



Teen Empowerment in Somerville, Massachusetts: A Multi-Method Evaluation of Process and Outcome

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Report to the Fetzer Institute

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Executive Summary

- Teen Empowerment (TE) seeks to engage at-risk youth in constructive social activities, to empower youth to achieve their personal goals, and to improve the quality of life in the surrounding communities
- TE operates in Somerville, Massachusetts, the Boston neighborhoods of Dorchester, Eggleston, and Warren Gardens, and Rochester, New York. This evaluation focuses solely on Somerville.
- Local youth are hired as Youth Organizers for an academic year or during the summer through an intense two-stage interview process. Adult staff work with the YOs to develop group cohesion through daily exercises and to design and carry out community-based events that seek to reduce violence and improve quality of life by spreading the values of love and forgiveness. YOs also organize an annual Youth Peace Conference. A behavioral contract is used to regulate individual activities.
- Data collection methods included: observations of Teen Empowerment exercises and community events; coding of TE records about community events and review of data on youth crime, suicide attempts, and drug overdoses; semi-structured interviews with program staff and community leaders involved with Teen Empowerment; and a structured survey of current and former Youth Organizers and a comparison group of unsuccessful applicants.
- The intense engagement required in the selection process resulted in hiring a diverse group of youth who reflected different community segments and diverse youth problems and who were subsequently considered to be exceptionally talented and socially capable.

- Group cohesion and personal transformation were developed through exercises delivered according to guidelines encouraged participation and provided multiple modes of engagement and expression.
- TE group exercises succeeded in breaking down barriers between youth and in encouraging recognition of one's own and others' abilities. Self-esteem and assertiveness seemed to improve and harmful attitudes toward others were confronted and often changed.
- Community events organized by TE Youth Organizers often attracted high risk youth, through their connections to Youth Organizers, and brought out diverse perspectives and concerns about community problems.
- Youth Organizers' performances at TE events and those sponsored by other groups drew attention to youth concerns and showcased individual talent.
- The annual Peace Conference was highly regarded and seen as very effective by community leaders. Other community events were less widely known.
- The themes of love and forgiveness appeared often in Teen Empowerment activities and events.
- The system of behavior contracts and weekly review sessions about contract violations play a critical role in demonstrating the value of peer support and re-orienting youth behavior.
- Community leaders uniformly praised Teen Empowerment's staff and saw evidence of impact of Teen Empowerment in the community and on Youth Organizers. Some spoke of the greater respect that politicians now had for the perspectives of youth as a result of Teen Empowerment's activities.

- Some community leaders were not aware of Teen Empowerment's activities other than the annual Peace Conference.
- Staff were highly committed to Teen Empowerment and found their experience as employees helping their personal growth and development of valued skills.
- Improving relations between police and youth had been a frequent focus of Teen Empowerment events, and there was considerable evidence that positive changes had occurred as a result, including greater adoption of an attitude of forgiveness. Some community leaders and former staff felt that relations had so improved that Teen Empowerment could focus more attention on other issues.
- In both group exercises with Youth Organizers and community events, Teen Empowerment sought to improve relations among youth from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Community leaders and staff gave many examples of the need for this focus as well as for the effectiveness of these efforts.
- Teen Empowerment maintains close relations with the Somerville Mayor's Office and plays a central role in coordinating activities of youth-oriented organizations in the city. There were some critical comments about the fraction of resources available to youth that are allocated to Teen Empowerment, but these concerns have lessened in recent years as Teen Empowerment has developed more collaborative relations with other organizations and is now routinely praised for its coordinating role. Community leaders generally felt that Teen Empowerment had been able to maintain its autonomy of purpose even while receiving support from the city.

- Some argued that Teen Empowerment should develop longer-term strategic goals for community change that can transcend the annual development of specific projects with each new cohort of Youth Organizers.
- Several interviewees commented about a “ripple effect” of Teen Empowerment in the community, as the changing orientations and behaviors of Youth Organizers spread outward through their social networks.
- A marked reduction in youth violence (Part I crimes) occurred during the years since Teen Empowerment began its work in Somerville. The most dramatic reduction in the youth crime rate occurred after Teen Empowerment closed its office in West Somerville and focused almost all of its community events in the East Somerville, where most youth crime occurs.
- Teen Empowerment began to work in Somerville at a time of an unusual number of youth overdoses and suicides (between 2000-2005). No youth deaths due to overdoses or suicides have occurred since 2005, while the number of youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses has not varied appreciably since then.
- Youth selected to be Teen Empowerment Youth Organizers were similar in many respects to applicants who were not accepted—including similar levels of criminal propensity and exposure to violence, but they came from families with more financial problems, had poorer psychological health, and more drinking problems.
- Youth Organizers appeared to have longer-term ties to the community and more pro-social orientations than unsuccessful applicants. Involvement in Teen Empowerment also made Youth Organizers much more likely to be working and to be involved in community activities.

- Former Youth Organizers appeared to have had improved psychological health and continued advantages in terms of working for pay and participating in community activities, compared to unsuccessful applicants, but there was no indication of a relative improvement in drinking behavior and some indication of more use of illicit drugs.
- Former Youth Organizers were very satisfied with their Teen Empowerment experiences.
- Recommendations include maintaining the program's model and infusing program elements in other youth-oriented programs.
- Community events should be publicized more widely, using approaches that have been successful for drawing attention to the annual Peace Conference. Current collaborative work with other community organizations should be continued.
- Attention to the risks of substance abuse should be heightened and considered as a focus for community events.
- Options should be considered for making mental health service connections available to Youth Organizers and their social networks. Other organizations can learn from Teen Empowerment about the design of activities that improve mental health.
- Hispanic youth are an increasing portion of the city's population and application statistics indicate great interest in Teen Empowerment. Means for reducing language barriers and engaging more Hispanic youth should be considered.
- Consider setting long-term strategic organizational goals, taking into account the changing social dynamics of Somerville and the roles of other organizations.

Teen Empowerment (TE) is an innovative program for youth in Somerville, Massachusetts, three Boston neighborhoods (Dorchester, Eggleston, and Warren Gardens) and Rochester, New York. Its goals are to engage at-risk youth in constructive social activities, to empower youth to achieve their personal goals, and to improve the quality of life in the surrounding communities (Fusoni 2005; Pearrow 2008).

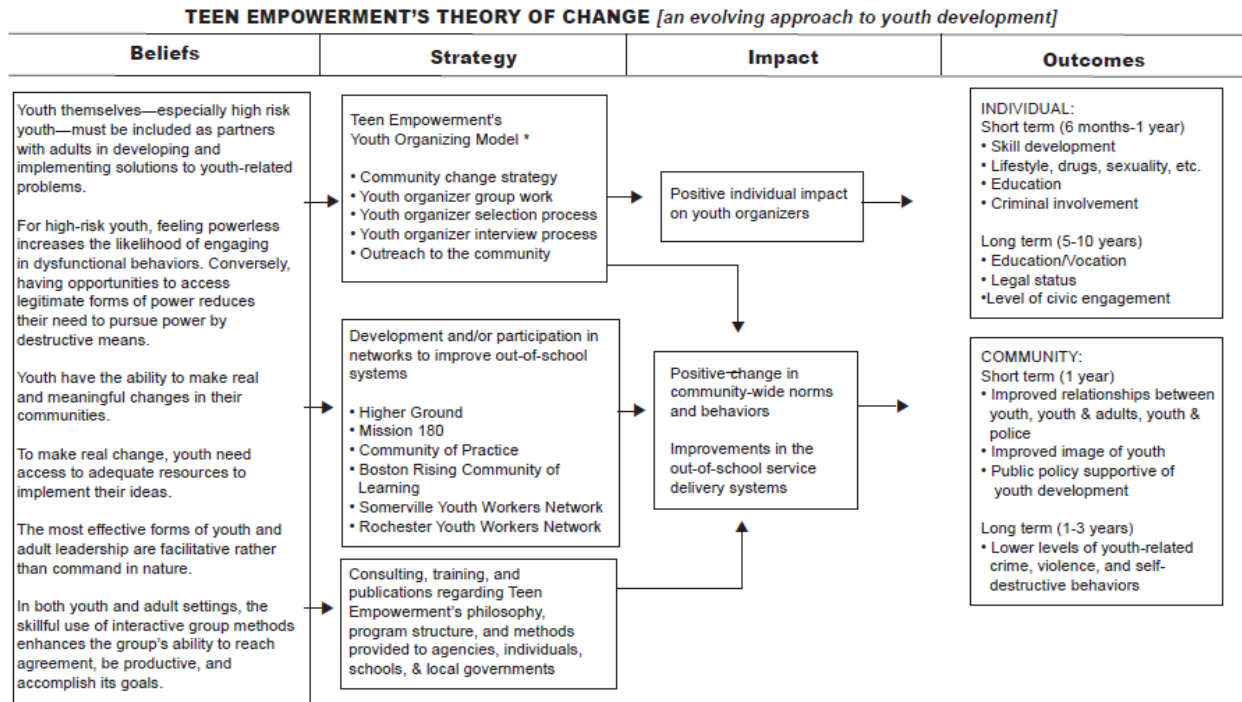
This is a report of a multi-method evaluation of the Teen Empowerment program at its Somerville, Massachusetts site. The evaluation was designed to learn how the TE model attempts to accomplish its goals as well as to identify its impact. The impact analysis focuses on individual participants, including their behavior, their feelings about themselves, and their awareness and demonstration of love and forgiveness toward others; on the relationships participants have with others; and on the program's impact in the community.

Students in Foundations of Applied Sociology, Graduate Program in Applied Sociology, University of Massachusetts Boston conducted an exploratory study of the process by which TE seeks to achieve its goals in Fall, 2011. With funding from the John E. Fetzer Institute, the process study was extended in the spring, 2012 and an impact analysis was added to the research. The process analysis and the impact analysis use mixed methods of research, including structured interviews with current and former youth participants and unsuccessful applicants, semi-structured interviews with TE staff and community members, observation of group activities and review of project documents, and analysis of police and public health records.

Overview of Teen Empowerment

Teen Empowerment organizes youth in communities with high rates of violence and low levels of youth achievement. It seeks to recruit at-risk youth in these communities, to engage them in group exercises that build self-esteem and social support, and to facilitate these efforts of

these youth to lead public events that improve community life. Teen Empowerment uses the following diagram to represent its twin goals of changing both individual participants and community processes.



At its Somerville site (and each of the other sites), TE hires approximately 12 youth as “Youth Organizers” for the summer or for an academic year (with some overlap between the two groups). These TE participants are between 14-21 years old and all reside in Somerville. A total of at least 400 youth have applied to the Somerville program over the last four years and more than 75 have been hired as Youth Organizers. Three adult TE staff direct the Somerville program currently and six others have worked at the Somerville site in the past. In addition, community members who work with TE, including community leaders, police officers, school officials, and service agency staff, help to shape its activities and can aid in the evaluation of its impact.

Program applicants are currently screened for positions as Youth Organizers through an intensive group-oriented process. In response to public advertisements for jobs as youth organizers, applicants first participate in a small group comprised of other applicants and led by staff, in which they answer questions and engage in some group exercises. The applicants are then interviewed individually. Staff review applicant performance and then invite the most promising applicants for another interview. Again, there is a group interview and an individual interview, followed by selection of the actual participants. Applicants also complete some information forms about themselves; those who are accepted complete a more extensive assessment designed by UMass Boston Professor Melissa Pearrow. Staff and participants also record information about the group sessions.

Recruitment occurs twice each year. In the fall, Youth Organizers are selected to work part-time through the academic year; in June, youth are selected to work as Organizers during the summer. Some youth who work as Youth Organizers during the academic year subsequently apply to and are accepted to work again in the same role during the following summer. Some youth who applied for an Organizer position are subsequently hired as Youth Associates for 4-6 weeks in the spring to help organize an annual Peace Conference.

Youth Organizers are paid competitive wages and meet in groups with two facilitators—10 hours a week during the academic year and 20 hours a week during the summer. TE staff use group problem-solving exercises to build social ties among the participants and to encourage them to brainstorm about concerns in their neighborhoods (Pollack 2005). The group then develops projects to address these issues. Youth sign a behavioral contract when they are hired as Youth Organizers and infractions of the rules in this contract result in loss of points and group discussion, with termination a possibility for infractions of some rules or for repeated infractions

of some others. Teen Empowerment groups focus part of each session on plans for actions or events in the community. These events or actions range in content and style, from community rallies against violence to dialogues with police and politicians, as well as social occasions. An annual Peace Conference also includes Youth Associates as organizers. All events engage community members and address vital concerns youth have identified.

Data Sources

In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former Teen Empowerment staff (N=9) and with leaders of community agencies or organizations who had had some type of working relationship with Teen Empowerment (N=16). Interview questions asked respondents to comment on their own work experience, their specific experiences with Teen Empowerment, and their opinion of TE's operations and community impact. They were also asked to identify the most valuable contributions made by Teen Empowerment and to suggest areas for improvement or future focus.

A structured survey was administered to all available current Youth Organizers in Somerville, all available past participants in the previous two years, and a sample of unsuccessful applicants. The survey was conducted through private, confidential interviews either in-person or by phone, according to respondent preference and interviewer availability. Some survey sections differed depending on whether the respondent was currently in high school or had left high school and whether he or she was or had been a Youth Organizer or an unsuccessful applicant.

Observational notes were recorded about the group sessions of Youth Organizers and staff, with names and other identifying information removed. The project Research Assistant also attended community events organized by Teen Empowerment, as possible based on

schedule and other responsibilities, and took observational notes—again, with identifying information removed.

The number and characteristics of events organized by TE in the community were also coded from TE records. The number of youth crimes in Somerville and of youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses were obtained from the Somerville Police Department and from the Somerville Department of Public Health, respectively. These events, crimes, and health problems were all categorized by date and location.

All instruments are available on request from the first author.

Data Collection Processes

The project was announced to current staff members at a regular staff meeting. Former staff and current community leaders were informed and recruited through email and phone notification by the project Research Assistant (RA) or, in some cases, by current or former staff. Project documents were also reviewed to chart the history of Teen Empowerment in Somerville and to create a timeline of TE community-based activities.

All current Somerville Youth Organizers were told by the project RA about the research project in a regular group meeting and the project information flyer was posted in the TE office. Those who assented to an interview informed a staff member of their interest and were then contacted for an interview by the project RA. Interviews were conducted in a private room in the Somerville Teen Empowerment offices with only the RA and the interviewee present; interviews began with review of the project consent form.

Each of the former Youth Organizers in the previous two years was identified in Teen Empowerment records and sent a project information flier by email or surface mail, as possible based on contact information retained by the program. All prospective sample members were

then contacted by the project RA or a staff member with a phone call, when possible, or by email or through Facebook or other social media. The project RA answered questions about the project and invited those who were interested to schedule an in-person interview at the Teen Empowerment office or an interview by phone. The RA scheduled phone interviews with those who preferred to be interviewed by phone.

A random sample of the total list of unsuccessful applicants (in the last two years) was drawn from Teen Empowerment records and sent a project information flier by email or surface mail, as possible based on contact information retained by the program and by local directories as necessary (those who could be located were replaced by others who are also selected randomly). All the prospective sample members were then contacted by the project RA with a phone call, when possible, or by email or through Facebook or other social media. The project RA answered questions about the project and invited those who were interested to schedule a phone interview at their convenience or an in-person interview at the Teen Empowerment office. All youth interviewees received a \$15 gift certificate for their participation (increased to \$25 in the last months of the study).

Survey Measures

Questions were included in the survey from validated instruments designed to measure social backgrounds, orientations to school and work, and behaviors—both pro- and anti-social. Most measures were selected from the instruments used in the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods and the transition to work survey (Earls et al., 2012; Gore and Aseltine; 2003). A measure of depression was included from Radloff (1977) and a measure of neighborhood violence was included from Sharkey and Sampson (2010). Some measures were also used from Pearrow (2008).

Survey Measures

Family situation
Economic concerns
School engagement
Social relations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive friends, peer influence, loneliness, people orientation
Health & mental health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health problems, drinking, happiness, life orientation, depression, future orientation
Crime
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal acts, fears, violence exposure, guns, peer deviance
Program satisfaction, forgiveness, community engagement

Data Summary

In-depth interviews, observational data, and some youth crime data were collected for the description of the process of program delivery by Teen Empowerment and to indicate some of its impacts.

- Interviews completed with 16 community members/leaders involved with TE
- Nine current and former TE staff interviewed.
- Observational notes recorded for 13 group sessions of Youth Organizers and staff.
- Records reviewed and coded for 78 community events.
- Thirteen TE community events observed, with ethnographic notes. Structured observational forms completed for six community events.
- Data obtained for time and location of juvenile criminal arrests, suicide attempts, drug overdoses.

Structured surveys were completed with 61 youth. The numbers of Youth Organizers and other applicants included in the survey sample was ultimately reduced from the original plan due to out-of-date contact records, unavailability for and disinterest in interviews, and failure to show up for scheduled interviews. A former Youth Organizer and Somerville Teen Empowerment staff assisted the project Research Assistant in the contact process. In spite of these challenges, enough Youth Organizers and other applicants were recruited both in high school and post-high school to allow comparisons between these groups.

- 17 current and 86 former Youth Organizers were identified in Teen Empowerment records (103 total)
- 17 current and 75 former Youth Organizers sent messages by email, Facebook, phone, in-person
- 48 YOs successfully contacted and expressed interest
- Interviews completed with 40 current (16) and former (24) YOs.
- 73 unsuccessful applicants identified from 2010 to 2012.
- 50 unsuccessful applicants sent messages, with 20% successful contact.
- Interviews completed with 21 unsuccessful applicants.

Observations of Program Process

Teen Empowerment was invited to play a large role in Somerville in 2005 in response to a rash of teen suicides and overdoses between 2000 and 2004. By 2005 and for the next several years, Teen Empowerment developing its operations in Somerville, hiring a new director to allow separate management of that site, consolidating two sites in East and West Somerville into one, publicizing the program with fliers, and developing a first Somerville Youth Peace Conference. The mayor engaged Teen Empowerment to manage his advisory Somerville Youth

Council and also to lead meetings of the city's Youth Worker Network, to facilitate discussion among providers of different youth services. Teen Empowerment organized youth –police dialogues, youth-youth dialogues (engaging youth from different backgrounds), dances, parties, and musical/rap events. Youth were encouraged to apply for Teen Empowerment's Youth Organizer jobs and over 100 were screened each year. Although the economic crisis that began in 2008 required some cutbacks, the program has continued to operate with the same basic model since those early years.

Observations of Teen Empowerment organizational processes provide a comprehensive description of how the program selects youth, facilitates social engagement among the youth chosen as Youth Organizers, and plans and delivers community events. Each program period cycle began with the selection of Youth Organizers in a two-stage process consisting of both group and individual interviews.

Selecting Youth Organizers

The youth who arrived for the first round group interview represented a balanced mix of males and females, and were almost all Haitian, Brazilian, and Puerto Rican. There was a warm-up question and then an interactive exercise, in which participants moved between chairs in response to questions, with one always left standing. Everyone then joined a pair, which was asked to talk about what they thought were key issues for Somerville youth. The answers were then discussed in the entire groups. Next there was a "brainstorming activity," for which the rules were announced as yelling out the first thing that comes to mind in response to a question, not second guessing someone else's word, waiting to process the comments after they have all been made, and being respectful of others.

Some of the issues that youth mentioned: knives and shootings; wearing colors and feeling unsafe at night; tension between east and west Somerville; bullying; drugs; violence; judging people; not having a lot to do; gangs; things costing too much; not feeling safe; cliques which make people do stuff just to fit in.

Some of the issues brought up by these words and phrases were then discussed at greater length. Examples include,

- *Violence*: Due to fights in the high school, youth need to learn to communicate and how to speak to each other instead of fighting. Shootings and stabbings around Winter Hill, most of it gang-related.
- *Bullying*: Makes people scared to go to school. Youth mentioned this being a huge problem. The issue of peer pressure also came up, and then led into the next word...
- *Cliques*: Kids stick together, along race and language. A Brazilian male in the group talked about how there's a small population of Brazilians, and thus these students feel like outsiders from others and then stick to themselves for comfort and safety and because they share a language.

Youth seemed to offer their insights and feelings voluntarily. Groups of 3-4 then had 5-8 minutes to develop a one-minute skit dealing with one of the brainstorm topics, such as peer pressure and marijuana use, drug dealing and shooting, and peer pressure not to study hard in school. The interview ended with a go-around evaluation in which many participants commented that the interview made them feel more energized.

In the individual interviews the following types of questions were asked:

- Where do you go to school and where do you live?
- What sports or after school activities are you involved in?
- Who do you represent in the community?
- With what people do you hang out and how could you get them to participate?
- What event would you organize in Somerville if you had a million dollars?
- How are you connected to the issues and the community?

Staff then debriefed about the individual interviews and decided who to move to the next Round. Three staff members talked through each youth they spoke to individually and gave their opinion as to whether the youth in question should be moved to the second round. The staff challenged each other as to whether or not the youth fit with the issues and who they represented in the community. The staff kept an eye on demographics and who the youth represented, to make sure the whole community had a voice, making sure there was a good balance of racial/ethnic, gender, age, and neighborhood composition.

The second round interview began with some tension in the room.

The vibe in the room felt quiet, a little tense, perhaps the air of nervousness. The dress was causal but I could tell a few kids were wearing something of their best: clean shirts, light blue jeans, a summer dress, and outfits with intended color coordination. Only a few kids were wearing clothes that I thought to be too revealing or too causal. A few youth were sitting next to friends or talking across the room to people that they knew.

The staff entered, and the male staff took the lead through the first half of the session. He congratulated the youth for making it to the second round, since from an initial 45 kids in the 1st Round, they were now down to 27 in the 2nd Round (of whom only 7 would make it into the group). He made sure to mention how much he already liked everyone in the group, that he'd like people to reapply in the Fall if they didn't get it in the Summer, and that sometimes it's just about the numbers. He remarked, "if you don't get the job, don't hate us" and again encouraged people to come back, volunteer or reapply, and that today in the 2nd Round, more than anything, the staff were looking for willingness to show who you are.

We [all participants in the group] then did "Name, Talent, Motion"; an activity in which you go around the room, each person says their name, a talent they have, and then makes up a motion to illustrate that talent; then everyone else must repeat the motion and say the person's name three times. After the activity the staff talked about how "Somerville is full of talent" and that it was also so important to learn other people's names. How are you going to organize and help create change if you don't know who you're working with? He again stressed and encouraged that the staff were looking for lots of unique and representative personalities and backgrounds.

The next portion was the Warm-Up Question: Why do you want this job? Responses included,

- A sense of independence
- Help make Somerville a better place
- Money helps, and need to change Somerville
- Be a part of this, lots to offer, be a part of family
- Experience that I can talk with my friends about

At this point the room still feels a little tense, youth aren't really laughing at jokes. Next we moved into "Bag Toss", an activity in which you must pass a beanbag to the same person, but the staff adds more and more beanbags to the circle. Things move fast and you have to try to not get distracted and not drop any bags. ... There was a lot of laughter and the room felt a little lighter after the activity. The staffer ... said the bags represent issues in the community, lots of issues, and who deals with it? Youth. He said youth have so many issues that they have to deal with, and at TE "we own issues – we own the community's problems". He stressed that even if a youth's "main issue or concern" is gangs, and another's is drugs, those two issues work together, so youth must learn about other issues and how that affects the community as a whole.

The next activity involved "concentric circles," grouping people in pairs, talking for two minutes on a given topic, and then

the people in the inner circle of the room move to the next person on the outside circle. [This is followed by “show your stuff,” where everyone has 10 minutes to present a poem, speech, or outline of a skit. They then present to the group. Next, the facilitator goes over the contract and feedback process and the benefits that youth get out of working for Teen Empowerment. After this the group reviews the process, evaluates the session, and then applicants have a second individual with staff.]

After the 2nd round interviews, staff discuss which youth will best represent the community in terms of neighborhood, risk levels, race, and gender, and decide who should be offered a position as a Teen Empowerment Youth Organizer.

Selecting Youth Associates

In addition, about 15 Youth were hired in February to work as Youth Associates for several months to help organize the annual Peace Conference. Many of those invited for interviews had previously been interviewed for the Youth Organizer positions. There were three days of interviews, with about 8 interviews each day. The warm-up question asked participants to state their name and one word to describe Somerville, then to give their name and make a motion to depict an activity they enjoyed—to be repeated three times by the others. Pairs were then formed to discuss “who is someone you admire or look up to?” Discussion and affirmation of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. in larger group after reconvening. Staff commented,

Changing what people think is what TE is all about. Teen Empowerment’s mentality is, if you can change what someone

thinks you can change their actions, and if you can change someone's actions, you can effect social change.

Next, staff ran an exercise called a Wordstorm in which they wrote the word "youth" on paper and asked participants to shout out the first word that came to mind.

This started a long conversation about youth's experiences in Somerville and the typical challenges and hardships that youth face. In particular peer pressure; alcohol and drugs, media, friends and relationships were all topics that were touched upon. Almost everyone in the interview added something to the conversation, though a few voices were most prominent. The feeling of the room was very comfortable and open.

Interviewees were then given 15-20 minutes to develop a piece that would share a talent with everyone.

It was somewhat astonishing to see how put together the talent pieces were since interviewees were given such a short amount of time to prepare, although the pieces were in very raw form and would have benefited from editing and practice. All but two people did poems/spoken word pieces, mostly surrounding issues of relationships and youth abilities in the community.

Staff then conducted an individual interview with each participant.

Facilitating Teen Empowerment Groups

Teen Empowerment sessions with Youth Organizers followed a standard protocol, which staff explained to a group of Youth Organizers.

Teen Empowerment facilitates through six steps: introduction, warm-up question, interactive, work, summary, and evaluation. We went through each step and talked about why it was important and what usually happens. Then we talked about what makes a good facilitator, and worked through different issues that come up while facilitating. The staff members shared different experiences each had had in dealing with groups. The youth seemed energized about learning the process through which TE runs.

Teen Empowerment staff sought to engage Youth Organizers in positive social relations with each other and to serve as mentors to the Organizers. The “vibes” in the Teen Empowerment office, both in meetings and before and after, often seemed “very lively and humorous...there is a tightness and closeness.” When one session broke up so that youth could work on musical pieces for a performance, there was “a jovial vibe in the room, though most youth seemed intent and serious about their work.” Staff seemed “skilled in motivating and building trust with youth,” emphasizing both individual responsibility and helping each other out. To motivate individual efforts and peer encouragement, staff told Youth Organizers they could have a pizza party on Friday if they all completed their pieces.

During work on a theater performance, “The staff leading did a good job of maintaining some focus and composure—at times staff let the group go off into laughter and side-talk, but then quickly brought everyone’s attention back.” There was lots of self-reflection, with youth being highly self-critical, and with staff and other youth “really cheerleading and keeping people positive.” Older youth “seemed to bring stability to the group session” and mentored younger youth. A free-style rap session “seemed to put everyone into a really good mood.”

The result of these efforts was a social environment that became increasingly self-supporting and self-reinforcing.

The overall mood was energized yet focused, youth seemed to really care and think deeply about the content and language and flow of the script. The Staff took feedback very openly and thanked youth when they gave input. As the group went on there was restlessness in the air, but youth self-policed and asked others to stay focused. It kept the mood light in that youth were setting examples for one another, rather than Staff controlling everything. It was very compelling to watch the process, each youth bringing their own vision of what the [Peace Conference] play should be and talking things out in a passionate yet open way.

A Youth Organizer who walked into a meeting looking very tired was met with “very familial and kind” expressions of concern. When two staff members and a Youth Organizer were encountered coming up the stairs, they “instantly reminded me of a family, perhaps home from a beach outing or shopping trip.”

Of course social engagement was not always so positive, but even when there were disagreements, staff and Youth Organizers attempted to turn them into positive learning experiences. For example, when a heated discussion erupted between some Youth Organizers about homosexuality, with some male Youth Organizers making demeaning statements, other Youth Organizers argued for tolerance and staff injected information about the biological bases of sexual preference.

The Youth Organizers' desire and ability to maintain group cohesion in the face of disagreement was also illustrated by their response when two youth organizers preparing food began to argue in the kitchen.

The conflict was about a younger male YO and his ability to cook. The youth seemed to mediate themselves very well, though there was a good deal of yelling. No staff came in to intervene, but several youth around the room went into the kitchen to help talk things through.

Developing Group Cohesion

The ability of staff to create this positive social environment was due in part to the use of cohesion-building activities in each group session. Each session started with a "Warm Up" question that all Youth Organizers (and Associates) and staff were asked to answer.

- What's one gift you bring to the group?
- What's one thing you would take back if you could, and why?
(There were many introspective and emotional responses, that staff were able to manage and connect to the immediate task.)
- Simply, "What do you have to complete your piece?"
- What's a piece of advice you remember someone giving you?
- When is a time you didn't feel listened to, and how did you get the person/group to listen to you?

The "Warm Up" was typically followed by an Interactive Exercise involving a group task.

- Asking one Youth Organizer to leave the room and then return and ask questions to figure out which participant had been picked as “it.” “If this person were a type of music, what type would they be?”
- Form groups based on different characteristics, in silence, to see who has which similarities. ““Youth were very good at self-monitoring—reminding each other that they can’t speak and making sure everyone was in the correct order.”
- In pairs, one member had to tap out the beat to a song, and the partner had to guess the song.
- A “line-up” in which a staff member mentions categories (such as age or hair-length) and everyone has to line up without speaking.
- Passing two objects around the group in opposite directions, with each person giving each object a nonsensical name. “Definitely the activity created a light vibe with lots of laughter and enjoyment.” Discussion of how it relates to managing pressure, balancing activities, dealing with peer pressure, need to depend on others.
- Finding the Path. A set of squares was outlined on floor in tape by a staff member. Youth Organizers then in succession, without talking, had to step through squares trying to determine the path to the other side intended by the staff member. There was much laughter and non-verbal communication, as well as frustration,

clapping, and sighs of relief when the path was finally figured out. Much discussion afterward focused on the parallels between the exercise and the work of youth leaders, including the different forms of leadership displayed; the implicit metaphor for the group finding a path for the summer; figuring out group goals; needing to work together; and the problem of relying on one person to do everything;

- 4 I's of Oppression: A discussion to define and give examples of Ideological, Institutional, Interpersonal, Internalized oppression. This elicited comments about stereotypes of neighborhoods, ethnic groups, rules enforced in the projects, gang conflict, racially-based hassles in stores, and negative youth attitudes toward peers who try to succeed. This activity seemed more like a lecture, with less energy and many side conversations and interruptions and unclear connections to the group's goals.

The impact of engaging in these exercises was apparent as a new group of Youth Organizers gradually congealed after the initial section process.

Summer Session

The following excerpts illustrate this process of developing group cohesion, as observed during the first summer session.

The session started off with staff congratulating the Youth Organizers for getting the job after tough interview process. Then there was a Name Wave, in which one person states their name and motions in a distinctive way, which is then passed around the group. Youth were shy

and relatively subdued. Next was the Warm Up, in which the Youth Organizers (and staff) were asked to name a person who had had a positive or negative impact on your life and explain how. Youth actively listened, but were still relatively quiet. Staff emphasized maintaining confidentiality about the stories shared.

The first interactive exercise was Human Knot, in which each participant crossed arms and held hands with another, and then they had to “untie” the entire group “knot” without letting go. Staff “processed” the exercise by connecting the activity to the importance of working together and making connections in the community, analogizing to dealing with community problems. Next came Concentric Circles, in which participants shared in pairs their answers to questions about personal experiences. “After going around the air in the room felt a little lighter and calm, as though people finally had the chance to figure out who the other people in the room were.” The next exercise was Stand and Deliver, in which Youth Organizers were asked a agree/disagree question and then indicated their response by walking to paper cards hung on the wall with the words Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. There was “intense debate and conversation. ...Quite a few Youth Organizers seemed energetic and charged about their position on the subject.” The day, like all Teen Empowerment sessions, ended with a go-around evaluation in which each participant rated the day on a scale of 1 to 10, and made a comment if they chose to.

The next day, Youth Organizers shared very personal stories about being abused, abandoned, and otherwise challenged through a “Lifeline” exercise in which each group member created a timeline of the major events in their life and then presented it. Staff explained how the new Youth Organizers had used their own personal stories as the bases of performance pieces.

During the evaluation period, “most of the youth seemed proud of sharing and very surprised by what they had heard.” Participants seemed reflective at the end.

As the fourth session of this new group began, Youth Organizers meandered in, eating snacks, playing pool, and talking casually. There were no set cliques, but returning Youth Organizers (from the preceding year) tended to sit with each other, while the new Youth Organizers struck up conversations among themselves as well as with older YOs. “There is an air of goofiness and lightness to the pre-group activities.” A staff member proposed a kayaking trip at the end of the summer, followed by much discussion and some excitement. In the Warm Up, participants discussed the previous day’s separate tours of East and West Somerville, commenting about changes and differences. There was also a discussion of an incident when a police officer had angrily reprimanded a Youth Organizer for taking a picture of him watching a group of youth in a park to document safety practices in the community (part of a new Photo Voice project). Staff emphasized the need to ask permission before taking pictures, but there was general concern about police orientations. When discussion turned to identifying assets in the community, a large list of resources and organizations was identified.

Staff asked Youth Organizers to consider “What kind of community we’re building...and what it could look like.” The group started to define goals and possible events for the summer. Goals were supposed to be SMART: specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, time oriented. After considering many possibilities and noting goals that staff had already chosen, the new YOs decided to focus on having a movie night, cleaning up Mystic River, hanging out with old people, and hosting an open microphone event.

By the next week, “returning and new youth have formed bonds and some of the newcomers have formed friendships.” The group “felt friendly and energized.” During the day’s

interactive exercise, improvising personas of well known characters (three at a time), there was much laughter and audience participation, followed by a stimulating discussion of communicating effectively and accepting multiple viewpoints. Plans for the evening's event, focused on tasks like setting up the room, picking up food, cooking, managing activities, and recognizing recent violent events. There was much Youth Organizer input, although the discussion was staff-directed

Preparing for Community Events

Teen Empowerment organized a diverse range of community events during each academic year and summer. Staff and Youth Organizers planned a dialogue session about violence in Somerville, another about Body Image, a National Night Out (as part of an annual event against violence), and repeat events like a police-youth basketball tournament, Open Mic sessions, social gatherings, and musical performances.

Successful community events did not happen spontaneously. They required careful planning by staff and full engagement by Youth Organizers. Sometimes, planning for an event brought underlying community tensions to the surface and required some plan for reducing them. In planning an event on community violence, for example, staff told Youth Organizers that it was important for them to ask why violence is happening and what youth can do. They specified goals for the event, such as getting people thinking and interacting, collecting information about safety and feelings of safety, and introducing police officer. However, some Youth Organizers didn't want to invite police officers, since they had gang-affiliated friends who they felt would not come if the police were there. These same Youth Organizers were concerned about having youth present from rival gangs due to the potential for conflict. There was much discussion

about whether and how to include friends from different gangs, and police, with staff urging the Youth Organizers to confront the problem of rivalry and distrust with a policy of inclusion.

A bit heated and intense in his energy, a male staff member asked the youth why, why? He felt the group needs to take risks and people need to try to reach out to their friends, getting people who need to broaden their perspectives is what TE is all about, and why the youth were hired. ...

A female Youth Organizer with gang-affiliated friends saw her position as being a substitute voice in the absence of her friends, since her friends wouldn't come and she understands why. She alludes to strained relations with police and a rival gang.

Another female Youth Organizer understands the anger of the youth and where it comes from, but feels it's Teen Empowerment's mission to break through these barriers, especially because they aren't always grounded in truth. Teen Empowerment shouldn't say we're not going to try; we need to keep working on friends and get them to come, or else people aren't really trying to do their job.

A male Youth Organizer with gang-affiliated friends said he doesn't invite certain friends because he wants to keep Teen Empowerment as a safety-zone. He believes that bringing certain

friends in gangs with rival gang members around, or the police, would only incite violence in a space he holds as special and safe.

A staff member said he is not afraid of gang members coming to Teen Empowerment, because it's something Teen Empowerment has dealt with before. People aren't going to show up at Teen Empowerment for a fight because the group has created a safe space that people respect. Moreover, the staff are ready to handle any trouble because of how important it is to get new people and the "right" people to events. He encouraged the group to think about friends who would be "ready to come"; maybe they'll come and listen... and the youth have to be willing to try. He said he'd rather try than not play, and that he took the job knowing this was some of the hard work.

A female staff member said she wanted Teen Empowerment to have a trickle out effect, so they could think that what they do here will spread by having new people come and then opening up their worldly views. Things have to grow from there.

A female Youth Organizer believes that if friends love you and you love them, then friends will respect you and your job, and they'll come and support you. She encouraged the three Youth Organizers to have a little more faith in their friends; that they would come out of respect for you.

A male staff member told the group how the beefs in Boston that Teen Empowerment is dealing with are much more heated than the gang activity in Somerville, yet in Boston youth have been able to get other youth to talk to one another and it has worked. The youth crime numbers are down because the hard work of youth who brought their friends to the table to talk to one another about violence in their communities.

One of the female Youth Organizers with gang-affiliated friends was still hesitant and seemed somewhat disbelieving of what people had been saying. She believed that the mentalities these days are different – people just say they won't go, or people say they would come but don't feel like they trust themselves to be cool. This also makes her not trust that her friends would actually be cool.

Staff continued to encourage of Youth Organizers to use Teen Empowerment as a place “to get into people's heads and make them think.” In this way, event planning itself became a transformative process for the Youth Organizers.

Delivering Community Events

The event finally was opened to gang members and other friends. It began with a pizza break. There were 23 participants, including nine guests, at Teen Empowerment's headquarters. There were very diverse in age, ethnicity, and gender. Youth Organizers and their friends talked about the quality of the pizza and other low-priced options. A staff member introduced the topic of violence and its consequences, and laid ground rule of respect for what others say. “The

opening mood felt very tense and slightly uncomfortable.” The event consisted of three exercises:

Name/Chant/Motion. Each participant said their name and made a silly motion, which everyone else had to repeat three times.

There was then debriefing about the value of names, remembering others, and how motions go through the community.

Warm Up Question: What is one thing that makes you feel proud? Responses were discussed. Everyone is proud of different things, but hurt pride can lead to fights.

Cross the Line: Staff posed questions, such as “Are you Latino” or “Have you ever witnessed violence and not responded?” and then those whose answer was yes would step over the line. There was a lengthy discussion after the activity about what was surprising, and then about experiences with witnessing violence. This led to emotional discussions about witnessing violence in the home, in the community, as well as at school. Comments were made about why violence occurs and why people react the way they do.

Teen Empowerment organized many other community events. A Body Image Dialogue drew about 20-25 youth participants who observed five images of overweight individuals and then wrote down their reactions and their thoughts about the sources of stereotypes. Small groups then developed short presentations about influences and feelings, followed by rich discussions of different media and images.

A summer social event in a park drew more than 50 participants, including 2 police officers, a few parents, three staff, and youth of different ages. There were games, raffles, talks about Teen Empowerment, and some performance activities. Small group discussions about community safety engaged some participants for a time.

Right away there seemed to be mingling and playing, with a lot of activity at the food table. ... People seemed to generally enter, grab some food, find a place to eat, and grouped themselves based on who they came with. The playing, hanging out, engaging with the space, and chatting all seemed to happen very organically. I saw about 20-25 people actively using the “people hunt” to casually engage with strangers.

The vibe at this time felt light, comfortable, warm, and fun. There were a lot of little kids with smiles on their faces, but no one seemed out of control or too loud. It didn't appear that too many people were paying attention to the hosts, but the YOs seemed to do a pretty good job of facilitating.

At the National Night Out event, 50-60 people sat at tables in park. Although another organization had planned the event, Teen Empowerment had its own table and Youth Organizers engaged visitors and discussed safety issues in Somerville. Visitors were shown a large map of Somerville and marked where they live, where they feel safe, and where they feel unsafe. Youth Organizers and staff discussed the responses and shared information about upcoming TE events.

Youth Organizers were nervous before an Open Mic event, but after staff encouragement seemed comfortable performing before a small group of 20 seated in plastic chairs, with others

nearby on the steps or on the ground. The audience did not seem too attentive, but was “happy and calm.”

When the Youth Organizers presented findings from their Photo Voice project at City Hall to the Mayor and other government officials, they dressed formally. The walls displayed their photos and paragraphs about their meaning. For their presentations, youth read their own poems and made speeches about their photos. “The youth did a fantastic job of presenting” and received much praise after the presentations.

A Peace Conference

Teen Empowerment’s premier annual event was the Somerville Youth Peace Conference. Much of the Youth Organizers’ work in the preceding year was directed to preparing for this event. Somerville High School devoted its auditorium and some classrooms for the event on one Saturday. Workshops were held in classrooms prior to the conference, such as Know Your Rights, in which police officers spoke. “The police seemed very engaged and eager to talk with residents.”

At the 2012 Peace Conference, a drumming group began the show, followed by two MCs who tried to energize the audience of over 400 youth. The MCs elicited the most response when they called out specific Somerville neighborhoods, such as “Mystics” and “Winter Hill.” The Mayor and Police Chief both gave speeches, with the Mayor focusing on community change and the role of organizations like Teen Empowerment.

The main conference program consisted of various speeches, songs, and performances. A skit was woven throughout, with lessons about teen girls arguing, family love, and gang-related violence. Many of the acts designed by the Youth Organizers focused on themes of love and forgiveness.

- *Resurrect My Soul*: A song expressing love for African American women and challenging the degrading language of hip hop songs.
- *Gentrification*: Lamenting the loss of community bonds due to gentrification but expressing forgiveness toward those involved, and appreciation for new resources brought to the community.
- *Living in America*: Talk about difficulties of being an immigrant and love for both his home country and for the United States.
- *Bullying*: Speech about developing love for oneself and forgiveness for bullies who had caused personal pain.
- *Self-Esteem*: Talk about finding beauty and love within yourself.
- *Body Image*: Poem/song about challenge of loving yourself and shutting out the media.
- *Addiction*: Experience of growing up with parents who were addicts, but choosing love and forgiveness and trying to find help for her parents.
- *Choices*: Song endorsing making choices to move in a positive direction, even when the system isn't fair and you made mistakes.

Many of the acts delivered uplifting messages about youth potential or poignant portrayals of life's challenges. However, hazardous behaviors such as drinking and drug use were not always presented in a negative light. A Youth Organizer who was asked whether it was acceptable to portray youth drinking as "normal" explained that the goal was to provide a realistic view of teen life.

He responded that most of the content in the script are things that actually happened in Somerville. ... He said that it's the people who have been in gang and who have made choices about drugs

and whatnot that people will listen to the most, as opposed to people just telling people not to do something. He made it clear that the content has to “be real,” or else people won’t listen.

Interviews with Program Staff and Community Leaders

Interviews with staff who have worked for Teen Empowerment and community leaders who have engaged with Teen Empowerment at different times provide substantial evidence of the success of its model and of its impact in the community.

Several elements were noted as essential to the success of Teen Empowerment’s internal operations: staff recruitment, Youth Organizer selection, daily team-building activities, and the behavior contract system.

Many of the community leaders praised the energy and commitment of Teen Empowerment’s Somerville staff. Community leaders referred to Teen Empowerment as “very passionate about youth, social issues,” “incredibly enthusiastic,” “dedicated,” “so caring...amazing; they really care about youth.”

- I really liked it and felt like, it was vibrant and you know, kind of alive; there was action behind the words of what they were saying and that all appealed to me.
- It was one of the few agencies that I worked with that really practices what they preach. So that they are all about empowering youth and youth voice and making sure that the message of youth is heard; and that’s true right from the very beginning when they’re involved in the interview process of who is going to be supervising themselves. So that was the beginning of it, and then you know, as I got involved and I just became a member of the community and was with the

youth all the time, it became a way of life, where I saw the kids on my time, you know just because I was living in the community, and just hearing them, it just um, it really meshed with what I was capable of, uh, the goals that they were trying reach for their selves and that's what I wanted to do is help them reach those same goals.

Staff reports about the bases of their attraction to Teen Empowerment also conveyed these qualities.

- It sort of brought everything I'd done in high school and college together into one thing. So I used to do community service this way and performing arts this way, and feedback this way, but it sort of like brought it all together.
- When I learned about the facilitation model I actually thought it was really brilliant and really authentic and a really good way to incorporate the values of community organizing into work with young people, and leadership skills.

Staff reported that the experience of working at Teen Empowerment helped them to gain understanding of youth and their problems.

- People would come up and tell me crazy things either about their life or things they had done ... In the beginning, ... I would get this shocked look ...and I wouldn't know how to respond ...like, whether it's domestic abuse or child abuse or like, pulling the fire alarm and bullying people. ... I'm much better at that, now – cause I can like listen and look at them and really hear them and then ask the questions that need to be asked, ...without feeling nervous or scared..

While working for Teen Empowerment, staff learned how to develop supportive and meaningful bonds with youth in the program.

- What we asked the youth to do, we ask our staff to do. So, just in the very structure of it, when we're asking warm up questions, we all answer the warm up questions. ... We all take part in the brainstorm and we all share our own stories. I mean the extent to which you want to share your own personal stuff is up to you, but you won't get close and you won't be able to relate to the youth in a productive way, unless you're sharing some of yourself. And, when they hear you sharing your own story, ... that's kind of a special bond that happens pretty naturally because of that.

Staff also modeled in their relations with each other the value of positive, supportive relations.

- We very rarely disagree on things and when we do I feel like we both are good at being like, "well have you looked at it this way?" ... it's kind of a beautiful relationship.

The in-depth interviews with staff provided many examples of an effective process of engaging youth and developing their skills and self-confidence. The initial interview process allowed identification of youth with high levels of motivation and ability to engage with others, from a variety of backgrounds.

- It just...opens people up and makes people feel comfortable and helps them to learn at the same time.
- People get to know each other on a much deeper level from this interview process, and that to me is what it's all about, connecting people.
- I think the hiring process is set up well to show people's skill sets and group dynamics, and also their stuff. ... it allows you to show the people in the group

and how they work with others in groups and things like that. ... it's harder to notice the quieter kids And they're usually more confident in the second round, as long as you're thoughtful about it.

- Gives everyone kind of a level playing field because they have the group setting and the individual setting, ... the brainstorm in particular is one of the most important pieces and brings out a lot in kids who maybe aren't comfortable with the spotlight but can, you know, share information in that way. The talent piece I think is important. I think the interviews, the individual interviews themselves and the responses to questions, should be the main thing. ... We were very aware that this group is representing an entire city. So we had to be mindful of all of that stuff.

Relations of trust developed between the youth and adult staff.

- Kids at Teen Empowerment always respect your position, like they respect you as an organizer, they know you're there to help. They feel important, they're needed, they're being paid for this, the relationship is already there that's so supportive and so unique from any other adult/youth relationship that you can have.
- Interactive facilitation is essential to people being drawn out, sharing who they are. Not only in this sort of daily meetings with the young people but also well they come together with adults, I think that that really breaks down barriers and let's people express themselves.

Staff regarded the system of behavior contracts as an important element in the process of positive change for Youth Organizers. In its first version, money was withheld from paychecks for infractions of rules. The money could be earned back for improved performance, but "I think

it worked really well. ...when people were losing money out of their check, wow did they ever get the message quickly.”

- I think it’s an incredibly effective tool towards like, getting people to realize what it takes to have any job you know, in particularly that job how to maintain their position in the group.

Within a few years, Somerville staff decided that the monetary penalties for contract infractions were too severe for low-income kids, unless the problem was excessive lateness or absences. It seemed that the feedback system, along with a modified contract that noted infractions but did not deduct cash penalties—along with peer pressure—was a sufficient motivator, although the threat of being fired for accumulating too many contract infractions remained as a very concrete extrinsic motivator.

- The feedback – I think it’s very powerful when the young people hear from their peers you know, “you have an attitude and it’s hard to be around you,” or something, you know you start to hear from three or four people in your group that are maybe your friends, I think that that really starts to let people sort of see how they’re acting and what the results are and maybe make some changes.

Staff encouraged youth to talk about why they had not been able to live up to the terms of the contract.

- If you ... had a really terrible day, talk to us first, we won’t call on you as much and we’ll let it slide, but you have to communicate these things – ...And that would be, it was always more effective if they would get that kind of feedback from their peers versus staff.

Community leaders made many appreciative comments about the impact of participation in Teen Empowerment on Youth Organizers.

- I've seen young people grow in their program from being a little more hesitant to, by the end of the year they get more comfortable, putting it out there.
- I am better at communicating how I feel about things ... just the ability to think about what it is that people do really well and what it is that they could do better.
- The youth who are a part of Teen Empowerment are just great. I really enjoyed working with them and building relationships with them too. Young people who are here feel powerful, feel that they are a part of a community, feel safe. I think they do a good job of that.

Teen Empowerment staff made similar comments.

- Kids come in and express how, they felt like they're a changed person; they become more mature. And they, actually, started thinking differently you know, more positively. ...They're here doing something positive when they could easily be out in the street doing nothing and be involved in gangs.
- The power of the organization comes from the youth being in a leadership position, and using that leadership because they're the ones that can actually do it, to get kids to follow along. ...the feedback system really works. ...having the adults talk to everybody on the same level and really respect them as employees, that's all really important.

Staff sometimes provided very direct guidance for youth.

- As an adult person, I understand that you're gonna need to have those conversations, you're gonna need to kind of say like "pull your pants up," you

know what I mean. I mean you're living in a world where, if you want a job you know, you're gonna have to go to an interview and you're gonna have to pull your pants up and not have your butt showing. You know what I mean and so, I think you have to have those conversations if you're going to be helpful to a person.

Like, this is reality, you know what I mean.

According to staff, the process of change in individual Youth Organizers revolved around ensuring a spirit of love for others and forgiveness toward past misdeeds, and using this process to make up for deficits in youth's own lives—whether in their families or in school.

- Feeling like you got friends around and people that are on your side politically, ... those positive relationships that form and thinking of yourself as a leader, knowing what it's like to have a job and have that responsibility, having these kind of adult figures in your life... A lot of them don't have men in their lives.
- The things they were natural at that never got valued in schools, I think got valued at Teen Empowerment, and that was really cool to watch kids start to think of themselves as artists, think of themselves as writers, and it wasn't so much about whether you were good at, it was did you have something to say.

Staff found that even youth who were not employed as Youth Organizers could benefit from Teen Empowerment's presence.

- People could come in everyday and just sit in without being a Youth Organizers, so just like knowing that there were trusted adults who were really there for their best interests was a huge impact. But the kids who were Youth Organizers s, ... it definitely impacted them very deeply, on every level down too, they made friendships that are very deep and will last, and they address parts of their lives

that they might not have addressed in the same way, and they were able to do things that they were proud of at a very young age.

Staff also felt that Youth Organizers changed in their orientations toward others because of growing recognition of their common problems.

- A lot of our kids were deeply affected when we had a sit-in group with us from Israel and a sit-in group from Ireland and we did some serious work around stereotypes and you know, what life is like and all of that kind of stuff; and I know that our kids were really, really, really deeply affected by that and they all stayed in touch

Interviews with staff and community leaders also provided many indications of positive community impact of Teen Empowerment events. The first and most dramatic indication of impact was in relation to the teen suicide crisis, as two staff members described.

- Not only did we model it—the unity and people coming together and seeing that their voice could matter—then we actually brought the street level, like the consumer level, the participant level, and showed everybody else that their voice matters, and that we cared and we were here to work on certain very important and critical issues.and then people went through this whole cathartic and then healing process out there, but again, it wouldn't happen if it weren't people that they trusted, already involved in this mix.
- There were these kids [at an event] that, I mean you could just look at them, ... some of their friends had just recently died, ... and these kids were just starting to realize like, heroin, oxycontin, whatever that whole family of methadone things, just starting to lose its fun. ... I think the number of drug related suicides and the

other incidents dropped like right off the rip because the young people started to see other opportunities; ...instead of egging kids on to go fight you know, ... [a TE staff member would say] like now, you got this hostility, you got this energy, that's great you know what I mean, I had it too, you know what I mean, but now I'm using it in this, in terms of this as opposed to just destroying my city, myself, and my family, you know driving my family through mud.

The annual Peace Conference held at Somerville High School was highlighted as Teen Empowerment's most notable activity in almost every interview with both community leaders and Teen Empowerment staff. The involvement of many high school students and other youth made it an important community event. Staff described that they met with school principals and other community organizations, as well as with youth and other staff in Teen Empowerment, to identify major issues to address in the conference. They then met with Youth Organizers to develop characters and build plot lines, as well as develop group spirit. All participants debated particulars about specific scenes and actions, and how best to make particular points. A director was brought in to help in the organization and rehearsal of the conference performances.

Community leaders' comments about the result of this process were overwhelmingly positive and mostly very enthusiastic.

- The Peace Conference is a fabulous event. It generates a lot of excitement, so that's really great. What they did was provide a real safe place for teens, they were involved in um, uh getting kids to work together, when maybe they wouldn't have in the past.
- It hit on really, really deep issues and had a lot of people really looking at themselves differently.

- It's well organized, it's thought out, it's well attended, so I think that ...the fact that they can get whatever, six to eight hundred people to come out on a Saturday at the high school, that's pretty remarkable. And, to give it all together and flowing, and have it be a meaningful experience for the participants.
- My sense is that Teen Empowerment has provided like, ... a narrative for talking about young people in this city. ...seeing young people performing and running this great event is a really inspiring and motivating thing. Having a public place to talk about a lot of the issues that come out during the Peace Conference is really powerful.
- For youth, the Peace Conference and other events really show young people that their thoughts and opinions matter.

Other examples were cited of positive community impacts of events organized by Teen Empowerment. Some community leaders focused on the role of Teen Empowerment in lessening the negative impact of youth gangs.

- When there were gangs going on, when kids felt very unsafe here, I think they were really essential, a fabulous resource for Somerville.
- I think we're very lucky in Somerville that gang activity seems to be ceasing some, there haven't been any suicides. Indirectly they played a part in that.

One staff member described how gang members had engaged in a Teen Empowerment event.

- We actually had some gang members come down, and just, play. This kid with a tattoo on his face, with this gang logo; like welcome, what's up, how are you?, come in. He's like "what's up?" Started playing, then two of his friends came, that was fine.

Several respondents emphasized Teen Empowerment's role in improving youth - police relations.

- The police/youth dialogues, it gives the police an opportunity to see themselves as participating in the community in a different way; it sends a message and pulls them over... when you build these connections you're pulling them, hopefully, you're shifting the curve.
- They're getting a message that they're thinking and their presence as a human being is valued somehow. ...it's opened up, it's really tapped into the resilience in the youth in this city and exploited it in a very positive way, and allowed it to you know, mature and be recognized. So ... it's opened up communication between the police and the rest of the community, both directly and periphery. It's set a good tone for how things should be conducted.

The theme of love and forgiveness often emerged in comments about Teen Empowerment's impact on police-youth relations. At one youth-police meeting, a staff member recalled, "there were a few things said in that meeting that I felt like really helped people see each other as people versus "there's a trouble maker kid and there's a copy." One staff member

described a particular incident at a Teen Empowerment police-youth meeting that captured their potential for realizing the value of love and forgiveness.

- I remember in particular a police officer taking off his hat and showing the kid next to him that he carries a picture of his kid in his hat you know, and that was really touching to the kid, to the teenager like – oh look it, like, he’s leaving his house everyday worried that maybe he’s not going to see his kid again, you know. And I think that the police said that when they first came in and everybody has on hoodies and hats and stuff, that they actually felt a like intimidated, like, who are these kids, you know. And I think that was kind of eye-opening to the young people, you know like, “oh, you’re afraid of us?” or not afraid of, but you know, and people were just genuine and I think that that sticks out in my head as being a poignant moment.

Another incident involving police-youth interaction indicated the importance of the focus on developing an attitude of forgiveness in order to improve relations. As a staff member described it,

- The kid...had been smoking weed outside, and the cop saw him and told him, “Hey buddy, put it out” (according to the kid). He wasn’t going to arrest him.... Instead of putting it out the kid laughed in his face. So then the kid ended up getting into trouble....It was a really tough one, and they both kind of faked it for the [police-youth] dialogue, but [Teen Empowerment staff

explained to the police] he tells us all the stuff that he's done and we're working with him to help him....

There were other concrete examples of Teen Empowerment's community impact. Somerville was employing youth in an innovative summer jobs program, but the youth were being paid less than the minimum wage. In response to the argument by Teen Empowerment's staff that youth work should be valued "as much as anybody else's work," the Mayor increased the summer wage to the minimum wage. "It symbolized sort of like, the valuation of young people in the community."

Staff and community leaders often observed changes in the orientation of other community members as a result of their contact with Teen Empowerment members or participation in Teen Empowerment events.

- It gives a lot of people the opportunity to talk to young people and realize how bright and thoughtful they are, that they're not just sort of like hanging out but that they're thinking about stuff and seeing stuff, and have ideas about how to improve things.
- And she always comes away feeling like, oh that kid was so interesting and he had all these ideas about music... and like, like being able to look past that stereotype of here's a kid with brown skin and a hoodie or whatever and that.
- I think [a city official] was shocked that those young people brought to him serious issues about ...what it was like for immigrant kids that were illegal, coming up through the schools.

And they wanted to talk to him about that stuff and not like, “how come we don’t have more parties.”

Another former staff member emphasized the cultural reorientation of relations between city officials and other adults and youth.

- I think it’s had a huge impact, I think it’s changed the culture of Somerville, period. Just how young people and adults relate to each other um, how the stakeholders in the community relate to each other and relate to youth, people just opening their eyes to young people and the possibility of building meaningful, sustainable, impactful relationships amongst the community.

Examples of improving the foundation of love between youth and their parents were particularly poignant.

- A holiday party. There were quite a few aldermen, police, and other city officials at the party and it was a good showcase of the youth’s talent: A big deal. For the parents of the Youth Organizers, many of whom have parents that don’t speak English as a first language, they are probably really amazed and proud to see their children perform, like at the holiday party. The parents at the party seemed happy to say “that’s my kid up there”, and to also share that feeling with other parents at the holiday party.

Teen Empowerment’s impact in the community was described by some as involving a “ripple effect,” in which changes the Youth Organizers would transmit their changed attitudes and their enthusiasm for positive change to their friends, who would in turn influence others.

- The youth have a lot of pride in what they do and they share with their friends. A lot of the youth cross back and forth and they bring in the influences and learned behaviors with them. Seeing [Youth Organizers] come to the recreational center, playing basketball with others, seeing how Youth Organizers influence people they interact with.
- They have proven that you can create a situation where it's cool to think peace and respect are cool.

This “ripple” approach also was used to connect Teen Empowerment with diverse ethnic communities through the staff who had been recruited from these communities. A staff member who had grown up in Somerville was described as able to provide “authentic communication” to others in Somerville. Another staff member from Haiti linked the organization to the Haitian community by being “somebody they knew, they respected, they trusted, had their best interest at heart, who spoke the language so to speak (figuratively but also literally).”

- We just went in and just kind of like connected with the key institutions both formal and informal that got us to where we needed to be at. So we modeled it and then we actually did it out in the real world and brought that community together.

Some argued that cultural barriers that had led to conflict between youth had lessened as a result of these efforts.

- The younger generation, you see a lot more of the cross pollination now, kids hanging out – despite, or actually maybe it's because of their cultural differences, trying to learn more about each other and

coming together. ... kids that would normally would not look at each other, ... it's lesser and lesser, you know, it's not even a tension anymore, it's actually a, a kind of a glue now, that brings people together, which I think is hugely powerful.

- What we helped with was to kind of like bring those cultures together and unify people and you know, give people the opportunity to kind of like cross those boundaries and feel good about that.

In the final analysis, one staff member explained, bringing people together was what Teen Empowerment does “really well.” The organization helped youth to improve understanding of others, to organize together, to regulate their emotions, to communicate better, to set goals and to manage better.

- As this world becomes more and more pluralistic and we divide ourselves into these little compartments more and more, we're getting away from connecting to people, you know, and that is the very essence of our humanity ... we got to work with individuals and give them hope and help them to understand that there is a future here and that you know, you have a purpose in life..

Some community leaders did have reservations about the Teen Empowerment approach and its effects.

- Police-youth relations are always a focus for the organization, but...the relations have changed, have improved, and it's a bit passé to continue to focus on that issue. ...TE doesn't look far

enough ahead. ...they don't have enough of a sense of how to actually get things done, through political means. The organization should be helping youth to see how their work within Teen Empowerment translates into adult skills.

- They're not totally on the radar screen a lot, you know except for the Peace Conference

Representatives of other youth-serving organizations in Somerville, and some Teen Empowerment staff, identified some problems in relations between Teen Empowerment and some of these organizations. These problems reflected concerns about a "zero-sum game" of competition for resources, in which Teen Empowerment takes limited city resources away from other organizations and does not see the value in collaborating with others.

However, with only a few exceptions, comments from those reporting on recent years indicated that Teen Empowerment has been engaging very effectively with other organizations and contributing to their success.

- People started to see the program more as a resource than like, you're getting something that we don't have or something like that. And I think that that first Youth Peace Conference was a nice symbol of those programs coming together and um, verses being sort of in competition. We worked hard to try to make it like, everybody's event. ...we included youth from other programs and we had a service fair where everybody was represented.
- That's been one of the great things is that they are really open to collaborating. ...At this point we've got like three of four things

we're collaborating on. It's really great for me to have other youth workers that I can talk about issues with and learn things from and share resources and materials with.

- Teen Empowerment is a huge force in different meetings, making efforts to connect.

Current and former staff members made many programmatic recommendations; the most important was to continue to implement and develop the current very successful model. Suggestions were also made for improving Teen Empowerment operations and the effectiveness of community action.

- Provide more training for new staff, particularly about the impact of race and class on social interaction, on working with highly traumatized youth, and on drug problems. This should also include ongoing opportunities for staff to reflect on their work and other experiences. "If you train people than they're more likely to stay longer."
- Use a more strategic process to focus on actions that will help to achieve valued community goals. Make "sure that you're not just thinking about the next thing that's happening," but rather, "What are we doing with the program? ...How does it all come together?"
- Open up the Teen Empowerment center for kids who are not going to be Youth Organizers but need a place hang out, play basketball, and hang out.

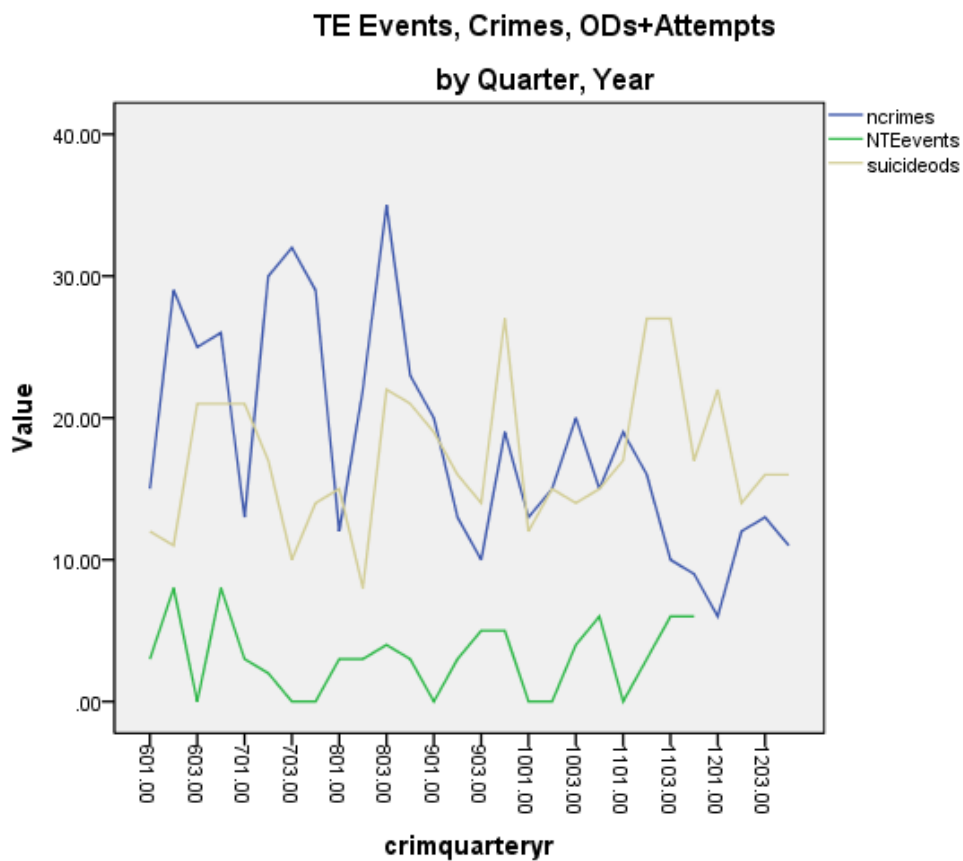
- Work more in the schools, with the younger population. Junior high could use more attention. The most severe problems are in younger kids: gang and pre-gang activity, more reckless behavior.

Community Events, Youth Crime, Suicide Attempts, and Overdoses

From 2000 to 2005, an unusual number of Somerville youth (21) died due to suicide or drug overdose (Arsenault, et al. 2011: 92). During the six years after Teen Empowerment's arrival, there have been no such deaths among youth. The number of attempted suicides called in to the Somerville Fire Department dropped from 20 in 2004 to 9 in 2005 and then fluctuated between 4 and 5 through 2009 (the latest year available). In a Somerville High School Health Survey in 2002, 38% reported depression, 21% reported having seriously considered suicide, and 14% had attempted suicide. These rates dropped in 2004 and declined somewhat thereafter, with the rates in 2012 measured as 31% with depression, 9% seriously considered suicide, and 5% attempted suicide (Release of Findings, Somerville Cares About Prevention, the Somerville Health Department, the Somerville Public Schools, and the Cambridge Health Alliance). Data from the Somerville Department of Public Health indicate that the number of reported non-fatal youth drug overdoses and suicide attempts has not changed markedly since 2005 (see following chart).

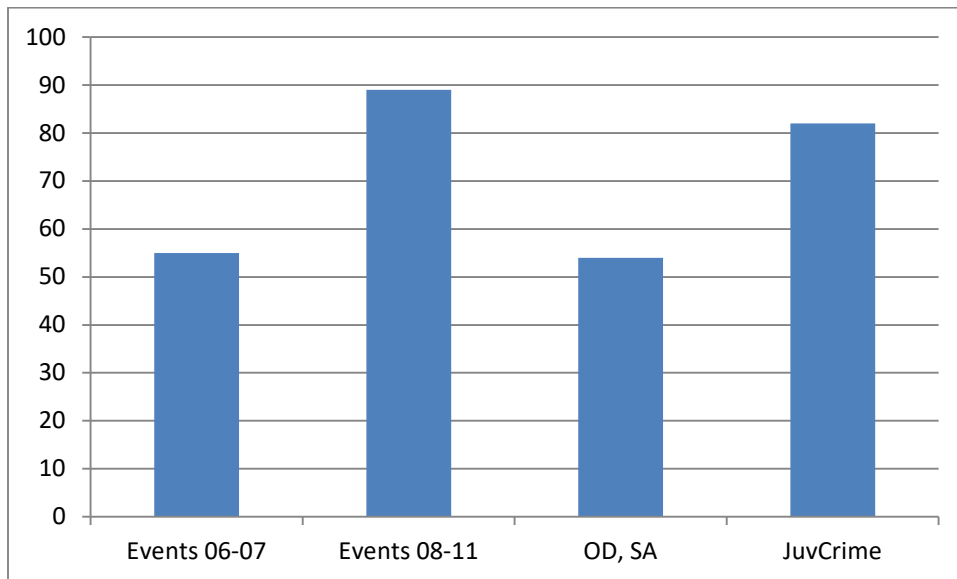
Data on serious (Part I) youth crime (from the Somerville Police Department) allow some estimation of the relation between youth crime and Teen Empowerment activities. In total between 2006 and 2011, there were 463 Part I

crimes committed by youth and 406 recorded instances of youth drug overdoses and suicide attempts (none resulting in death). During this same period, records indicate that Teen Empowerment’s Youth Organizers led 65 public events in the community. The variation in these events over time, by quarter, appears below. As the chart indicates, the frequency of youth crimes tends to rise in the summer and drop in the winter, but overall there was a sharp drop in youth crime after 2008. By contrast, the frequency of youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses has been fairly constant between 2006 and 2011, except for seasonal variation. The number of public events sponsored by Teen Empowerment in the community dipped in 2007-2008, but was been relatively constant at about 10-15 events each year from 2008 to 2011 (and similar to the level in 2006).



As the next chart indicates, youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses were spread evenly between East Somerville (defined as Wards 1-4) and West Somerville (defined as Wards 5-7), but youth crime was heavily concentrated in East Somerville. After 2007, Teen Empowerment closed its office in West Somerville and shifted the focus of its events to East Somerville, thus concentrating its efforts in the area where most youth crime occurred. The correspondence of this shift in the geographic focus of Teen Empowerment to concentrate almost exclusively on East Somerville and the decline in the number of youth crimes—which have largely occurred in East Somerville—is consistent with an impact of Teen Empowerment’s activities on youth involvement in crime.

Percentages in East Somerville: TE Events, Health Crises, Crimes



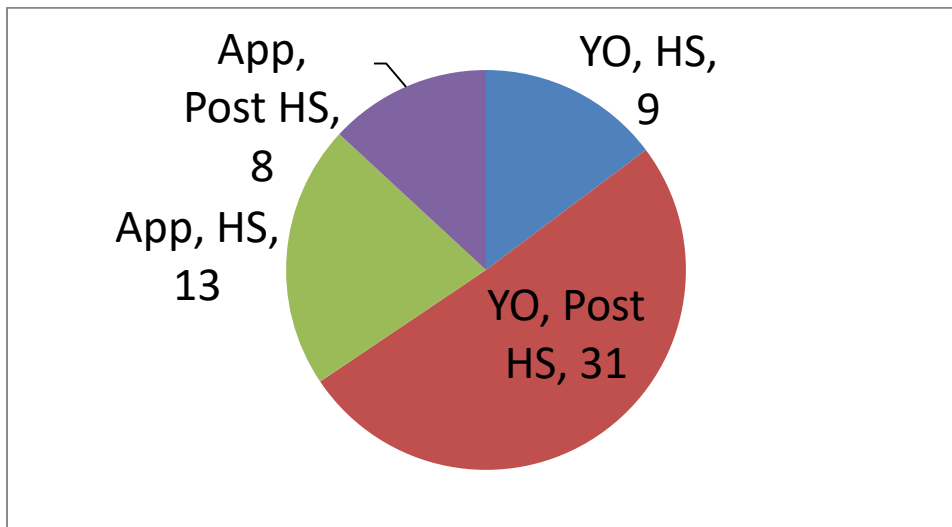
*TE Events 2006-2007, TE Events 2008-2011, Suicide Attempts+Drug Overdoses, 2006-2011, Part I Juvenile Crimes, 2006-2011.

**Suicide Attempts +Drug Overdoses occurring in Tufts University housing have been omitted from the totals.

Survey of Youth Organizers and Program Applicants

Structured interviews were completed with 40 current or former Youth Organizers, with most being high school graduates (see Figure 1). All of the nine current or former Youth Organizers interviewed in high school were YOs at the time of the interview, compared to only seven of the 31 post-high school interviewees in this category. Twenty-one (21) unsuccessful applicants were also interviewed, with the majority still in high school.

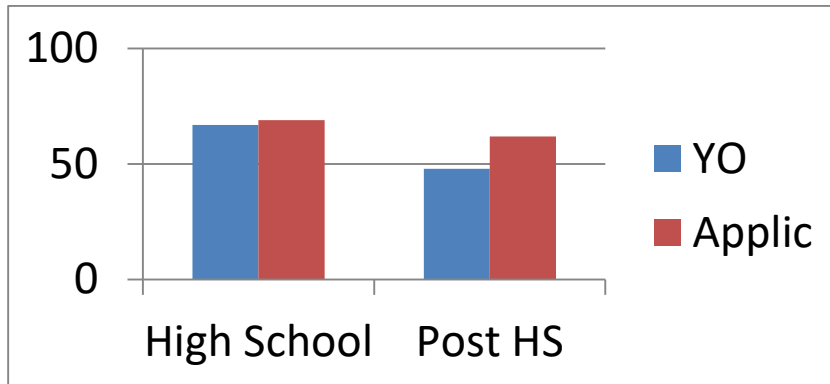
Figure 1
Survey Sample Composition



Both Youth Organizers and other applicants were somewhat more likely to be female, but there were no meaningful differences between the different sample groups (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

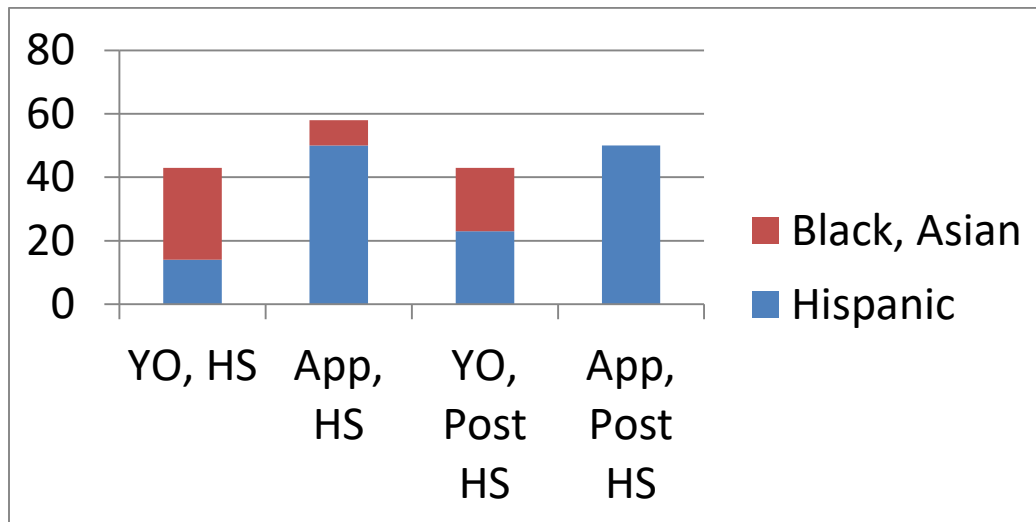
Percent Female



About half of each of the four groups belonged to a racial or ethnic minority, but the proportions of racial and ethnic minorities varied markedly between Youth Organizers and applicants (see Figure 3). About half of the unsuccessful applicants were Hispanic and almost none were African American or Asian. By contrast, only about 20 percent of the Youth Organizers were Hispanic, while another 20 percent were African American or Asian.

Figure 3

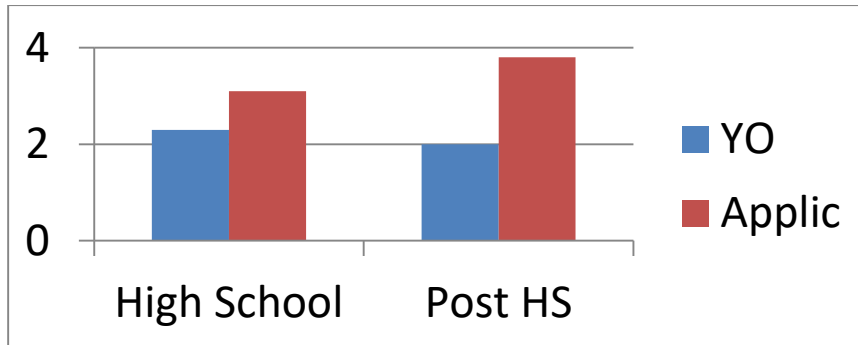
Race/Ethnicity



Youth Organizers were less likely than applicants to have at least one parent with some college, both for those still in high school and for those who had graduated (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

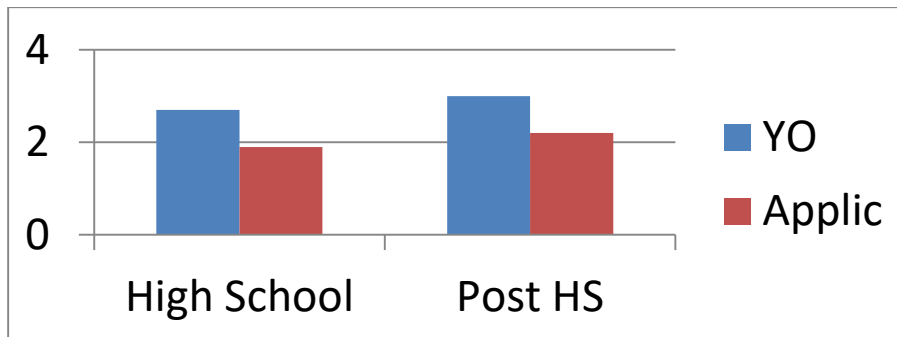
Any Parent with Some College



Youth Organizers were more likely than applicants to report having money problems on their mind, both for those in high school and after high school (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

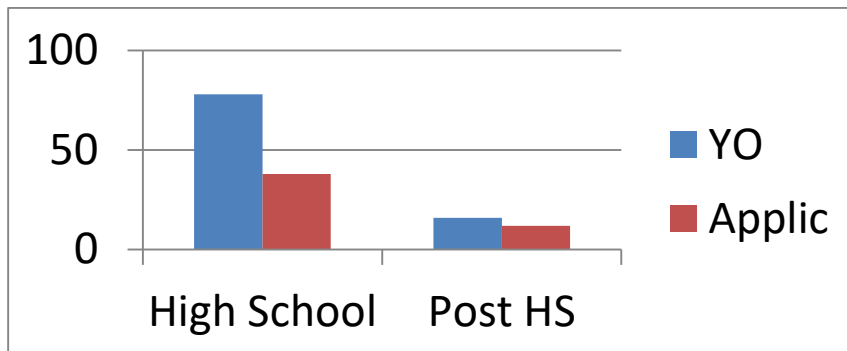
Money Problems on Mind



Youth Organizers in high school were much more likely than applicants to report attending church more than a few times a year (see Figure 6). Both groups in the post high school period reported much less church attendance and the difference between the two groups was no longer apparent.

Figure 6

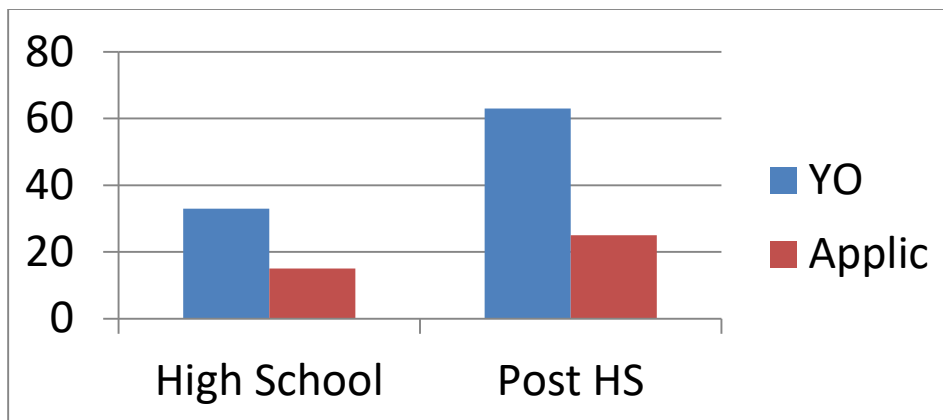
Attend Church More than Few Times/Year



Only a minority of both groups lived in a home they or their family owned when they were in high school, but Youth Organizers were much more likely to do so. This difference was even greater among those who had graduated from high school, with over 60 percent of the former Youth Organizers reporting living in a home they or their family owned, compared to just over 20 percent of the post-high school applicants (see figure 7).

Figure 7

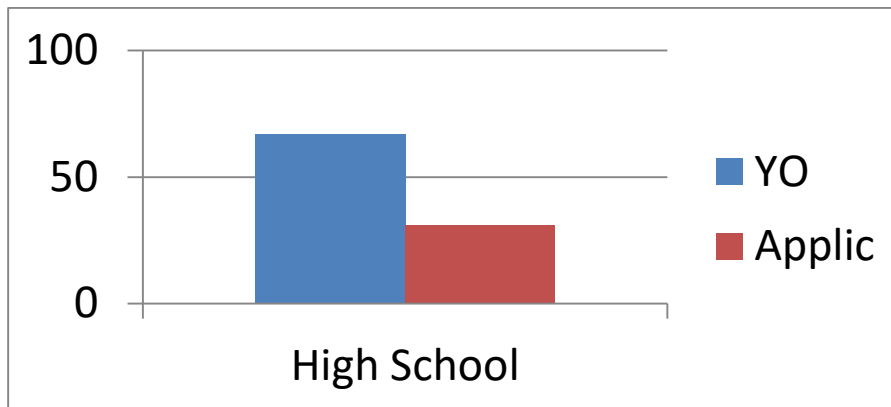
Family Owns Home



While they were in high school, the Youth Organizers reported spending more than twice as much time helping others than did applicants (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

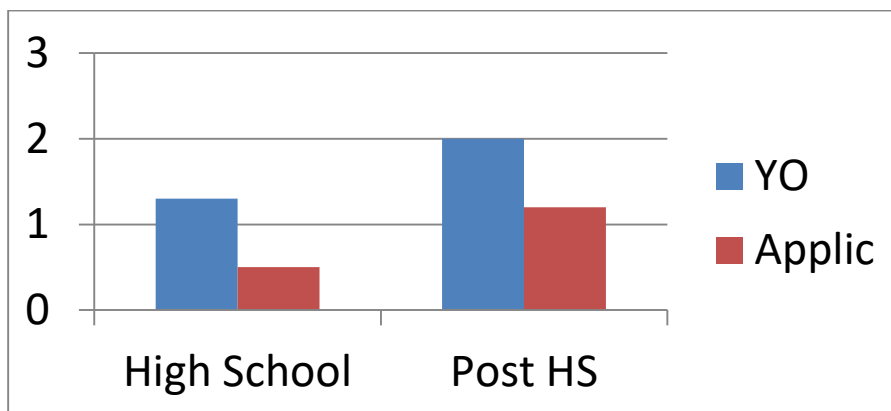
Time Spent Helping Others (Most, A Lot)



Youth Organizers were much more likely to give indications of excessive drinking than applicants while they were in high school (see Figure 9). Both groups post high school reported more drinking, but the difference between Youth Organizers and applicants was somewhat reduced.

Figure 9

Drink to Excess

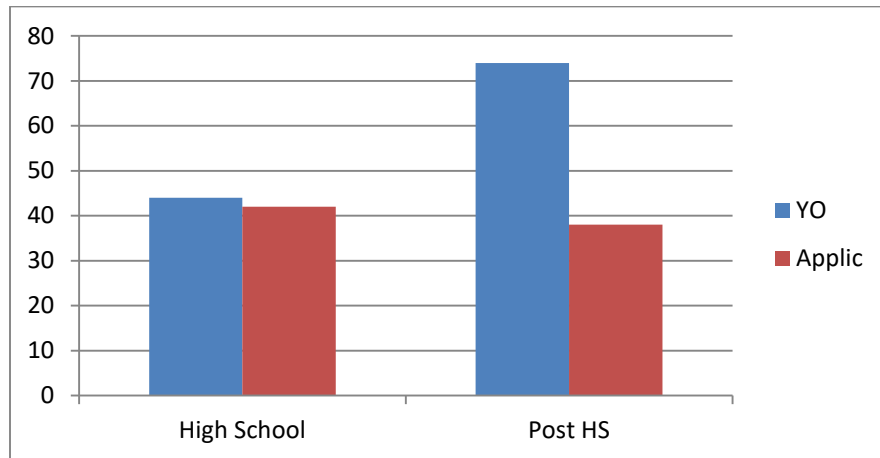


Self-reported use of illicit drugs, in the special sealed survey section, revealed a greater difference in the post-high school group between former Youth Organizers and applicants (see Figure 10). While self-reported illicit drug use was comparable for Youth Organizers and

applicants in high school (just over 40% reported use of any illicit drugs), the rate reported by former Youth Organizers was much higher (74%), while the rate for former applicants was not.

Figure 10

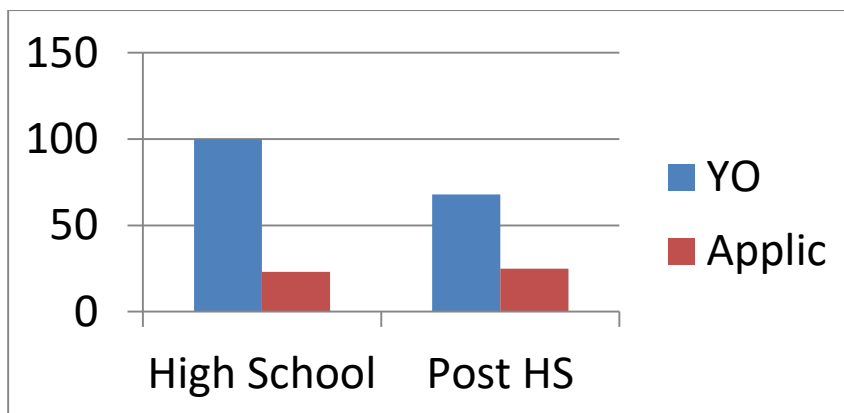
Any Use of Illicit Drugs



All of the Youth Organizers reported working for pay while they were in high school (and so working for Teen Empowerment), compared to just 20 percent of the applicants (see Figure 11). Although this difference was diminished somewhat among the high school graduates, that was due to a lower rate of employment about the former Youth Organizers, not to an appreciable rise in the applicant employment rate.

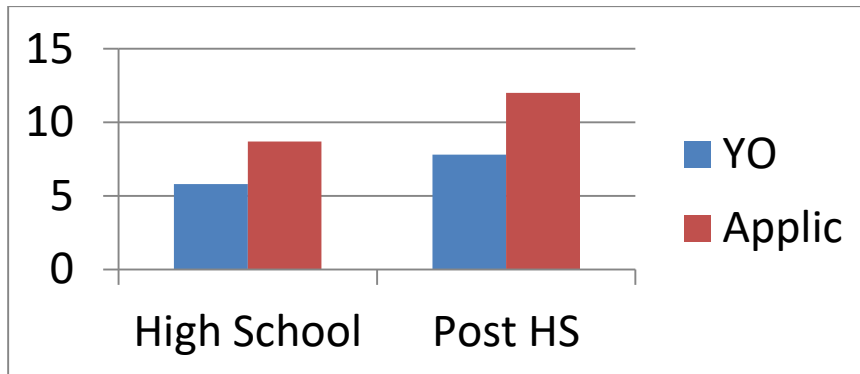
Figure 11

Work for Pay



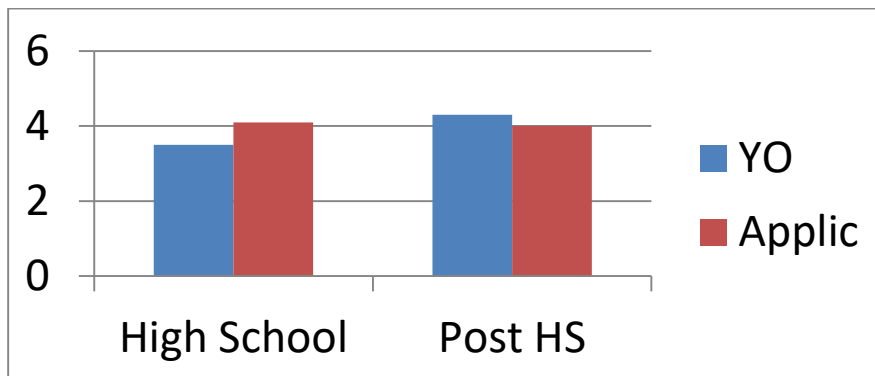
Life satisfaction was rated as lower by Youth Organizers than applicants. This difference occurred for both those in high school and for those in the post-high school groups (see Figure 12).

Figure 12
Life Satisfaction



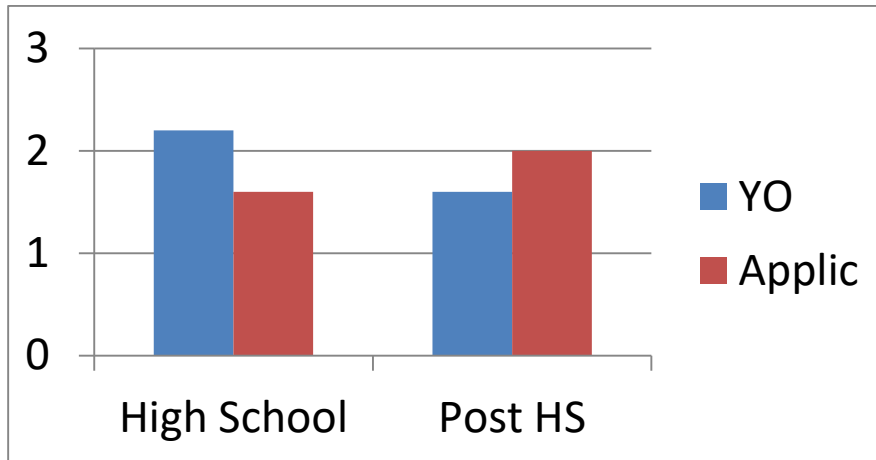
In high school, Youth Organizers indicated lower levels of self-esteem than applicants, but this disadvantage was reversed among those in the post-high school period (see Figure 13).

Figure 13
Self Esteem



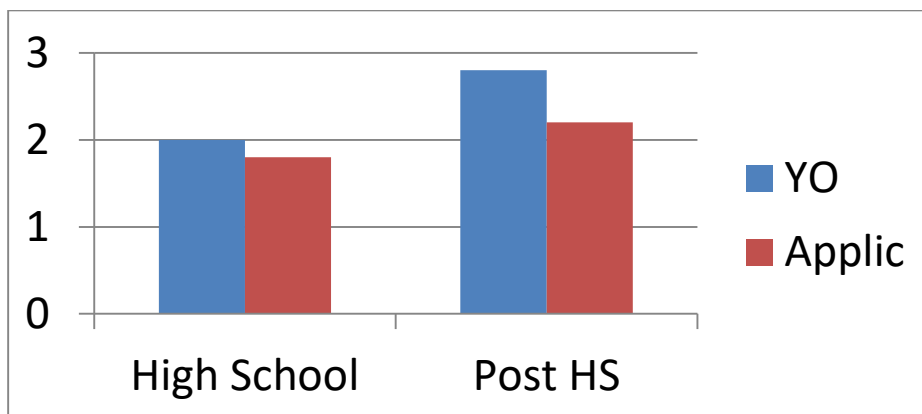
Youth Organizers reported more symptoms of depression in high school than did applicants, but this disadvantage was reversed among those in the post-high school groups (see Figure 14).

Figure 14
Symptoms of Depression



Those who were currently or formerly Youth Organizers reported more indications of substance abuse by their peers than did applicants (see Figure 15). There were no differences between the four groups that were statistically significant in terms of indicators of criminal involvement or fear of or awareness of violence, but reports of crime and of access to guns were somewhat more common among the Youth Organizers compared to applicants (figure not shown). About one-third of those in high school reported having been expelled or suspended, but this did not differ between Youth Organizers and applicants (figure not shown).

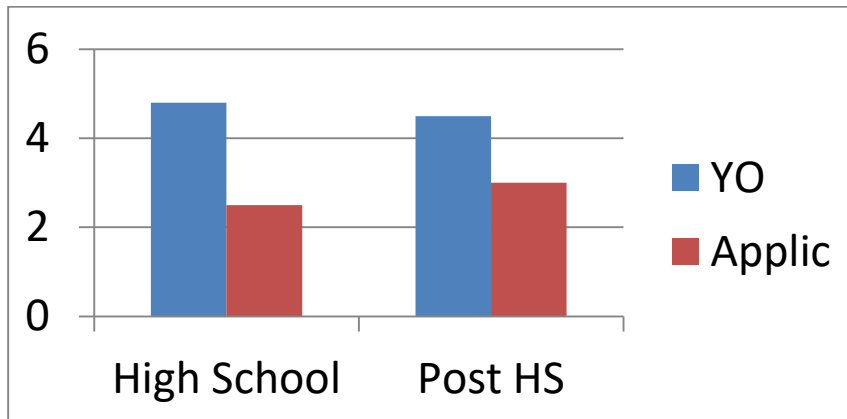
Figure 15
Peer Substance Abuse



Youth Organizers reported much higher levels of involvement in community activities than did applicants while both groups were in high school (see Figure 16). This difference was maintained after high school.

Figure 16

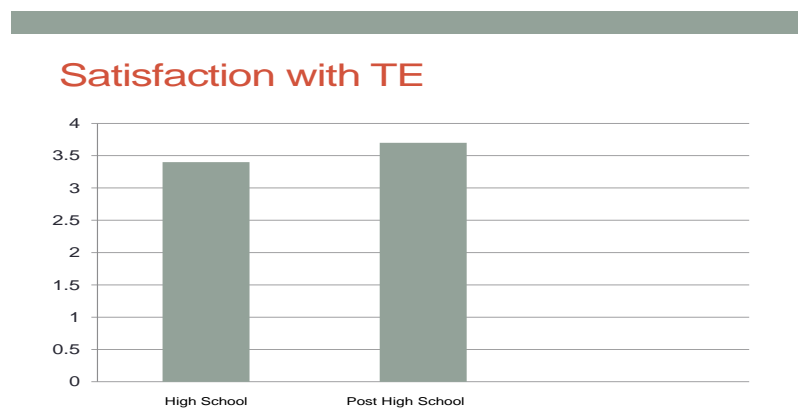
Number of Community Activities



Satisfaction was very high among current Youth Organizers and was not diminished among those who had graduated (see Figure 17).

Figure 17

Satisfaction with TE

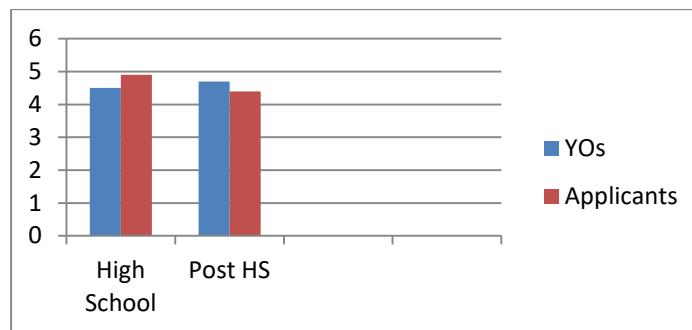


The youth generally displayed a positive orientation toward forgiveness, averaging between five and six on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagreeing (1) with statements

indicative of a forgiving attitude to strongly agreeing (7) with such statements. There was no indication of differences between organizers and applicants or between the high school and post-high school groups in this orientation, but the responses to specific questions within the set comprising the forgiveness scale were not highly related to each other, and so did not seem to be successful in capturing an overarching orientation (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

Agreement with Forgiveness



Multivariate analysis indicates that financial circumstances are related to some of the differences between Youth Organizers and applicants. More worries about money are associated with more drinking, less time helping others, and higher satisfaction with Teen Empowerment. However, differences in liking for self and life satisfaction between Youth Organizers and applicants are not explained by money differences or any demographic indicators.

Discussion

Findings presented from the observations, interviews, and survey analysis provide many indications of an effective program process and positive program impacts on individual participants and within the community.

Observations

Observations of the program in action revealed an effective approach to selecting applicants, building group cohesion, developing individual talents, and engaging community members. The different processes involved in this approach were carried out systematically by enthusiastic and committed staff, adhering to guidelines that ensured continuity in operations and impacts even as personnel changed over time. In session after session, the Teen Empowerment approach engaged youth, built supportive relations among them and with the adult staff, focused their attention on challenges in their own lives and problems in their community, and encouraged them to devise actions to improve their circumstances and those of others in the community. Not every social interaction was supportive and not every community event was successful, but staff drew valuable lessons from even the disappointments in a way that allowed those experiences to be as instructive as the much more common successes.

The lengthy group-oriented selection process was effective in identifying youth who represented different dimensions of the community, in revealing youth orientations toward others, and in challenging applicants to reveal their potential as social leaders. The observational notes also revealed growth of group spirit and support as a new cohort of Youth Organizers came together as well as a gradual process of individual change. Exercises in each group session reinforced the importance of confronting differences, finding common ground, and achieving valued goals. Staff turned differences of opinion into valuable learning opportunities about one's own and other's perspectives. The value of love and forgiveness was a frequent theme and there were many examples of youth developing more loving relations with others and forgiving police and members of rival groups with whom they had had conflicts. The structure for Teen Empowerment group sessions and the variety of approaches used to facilitate group engagement

were successful in keeping interest levels high and continuing to strengthen mutual respect and cooperation. There were many examples of Youth Organizers growing in self-confidence and ability to engage others.

Events

A marked reduction in youth violence (Part I crimes) occurred in Somerville during the years after Teen Empowerment began its work in that city. The timing of the most dramatic reduction in the youth crime rate occurred after Teen Empowerment closed its office in West Somerville and focused almost all of its community events in the East Somerville, where most youth crime occurs. The numbers of youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses have not changed markedly.

Interviews

Interviews with staff indicated that Youth Organizers were empowered by their involvement in Teen Empowerment and developed greater confidence in their own abilities, as well as greater sensitivity to community concerns. Many observed growing sensitivity to others' perspectives and willingness to reconsider their own orientations. Staff were themselves highly committed to their jobs—and those who had left largely treasured their experiences while working for Teen Empowerment—and they found the experience of working at Teen Empowerment to be personally transformative. There were many indications in the staff interviews of development of greater skill in leading groups and planning programs.

Community leaders were selected for interviews because of their liaison role in relations between their own organizations and Teen Empowerment. They offered a great many positive comments about Teen Empowerment's community role, universally lauding the talents of Teen Empowerment's staff and the efforts of the Youth Organizers. Some pointed to the role of Teen

Empowerment in responding to the problem of youth suicide, most appreciated the leadership of Teen Empowerment's staff in the Somerville Youth Network, and all praised the quality and scope of the annual Peace Conference. Although some expressed concern about the extent to which Teen Empowerment had engaged effectively with other youth-oriented organizations in Somerville, many comments indicated that in recent years Teen Empowerment staff had been very collaborative with and supportive of other organizations and that they played a critical role in coordinating youth services. Some argued that Teen Empowerment should be guided by a longer-term strategy to change conditions for Somerville youth, rather than relying primarily on each new cohort of Youth Organizers to develop community events and placing singular emphasis on the success of the Peace Conference. However, others remarked on a positive “ripple effect” of Teen Empowerment activities in the community, including improving understanding and forgiveness in relations between youth and police, among youth from different groups, and even to improve love and appreciation between parents and children.

Survey Analysis

The survey analysis included a systematic comparison between youth selected as Youth Organizers and those who applied to the program but were not accepted, while both groups were still in high school.

The two groups were similar in many respects, but there were clear indications of the impact of the program's selection process. Rather than choosing youth from more advantaged backgrounds, Teen Empowerment had hired as Youth Organizers high school students who reported more family financial problems, who were in poorer psychological health, and who evinced more indicators of drinking problems. The YOs and applicants in high school did not differ in terms of indicators of criminal propensity or exposure to violence. These differences

suggest that the program had succeeded in hiring youth who had problems like those on which the program focuses, with more needs in some areas than those not selected for the program. These selection outcomes were thus consistent with a process in which Youth Organizers' social ties would provide connections to youth in need of program services. In contrast to their financial and health disadvantages, the Youth Organizers appeared to be more stable in their community and to have a more pro-social orientation. Of course, they were also much more likely to be working for pay (since they were being paid through Teen Empowerment) and they were much more involved in community activities.

After they left high school, the survey analysis indicated improved psychological health among former Youth Organizers, compared to Applicants, and continued advantages in terms of working for pay and participating in community activities. The post-high school former Youth Organizers were also very satisfied with their Teen Empowerment experiences. However, there was no improvement in drinking behavior in the post-high school Youth Organizer group, compared to Applicants, and some indication of more use of illicit drugs.

Recommendations

The analysis supports several recommendations:

- Maintain the program's basic model. The analysis suggests that the program is successful working with varied but often disadvantaged youth and engaging them in a program process that has multiple positive impacts.
- Infuse program elements in other programs. The Teen Empowerment processes of selection, group activities, and behavior contracts may each be useful in other youth-oriented programs.

- Increase publicity about community events. Data collected about events indicates success in engaging community members, but not all leaders of youth-oriented organizations receive information about them.
- Heighten attention to substance abuse, perhaps extending the current system of periodic “check ins” about personal problems and adding some group exercises that focus on substance abuse problems.
- Support connections for mental health counseling. The program itself seems to have positive value for mental health problems, but the prevalence of feelings of distress suggests that mental health counseling options should be publicized.
- Maintain the system of behavior contracts. Although this a less publicized aspect of the Teen Empowerment approach, the weekly review sessions about contract violations play a critical role in demonstrating the value of peer support and re-orienting youth behavior.
- Consider special needs of Hispanic youth. About one in five of the Youth Organizers in the survey were Hispanic, which is about what would be expected based on the proportion of Hispanics in Somerville. However, more than half of the unsuccessful applicants were Hispanic. This discrepancy suggests that more Hispanic youth may be interested in Teen Empowerment and may have needs like those on which Teen Empowerment is focused, or perhaps that there is better publicity about the program among Hispanic youth. These possibilities should be investigated.
- Increase publicity about Teen Empowerment’s contributions to the community. Teen Empowerment facilitates monthly meetings of a network of youth oriented community organizations in Somerville (the Somerville Youth Workers’ Network) and plays an important role in providing youth-oriented services. Leaders of other youth-oriented

community organizations may benefit from receiving more information about these activities and working with Teen Empowerment to maximize program effectiveness.

- Consider developing and reviewing long-term strategic goals to guide the design of some portion of community events each year. For example, some interviewees felt that police-youth relations had improved enough to warrant lessening the frequency of events with police and others felt that a focus on risk behaviors among younger youth should be given increasing attention.
- Maintain active relations and consider shared planning with other youth-oriented organizations. The current collaborative practices of Somerville's Teen Empowerment staff have been very effective in helping to enhance the effectiveness of and communications among youth-oriented organizations in the community, but some reports of strains in the past indicate the importance of continually nourishing and evaluating inter-organizational ties.

Limitations and Opportunities

The analysis is also limited by several problems that suggest the need for additional research.

- Measuring attitudes toward forgiveness has been a challenge in previous research and was so in this study. Questions in a previously used index did not achieve an adequate level of inter-item reliability and responses to them did not appear to indicate a program impact. Additional measures should be tested in future research.
- Assessment of ability to love others in this research was indirect, but the interviews did provide evidence of improved quality of social ties and of increased parent-child

attachment as a result of program participation. More intensive analysis of observational notes from program activities should add to this evidence.

- The analysis of interviews and observational notes provided many indications of community impact, but a more ambitious research design involving extensive data collection in the community would be required to come to more definitive conclusions.
- The indications of program impact on participants that was provided by the survey data analysis could be explained by preexisting differences in the cohorts of youth who applied to and participated in Teen Empowerment at different times, as well as by changes that might have occurred in the youth irrespective of their participation in Teen Empowerment. To provide stronger evidence of program impact on participants, the research should be extended with a longitudinal design that includes randomized assignment of apparently qualified applicants for program admission. Following youth from the beginning to the end of their participation as Youth Organizers and comparing changes in this group to a group of initial program applicants that is equated in all respects through random assignment would allow much more confident conclusions of program impact.
- An important additional question to consider is how long any impact of participation in Teen Empowerment extends? Adding a follow-up interview with both former Youth Organizers and unsuccessful applicants some years after high school would be necessary to assess the lasting effect of program participation.
- Test for differential benefits for different youth. A larger sample would be required to identify differential benefits of program participation for different types of youth. Such

identification could lead to improvements in program recruitment strategy and other changes in program operations that would maximize program impact for different youth

- Evaluate components of program process. Longer-term research would allow identification of the value of such program components as the selection process, daily team activities, and behavioral contracts.
- Extend research on program impact in community. A survey of a large community sample or of a sample of the high school student body would help to identify the program's impact in the larger community.

Conclusions

Teen Empowerment uses an asset-based approach to reorient at-risk youth and reduce violence and improve social relations in their communities. The organization's systematic approach to identifying and selecting at-risk youth with high potential for positive social engagement and ties into diverse segments of the youth population succeeds in attracting as Youth Organizers young people who can benefit from the program and influence their communities.

Both ongoing interaction between staff and youth and the weekly review of behavior contract violations help to bring to the surface attitudes and behaviors that are conducive to conflict and reorient them in a positive direction. Youth model in their relations with others in the program the values of love and forgiveness and receive in return a high level of social support that many experience as another—or missing—"family" in their lives. As a result, youth grow in self confidence and social skills while in the program, even while also receiving pay for their efforts.

Teen Empowerment's impact seems to have extended beyond the youth hired as Organizers to the levels of violence and the quality of life in the surrounding community. Youth "learn by doing" about how to engage in community life as they organize community events and recruit other participants. The pro-social orientations and behaviors that Teen Empowerment develops spread through Youth Organizers' social networks into the larger community and the events Teen Empowerment sponsors draw attention to critical problems that local youth confront. The annual Peace Conference has given many youth who have not achieved recognition in school or sports the opportunity to develop and display their talents in a public forum as well as to demonstrate to community leaders the value of their perspectives. Greater attention to youth concerns and increased respect for their abilities indicate lasting impact, while a lessened frequency of youth crime is consistent with the focus of Teen Empowerment's efforts. The remarks of many community leaders affirm Teen Empowerment's central role in meeting the needs of at-risk youth in Somerville.

Teen Empowerment has succeeded in developing and maintaining an approach to engaging at-risk youth and reducing youth violence that can serve as a model for other communities. Its systematic approach to selection, engagement, and transformation provide the foundation for individual achievement and community change.

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