



# Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action

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## Partnering With Youth Organizers to Prevent Violence: An Analysis of Relationships, Power, and Change

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### Abstract

**Background:** Youth from the city of San Bernardino, California, launched a community organizing campaign to develop policy changes to address conditions of inter-racial violence in their community. Pitzer College students collaborated with the high school youth organizers in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project to study violence and racial conflict at local high schools.

**Objectives:** The purpose of the project was to explore the experiences and perceptions of high school youth about racial conflict in their community and to develop policy proposals to address this issue.

**Methods:** Undergraduate student researchers and high school youth organizers collaborated in designing and conducting narrative research. Together they developed questions and carried out semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with 40 local youth. The undergraduate students then coded and analyzed the data to identify common themes. Youth organizer's feedback was incorporated into a final, shared research report, including policy proposals, which were presented to the greater community.

**Results:** Youth organizers worked with city and school administrators to secure the implementation of programs they recommended to address their research's findings. Programs were enacted to reduce racial bias and conflict on school campuses, and city leaders agreed to develop a strategic youth development plan together with youth organizers.

**Conclusion:** The partnership experience supported important policy changes in San Bernardino high schools, yet also illuminated areas wherein the community-campus partnerships could work more intentionally to shift power dynamics between and within the partners, address conditions that generate dependency and inequality in the partnership, and expand outcomes of institutional and community transformation.

### Keywords

Community-based participatory research, community-campus partnerships, violence prevention, race relations, community organizing, students

“A girl from our confirmation class was shot at a birthday party and then died 2 days after in the hospital.” This tragic event, described in 2007 by an inner-city youth from the city of San Bernardino, California, launched the community organizing efforts of local high school students that resulted in policy changes in their city and schools aimed at reducing violence. In a city that had more than 60 murders

that year, 15 of whom were under age 19, this effort seemed critically necessary, but also overwhelming.

To support their organizing efforts, the youth wanted to conduct research that would document the lived experience of high school students with regard to racial tensions and violence, as well as support their recommendations for grassroots change and policy reform. The research approach

most fitting to the philosophy of the youth-driven community organizing effort was CBPR, which gave birth to a partnership with Pitzer College. After 2 years of working together, partners feel that they have mutually benefited from this partnership. However, in participating together in critical reflection on the partnership’s development, they have illuminated the need for deeper levels of collaboration, power shifting, and organizing within the partnership itself. This article explores the objectives, methods, and findings of the community-based violence prevention research and then goes on to reflect on how the dynamics of the community–campus partnership both supported and limited this effort.

**PARTNERS**

This partnership involves Pitzer, a small, liberal arts college, that aims to “produce engaged socially responsible citizens of the world through an academically rigorous, interdisciplinary liberal arts education emphasizing social justice, intercultural understanding and environmental sensitivity.”<sup>1</sup> The students involved directly with this partnership were sophomores from white, upper-middle class backgrounds with no prior service-learning or research experience. Over the course of a semester, they spent approximately 15 hours weekly as interns with the youth organizers, attending meetings, learning skills of community organizing, and co-conducting the CBPR.

Community participants in this partnership were youth organizers involved with Inland Congregations United for Chance (ICUC), a faith-based community organization devoted to community organizing in San Bernardino. The ICUC organizing committees that participated in this partner-

ship were made up of approximately 15 youth leaders and 50 affiliated youth—primarily working-class Latinos, ages 13 to 19 years old—who organize youth in their schools and congregations, conduct research, and take action to improve conditions for youth in the city of San Bernardino.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The participation of the school community and particularly that of students, in the identification and implementation of violence prevention programs is almost completely ignored in the literature of violence prevention. When considered in the research, the community is viewed as an intervening variable in terms of its contamination effects,<sup>2</sup> or as a mediating factor because of its ability to reduce risk,<sup>3,4</sup> rather than as an actor in violence prevention in and of itself. Research in community participation in violence prevention highlights the emphasis given in existing research and prevention efforts to the effects of experiencing violence at the individual level and to interventions aimed at individuals instead of the community-level engagement to prevent violence. Although limited community-focused research has been carried out, it does support the importance of community engagement in prevention.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of violence prevention in schools, researchers who have studied the role played by the school community have found that promising practices identified by educators and administrators are imposed on schools without asking students what they think is needed to help them feel safe or to prevent violence.<sup>6</sup> The focus in the literature on definitions of violence that target youth as “at risk” not only blame

<b>Violence</b>	<b>Racial Conflict</b>
Violence is widespread in our schools and community: 72% of students we surveyed have experienced violence in their community and 78% have experienced violence in their schools. 48% of students say they have personally been a victim of violence.	Racial conflict in schools affects a majority of students and programs to address this are urgently needed: 53% of the students we surveyed say they have been verbally harassed at school because of their race and 85% of students surveyed think programs are needed to address racism.
<b>Youth Services/Jobs</b>	<b>Security</b>
There are significant gaps between the availability of jobs, job training and after school programs and the need for these programs for high school-aged youth in the city: 22% of students we surveyed who don't have a job want one. 36% of students surveyed think that there are not enough after school activities.	Students feel disrespected by campus security on high school campuses. 78% of students surveyed think campus security shows little or no respect for students: 82% of students think few if any more security personnel are needed.

youth (and their cultures) for violence, but also marginalize youth from discussions of their experiences as knowledgeable subjects in their schools and communities.

In her research on student voice and school change, Mitra<sup>7</sup> shows how the engagement of students as researchers who identify school problems and possible solutions makes teachers and administrators aware of the distinctive knowledge possessed by students that, when engaged in discussions of school safety, can help to raise issues of equity that are often ignored by adults. Research on student involvement shows that students can be active participants in school change.<sup>8,9</sup> This research suggests that there are multiple pathways for students to be engaged in the construction of safe school environments and in measuring the effectiveness of school safety measures: By conducting surveys of the school's climate, following up those results with action plans, and participating in school committees where they have real decision-making power.

**Table 2. Interview and Focus Group Questions**

<p>Have you ever seen a fight between groups of students at or near school? Tell me what happened and what you saw.</p> <p>Why were they fighting?</p> <p>How did other students react?</p> <p>How did teachers react?</p> <p>People often stand by and watch fights. Why don't they do anything to stop them?</p> <p>What should you do if someone tries to fight with you? Why?</p> <p>What should you do if someone hits you? Explain why.</p> <p>Do you think people use violence to get respect? Why?</p> <p>How do you define violence?</p> <p>How does violence affect you?</p> <p>What do you think is the source of violence in schools?</p> <p>What do you think should be done about violence in the schools and neighborhoods?</p> <p>Do you think issues related to peoples' race are important at school? Why?</p> <p>Tell me about your relationships with students of other racial groups.</p> <p>How many of your close friends are of a racial group other than your own?</p> <p>Why have or haven't you been able to make more close friends across racial lines?</p>
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This article aims to contribute to the apparent lack of community-based and youth-driven research in the field of violence prevention, while expanding the scholarship to include reflexive critiques of the limitations of such community-campus partnerships.

## OBJECTIVES

Early in 2007, ICUC youth organizers developed an extensive needs- and assets-based survey and used the results to document widespread racism and racial violence in the city's high schools. The student survey was administered to 7,613 high school students, representing more than half of the entire high school student body in the San Bernardino City Unified School District; although this survey was a precursor to the narrative research that is the focus of this article, a summary of the survey's findings are described in Table 1 to offer the reader background to the conditions of the research site.

With the results of the survey, the youth organizers implemented a successful campaign to expand after-school programs, and then decided to deepen their research and organizing to address the underlying causes of violence in their community. In this phase of organizing and research, the youth organizers partnered with Pitzer students to utilize CBPR to uncover youth narratives of racial conflict on school campuses. CBPR empowered youth to use their knowledge of their community to drive the inquiry design and execution. Narrative research helped to them uncover how high school students experience, cope with, and avoid racial conflict at school. Two research questions framed this phase of the project: "What is the nature of interracial violence among San Bernardino youth?" and "How can such violence be prevented?" Youth organizer and undergraduate co-researchers used youth narratives to understand the interpretative frameworks that students used to construct their accounts of racial violence in their schools and to make sense of their action or inaction when they were confronted with racial violence on campus.

## METHODS

The first step of the partnership involved one of the authors of this article, a Pitzer college professor, teaching a combined group of ICUC and Pitzer students how to design and conduct a CBPR project using a narrative approach. The college students and youth organizers formulated the primary research

question and the interview and focus group questions and then carried out 15 interviews and two focus groups together in four high schools in San Bernardino. The interviews and focus groups involved 40 participants (15 in the interviews and another 25 individuals spread between two focus groups); they were all recorded, lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, and used a snowball tool for recruitment.

The undergraduate researchers' interview and focus group transcriptions, participatory observation notes and literature reviews were all noted sources of data, which were analyzed under the direction of their professor within an emergent design, using the procedures of open coding, initial memos, focused coding, and integrative memos. Using the same interview and focus group transcriptions but individually compiled field notes and literature reviews, data coding was conducted separately by both of the college research students, who formulated thematic categories of analysis and conclusions

based on their individual interpretations of the data (thus no inter-rater reliability was necessary for coding procedures). Although from a traditional, quantitative research perspective this may have posed a limitation for the study, the qualitative researchers felt that multiple assessments of the data actually widened the scope of the interpretative conclusions and recommendations presented. The students presented their final research reports to the youth organizers, who commented on, and in some cases changed or expanded the categories and conclusions, and final reports were then created to reflect their feedback. These final papers were later synthesized by the community organizing director into executive summaries to support the recommendations for policy changes. This article was cowritten by the community organizing director and the professor who supervised the service-learning and research efforts, incorporating excerpts of the final report of one of the undergraduate researchers.

**Table 3. Direct Quotes From Interview and Focus Group Responses Related to Themes**

Shame	<p>“They do it [fight] for show-off-ing reasons, or maybe they try to show someone—try to show them that they’re not something to kick around. And to me, I think that’s what the important part is because if you look down on others then they’ll try to express the feeling—then they’ll think that they’re not good at all—so the only way for them to do that is by violence.”</p> <p>“Being around it so much just affected me to the point where—back when I was going to my old school I would just be all depressed and I’d start punching random stuff and just hitting things—punch myself. You know, just random stuff.”</p>
Respect	<p>“It’s all about the pride of somebody. If you get disrespected, automatically you think you have to fight to gain your pride so he can respect you. That’s pretty much what it is. That’s why we—if you tell us something, something bad, automatically it will end in fighting. That way he can respect us. You know?”</p> <p>“As long as you don’t kill yourself, then you made it.”</p>
Racial Division	<p>“Basically, there’s pure blacks and Mexicans. So you can’t—you could hate Mexicans, but...you’re just gonna hate black people. There’s no white people, there’s no Chinese people—so there’s only black people.”</p> <p>“Yeah, at my current school it’s like everybody hangs out with their own group. Like to describe it, where I go, the Mexicans—they hang around in the quad area. By the office you’ve got Black people hanging out. You got—most of the white people just sit behind everything on the benches. And then I just hang out by the [coach’s class] because it’s fun to hang out there, you know? So everything’s pretty much segregated. During class everyone’s friends and stuff, but at break everyone just goes to their own little crew.”</p>
Environment	<p>“It’s kind of like a cycle—it’s like you’re young, then you’re still gonna wanna go out and party even if you have kids, then your kids see that and then they think it’s okay.”</p> <p>“When I see violence all the time it affects my life and it’s in my mind most of the time, and I guess once you’re around it—and it’s always in your surroundings—it helps you funnel your anger...So like, if I went over and turned on the T.V. or the radio—we always hear about killing and stuff like that... And it makes me just want to go out and fight and say angry words—abusive words—to other people.”</p>
Possibilities/ Recommendations for Change	<p>“It’s just about having better neighborhoods, people who were raised better.”</p> <p>“Support groups for students of any ethnic background who desire them should be created, along with a group where kids of different races could talk about their heritage, discuss academic or social issues, and have fun.”</p>

## RESULTS

The themes that arose from the data analysis of the student interviews and focus groups revealed student-identified sources of violence (including shame, respect, racial divisions, and environment) and possibilities/recommendations for change. Table 3 provides direct quotation excerpts from the data.

### Shame

Many students share a sense of shame and deeply desire to rid themselves of this stigma and prove to others that they are worthy of respect. Students demonstrated awareness that they are on the bottom of the city's social hierarchy and that with this lack of privilege came a great sense of shame; shame has been isolated by research in numerous disciplines as the emotion necessary for the development of violence.<sup>10</sup>

### Respect

Much like socioeconomic status in consumer society, respect within this subculture of violence is a positional good—it is in fixed supply and its value is a function of its ranking compared against other like goods. One cannot gain respect without taking it from someone else. Having been unabashedly denied power and respect by the greater society they inhabit, these youth take and demand these commodities from the only ones vulnerable enough to be victimized by them—each other.

### Racial Division

The racism San Bernardino's youth of color suffer on a daily basis now serves as a guide for their own behavior as they draw racial lines among themselves, discriminating against and stereotyping their peers of other races. They seek comfort and respite from the discrimination they face within the confines of the segregated society they create. Groups of youth internalize the discrimination they suffer as a result of deeply embedded structural inequalities and reflect it back on each other as a means of bolstering their self-esteem and mitigating their shame. Racially divisive behaviors also serve as a form of protection—although they isolate each race from all others, they increase solidarity among people of one race.

### Environment

Perhaps the most common response to the question "What is the source of violence in San Bernardino?" was one

that related to students' upbringings. The influence of parents, siblings, surrounding neighborhoods, and peer groups were all mentioned by interviewees as important factors in the socialization of youth of color in San Bernardino. Another factor was the general sense that violent acts are constantly occurring in San Bernardino's poorest neighborhoods, which encourages students to accept and perpetuate a street culture of violence.

### Possibilities/Recommendations for Change

Despite frequent initial responses that there were no possibilities for change to the daily reality of interracial violence, interviewees eventually proposed some solutions. They reported that San Bernardino desperately needs community-based organizations and schools to develop safe public spaces for kids to develop social and academic skills. Students universally agreed that more parks, basketball courts, recreation centers, and youth centers would help to revitalize neighborhoods and reduce violence. They also consistently advocated for better programming within their schools and for after-school activities and discussion groups that would help to reduce interracial violence (which would turn around what many believe is a trend in which their schools intentionally seek ways to avoid dealing with racial conflict).

### Outcomes

The ICUC youth organizers presented a summary of these findings and recommendations in a large, public meeting with city and school leaders and obtained commitments from these leaders to implement the changes they called for. The principal of a local high school agreed to pilot an anti-bias education and violence prevention program at her school. The mayor's office agreed to work with ICUC youth to develop a comprehensive youth development plan for the city. The president of the local school board agreed to study and implement a Project Labor Agreement aimed at creating apprenticeship programs and jobs for youth in the construction of local schools.

## CONCLUSION

The youth researchers concluded that interracial violence in San Bernardino is a symptom of a greater issue: The marginalization of San Bernardino's low-income youth of color from mainstream society and the shame they incur as a result. Beyond the social dynamics that influence youth to partici-

pate in violence, exposure to violence can result in a host of mental health issues, from depression to posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>11</sup> Youth's internalization of the interracial violence is evident in the way they see themselves, the manner in which they perceive others, and the limiting attitudes they have toward any possibility of change. Any educational program or policy reform intending to overcome the overwhelming internalization of violence and racial hatred embodied by the youth of San Bernardino needs to facilitate students' understanding that they are not inherently violent, racist individuals, as respondents often suggested in this study, but rather that they are products of a society which has shaped the creation of these very characteristics. For any lasting and significant change to take place, these youth need access to tools to achieve change and the commitment of city leaders to take steps to address the root causes of poverty, racial segregation, educational inequity, and the lack of jobs and services for youth.

### Reflections

Although insightful findings emerged from this study and the collaboration between community organizing and CBPR proved to be a successful model for community-campus partnerships, the authors believe there is much to learn by engaging in a critical reflection of the limitations of the community-campus partnership itself. The primary limitations revolve around the fact that the partnership was not designed to overcome deeper problems of geographic fragmentation, isolation, and positional inequality—issues that often underlie even the best-intentioned community-campus partnerships. The remainder of this article reflects critically on the partnership itself.

This collaboration began with a shared understanding that it sought to engage partners in a process of community transformation. Although the undergraduate students' assistance with the organizing and research efforts was a "service" to the community partner, the professor and community organizing staff were cognizant that the goal was to build a partnership that would avoid relationships of clientelism in which a relatively powerful and rich "patron" promises to provide services to a relatively powerless and poor "client." Interested in connecting CBPR with community organizing, this cooperative effort took a far different approach than many

service-learning projects that prioritize charitable acts over collaborative actions of social change. Rooted in the fundamental principles of community organizing, the partners sought a research approach that would subvert traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power. This matched the political and epistemological values of Pitzer College's general learning objectives and community engagement efforts. However, the desire to create this opportunity for transformation was conditioned by several factors that eventually limited the partners' abilities to overcome the shortcomings of traditional community-campus partnerships.

One of these shortcomings had to do with the limitations of the semester calendar and with the academic language used in the research reports created by Pitzer students. Because the academic semester does not coincide with a typical community organizing cycle, Pitzer students completed their research and moved on to new class projects while ICUC organizers were still working on their organizing campaign. Opportunities to debrief the research were limited, not only because ICUC youth had limited access to the undergraduate researchers after the end of the semester, but also because the language used in the research reports and the length of the reports limited the youth organizers' interest and ability to appreciate the research findings. The lack of resolution of these issues affected the ability to effectively communicate the complex research results and transfer them directly into the community organizer's grassroots campaign.

Another limiting factor was the difficulty undergraduate students faced in traveling to the community site where ICUC student organizers live and work. We originally saw this as an external factor that we would have to address with technical responses, such as the use of school vans, carpooling, and travel vouchers. But on deeper reflection we realized this problem is because of the lack of intentional physical immersion of colleges in the inner city, the poor transportation design of southern California, and economic limitations that inhibit access between our sites for low-income community members. As we sought to respond to this problem, we realized that obstacles for interactions between Pitzer students and local community residents actually point to deeper issues that need to be addressed with further tools of community engagement and organizing. We have concluded that this is part of a larger problem that isolates institutions of higher education from



their neighboring, marginalized communities and isolates academic knowledge from community-based knowledge. These factors severely limit the ability to build a community of collective interest, shared power, and equal access. The apparent issue of transportation points to an exacerbated social, economic, and racial isolation of the college that can only be overcome if the college sees itself as part of the wider community and if members of the broader community help to engage the college in an active role in the resolution of community issues. This illustrates the need for the college campus itself to become the target of future organizing and research efforts, to address its own role in issues of inequality, power shifting, and community building. Although we started with an awareness of the need for conducting assets- and needs-based assessments and a power analysis of the inner city, we ended with an awareness of the need to carry out a similar analysis of the college itself.

Other limiting factors have become evident as we deepen our partnership and evaluate our efforts to produce transformation. For example, questions have arisen regarding how the inner city youth organizers' lives were transformed by the partnership in comparison with their undergraduate counterparts. This highlights the fact that long-term educational and professional growth for community members is not typically an explicit goal of community-campus partnerships, and thus does not often take place. We found that, although the youth organizers did benefit from new research skills and new friendships, their general levels of power, college access, educational gains, or economic and career opportunities were virtually unchanged. On the other hand, the undergraduate students gained exposure to community organizing and community-based research, local knowledge sources in the inner city, career development, credit for classes, subsequent grant awards for their work, and advancement in their college careers. They were virtually untouched by the success (or failure) of the community gaining its organizing demands and yet spoke again and again of how life changing the experience was (an expression absent from the youth organizers reflections).

The limiting factors described here speak mainly of the greater tensions underlying the seemingly technical and practical obstacles in community-campus partnerships. The success at addressing these challenges hinges on sharing and making use of the strengths, assets, and power that each

partner brings to the collective and the creation of processes that will permit us to create new knowledge and continuously develop and reflect together. For true community-based and institutional transformation to occur, greater emphasis must be placed on the long-term investment of all parties in overturning policies and practices that keep these communities distant and unequal.

We are aware of several steps that we must take to deepen this process. First, we must reflect on the individual and collective "self-interest" of those engaged in the relationship. Community organizing practice teaches us that this will allow us to address potential conflicts of power by building "power with" instead of "power over" each other. Inherent in the recognition of self-interest is an analysis of the type of knowledge that we hope to create through our partnership. The value of academic knowledge needs to be reflected on from both the viewpoint of community organizers attempting to influence public policy and members of the academic community who attempt to build just relationships with oppressed communities. As we try to build a partnership based on collective self-interest, we need to question the valuation of academic knowledge in an economic market that recreates the social, economic, and racial exploitation that community organizers seek to transform. Are we initiating a select few community members to membership in privileged society through their exposure to academic methods and helping those with one foot up further enhance their marketability or are we legitimizing other forms of knowledge as valid means to understand and transform community? Are we sincerely addressing the disparity between the college's demographics and that of the surrounding communities within a context of shared burdens/social change goals?

Concrete steps toward addressing these issues might include reframing current tutoring and mentoring service-learning programs in a community organizing framework that moves beyond the individual successes of various service-providers and into a city-wide campaign for increased college access. The principal partners involved in the ICUC-Pitzer partnership propose that Pitzer engages in community organizing on and off-campus to garner support and power for a campaign to increase graduation rates and local college access rates. Furthermore, they recommend that a community organizing institute and college pipeline program be implemented

at Pitzer College that is open to both on-campus students and off-campus community members who wish to become collaborators in the task of reshaping their shared community.

With these recommendations comes the need to incorporate increased community evaluation of our progress. Critically evaluating our collaborative efforts and the ways they do and do not lead us toward shared social change goals must be part of the measurable outcomes assessed in the community-campus partnership framework. At the moment, this basic understanding and evaluation of how change occurs in communities is not explicit. Although we appreciate the findings and subsequent actions that occurred as a result of the CBPR that we carried out together, we feel that this critical reflection on the limitations and needs of the partnership is as important as the results of the research itself.

Although there is much room for increased awareness and depth in this partnership, there is also the need to celebrate its positive results. Bridging CBPR and community organizing was naturally synergistic and mutually benefiting. Furthermore, the youth organizers infused the traditional boundaries of the classroom with new problem-solving opportunities and creative knowledge making possibilities; likewise, their willingness to learn, awareness of issues of diversity and difference, and ability to understand and reframe issues of power and justice were only some of the skills that the high school and

college student collaborators used to create multiple learning experiences. That the collaborative research endeavor resulted in recommendations that were funded and enacted within the target community is a success not to be overlooked. Finally, the hiring of ICUC's community organizing director to teach a new community organizing course on campus demonstrates Pitzer's commitment to learn how to engage a community organizing approach, on and off campus.

After 2 years of partnership, we are beginning to foment a shared commitment to building healthy communities. Yet, it is also apparent that we are bound together by ties that go well beyond our formal partnership. Pitzer College and the surrounding communities are not accidental neighbors but rather members of one community with historical relationships of social, economic, and racial inequalities, oppressions, and struggles for transformation. The partnership that we are creating is a natural consequence of our existing geographic and political relationship. Success in terms of educational, professional, and economic transformations of power for all community partners is dependent on remaining critically aware of the roles we choose to play and actions we choose to take in this ongoing relationship. We will be better able to support youth who face violence in their communities and to impact CBPR collaborations by addressing the limitations that emerged in this community-campus partnership.

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