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Neighborhood Institutions and Well-being: Youth Perspectives from East Oakland

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/67q8x620>

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### Publication Date

2022-08-25

### Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

ISSI GRADUATE FELLOWS WORKING PAPER SERIES 2021-2022.90

**Neighborhood Institutions and Well-being: Youth  
Perspectives from East Oakland**

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August 25, 2022



Institute for the  
Study of  
Societal Issues

# **Neighborhood Institutions and Well-being: Youth Perspectives from East Oakland**

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A growing body of literature suggests that the neighborhoods that young people live in have a substantial influence on their lives. As part of this work, researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between young people and local neighborhood institutions such as schools, libraries, grocery stores and youth centers. Engagement with these local institutions has been observed to strengthen youth well-being. Often, this area of research relies on the perspectives of adults and neglects youth experience. This is problematic, given that young people have a great deal of choice and autonomy when selecting neighborhood institutions to engage. Thus, this phenomenological qualitative pilot study highlights youth voice and lived experiences to explore which neighborhood institutions are important to young people and begins to unpack the ways institutional engagement influences well-being. I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten young people between the ages of 14 and 20 who live in East Oakland, California. The findings from this project provide: (1) a descriptive understanding of the different neighborhood institutions that are important to young people, and (2) youth perspectives on why they choose to engage neighborhood institutions. I find that youth-serving organizations, in addition to schools and churches, provide important opportunities for young people to develop both community and individual well-being. Young people say that these institutions strengthen their connectedness to strong social networks, increase positive future outlooks, and provide safe spaces that support a wide variety of interests - including college and career preparation, sports, and arts and crafts. These findings will help practitioners and researchers develop a deeper understanding of the vital role space, place, and institutions play in the lives of youth.

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## Introduction

What is it about attending the youth programs that you enjoy?” I asked M.X., a 16-year-old Latinx youth from East Oakland, California. M.X., who was wearing a faded black Adidas hoodie, looked off to the left of the Zoom screen and then directed her gaze downward. After a few seconds, she turned her attention back to the camera and responded, “Going there I’ve met a lot of good people and good friends that I’ve been friends with for five plus years already. And it’s just a good way to build working skills, community skills, and social skills.”

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This study centers well-being within a strengths-based lens, framing well-being as something that can be built upon to improve youth quality of life, rather than viewing youth as needing to be “fixed,” an approach defined by Native scholar Eve Tuck as “damage centered” research (Tuck, 2009). As seen in the quote above, well-being encompasses multiple dimensions of any given youth’s skills and abilities, which can be expanded through engagement with diverse institutions and organizations. Focusing on well-being directs our attention to strong, resilient and positive aspects of youth character and identity, in addition to their needs; it assumes that youth are already able to work towards goals, develop and maintain friendships, and feel optimistic about the future (Baldrige, 2014; Browning & Soller, 2014). This exploratory qualitative study engaged ten East Oakland youth ages 14-20 through semi-structured interviews and was guided by the following research questions: (1) What neighborhood institutions are important to youth in Oakland? and, (2) What are youth’s perspectives on how their engagement with neighborhood institutions makes a difference in their lives?

## Background

An extensive, interdisciplinary literature has established that growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods is associated with a range of negative life outcomes (Coulton et al., 2016; Cummins et al., 2007; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). This research posits that specific compositional characteristics of disadvantaged neighborhoods - including high rates of poverty, high rates of residential mobility, high unemployment, majority racial and ethnic minority resident composition, and high crime (Bowen et al., 2002; Pemberton & Humphris, 2016) - lead to poor health, economic, criminal justice, and education outcomes for low-income urban youth of color (Ellen et al., 2001; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Minh et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 2015; Pebley & Sastry, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002). Individuals who grow up in socially and economically depressed neighborhoods experience greater health disparities, such as early mortality, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and cancer, when compared to individuals residing in wealthier communities (Campo et al., 2015; Ellen et al., 2001). Additionally, youth who live in concentrated poverty experience increased rates of mental health issues (i.e., anxiety and depression), violent behavior, and reduced achievement in education (Boardman & Saint Onge, 2005; Campo et al., 2015; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Minh et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 2015; Pebley & Sastry, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002).

A burgeoning area of investigation within neighborhood research seeks to illuminate how local institutions impact resident well-being. Researchers have found that individuals living in disadvantaged neighborhoods have reduced access to high quality programs and services, thus compounding the negative impact of the surrounding environment (Browning & Soller, 2014; Small, 2006). However, not enough work in this area has focused on youth's experiences and perspectives throughout the research process. Creating space for young people to participate and

share their interests and preferences can serve as a tool for social change, program improvement, and empowerment (Akomo et al., 2016). Too often, research has focused on the deficits present in a young person's life within a neighborhood context and analyzed information generated from parents, guardians or caregivers (Baldrige, 2014). This paper respects and privileges the voices of youth, while identifying aspects of institutions that they see as contributing to positive development. The goals of this work were to identify young people's own perspectives on which neighborhood institutions are important to them and to better understand how young people engage with these institutions; these data were then used to infer connections between institutions and youth well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### **Well-being**

Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct defined throughout this paper by four components: autonomy, connectedness, competency, and optimism (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021). Autonomy refers to the ability of a young person to learn and make their own choices; connectedness is the presence, maintenance, and development of positive relationships that support youth growth; competency is developing and building skills that allow young people to move forward in their careers, education and abstract aspects of themselves such as spirituality and psychological beliefs. Lastly, optimism is observed when youth remain positive and hopeful, even when faced with uncertainty or life challenges (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021).

Well-being has been observed to be shaped by many factors including individual behavior, economic standing and the surrounding environment (Steinmayr et al., 2019). Research has found that young people residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods experience reduced well-being through exposure to negative social interactions, lack of safety, and a shortage of positive

relationships (Cicognani et al., 2008; Laurence, 2019). Importantly, well-being has been observed as providing a buffer against the surrounding disadvantaged neighborhood context. Those who have strong social relationships, an optimistic outlook and who feel confident have more positive educational and mental health outcomes over time when compared to those with lower levels of well-being (Cavioni et al., 2021; Fergusson et al., 2015). Given the importance of well-being to development, it is critical that researchers begin to unpack the ways in which it is fostered.

### **Institutions and Well-being**

One theorized mechanism through which neighborhoods positively influence the well-being of residents is through local institutions. Institutions are defined as organizations in which specific services are provided to neighborhood residents (Small, 2006). In brief, the availability and utilization of institutions such as nonprofits, health clinics, recreational centers and schools (Bissonnette et al., 2012; Mendenhall et al., 2006; Small, 2006; Small & McDermott, 2007) are aspects of neighborhoods that have been shown to directly impact resident life outcomes. For example, engaging roles such as peer mentorship in out-of-school programs has been found to increase feelings of belonging and agency – the ability to make decisions in life (Zeldin et al., 2016). Youth well-being is supported by neighborhood institutions, especially through the provision and engagement of programs operated through youth-serving organizations (YSOs). This is particularly true for those that present youth with opportunities to grow, strengthen, and maintain their social networks - an aspect of the connectedness facet of well-being (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Ferguson, 2006; Jarrett et al., 2005). Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins (2005) highlight that disadvantaged youth often have a dearth of opportunities to interact with adults outside of their close family and peer groups. Thus, YSO programs fill a need for young people by creating

opportunities for engagement with residents of the neighborhood that remain distinct from familial connections and interactions. Participation in these programs has been shown to reduce criminal justice involvement (Heller, 2014) as well as increase future earnings and career development (Modestino, 2018). Other research suggests that a young person's engagement with school and educational programming is associated with increased life satisfaction, reduced antisocial behavior (e.g., aggression and criminal activity involvement) and improved academic achievement (González et al., 2021). Given the diversity of neighborhood institutions and the depth of interdisciplinary literature which espouses the positive value of these places in relation to youth outcomes, this study focuses on youth perspectives on which neighborhood institutions are the most important to them and why.

This study begins to analyze how engagement with local institutions influences youth well-being across a number of key domains including: autonomy and decision making, connectedness to others and the local neighborhood, competency and skill development, as well as optimism. This study is guided by the Community Youth Development framework.

### **Theoretical Framework: Community Youth Development**

The Community Youth Development (CYD) framework postulates that young people develop across multiple levels in the surrounding environment. In this framework, youth engagement is seen as critical for positive development, both at the community and individual level (Perkins et al., 2001). CYD can be defined as the creation and maintenance of environments that provide safety, diverse opportunities to build skills and knowledge, positive and supportive relationships with adults, and equal partnership when making decisions in relation to individual and community development (Perkins and Borden, 2003). This framework



focuses on strengths and assets, moving away from the deficit approach to investigating youth development (Perkins, 2009). CYD acknowledges that: people at all ages make decisions and actively shape their own development, young people possess strengths from which to build upon throughout their development, engagement of young people must occur in diverse ways through individual relationships as well as program participation, and young people are active members of their communities.

To follow the CYD framework, institutions must promote a range of activities for youth to build relationships with adults and peers as well as be adaptable and responsive to individual needs (Perkins, 2009). Opportunities must be offered for young people to engage in decision-making processes and leadership roles while also deepening their knowledge and experience relative to future school and career goals. Creating a space for youth engagement ensures that they participate as active members of their community, have knowledge of their community, and generate ideas for healthy community development.

Well-being is shaped within the CYD framework in multiple ways. Institutions applying the CYD framework seek to build youth optimism through strengths-based approaches, while bolstering other facets of well-being including the connectedness between youth and their peers, mentors, and other institutions, and lastly by offering programs that build a youth's social, cognitive, academic, and vocational abilities (promoting competence). In theory, the more support and opportunity young people have to develop their skills and knowledge, the more resilient they will be in the face of life challenges. This study uses the CYD framework to situate how youth describe their engagement with neighborhood institutions as having meaning in their lives.

## Study context

The City of Oakland faces many challenges related to well-being. Crime rates are high, with a homicide rate of 16.2 (per 100,000 residents), more than triple the national rate of 5. Nearly 17% of the population lives in poverty compared to 10.5% at the national level. Furthermore, certain neighborhoods within Oakland are disproportionately impacted by inequity. In East Oakland, the site of this study, unemployment is twice that of the rest of the city. Many young people in East Oakland experience social hardships. Approximately 40% are at risk of dropping out of school, and more than 30% are involved with the criminal justice system (Youth Uprising, 2018). Compared to residents in other areas of Oakland, those living in East Oakland have a seven-year shorter life expectancy. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted this Oakland neighborhood. More than 60% of Oakland's COVID cases have occurred in East Oakland, an area home to only 20% of the city's population. Available institutions providing services for residents within East Oakland have changed dramatically over time. Thus, East Oakland now experiences a scarcity of services and resources. This is depicted on the website of Youth Uprising, a local neighborhood nonprofit serving youth:

East Oakland was once a flourishing middle-class community. Changing land-use policies caused an exodus of industry and commerce and the elimination of the high-wage, low skill jobs that residents relied on. Liquor stores, check-cashing agencies, hair and nails shops, and fast-food businesses now reside where commercial thoroughfares, banks, and restaurants once thrived (Youth Uprising website, 2022).

While there has been a decline in many East Oakland institutions over time, East Oakland boasts a robust community of YSOs. A unique aspect of these neighborhood organizations is that many were formed in Oakland and maintain a deep connection to the surrounding community. Organizations such as the East Oakland Youth Development Center (EOYDC), Youth Uprising,

and the Youth Employment Program were founded locally and provide a rich array of programming for youth.

## **Methods**

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative approach. Phenomenology in research seeks to understand the meaning of lived experiences from participant perspectives while also generating new information to support the development of increasingly focused hypotheses regarding a specific phenomenon (Knaack, 1984). In this exploratory and descriptive method, the researcher assumes a role of “not knowing” and instead listens and observes participants to better understand behavior and experiences (Knaack, 1984). Given that this was a pilot study, a phenomenological approach was appropriate, as the findings served to inform a larger, more in-depth investigation into neighborhood institutions and youth well-being. Data were collected through 10 semi-structured interviews. Any young person aged 14-20 who spoke English and resided in East Oakland was eligible for the study. Adolescents were interviewed because this phase of life is defined by numerous social, emotional and biological changes as an individual transitions from childhood into the early stages of adulthood (Laski, 2015). During this period, individuals begin to learn and build skills that can contribute to health and success later in life.

Participants for the study were recruited through a convenience sample. The researcher asked staff at the Oakland Unified School District and local youth serving organizations to share a flier containing the study information with students, as well as post the study information on social media sites. Interested participants contacted the researcher directly. Recruitment via schools and YSOs was used to reach young people who had some involvement with a diverse range of East Oakland institutions.

Assent, parent or guardian permission, and consent were collected electronically for all participants prior to any interviews being conducted. Youth scheduled a 30-minute virtual interview with the researcher. The interviews were held during 2020 and into the beginning of 2021, via Zoom due to the health risks of COVID-19. Prior to the start of each interview, participants were asked to select a pseudonym to be used in lieu of their legal names. This was done to maintain participant confidentiality. In total ten youth engaged this study, each completing one interview.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 displays the participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Youth-identified Gender	Youth-identified Race/Ethnicity
A.R.	17	Female	Latinx
B.B.	19	Male	Mixed
J.D.	18	Female	African American
M.X.	15	Female	Latinx
M.	18	Female	African American
M.B.	14	Male	African American
S.N.	16	Female	African American
S.A.	20	Female	Latinx
T.J.	18	Male	African American
W.B.	18	Female	Asian-Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

## **Analysis**

Data for the study were analyzed using deductive thematic coding to find common patterns as well as differences across all the interviews. The purpose of this approach was to identify similar experiences and perspectives across different cases (i.e., participant narratives) regarding the neighborhood institutions East Oakland young people access and to elicit their perspectives on how this engagement influences different aspects of their well-being. The interviews were first transcribed manually from audio files. I then cleaned the transcripts for readability and clarity, while also developing analytic memos to record the emerging themes. Commonalities and differences were identified between cases. An initial codebook was developed and further refined to include parent and child code hierarchies with a focus on neighborhood institution type and well-being. Descriptions of the boundaries of each code (what is included and what is not) were developed and described. The codebook was then applied to all transcripts using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. Themes were then conceptualized by the researcher, undergirded by the study research questions.

## **Positionality**

I identify as an Asian-American woman, and I have spent the majority of my life living in East Coast cities. Professionally I identify as a social worker who supports and engages community-led revisioning projects with the goal of reducing the inequity that emerges as a result of living in under-resourced urban spaces. As part of this work, I strive in my engagement with diverse individuals and groups to maintain a stance of “not-knowing.” I listen to and observe what people tell me in interviews and community meetings in an effort to understand how they experience and view their world. In doing so I fully acknowledge that my own biases and identities influence how I process and interpret these interactions.

Over the two years prior to this study being conducted, I developed relationships with leaders of Oakland YSOs and Oakland school staff, and I engaged youth at nonprofits and in their surrounding neighborhoods across several different research projects. Nonetheless, I view myself as an outsider to the lived experiences of East Oakland youth residents and to Oakland's deep history of advocacy and organizing. The goal of my engagement in this study was to use my institutional privilege and social capital (i.e., resources available to me through my social connections and relationships) to create a space for the voices and perspectives of young people who are left out of research processes far too often. Creating a space for young people to identify the institutions that best support their well-being while uplifting their visibility as active and important members of their community begins to fill this gap in the neighborhood literature.

## **Findings**

Overall, East Oakland youth identified three types of neighborhood institutions that they perceive as important to their well-being: churches<sup>2</sup>, schools, and YSOs. The participants shared how they perceived their engagement with these institutions as influencing their autonomy (the ability to learn and make independent choices); connectedness (the presence, maintenance, and development of positive relationships); competency (developing skills necessary to move forward in careers and education, as well as abstract aspects of self, including spirituality and psychological beliefs); and optimism (maintaining a positive future outlook even when faced with uncertainty in life). In this section, I present the youth perspectives on how these institutions support their well-being.

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<sup>2</sup> In this study churches functioned similarly to YSOs. The participants discussed how they engaged in programs through these institutions but did not comment on any religious components. They also did not mention any religious institutions aside from churches.

## **Autonomy and Youth Decision Making**

East Oakland youth strengthen their autonomy and decision-making skills through neighborhood institutions. This aspect of well-being relates closely to responsibility and was often described by the participants as taking on leadership roles within institutions. For example, some YSOs provided young people opportunities to serve as mentors for younger youth, thereby creating a space in which the older youth are responsible for serving as leaders. Sitting in the passenger seat of a car along a busy East Oakland street, M.B. reflected about how he viewed his role and associated responsibility within the purview of a local YSO:

I monitor kids, you know, help them. Basically just help them. 'Cuz like again it is based off of East Oakland, so it's a lot of stuff that goes on out here, you know, during the day at night, a lot of stuff happens. So, we're just trying to help them be bet- not be. I'm trying to think of the word. Like I don't want to say, be better because they are good as it is, but like we help them [young children] too... We just want to put them in the right direction. Basically, we want to keep them in the right direction and to make sure that they go to school, you know that they're learning ok and all that.

For M.B., his participation in the local YSO program had taught him how to engage in a strengths-based approach when working with others in his community. As such, he identified the unique strengths of the younger participants while mentoring them throughout their early life stages of development. This experience strengthened M.B.'s leadership and social skills.

Some youth also commented favorably on the opportunity to select program activities. While most YSOs and schools provided highly structured programming or curricula, some churches providing youth programming also developed youth autonomy in determining which activities would be offered week to week. This process created space for youth voice to be heard and valued, while also providing an exercise in decision making for the participants. As J.D. described: "But every week we would pick somewhere to go. So, we'll be skating, like to

McDonalds, like bowling, just different activities every week. But they present it like we did have a choice. They [adults] would give us options to choose from.”

### **Connectedness and Relationships**

Engaging with neighborhood institutions fostered youth well-being by creating an environment in which youth developed connections and relationships with a variety of different people including peers and institutional staff. B.B., a Latinx youth now attending college, described changing schools in the middle of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, finding himself exposed to a student body that was quite different from the school he had previously attended. This experience helped him hone his ability to connect with people: “I think Patten [high school] just helped me understand people. I think Patten was helping me understand relationship connections and stuff like that. Like I feel like I learned more about how to build bonds with people, and just how to be a person.”

At some institutions, particularly YSOs, the relationships that young people developed and maintained with staff members provided an important positive social support within the surrounding neighborhood context. Staff serve as mentors and engage with young people to provide input and guidance on how to achieve their future goals. As noted by A.R.:

Oakland is not one of the major crime-ridden cities, but it is a city with a lot of crime, and everyone knows that. And I’ve also directly seen a lot of things just growing up in Oakland. There’s a lot of gang activity, a lot of, like I said, crime. And so, there’s a lot of things you can get into when you grow up here, especially when you’re connected to other people that grew up here. They’ll introduce you to things that aren’t good for you to do. However, it’s something that they found themselves getting into. So being in somewhere where you’re around mentors who are pulling you in a direction, but it’s a positive direction, is helpful.



Participants also shared that the relationships they developed through neighborhood institutions were maintained even after formal programming ended. The sustained connection of young people to a growing and increasingly diverse community is an important component of well-being that emerges organically from strong communication skills and active engagement. This was observed within churches and YSOs. J.D. shared: “So I stay in contact with these people. I stay in contact with everyone who I met like at church and had a relationship with, same thing with EOYDC.”

Beyond individual relationships, engagement with some neighborhood institutions like YSOs also developed connections with the community writ large. This was done by providing opportunities for young people to participate in service learning through tasks such as neighborhood clean-up and volunteering at local giveaways. As noted by A.R.:

You have to do a like a list of requirements before you can get hired [by the YSO] which is kind of how they narrow it down. And one of them requirements is to work for the summer program on Earth Day, which is I’m thinking like April or May. We walk through the streets of East Oakland on International [Boulevard] and pick up trash. We all have like vests on, trash bags, gloves and grabbers. And we walk through picking up the trash on the streets. And each year people drive by and honk at us like showing their support. Everyone who lives on the streets every year they’d be like expecting us, and it makes them super happy.

Connecting young people to the broader neighborhood served as an organizing and community-building method. From A.R.’s quote it becomes clear that youth engaging in visible service activities were recognized for doing “positive” things in their neighborhoods and infused a sense of positivity and happiness into the day-to-day routine of the residents, and from the way A.R. recounted this experience, it seems like A.R. also felt this positivity.

## Competency

Young people living in East Oakland noted that neighborhood institutions supported their well-being by offering experiences that supported the development of skills and knowledge that they viewed as being necessary to further their education and careers. For example, community colleges provided individualized English as a Second Language instruction to youth who felt that they needed additional support in post-secondary education. Young people also shared that the services and programs offered through these institutions reduced some of the financial barriers that often lead to higher education being inaccessible to low-income individuals. As described by the study participants, these institutions provided the time, support and opportunity to build the skills youth perceived as being necessary to reach their dreams of obtaining a college degree.

W.B., an 18-year-old first-generation Asian-Chinese female wearing bright blue eyeliner, described excitedly in our interview why she valued her engagement with a local community college:

So, I'm, I'm enrolled in EOPS [Extended Opportunity Programs & Services], which is a program that...well they do a lot of things but a big thing they do is that they help support. They give you a book voucher so you, so you don't have to pay for books that are purchased through the school bookstore. And they also give disability support, so if you're a disabled student, and they help you a lot out with that. And if you're in, what's it called again? An ESL learner, like English is your second language, and they give you support for that. Also, and then they give you a personal counselor and peer advisory to really just like support you all the way.

YSOs provided opportunities that supported the competency of young people in ways that were not provided in schools. This included things such as resume development, career exploration, and college preparation in the form of campus visits and application completion support. These knowledge and skills were described as being critically important for youth seeking access to higher education as well as obtaining future employment. The language used

by young people when describing their role within YSOs often centered on being a “worker,” an experience contributing to their career readiness, a component of competency. This was exemplified by A.R., a 17-year-old Latinx female.

So, one of the main opportunities that they give to the workers, as far as like teenagers and preteens, is their Pathway to College Program, the PTC. Through that program, depending on your different age group, you get different support on things that matter for whatever grade you're in. For example, junior year you get direct classes with SAT prep, and senior year you get help with applying to colleges, scholarships, and just matching you with the college that works for you. And then the other grades, you kind of just get homework help, any support for anything you're going through at the moment. You also get college tours. I've been on the college tour to New York, and we visited three different schools out there. And you also get support through career exploration. Like you don't really get that in typical high schools where it's more about just taking your classes to graduate so you don't get to really explore hobbies and interests. You have to just pick a career.

This sentiment was also shared by B.B. He leaned back in his blue and black gaming chair, crossed his hands in his lap and explained:

Well, EOYDC is the reason I kind of like got into college or got myself together, you know? Because before when I was going to Patten, I didn't really know about how other kids competed taking AP classes and you know studying ahead for the SAT. Patten [High School] it wasn't as well informed as when I transferred to St. Joseph in Alameda. But I remember EOYDC they used to help me a lot. They used to help me there. They're like, “Oh, this how you make a resume; this is how you build up your classes so you can compete at different colleges.” And you know, they just gave me a lot of advice. They're probably the main reason I got into college because I didn't know how to even research for college or what college I wanted to go to. So, when they took me on college tours, and when I got to talk to the college people there, it was like that's when I knew where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.

From the quote above, the synergy between schools and YSOs can be observed. In some ways, schools provide fundamental education on traditional topics necessary for entrance into post-secondary institutions. However, some students may not have the knowledge of how to navigate these complex and often hidden systems of privilege and access. As such, both schools and YSOs provide invaluable experiences in developing East Oakland youth competency.

## Optimism

Youth reflected on how programming offered through neighborhood institutions supported their optimism by identifying goals and offering opportunities to work towards achieving them. Some of the goals included applying and being accepted into college while others focused on achieving good grades and supporting others. As noted by J. D., goals were varied and personal, and YSOs provided programs that encouraged young people to develop and work towards their idealized futures:

Say if this semester you want to have like four A's and only one B. So that would be a goal. Or, if you want to turn in all your assignments for the semester, that would be a goal. So, goals like that. Or some people set smaller goals. We also do goals with money, which I feel is very good. Like we will do budgeting goals, like we want to save this much by the end of the month, or we want to apply to this scholarship by the end of the month, so stuff like that.

Optimism was further developed in YSOs by encouraging youth to engage in rigorous selection processes for some programs. Participants were required to stay focused on their end goal of obtaining a paid position at specific institutions, engaging in programming for multiple months before being accepted. The optimistic outlook of youth and value of setting goals even when faced with challenging program admission requirements were further described by J.D. in relation to her engagement with a local YSO:

Yeah, so YR Media, it's a youth center, and it's highly selective. If you're not focused on what they want you to focus on then you're like not getting in. So, it's geared towards graphic design, producing beats, videography, photography, and journalism. Very much instant media. And you get paid hourly for doing your work. First, they make you do a three-month program where you're exploring all the different paths. And then for the next six months, I believe, you pick one path and then you really focus on that. And then after those nine months are up then you can apply for a job. And it's 100% that you're going to get hired. As long as you finished the program you'll get hired. I've been working for a year now.

Schools, specifically community colleges, also bolstered optimism among the study sample by providing a diverse range of resources to support them in reaching their goals. As noted by the participants, these resources provided invaluable support for youth to maintain a positive future outlook. This was particularly true when facing the financial barriers associated with higher education. W.B., who had openly discussed her experiences with being low-income, shared: “This method of being a community college transfer really just alleviates the cost completely. And more importantly I've been able to, I guess, buy myself time, so I can get the guidance and I can get the flexibility I need to reach my goal. And I think that's, well that's definitely the same for a lot of other folks too.”

While I only explicitly asked about positive aspects of neighborhood institutions, some critiques did emerge such as barriers to accessing institutional facilities and low wages for paid internships. Though schools provided opportunities for young people to engage sports that they enjoyed, at times they experienced challenges accessing the actual facilities. When youth entered these locked locations, they put themselves at-risk for arrest. However, young people and their peers identified these institutions as locations in which they were comfortable, and accessed them by finding ways around the physical barriers, as described by B.B.:

I would say I like my old high school. One of the high schools I went to, Patten Academy. I just loved being there because you know, that's when I started getting into sports and playing basketball. So, after school I would be there a lot, just spending my time playing basketball. I didn't know what else to do. And even after high school like we even go just hop over the fence and we just go shoot at the courts over there. Because it's like, it's somewhere where me and all my friends went to high school; so, we all been there before.

Another critique shared about programs offered through institutions was low wages. Though obtaining a paid position was important to the youth who participated in this study, receiving a fair wage was at times challenging. Some YSOs offered better pay than others, an aspect of these

institutions which influenced youth's decisions when selecting specific programs to engage. As noted by J.D.:

Oh, this is another thing about the EOYDC [East Oakland Youth Development Center] I liked too. Because they gave young people like job opportunities that's hard to come across. Just in general, but especially in Oakland or in East Oakland. So, I get paid and get paid a reasonable amount. 'Cuz I was working for a program [at another YSO<sup>3</sup>] that would only pay \$100 a month. That's a total rip-off. But the EOYDC didn't do that. They actually will pay reasonable amounts.

In general, neighborhood institutions foster the maintenance and creation of social connections with peers and adults who provide support within an under-resourced and at times unsafe neighborhood context. Moreover, within neighborhood institutions youth feel safe and are provided a plethora of opportunities to build their autonomy, responsibility, and goal setting. In doing so, they serve as leaders within programs; their input is valued and integrated with the adult staff opinions, a process which positions them as decision makers regarding the activities they engage.

## Discussion

Situated within the framework of CYD, this study explored the various ways in which young people's development and well-being is fostered through neighborhood institutions. The participants in this study shared that engaging with neighborhood institutions strengthens their competence defined as social, cognitive, academic, and vocational skills. Through paid work experiences, tutoring, SAT preparation courses, and field trips, young people build their knowledge and skills in developing relationships as well as pursuing higher education and careers. Youth build upon their strengths and contribute to their community by participating in

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<sup>3</sup> The YSO offering \$100/month was not one of the "home-grown" East Oakland YSOs, but rather part of a national chain.

initiatives like annual neighborhood clean-ups. Lastly, their perspective and input are valued in the decisions made by religious organizations and YSOs regarding program activities.

The importance of young people actively participating in their learning and development is a core tenet of the CYD framework. The findings from this study present evidence that meaningful engagement with neighborhood institutions is critical for young person development and is often fostered through YSOs. However, active student participation has been noted to be component of the U.S. education system that is severely lacking. Schools are critiqued for operating with the goal of “producing” youth who display an acceptable amount of knowledge on specific subject matter. In many ways schools fail to support the development of other aspects of young persons’ self, including aspects of autonomy (Ayers & Ayers, 2011). My study finds alignment with those claims, in that none of the participants shared experiences from schools that engaged their decision-making abilities. However, by broadening the investigation to include multiple types of institutions, I find this gap is filled (for some) in other places. In East Oakland, YSOs offer positions for youth to take on leadership roles mentoring younger participants. Additionally, in some church programs, young people are encouraged to share which activities are the most appealing to them, thereby encouraging participation through shared decision-making processes. By engaging with neighborhood institutions, youth participate in activities through which they continue to develop their sense of identity and agency within their surrounding environment and come to understand their strength and ability to make a difference in the world.

Overall, these findings align with previous research which suggests that engagement with neighborhood institutions positively supports young people. For example, this study found that programs outside of the school context provide invaluable academic support including tutoring

and SAT preparation. Previous work in this area suggests these activities foster positive future orientations among young people (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). Moreover, neighborhood institutions create a space in which young people build and maintain important relationships which provide valuable access to resources such as support and information (Jarrett et al., 2005). This study also corroborates findings from local reports generated by the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth (OFCY), which provides resources to many Oakland programs that target the healthy development of young people.

Though extensive work has been done in the area of youth and well-being, my paper contributes to the literature on neighborhoods, youth, institutions and well-being in several key ways. It is the first project to my knowledge to apply the Avedissian and Alayan (2021) conceptualization of well-being using youth lived experience to ground the findings. Well-being has been a growing focus of research interest: for example, the World Health Organization and the United Nations and Partnerships for Maternal, Newborn Health & Child Health recently developed a framework for child and adolescent well-being (WHO website, 2022). In their description of well-being, multiple institutions are noted, including school and community organizations. Nonetheless, little work to date has explored youth perspective on how neighborhood institutions support their well-being. For example, Bourke and Geldens (2007) investigated the meaning of well-being to young people, but not in relation to engagement with institutions.

Additionally, only one study has applied the CYD framework to an investigation of youth programming. Perkins and Goam (2009) discuss sports-based programs as an example of how youth-focused programs could be structured and implemented. Their data were drawn from a national conference on positive youth development and did not entail any direct interaction or



collection from youth participants. My study drew upon direct interviews with youth and their descriptions of a variety of different institutions that they engaged. As such, this work adds to the literature on CYD by adding youth voice and perspective.

Lastly, the geography of the study is unique, in that to my knowledge no research to date has been published on the engagement of young people in East Oakland and multiple neighborhood institutions, with a focus on multidimensional well-being. Akom et al. (2016) engaged East Oakland young people and their interactions with local liquor stores while addressing issues of food insecurity. Fong Gomez et al. (2020) qualitatively investigated adolescent male identity development within the geographic context of East Oakland. Finally, Dill and Ozer (2019) conducted interviews with adolescents to learn how East Oakland youth developed social capital through YSO engagement. My work provides value in that it has uplifted youth and their lived experiences to provide an unstructured perspective on which institutions matter the most to East Oakland youth. In doing so, the findings of this work could prove useful to schools seeking ways to strengthen their curriculum or pedagogical practices, as well as other neighborhood institutions that offer youth programming. Moreover, as mentioned above, East Oakland is distinctive in having several “home-grown” YSOs with staff who are from the neighborhood, thus the policy implications of this project (discussed further below) are another contribution.

### **Limitations**

As with all research, this study has some limitations. Since this was a pilot investigation, the sample was small (n =10). The findings of this work served to inform the research questions for a larger follow-up study. However, given the phenomenological and exploratory approach of

this study, a small sample was satisfactory. The power of such an investigation lies in identifying common themes across multiple lived experiences. Another limitation of this study is that only young people living in East Oakland were asked to participate. As such, generalizing the findings to other contexts and populations was not possible. Additionally, all of the youth selected for this study were already engaged with East Oakland institutions. This sampling process eliminated the potential for understanding why some youth do not engage neighborhood institutions. These perspectives would provide insight on how institutions can strengthen their outreach strategies and bolster the breadth of program offerings appealing to an increasingly diverse population. Lastly, due to the restrictions of COVID-19, observations of young people engaging with different neighborhood organizations were not possible. Future research in this area using qualitative methods will diversify the types of data collected with larger sample sizes, to advance a holistic understanding of how youth engagement with institutions positively impacts development across a variety of measures of well-being.

Aside from methodology, one limitation of this work is a focus on individual and micro-level processes rather than the structural aspects which create and perpetuate inequality. Oppressive policies and cultural norms are followed and implemented in ways that privilege some groups and not others. Urban youth of color experience many barriers to upward social and economic mobility which at times isolate them from employment opportunities and elite education institutions which generate important social networks when moving from adolescence into adulthood. For example, some YSO's may be prioritized over others when considering funding awards, and public schools receive inadequate funding. Thus, future investigation should more thoroughly consider how youth development is hindered or supported by structural forces, with a specific focus on how these processes emerge in neighborhood institutions.

Lastly, for this study youth were only asked to identify positive things about the institutions in their neighborhoods. This was done intentionally to uplift a positive narrative that is often missing in research focused on urban youth. However, young people may also have negative interactions with neighborhood institutions, experiences that were not captured systematically in this study (a couple of critiques were shared, as noted above). To develop a holistic understanding of how these institutions and youth interact, additional work is needed to unpack both the positive and negative aspects of these relationships.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

As our interview drew to a close, I asked W.B. if she had any additional questions or thoughts that she wanted to discuss. She sighed and appeared to be lost in thought for a few seconds. After a brief pause, she smiled and said: “No, I just...I just really appreciate the opportunity to share my side of things. It’s nice to know that some people out there are interested in what we [young people] have to say. I think it’s important. But a lot of times, well really, we don’t have the chance to speak about this stuff. I want to do things like that with my career, because as a young person I know it matters.”

Neighborhood institutions provide important spaces and opportunities for young people to build and strengthen their well-being. Given the immense value these programs and services present for young people, upholding their perspectives and experiences when considering how to design and implement youth-focused programs is critically important. The findings from this study have several implications. At the practice or intervention level, institutions seeking to support youth development should provide strong mentorship, academic support, decision making power within the program, college preparedness workshops, fair payment for the time

young people are participating in programs, and exposure to places outside of the youth's everyday community, and they should ensure the spaces in which these programs occur are safe and staffed by professionals who also have ties to the community. At the policy level, the findings of this work suggest that investing in local institutions that focus on youth development has meaningful impact for young people. Well-funded organizations and schools are able to offer higher-quality and more diverse experiences than those which are financially restricted. As such, neighborhoods in which dollars are limited should be prioritized in terms of funding disbursement. Infusing institutions in these places with added monetary support and high-quality programming that follows the CYD framework could provide a buffer of sorts against the structural violence imposed on many low-income BIPOC young people. Supporting youth well-being through neighborhood institutions will foster holistic, positive development and embolden young people to embrace their agency in making life decisions while reducing inequity.

## Appendix A. Interview Guide

### **East Oakland Local Institutions and Organizations Interview Questions**

1. What are your favorite institutions and organizations in East Oakland?
  - a. Why are these institutions and organizations your favorite?
  - b. What are your favorite things to do at these institutions and organizations?
2. How do these institutions, and organizations help you and/or your family?
3. How did you learn about these institutions and organizations in East Oakland?
  - a. Do other people you know use these institutions and organizations?
4. How do you travel to get to these institutions and organizations?
  - a. How long does it take to get to these institutions and organizations?
5. How often do you use or access these institutions, and organizations?
6. What types of institutions and organizations do you wish there were more of in your neighborhood?

#### Potential probing questions:

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. Can you please give me an example?
3. What do you mean when you say....?

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