

## Sacramento's LGBTQ Youth: Youth-Led Participatory Action Research for Mental Health Justice with Youth In Focus

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) provides a way for young people to advocate for themselves and their communities, and for organizations to engage youth in the effort to bring about social and environmental justice.<sup>1</sup> Youth In Focus (YIF), a nonprofit based in northern California, fosters the development of youth, organizations, and communities by supporting Youth-Led Research, Evaluation and Planning (Youth REP). Our work is based on the belief that youth can effectively partner with adults to address social and institutional challenges, and that these partnerships are crucial to achieving just, democratic and sustainable social change.<sup>8</sup> Currently YIF emphasizes three main themes through our Health Justice, Education Justice, and Community Justice Initiatives. Nancy Erbstein<sup>2</sup> has described how YIF contributes to the emerging frameworks of Community Youth Development<sup>4</sup> and Social Justice Youth Development (see box).<sup>3</sup> This article describes YIF's Health Justice Initiative and illustrates our approach to youth-led participatory action research with an example of a needs assessment by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in Sacramento, California.

### Youth-Led Participatory Action Research for Health Justice

With support from YIF, young people and adult allies investigate disparities and advocate for greater justice in fields such as health, juvenile justice, education, and community planning. YIF supports young people to utilize research methods such as interviews, focus groups, surveys,



observation, photography, and video to draw out and present community knowledge. YIF's youth-friendly curriculum structures research as a series of eight "Stepping Stones" from team building and initial planning of a research project through research design, data collection, analysis, findings, recommendations, public presentation, and dissemination, leading to direct action and advocacy. YIF has experienced successes and challenges in using participatory action research methods in fields (e.g., health) that, in our experience, are not traditionally receptive to research not grounded in experimental methods.

For example, through our Health Justice Initiative, YIF projects have expanded definitions of health to revolutionize advocacy for some of the most marginalized populations of youth who are often overlooked or ignored by health systems. YIF's Health Justice Initiative envisions a world where the voices of underrepresented youth, including queer youth, youth of color, foster youth, and homeless, immigrant and low-income youth are engaged in all aspects of health policy that affect their lives. Since 2005, YIF's Health Justice Initiative has supported over 30 YPAR projects to make space for youth voic-

es on issues such as food and nutrition, physical activity, access to health care, mental health, environmental justice, sexual health, and reproductive justice. Previously called the "Adolescent Health Initiative," YIF's work in the health field began in 2002 and focused on improving school wellness centers while addressing issues such as stress, drug use and sexual health. In 2005, YIF redefined and renamed the initiative

"Health Justice" to especially amplify the voices of those youth who are often the most marginalized due to sexism, heterosexism, racism, poverty, violence, HIV/AIDS and STIs, drugs and alcohol, and other such issues affecting young people's well-being.

Because YIF sees all health justice work as interconnected, YIF's Health Justice Initiative continues to expand to include food justice, environmental justice, and mental health. For example, when youth-led research reveals that homeless queer youth in San Francisco report that a lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables affects their mental health as much as a lack of affordable healthcare,<sup>10</sup> we see that food justice is intimately connected to prevention and early intervention of mental health issues. Adapting the Health Justice Initiative to meet the needs of communities is a key part of our success, seeing both systemic and personal change as integral to our work. One project that demonstrates the power and impact of YPAR on young people and on the health field is a multi-phase project conducted with the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center.

## LGBTQ Youth Mental Health

In Sacramento, the sprawling capitol city at the heart of California's Central Valley, LGBTQ youth confront daily challenges to health and spirit. More so than their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ youth are often on their own in seeking support, resources, positive relationships and safe spaces.<sup>5</sup> Since 2007, Youth In Focus has been promoting and supporting youth-led participatory action research with LGBTQ youth in Sacramento, particularly regarding mental health needs. Sacramento has a growing number of youth-serving agencies, too many of which seem to lack the consciousness, skill and sensitivity to work effectively and respectfully with the LGBTQ youth community. YPAR projects are creating a stage for LGBTQ youth to discuss their needs and demands for mental health services, thereby gaining the attention of gatekeepers and service providers from the city, county, and Central Valley region.

Through a partnership among Youth In Focus, the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center, and adult allies in local Gay Straight Alliances, LGBTQ youth in Sacramento are acquiring skills in self-advocacy, civic participation, and research. Over the course of the project the research team included 25 young people ages 13 to 22 who had connections to the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center, and three adults. Participant numbers from this transitory population fluctuated as participants self-selected, but there was a core of five. This team of LGBTQ youth had many questions as they initiated the research. The broad question, "What are the needs of LGBTQ youth in Sacramento?" stood out as the one the youth research team wanted to tackle, having otherwise lacked opportunities or spaces to do so. To begin the research process, youth vocalized ideas and concerns they believed to be pressing for their peers. They articulated the effects of homophobic society: their narratives of abandonment, depression, anxiety, homelessness and suicide reiterated the strong need for action regarding the mental health of LGBTQ youth.

\* In the context of this research, "identifying" was defined to mean choosing to identify with a particular LGBTQ label or labels.

The group felt that it was imperative to get a general sense of LGBTQ youth experiences in Sacramento and that a needs assessment could provide insight on what strategies might support LGBTQ youth throughout the city. With help from Youth In Focus, the youth researchers created a survey concerning LGBTQ youth needs, with an emphasis on mental health.

Following YIF's Stepping Stone process through team building, research design and data collection, youth were then ready to conduct their data analysis, formulate findings, and make recommendations, opening up many windows on this oft-silenced community of young people. Many of the youth researchers expressed a sense of solidarity in struggle with survey participants they had not even met. The survey, distributed directly to peer networks and more broadly by counselors and gay-straight alliances at high schools, elicited key issues and suggestions for improved programs and activities. Of the 100 LGBTQ youth surveyed, 70% agreed that coming out in an unwelcoming environment heightened their experience of depression and anxiety, 72% agreed that there is a lack of support for LGBTQ youth to come out, 48% said the pressure of identifying\* as LGBTQ is the biggest challenge in coming out, and 54% felt that mental health is the biggest issue for their LGBTQ peers.<sup>6</sup>

The data analysis phase gave the youth research team insight for forming recommendations and strategies to meet these great needs. Prioritizing prevention and early intervention, the team recommended the following:

- Increase mental health services for LGBTQ youth and increase visibility of providers who have skills to work with this population. Services should be affordable and accessible, consist of strong outreach to community centers and schools, and provide transportation.
- Train schools and institutions to build their capacity to create systems for working with LGBTQ youth. Connections with such institutions as the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center can help

bring this information to other neighborhoods and communities. Trainings should be available for teachers and youth service providers, particularly for those from rural and conservative areas.

- Increase awareness and understanding of the transgender community, identity, and experience, by encouraging more trans visibility, and conducting workshops and trainings such as Trans 101 from the Transgender Law Center of San Francisco.
- Increase LGBTQ-specific programs, such as LGBT Big Brother/Big Sister, gay-straight alliances in high schools, parent support programs and organizations, LGBTQ sex education, and LGBTQ-specific youth activities.<sup>6</sup>

With an overwhelming sense of both need and optimism, the youth research team developed its strategy

### CYD AND SJYD

**C**ommunity Youth Development (CYD) "focuses on how we can harness the energy, creativity, and dedication of both youth and adults to create systems and communities that fully engage young people in their own development and in building sustainable community." (Hughes & Curnan, 2002, p. 28)<sup>4</sup>

**S**ocial Justice Youth Development (SJYD) "is youth development to achieve a higher quality of life through a more equitable world" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 93).<sup>3</sup> SJYD "expand[s] the current terrain of youth development to include practices that encourage youth to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities ... [to] contest, challenge, respond, and negotiate the use and misuse of power in their lives" (p. 87).<sup>3</sup>

to be not only an informative process but also an exercise in advocacy for the many who are silenced by homophobia.

The project's significance has been underlined by support and enthusiasm from various organizations. In the spring of 2007, the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center YPAR project attracted attention from the University of California, Davis' Center for Reducing Health Disparities and the National Institute for Mental Health. The Community Health Program Manager at the Center for Reducing Health Disparities, Katherine Elliot, Ph.D., MPH, connected YIF and the youth research team to a county-wide research project investigating the needs of under-represented communities throughout the Sacramento region. The youth research team shared key information with the university for publication.<sup>7</sup> YIF, in turn, received an invitation to participate with the Sacramento County Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Steering Committee. The youth research team's recommendations continue to inform the collective efforts of LGBTQ youth of Sacramento, Youth In Focus, the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center, the UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, the MHSA Steering Committee, and the LGBT Mental Health Collaborative of Sacramento. In 2008-09, YIF and the Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center youth culminated their research by filming a documentary\*\*<sup>9</sup> to gather and share the narratives and needs of LGBTQ youth throughout Sacramento, with the goal of educating and attracting attention from local service providers and putting human faces on the research project data.

### Summary

Youth In Focus' twenty years of experience has demonstrated that YPAR is a powerful tool for marginalized youth to transform not only their own lives and community, but also the ways in which youth voices are heard by adults and policy makers. YPAR challenges the narrow definitions of what is considered legitimate research in the public health field. These methods have proven capable

of quantitatively and qualitatively assessing youth health needs and outlining effective, efficient, youth-friendly strategies for action. For the youth involved in YPAR projects, research becomes a means for young people to connect as agents with their community and policy makers rather than merely as clients, recipients of services, or subjects of study. YPAR can be a key tool for prevention and early intervention in the health field



and beyond. Service providers, public health officials, and others involved in the health field can engage YPAR as a transformative process that allows agencies to more effectively reach youth and start to truly address the critical mental health needs of marginalized young people.

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\*\*Funding for the documentary project was provided to Youth In Focus through a REACH grant from Sierra Health Foundation.