention of violence and innovations in community and public safety. For more information, visit: https://health.ucdavis.edu/vprp/

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

YOUTH ARE **ASSETS**, NOT DEFICITS, TO THEIR PEERS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES.

2

ADDRESSING **MENTAL HEALTH** IS CRITICAL FOR PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELL-BEING, DISRUPTING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE, AND HEALING COMMUNITIES.

3

KINSHIP WITH TRUSTED ADULTS WHO CONSISTENTLY SHOW THEY CARE ABOUT YOUTH, LISTEN TO THEM, AND PUSH THEM TO SUCCEED IS TRANSFORMATIVE.

4

IMPROVING THE **BUILT ENVIRONMENT** CAN FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS, REDUCE VIOLENCE, AND INCREASE FEELINGS OF SAFETY.

5

ENHANCING THE **ECONOMIC CONDITIONS** OF YOUTH AND NEIGHBORHOODS PROMOTES SAFETY AND WELL-BEING.
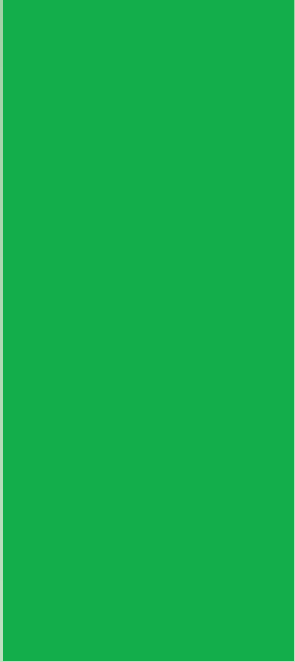
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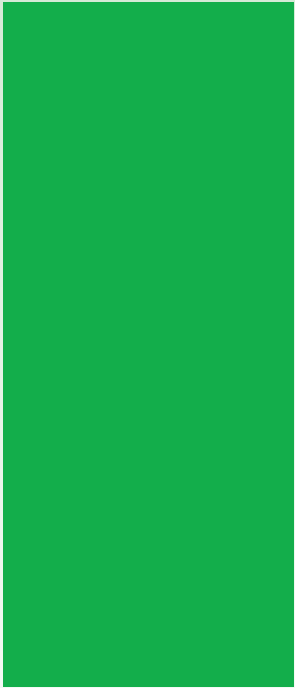
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YOUTH WANT **SOCIAL MEDIA** TO PROMOTE SUPPORT AND SAFETY, RATHER THAN HARM AND NEGATIVITY.

8

HARNESSING THE POWER OF **YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND COLLECTIVE VOICE** IS VITAL FOR ENSURING THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

Media and public narratives are too often dominated by stories about young people whose actions may have contributed to violence or harm, rather than highlighting the myriad ways youth constructively contribute to their peers, schools, and local communities. This results in language, images, culture, and media that reinforce distorted views of youth as "aggressors" or "troublemakers" while minimizing their humanity and concealing the root causes of social problems and unequal life chances. This is especially true for young people of color and indigenous youth. Youth are acutely aware of these harmful narratives, and when not directly confronted and challenged, these narratives can create a chasm between youth and adults. When asked what message they want adults to hear, one youth participant said:

1

YOUTH ARE ASSETS, NOT DEFICITS, TO THEIR PEERS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES.

" **Try to tune in to see why people in this generation act the way they do, instead of just assuming like he just a gangbanger, that's it.**

There is immense untapped opportunity to develop, shift, and lift up positive narratives about young people that showcase their personal, cultural, sociopolitical, and spiritual roots and resilience-building assets, which too frequently go unseen and undervalued. Creating space and empowering youth—as experts in their own lives—to give and receive mutual support to and from their peers and within their communities is especially valuable:

" **One of my friends opened up to me, and I feel like I was there to help her, to talk, to listen. She's always told me that she feels like she has nobody to talk to, so when she told me that she feels like she could talk to me, I felt good about myself because I don't really get that from a lot of people.**

2 ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH IS CRITICAL FOR PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELL-BEING, DISRUPTING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE, AND HEALING COMMUNITIES.

Compounding stressors in their local environments and in the world at large have taken a toll on young people's mental health, safety, and opportunities to reach their full potential. As one student summarized:

> **People at our school, a lot of us have deteriorating mental health. And for us, [high school] seniors, we're supposed to be going off to college, to work, to these next steps, and we can't get there if in the present state, we're struggling to rationalize everything that is happening and there's no time to take a breather to slow down.**

Many youth feel that students' mental health and the issues stemming from poor mental health have gotten worse since the COVID-19 pandemic:

> **It's not always easy being a student, especially coming from COVID and everything, being on lockdown. Like everyone's anxiety is up right now. Like no one feels like they can trust anyone. Everyone feels like they're to themselves.**

Young people also recognize the cyclical and often intergenerational nature of trauma and violence among their peers and adults in their communities. In their eyes, young people fighting is often the product of low self-esteem, insecurities, rumors, and **"people feeling like they need to act tougher than they really are"** or to **"act grown."** In turn, acts of violence lead to increased fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, and other trauma responses as well as potentially disruptive behavioral changes, such as avoiding going to certain places, staying in at night, or carrying a gun, which can further disrupt social relations.

For their community to be safer, one young person emphasized the importance of internal emotional work:

> **People need to stop thinking about how they look physically...They need to start thinking about their brain. How you think about in your head. What we need to do is figure out how we can become mentally peaceful.**

To break the cycle of violence, more accessible, affordable, and culturally affirming mental health care and inclusive strategies for healthy trauma coping, stress management, and conflict resolution are needed.

Young people can find it hard to trust their peers, adults, and people in general, a feeling fueled by their own experiences of and stories they have heard about harm and systems failures.

However, there are often a select few adults—sometimes just a single family member, teacher, coach, or other school staff person—that stand out to youth as being trustworthy and filling a shared human need for collective kinship and belonging. According to youth, these trusted adults are attuned to young people's needs and genuinely care about their well-being:

3

KINSHIP WITH TRUSTED ADULTS WHO CONSISTENTLY SHOW THEY CARE ABOUT YOUTH, LISTEN TO THEM, AND PUSH THEM TO SUCCEED IS TRANSFORMATIVE.

> **Like for example, if we're going through a hard time, and like he sees that, like if we're down, he sees that, notices that, and he'll ask you about it.**

When problems arise, these adults seek to understand what happened and why, encourage accountability, and work with youth to remedy the situation and repair harm without punishing or criminalizing them, practices consistent with restorative justice. As explained by one student:

> **I feel like most teachers and deans and principals at other schools, they want to tear you down...but he really try to work. It ain't just tryna be like, *'Ok well since you did this, you're gonna get this and that's it.'* He really tryna help you figure out where that came from, how'd you do it, why'd you do it. He tryna dig deep into what you did, and how you did it, and why.**

Youth value the adults in their lives who motivate and challenge them, for example those who they say **"will not let us give up on anything,"** who **"really push us to succeed,"** and who provide meaningful and relevant advice. Connection with a nurturing adult, even just one, who youth feel has "got their back" can make spaces like classrooms and after-school programs feel welcoming and safe for young people and help them **"stay out of trouble."**

The safety, health, and well-being of youth are closely tied to the places in which they live, grow, learn, and play. When violence, neglect, and loss are pervasive in these environments, it can lead to fears of an unsafe world:

> " I feel like, an unsafe place is just the world, period. Cause it ain't just where you at, it's everywhere.

Whether or not youth have experienced violence directly, seeing or hearing about violence and its impacts on their communities can be enough to make them worry that **"anything could happen at any time."** For instance, several participants noted:

> " I mainly feel safe at home. When I'm out in public, I don't really feel safe. I walk home from school and there's a bunch of private alleyways people could pull me into.
>
> Like you could just go to the grocery store and you never know if there's gonna be gun violence or anything.
>
> They be having school shootings and stuff, so I ain't never feel safe at school.

Youth nonetheless find peace and comfort in places where they can engage in healthy, stress-relieving activities, such as working out, playing sports, listening to music, or reading a book.

But access to the resources and opportunities needed to thrive—at home, school, or in the community—is not equally available to everyone. Investments in the built environment are needed, especially in communities experiencing elevated levels of violence and inequity, and can have widespread benefits by facilitating social connectedness, reducing violence, and increasing feelings of safety. **Better street lighting, improved roads and sidewalks, more water fountains, fewer vacant lots,** and **additional community and recreational centers** are just some of the things youth believe will make young people and their broader communities safer and healthier.

4

IMPROVING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT CAN FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS, REDUCE VIOLENCE, AND INCREASE FEELINGS OF SAFETY.

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ENHANCING THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF YOUTH AND NEIGHBORHOODS PROMOTES SAFETY AND WELL-BEING.

Ample evidence supports the adage, "nothing stops a bullet like a job." Structural disinvestment in neighborhood infrastructure and the institutions needed to stabilize families and communities, and a resultant concentration of poverty and lethal absence of hope, are fundamental drivers of violence and harm. As several youth summarized:

> **I feel like some people gang bang to survive.**
>
> **Yeah, that's why they started drug dealing and all that.**
>
> **Some do it to feed their family.**

Yet young people are keenly aware of deeply rooted systemic barriers such as racism and negative cultural perceptions:

> **If you go apply for a job, they gonna look at you like, *'Wow, your pants sagging, or you look like this, I'm not gonna hire you, or you got dreads.'* It don't make sense to me. People say dreads aren't professional, but you see white people getting them done with fake hair.**

On the other side of this relationship, research shows that youth workforce development and employment opportunities, particularly summer jobs coupled with social and emotional well-being programming, can significantly reduce youth exposure to and involvement in violence.

Yet young people consistently report the need for more—and more responsive and sustaining—programs in this space:

> **There's not many jobs or different places to work.**
>
> **And they wonder why teens want to sell drugs; these little jobs is not enough.**
>
> **When they do give us community jobs, it don't make sense because it be like, we have to work for a month for $100. We're old enough to know the value of money, so let us make that.**

Local investment in people who are from the community itself also matters. For example, when commenting on the economic health of their community, one youth said:

> **I think the best thing in our community is there's a whole bunch of Black-owned companies. I feel like that really helps with a lot of positivity. And it helps with people feeling like they can do something. 'Cause I know that as Brown people we feel like we can't, from everything that has happened to us. But knowing that we do got Black-owned businesses, and a bookstore, that's like– intelligence!**

Violence is too often a symptom of prior and ongoing experiences of adversity and trauma. "Harm begets harm," as the saying goes. Normalizing a broader range of trauma-informed and healing-centered responses to conflicts and crises is therefore critical for reducing and preventing violence. At the individual level, young people noted the importance of shifting norms about the acceptability of violence:

> **I don't want my younger siblings growing up thinking that it's okay to start just going around shooting people, killing people for no reason, beating on people. That's not the way to get your life. That's the easiest way to get you locked up. But to get their lives and succeed, not at all.**

At the city or community level, youth also emphasized the value of reducing the harms of punitive and law enforcement-dominant responses to some problems and incidents of violence, highlighting concerns related to policing practices, priorities, and lack of accountability that contribute to distrust. When discussing the police, one youth shared, **"They don't like us for real."** Another commented:

> **It's 'cause you see all the stuff on the news and all stuff that be happening, so you just be scared. Like I ain't never had no bad experience with an officer, but since I know it be happening in the world and stuff, it just makes me scared.**

6

BUILDING COMMUNITY SAFETY REQUIRES **SHIFTING INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETAL NORMS** ABOUT VIOLENCE AS A NECESSARY RESPONSE TO CONFLICTS AND CRISES.

Unarmed community-based outreach and (co-)responders trained in de-escalation and mediation may be one alternative to punitive strategies. Several youth participants noted:

> **I think all cops do not need a weapon.**

> **I feel like when it's one person, you don't need 10 officers.**

Social media is ubiquitous in young people's lives, and most are keenly aware of the role it plays in their behavior and well-being. Youth feel that social media negatively impacts mental health, decreases feelings of safety, and promotes violence in several ways, for example, by perpetuating unrealistic standards, helping spread rumors, and incentivizing shocking, violent, and depressing content, which can encourage young people to engage in harmful "trends" in real life.

> **"It's easier for negative things to blow up. It's the same reason that the news uses more negative stories.**
>
> **People see [things] on the Internet, and then they go do it to other people.**

Youth recognize many of the risks associated with sharing information online, such as their location, misinformation, or illegal activity, and can therefore be critical partners in developing approaches to offset potential harms. Notably, some youth perceive school administrators' monitoring of student activity on social media primarily as a way to get students in trouble, rather than to ensure their safety and well-being, which can erode trust between students and school authorities.

Despite its drawbacks, young people believe social media has the potential for good, if used responsibly:

> **If more people repost things that are positive and repost things that we should be aware about, if we all put more effort and support each other, then we could really make a difference.**

Youth also suggest that social media could help promote safety and positivity by providing a platform for raising awareness about local and global issues that matter to youth, posting good things about the community, meeting new people, playing games, and locating community resources.

7

YOUTH WANT SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE SUPPORT AND SAFETY, RATHER THAN HARM AND NEGATIVITY.

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HARNESSING THE POWER OF YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND COLLECTIVE VOICE IS VITAL FOR ENSURING THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

With the right supports, youth have the potential to be change makers, transforming their communities and their futures in the service of shared goals for safety and well-being. As one young person summarized:

> **We all have these shared similar experiences and I feel it's really important that we all get to know that we all have the same issues to fight, like we're not against each other. We're all one. Even though we're from different regions of Sacramento, we equally share the same problems and we fight the same fight.**

Yet too often, youth are not at decision-making tables and their voices are marginalized.

> **Most adults in our lives, they never really listen to us. Whenever we have an idea, y'all don't even hear it. Y'all think it's dumb. Think it's nonsense.**

Youth want more opportunities to **"talk for ourselves, be advocates for ourselves, stand up for what's right"** and, importantly, to be taken seriously by adults in power. Their push for positive change stems from their aspirations to improve not only their own circumstances, but those of future generations too:

> **We're here today to have our voice be heard so that Class of 2030, all the other classes, have something that they don't have to worry about. They can just get what they need to get done and go enjoy their future without having to worry about whether or not there's going to be violence around the corner when you show up at school.**

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Data Collection

More than 100 middle and high school students from the Sacramento region attended the Student Voices event on March 30, 2023. During lunch, individuals sat in small groups of between 6-12 young people and 1-3 adults who were designated as discussion group facilitators, scribes, and/or influential listeners. In each small group, the facilitator asked a series of questions using a semi-structured discussion guide (see following page), developed by a team of researchers at the UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program (VPRP). The group's scribe took written notes of students' responses. At the 7 tables where VPRP researchers were the facilitators, the discussions were also audio recorded. Students were asked to use only their first names and informed that their identities would be kept anonymous. Participation was voluntary, and students could excuse themselves from the discussion at any time. The discussions lasted approximately one hour, after which students were invited to share their thoughts about the discussion with the entire group. This full group share out activity was also audio recorded.

Analysis

Two VPRP researchers listened to the audio recordings and took detailed notes, including verbatim transcription of selected quotes from student participants. These transcriptions were combined with the written notes from the day of the event, using Word and Excel, to allow the researchers to identify patterns of ideas within and across discussion groups. After exploring these patterns and their meaning, the researchers identified 8 major, cross-cutting themes (or "key takeaways") that were considered the most relevant, important, and distinct. These themes were confirmed and revised as appropriate with the larger VPRP research team, as well as staff from Impact Sac. Quotes appearing in the final report were lightly edited for readability while maintaining their underlying meaning.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. To start, I'd like to ask everyone at the table to introduce themselves—your first name only—and then say one or two words or feelings that come to your mind when you hear the word: "health."

2. What about "safety?" Say one or two words or feelings that come to your mind when you hear the word: "safety."

3. Think about a specific time or times when you have felt really safe. What are the things that make you feel safe? What are the things that make it difficult to feel safe?

4. Are there places where you or other young people in your community feel most "safe?" What about places where you or others feel least "safe?"

5. If you or your peers had concerns about safety, who would you go to for support?

6. Which people or organizations do you think are making a positive difference in your community?

7. I want to get your opinion on violence in your community. In general, how would you describe violence in your community? What are your feelings about violence in your community? What about guns in your community?

8. How does violence or concerns about safety affect the day-to-day lives of young people in your community? Have any of these things affected you in your day-to-day life?

9. What things do you, your peers, or your community need more of to make your community safer and healthier? What about things that already exist in your community that help make it a safer and healthier place to be?

10. In what ways does social media make your community more or less safe?

11. Who or what inspires you or keeps you going, in general or during difficult times?

Authorship and Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the young people who generously shared their expert perspectives and life experiences with us to help increase understanding and spark action to make our communities safer and healthier.

Suggested Citation

Aubel AJ, Kravitz-Wirtz N. *Impact Sac Student Voices Report, 2023*. Sacramento, California: University of California, Davis; 2024.