POSITIVE YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN

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I am grateful to the youth, staff, and partners of the Brownsville Community Justice Center for welcoming me into their space and community. It is an impossible task to represent your experiences and wisdom in any written document or study, but I hope that I was able to portray all of your individual and collective strengths—as well as some of the circumstances that youth and community members are working together to improve. This thesis could not have been achieved without your time, your honesty, and your powerful voice.

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ABSTRACT

Community development programs and practices have been led by a variety of programs and organizations including government agencies, community development corporations (CDCs), other nonprofit organizations and community leaders. However, the most important stakeholder, the community, was not involved in the decision making or implementation of many of these initiatives. This has had significant consequences to low-income families and communities as some of these initiatives have perpetuated negative health, educational and economic conditions and disparities for people of color and poor neighborhoods across the nation.

To address the power imbalance in the planning of poor neighborhoods, the fields of city planning and community development have started to incorporate participatory practices. However, rarely do participatory practices give power to residents by allowing them to be decision makers in the planning of community development strategies. How can planning become transformative and consider capacity building, community empowerment and a true redistribution of power from professionals to community members?

This thesis considers how community-based organizations (CBOs) have acted as transformative planners by creating spaces for residents to participate in the decision-making and implementation of community improvement projects. It considers the work of the Brownsville Community Justice Center and its partners in facilitating resident involvement, specifically for youth of color engaged in the juvenile or criminal justice systems, in the improvement of a disfranchised community. This thesis seeks to understand the value of involving youth, who are at a critical stage in their development, in community improvement efforts.

While community development has been moving toward more inclusive strategies by government and planning professionals, this research will bring attention to the role of community-based organizations and neighborhood youth in improving their local community. Furthermore, this research speaks to the need for planners to create processes that introduce, engage, and incorporate residents in community development approaches so that they can be in positions to make informed decisions for their community.
Community development programs and practices have been addressing neighborhood poverty since the late nineteenth century (von Hoffman, 2012). Since the beginning, improving life for individuals and families through community development has required a comprehensive and holistic approach that supports housing and sanitation improvements, increases in educational and employment opportunities and supportive welfare measures (von Hoffman). For that reason, community development initiatives have been led by a variety of programs and organizations including government agencies, community development corporations (CDCs), other nonprofit organizations and community leaders. However, the most important stakeholder, the community, was not involved in the decision making or implementation of many of these initiatives. Throughout most of community development’s history, decisions on how to improve disenfranchised communities, many of which are communities of color, were largely dictated by policymakers, planners, and social reform professionals (von Hoffman; Massey, 2013). While these professionals would collaborate with community leaders, ordinary community members were not engaged in decision making processes. This has had significant consequences to low-income families and communities. While community development strategies have improved the living conditions for residents in many neighborhoods, it also has a past history of perpetuating negative health, educational and economic conditions and disparities for people of color and poor neighborhoods across the nation (Massey; von Hoffman).

To address the power imbalance in the planning of poor neighborhoods, the fields of city planning and community development have started to incorporate participatory practices. However, rarely do participatory practices give power to residents by allowing them to be decision makers in the planning of community development strategies. On the other hand, community-based organizations (CBOs), including CDCs and other nonprofits, have started to fill this gap between professionals and community members by creating spaces for residents to participate in the decision-making and implementation of community improvement projects. For example, some CBOs have gone beyond traditional youth programs to incorporate group-based processes for youth to have meaningful discussions about the challenges they face in their communities and how they can achieve greater control over their environment, their basic rights, and their lives (Checkoway, 2011; Christens, 2011). These programs may include youth involvement in community improvement projects, youth organizing to challenge structural barriers and institutions, and discussions about the importance of civic engagement.

This thesis looks closely at one of these organizations, the Brownsville Community Justice Center, to understand the role that they have played in facilitating resident involvement, specifically for youth of color engaged in the juvenile or criminal justice system, in the improvement of a disenfranchised community. This thesis seeks to understand the value of involving youth, who are at a critical stage in their development, in community improvement efforts. This research will have many implications for the planning and community development field. While community development has been moving toward more inclusive strategies by government and planning professionals, this research will help bring attention to the role of community-based organizations and neighborhood youth in improving their local community. This is a crucial time to assess the role and impact of non-profit organizations that perform community improvement projects — especially those supported primarily through government funding — because of recent government reductions to social and economic programs. Furthermore, this research will be an advocacy tool to encourage planners to create processes that introduce, engage, and incorporate residents in community development approaches so that they can be in positions to make informed decisions for their community.

Note for consideration: As you read this thesis, please keep in mind that it is not the intention of this research to share a single story or narrative of Brownsville or its residents. Brownsville is the home to many residents and non-profit organizations that are actively engaged in making positive changes to their community. Please keep this in consideration as you read this document.

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INTRODUCTION
Urban development, known as urban renewal, also known as urban renewal, gave the government permission to demolish areas that were designated as blighted and give them to private developers to rebuild, while the public housing programs was believed to help the poor by providing them with high quality low-income housing. Ultimately, these programs were not always used with good intentions. In many cases, public housing was used by city officials to relocate low-income people of color further from wealthy neighborhoods, as well as to create and maintain racial segregation (von Hoffman). Furthermore, not enough low-income housing was built to account for those destroyed by urban renewal in New York City, even with the increases in public housing (von Hoffman). These superficial attempts to address neighborhood poverty had significant long-term consequences for low-income families and communities including the community of Brownsville.

From the 1910s to the 1940s, Brownsville, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, was a poor neighborhood with the nation’s highest concentration of Jewish immigrants. It was very well known for its main commercial corridor, Pitkin Avenue, which attracted shoppers from all over Brooklyn (Bellafonte, 2013). The Municipal Art Society of New York, n.d.). However, because it was still a poor neighborhood with deteriorating housing, Robert Moses, an urban planner known for his use of urban renewal and slum clearance, used Brownsville to relocate people displaced from other large-scale development projects in New York City in the late 1940s. Moses and former Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s primary interest in relocating poor residents to Brownsville was to maintain the deteriorating conditions of the neighborhood. Mayor La Guardia stated that the public housing was located in “areas where there is not the slightest possibility of rehabilitation through private enterprise” (Bellafonte, para. 9).

This led to large amounts of public housing being built in Brownsville around this time. Race was also a strong motivation — Moses stated that the public housing would be specifically for blacks displaced from urban renewal projects. Moses’ construction of public housing was the main reason that the African American population replaced the Jewish population in Brownsville by the 1960s (The Municipal Art Society of New York; Vitullo-Martin, 2013).

The residents of Brownsville were not silent on the racial discrimination that was apparent in education, employment, housing, and government services. Following the civil rights movement, Brownsville had a number of political demonstrations and riots in 1967 and 1971 over education and cuts to public assistance, Medicaid and anti-poverty programs (Bellafonte; Vitullo-Martin). However, these actions were often met by racial tensions, police hostility, business closures and in 1971 fires spreading throughout the neighborhood (Bellafonte; Vitullo-Martin). Furthermore, in the 1970s, New York City was in a fiscal crisis which reduced city services and funding that left Brownsville without the necessary government support or resources (Vitullo-Martin).

The Center for Court Innovation (CCI) was established in 1993 to help “justice system aid victims, reduce crime, strengthen neighborhoods, and improve public trust in justice” (Center for Court Innovation, n.d., Who We Are section). CCI’s model has three areas of work — research, demonstration projects and expert assistance. The organization conducts a wide-range of research to create a foundation for its demonstration projects, which are programs that use innovative strategies to address the criminal justice systems. The third area of work is expert assistance, which CCI provides to other organizations and researchers.

CCI was approached by District Attorney Charles J. Hynes and Rosanne Hagerty of the Brownsville Partnership to replicate one of their demonstration projects, a Justice Center, in Brownsville (J. Brodick, personal communication, February 2014). The CCI survey that was conducted in 2010 was used as the foundation for the Brownsville Community Justice Center. It showed that people had negative perceptions of youth as a whole and that there was a strong need for youth programming. Furthermore, residents voiced strong concerns about violence and its impact on safety. In 2014, James Brodick, the Project Director of the Brownsville Community Justice Center and former Project Director of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, was determined to address the overall concerns from the survey and to build trust with community residents by providing a safe and positive place for youth to go and creating opportunities for neighborhood improvement (J. Brodick).

The Brownsville Community Justice Center does this primarily through two programs—the Brownsville Youth Court and Justice Community. The youth in these programs are all involved in community improvement projects during their engagement at the Brownsville Community Justice Center. Members in the Youth Court provide a service to the community by playing a role in reducing crime and preventing peers from entering the juvenile justice system. These youth and the youth in Justice Community also participate in working at food pantries and kitchens, painting murals, building community gardens, participating in street or park cleanup and volunteering at community events. The Brownsville Community Justice Center has two main beliefs of the importance in engaging youth in the improvement of Brownsville. First, it helps improve pride and increases positive community connections of youth, as shared by a case manager of Justice Community:

**BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN**

**History.** Community development programs have a past history of neglecting and doing further harm to poor communities and communities of color. An important example is the Housing Act of 1949, which created two programs aimed to reduce neighborhood poverty—the urban redevelopment program and the public housing program. Urban renewal, also known as urban renewal, gave the government permission to demolish areas that were designated as blighted and give them to private developers to rebuild, while the public housing program was believed to help the poor by providing them with high quality low-income housing. Ultimately, these programs were not always used with good intentions. In many cases, public housing was used by city officials to relocate low-income people of color further from wealthy neighborhoods, as well as to create and maintain racial segregation (von Hoffman). Furthermore, not enough low-income housing was built to account for those destroyed by urban renewal in New York City, even with the increases in public housing (von Hoffman). These superficial attempts to address neighborhood poverty had significant long-term consequences for low-income families and communities including the community of Brownsville.

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**Current Narrative.** As a result of this history, Brownsville is reported to have the highest concentration of public housing in the nation (Bellafonte; Vitullo-Martin). Approximately one-third of Brownsville residents, or about 21,000 people, lived in public housing in 2013 (Bellafonte, para. 8). The population demographics have not changed significantly and in 2010, the population of Brownsville was 76.1% black, 20.0% Hispanic, and only 0.8% white (NYC Department of City Planning, 2010).

The neighborhood of Brownsville has a similar narrative to other neighborhoods in the U.S. that are disenfranchised. Families have had more stressors than they should due to a lack of employment opportunities, lack of educational opportunities (until fairly recently), and a lack of private market and government investment in the community. As a result, Brownsville has had low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, high poverty rates, and high crime rates in comparison to Brooklyn and New York City, although steadily improving (Center for the Study of Brooklyn, 2012).

However, despite these challenges, the people of the community have been resilient and hopeful and have built many of their own resources — making Brownsville the home to many churches, food pantries and kitchens, nonprofit organizations, a recreation center, community-led farmers markets and shops along Pitkin Avenue. In 2010, over 800 residents completed a community survey conducted by the Center for Court Innovation to provide their perspective on the neighborhood’s strengths and challenges. In the survey, community residents spoke about a strong connection to their neighbors and a desire to help one another out. Survey respondents stated that their strengths included “friendly people who come together in a time of crisis, churches, [and] everyone coming together for the ‘Old-Timers Day’ barbecue.” Brownsville’s close access to public transportation, the commercial district on Pitkin Avenue, and a strong police presence were also listed as some of the neighborhood’s strengths. However, although strong police presence was listed as a strength, there were still 52% of respondents who felt that the relationship between police and the community was negative.

**The Brownsville Community Justice Center**

The Center for Court Innovation (CCI) was established in 1993 to help “justice system aid victims, reduce crime, strengthen neighborhoods, and improve public trust in justice” (Center for Court Innovation, n.d., Who We Are section). CCI’s model has three areas of work — research, demonstration projects and expert assistance. The organization conducts a wide-range of research to create a foundation for its demonstration projects, which are programs that use innovative strategies to address the criminal justice systems. The third area of work is expert assistance, which CCI provides to other organizations and researchers.

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"I think when you are connected to your community in a way that you feel responsible for it, where there’s ownership of it, where you’re proud of it, and you are an active participant in the development and the maintenance of that community — then when negative things are happening in your community they tend to affect you because you feel connected to that community. So I think it’s important for the participant of Justice Community to foster that sense of pride. And that’s difficult here because there’s a lot of nihilism in this neighborhood because of the conditions that have been going on here for so long. Trying to foster that sense of pride and develop that connection that they have to their community — it motivates them a little bit. We do a project with Groundwork where we do large murals in the community, for them to be able to walk past that mural and say, ‘I did that. I had an involvement in that. I participated in making the beautification of my neighborhood.’ When someone wants to come by and do graffiti on their mural, that makes them feel some kind of way now. They want to participate in keeping their community nice. I think that’s the reason why it’s important to make sure that they are connected to the community and they did do community work, and they fostered the pride themselves and their community (Case Manager, personal communication, January 2014).”

Second, youth participation in community improvement projects benefit the community as a whole because of the finished work those projects. This includes the NYC Police Department, NYC Department of Probation, the Center for Economic Opportunity, Mayor’s Young Men’s Initiative, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (Center for Court Innovations, n.d.; B. Smith, personal communication, January 2014).

“We are constantly challenging ourselves to say how can we do programming with our young people that also the people who have never set foot into this building can benefit from. And whether or not that’s the beautification of a park, whether or not that’s a mural, whether or not that’s just going out and doing surveying — the point of the matter is that we want the work that’s happening inside with the individual to go into the outside. And then the other piece of it, it’s just by putting young people in positions that they’re doing positive stuff — that has an influence on others. When a young person does something wrong because of peer pressure a young person also has an opportunity to do something right because of peer pressure. And I mean that in the best way. You see a person who has a job and his purple shirt feels proud of what they do, they ask, ‘What is this? How do I get involved? (J. Brodick)’”

The Brownsville Community Justice Center is still a developing and expanding project that is trying new approaches and testing them to see what works (J. Brodick). They are not leading a community development initiative within Brownsville with planning professionals or as a comprehensive planning strategy. However, their work allows youth to be involved in community improvement and development efforts as individual projects, and more importantly with a range of leadership and decision-making opportunities, which improves sense of pride.

It is important to note that the Brownsville Community Justice Center relies heavily on the partnership with government entities who provide youth referrals and/or funding. This includes the NYC Police Department, NYC Department of Probation, the Center for Economic Opportunity, Mayor’s Young Men’s Initiative, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (Center for Court Innovations, n.d.; B. Smith, personal communication, January 2014).

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Community Empowerment in Community Development Practices

Youth and resident involvement in community improvement projects is an important consideration of this research because it has the potential to lessen the psychological impact of generational trauma and oppression (Wilson, 2010). People of color and their communities have endured “slavery, Jim Crow segregation, school segregation, legalized discrimination, residential segregation, the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining of black neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s, the construction of public housing projects in poor black urban neighborhoods, employer discrimination, and other racial acts and processes (Wilson, p. 203).” Furthermore, current policies and institutions have perpetuated the inequalities in educational attainment, public health and poverty that are associated with place (Massey, 2013). These inequalities and the disadvantages of a neighborhood have created a system that is very difficult to leave. A longitudinal study of communities of color found that more than 70% of black children who grew up in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods remained in similar neighborhoods as adults (Wilson). Furthermore, since the 1970s, a majority of these families had lived in the poorest neighborhoods for consecutive generations, compared to only 7% of white families. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright of the University of Wisconsin has stated that experiences that are systematic over generations can cause psychological states that become normative, for example, the norms of resignation and hopelessness (Wilson).

This brings importance to organizations like the Brownsville Community Justice Center and its partners that have created settings and provided tools for residents to restore the belief that they have control and influence in various aspects of their lives. The work of these organizations has the ability to empower a group of residents by helping them to find the power in their own abilities and voice. The Zimmerman model of psychological empowerment is the most widely used in research studies (Christens, 2011; Peterson, 2011) and has been defined by Maton (2000) as a “group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization (p. 5).” Community empowerment then, is about the participation, development and capacity building of marginalized groups, which can occur through technical assistance, mobilization to effect positive systemic change, and transforming neighborhoods (Eisen, 1994). Having youth and residents be decision-makers in community development practices is not an innovative idea. Academics and researchers have been discussing the relationship between community empowerment and community development for some time. In a speech at the 1996 Planners Network Conference, Marie Kennedy states, “a good planning project should leave a community not just with more immediate ‘products’—e.g., housing—but also with an increased capacity to meet future needs (para. 2).” Kennedy continues to state that community development has to take into consideration capacity building through combining material development with the development of people: “Real development, as I understand it, necessarily involves increasing a community’s capacity for taking control of its own development-building within the community critical thinking and planning abilities, as well as concrete skills, so that development projects and planning processes can be replicated by community members in the future (para. 2).”

Kennedy describes this as transformative planning, a form of participatory planning that empowers the community to act in its own interests. Participatory planning suggests that there is a redistribution of power but instead it is often superficial and can obscure true power imbalances (Christens, 2012). However, transformative planning goes one step further to say, how can we redistribute power (Kennedy, 2011)? Christens calls for community development practices to identify and sustain processes that enhance the psychological empowerment of community members and that the result would be more than economic and would result in a “wellness, resilience and sustainable community power,” and this is the heart of transformative planning (p. 346).

In Kennedy’s professional experience, planning practitioners on a community level often work in a transformative and collaborative way. However, Kennedy argues that planners on a city, state, and national level need to have the same understanding of what community development should look like. These are the planners that are “framing public problem definitions and policies, writing legislation, designing governmental programs, prioritizing funding targets for private foundations and governmental agencies, or preparing requests for proposals, to have a shared understanding of what constitutes community development (1996, Role of the Planner section).”
Role of Nonprofit Organizations

Planners are not the only source for community-level empowerment. Community-based organizations have played a crucial role in neighborhoods including Brownsville and have had to find solutions for the lack of “municipal services, political representation, and employment and housing opportunities as well as changes in neighborhood composition and quality (Hum, 2010, p. 46).” Furthermore, CBOs have been knowledgeable of the cycle of poverty that has existed between families and their children because of the inherited disadvantages of a neighborhood. Traditionally, CBOs have done this by creating spaces for youth to develop knowledge and skills through educational and recreational programming but there are more and more organizations that are going beyond traditional programming to include empowering settings, processes and activities.

Projects like the Brownsville Community Justice Center offer more than traditional youth programming in that youth are able to participate in changing community conditions, decision-making processes, and having the youth take the primary lead. These settings have a dual role to simultaneously improve individual psychological processes, and having the youth take the primary lead. These settings to participate in changing community conditions, decision-making processes and activities. While program settings are needed to facilitate individual empowerment, the program participants — or youth, as in the case of the Brownsville Community Justice Center — become central to the empowerment of a community. Maton states that, “empowered members have a central role as 1) a direct embodiment of enhanced quality of community life due to individual citizen development and empowerment, 2) contributing to positive change through empowered member radiating influence, and 3) serving as a person power necessary for effective external organizational activities (p. 16).”

leadership development, sociopolitical development, and a sense of community” (Christens & Dolan, 2011, p. 538-540; Lapalme, 2013). In fact, a longitudinal study by Christens, et al., showed that community participation is also a strong predictor of psychological empowerment as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows that there are increases of psychological empowerment for youth and adults through community participation — however, it does not speak to the potential for the empowerment of a community. Figure 4 elaborates on the process of community empowerment. In the diagram, empowered organizational settings can influence the psychological empowerment of an individual who then has a radiating influence to their family and peers. Furthermore, and as it relates to the work of the Brownsville Community Justice Center, there is an additional radiating influence on community created by external organizational activities. While program settings are needed to facilitate individual empowerment, the program participants — or youth, as in the case of the Brownsville Community Justice Center — become central to the empowerment of a community. Maton states that, “empowered members have a central role as 1) a direct embodiment of enhanced quality of community life due to individual citizen development and empowerment, 2) contributing to positive change through empowered member radiating influence, and 3) serving as a person power necessary for effective external organizational activities (p. 16).”

Case Studies

CBOs have started the groundwork to what Kennedy refers to as transformative planning. Case studies from neighborhoods in New York City, NY, Boston, MA and San Bernardino, CA provide examples of successes and challenges in engaging residents in community development work and are relevant to the Brownsville Community Justice Center.

**Lower East Side.** In 1958, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin created Mobilization for Youth in the Lower East Side in New York City. The organization was created to address youth crime but similar to the perspective of CCL, Cloward and Ohlin believed that youth crime could be resolved by addressing community conditions and opportunities. The organization included job training, mental health counseling and educational programs. More relevant to this study, the organization also had a community development program that organized residents to create and advocate for sustainable solutions for their community. Mobilization for Youth’s community development program had activities that included “rent strikes, block clubs, voter registration, and school boycotts (Abraham, et. al, 2007, p. 13).”

The organization valued democratic group processes and believed that the knowledge of community residents was important. Historic meeting notes and documents from the organization stated that their purpose in the community development program and their overall work was to create “democratically functioning organisms, which helps itself as much as possible through its own resources (Oberham, et. al, p. 10).”

Mobilization for Youth was successful in organizing Lower East Side residents to address some of the structural issues facing their community. However, because the organization was funded by city and federal programs and because residents were challenging large institutions, there was strong criticism of the organization from schools, politicians and the city and federal government that left the community development program in a challenging state (Abraham, et. al, von Hoffman). Mobilization for Youth continues to operate in the Lower East Side but in a very different capacity — offering legal services to youth in the juvenile justice system. Roxbury and North Dorchester. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) was established in 1984 to support residents from Roxbury and North Dorchester, two adjacent neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts. Residents wanted to revive their neighborhood after it was “devastated by arson, disinvestment, neglect and redlining practices, and protect it from outside speculators (DSNI, n.d., History section).”

DSNI has a community empowerment theory of change that emphasizes the role of residents and stakeholders in creating neighborhood transformation, as seen in Figure 5. Residents of Roxbury and North Dorchester are represented on the Board of Directors and Standing Committees. There are also 4,000 residents that are paying members (Kennedy, 2011). Youth are also represented on their staff and board as youth development is another focus of the organization (DSNI, Kennedy). Since 1998, the organization has also created the Resident Development Institute for community members to participate in core leadership competency workshops that provide information and tools for community decision-making. These workshops include modules on Values, Vision & Power, Community Organizing, Developing Leaders, Meeting Design & Facilitation, Resource Development, Public Policy Advocacy, and Strategic Thinking & Planning (DSNI). As of 2011, DSNI and residents have helped to create more than 400 new homes, small businesses, a greenhouse, several parks and playgrounds and a community center (Kennedy). They are also able to ensure that housing continues to be affordable using a community land trust.

Similar to Mobilization for Youth, DSNI has struggled with maintaining a grassroots approach and funding simultaneously; however, they have been able to stay true to their mission (Kennedy).
Research Question

With the planner’s role in community development initiatives in mind, this research seeks to understand why there is a need for programs like the Brownsville Community Justice Center in neighborhoods like Brownsville, Brooklyn. This research question will bring attention to the role of community-based organizations and neighborhood youth in improving local communities.

Understanding why these programs are needed requires an understanding of how these programs impact both the youth served and the surrounding neighborhood. Therefore, the questions being asked for this research are:

1. What purpose do these programs serve in Brownsville, Brooklyn?
2. What implications do these programs have on the youth served?
3. What implications do these programs have on Brownsville?

Methodology

This thesis uses a mixed-method approach to answering its research questions, determined by an extensive literature review.

Variables for Program Characteristics. As individual and community empowerment are strong components of transformative planning, it was relevant for this study to gather data on the Brownsville Community Justice Center’s organizational characteristics to determine if they provide an empowering setting to youth. A literature review conducted by Maton found four organizational characteristics that have a direct effect on the empowerment of members, also shown in Figure 6.

1. Group-based belief system: the staff uses a strength-based approach that inspires change and increases awareness and motivation in youth;
2. Core activities: good quality activities that are engaging, prioritizing and active learning style, and increases skill development;
3. Relational environment: there is a support system in place that allows youth to develop caring relationships, feelings of belonging and a sense of community; and
4. Opportunity role structure: the program has meaningful roles for youth that are accessible and multifunctional.
Youth participation was entirely voluntary for the study, and therefore the number of youth participants in the study were determined by convenience sampling. Justice Community Youth Court members did not have any programming at the time of the study and were not used for the community development outcome analysis. It may also help in future research to do surveys with a larger team who have a stronger rapport with the community.

Overall, finally, to develop the research methodology, meetings with knowledgeable mentors were conducted about participatory research methods with youth. It would have been ideal for this project to have youth engaged in the research design, collection and analysis. If there were more time dedicated to this project, participatory research would have been a preferred course of action and is recommended for anyone doing research on youth.
are given community service as a sanction. These young people have conducted over 1,400 hours of community service in Brownsville since the start of the program (Brownsville Community Justice).

Justice Community. Justice Community engages sixty young people between the ages of 16 and 24 each year to help them attain educational or career goals. Many of these young people have touched the juvenile or criminal justice system in some way, which is unlike Youth Court members. In addition to their individual goals, participants are required to complete twelve community benefit projects to complete the program. The community service projects are sometimes shared between Youth Court and Justice Community and have included painting large murals, building community gardens, planting trees and cleaning sidewalks along Pitkin Avenue, helping at local food pantries and kitchens, assisting with community events or fairs, as well as other small painting and cleaning projects at other community locations (D. Lashley, personal communication, February 2014).

The reason that community improvement projects are an important component of Justice Community, is because it helps youth to build confidence and see themselves as leaders (B. Smith). Ben Smith, the Project Coordinator of Justice Community, stated that there is also a relationship between the projects and the progress in educational and career goals:

“When these projects have gone really well, it’s something they can be proud of and it something they can see in their community and have had an effect on. At the end of the day what we really want is educational progress and employment and they need to take steps in those areas, and these experiences sometimes are confidence builders and then they are newly motivated to come in and sign up for a GED program and things like that” (Personal Communication, January 2014).”

In the last cycle, sixteen participants completed all requirements from the program, which include the twelve community projects; as well as twelve community planning sessions, twelve educational activities and eight weeks of an internship (Brownsville Community Justice Center, 2013).

More youth completed more than one phase but did not completely finish the program. The Brownsville Community Justice Center still engages these youth as often as possible and rewards them for what they have been able to accomplish. For some of these young people, they have external stressors that prevent them from participating consistently (Case Manager).

Community Improvement Projects

Changing the Narrative with PhotoVoice.

Eighteen youth from the Brownsville Community Justice Center were engaged in a participatory photography program named PhotoVoice. Two professional photographers provided workshops to youth participants, class critiques, and field trips as a way to teach participants photography skills. Youth were able to engage in a dialogue about their neighborhood through photography, and shared their perspective and story at a final exhibit and through a book named, ‘Brownsville Through Our Lens.’

Alfonso Jones, a youth participant stated:

“The overall goal was to shine a better light on Brownsville to let people in our community, and also outside of our community know that if you [are] coming to Brooklyn and in particular Brownsville, it’s not all that it leads up to be. It’s not all a negative place, it’s not all violence, it’s not all gang related. There’s a lot of good things, a lot of opportunities. My topic that I chose for PhotoVoice was non-mandatory community service cause it’s basically, you’re giving back to your community, you’re doing community service, basically cleaning the streets, whether its picking up papers, giving out food at the soup kitchen, painting mailboxes just because you want to and you’re not being court mandated (personal communication, February 2014).”

The Brownsville Community Justice Center was funded by the Red Hook Community Justice Center, the Brooklyn Arts Council and the United Photo Industries.

Community Murals with Groundswell.

Groundswell is a nonprofit arts organization that uses large-scale public arts projects as a tool for social change. Groundswell’s murals not only beautify the neighborhood, they also bring ideas to the public forefront that are underrepresented in public dialogue (Groundswell youth advocate, personal communication, February 2014).

In 2012, Groundswell and the Brownsville Community Justice Center partnered on a mural project shown in Figure 8. The partnership was so successful that they recently received a joint grant for five additional murals as part of a series called “Transform Restore.” The first painting of the series was completed last year and is called “Intersections Humanized” (Figure 9). All five murals will be completed by 2017, with the second currently in planning stages. Approximately 15 youth participate in each mural, many from the Brownsville Community Justice Center, referred to by the Department of Probation or an East New York organization (Groundswell youth advocate). Some of these youth made such a connection with Groundswell that they were able to participate in murals not only beautify the neighborhood as well as “I’m interested in drawing and anything that deals with my hands cause I don’t know— I just can do anything with my hands. And they found Groundswell, gave me an internship and since that I’ve done 14 murals. Two years – I’ve done 14 murals (S. Turner).”

From youth interviews, the mural projects were the most memorable for the youth that participated:

“Since I’ve done it and being that I live in the community I have actually — it made me feel better. Like I did something in the community that can stay there as long as it wants and it’s something that I know I participated in. It makes me feel good that I can show others and tell others like, ‘Listen, hey look, you can do this too.’ You don’t necessarily have to tap you can just do it as a paint ad, something that’s your creativity, and art is something that I like to participate in (Youth participant).”

Similar to PhotoVoice, these youth were led by artists who provide workshops for the youth. The youth attended a planning session with community partners to determine the theme of the mural and then brainstormed and created ideas, symbols and drawings and worked collaboratively as a team to determine what the final mural looks like. The goal of Groundswell is that youth are able to learn the process of creating public art so that they are able to continue similar work in the future (Groundswell youth advocate). This learning process was supported by youth interviews as one youth stating:

“It was the whole thing — the planning, actually getting the ideas into one, mapping out how we was gonna do it, and how it was gonna be done, the colors that we needed for it and stuff like that. The measurements and everything else. It was actually cool cause I never knew. I always seen those type of paintings but I never knew the work that’s been done in it and for me to actually be one of the participants it was actually cool. I seen how they actually measure,
how long or how far, they gonna place the certain picture here or what's gonna be done there, it’s actually cool (Youth participant).”

Building Community Gardens with Isahahlia Ladies of Elegance. The Isahahlia Ladies of Elegance is a nonprofit organization with the mission to serve the people of the community (B. Duchane, personal communication, March 2014). The organization focuses strongly on youth and provides hands-on skills, including gardening. Approximately 23 youth from the Brownsville Community Justice Center participated in building four community gardens in Brownsville. Their responsibilities ranged from building the boxes, painting benches, planting seeds, and maintaining the garden by raking, weeding and harvesting.

The Executive Director, Daniel Murphy makes sure to provide youth with context for why these projects are important for them and the community, and opportunities for them to actively participate and share ideas:

“Street cleanup — it’s one of the things that is easy to get funding for. Lawmakers like that — you’re literally cleaning up the streets. But I don’t think you’re getting to the nuts of the problem, so I like to take it a step further and do beautification things, and to the extent that we can invite the clients or the community service workers in to give ideas, to explain as much as you can about the project that you’re doing — whether you’re expanding street pits or painting, and explaining why it’s important, that these trees are there for a reason (personal communication, March 2014).”

Murphy believes these projects will challenge them and “at the end of the day they see the change in something.” From the interviews, these projects also contributed the most to changing youth’s perceptions and awareness of community participation and change. One youth stated that:

“It actually made me see that it was more to it than what I had actually thought in Brownsville. The things that he [Daniel Murphy] wanted them to do and wanted us as participants to do — it’s actually cool because I haven’t gardened anything over here, I didn’t do no mailbox before, I actually thought the mailbox people — like the mail-lady and the mailman — I actually thought that they was the ones that do that — painted those mailboxes, the little green and blue ones. I actually thought that they did that but to know that it was people like us in our community that did it, it was a cool thought. Oh how these flowers wound up right here and this is nobody’s garden.”

Another youth stated:

“Through the street cleaning — that one actually got to me a lot because we were out there cleaning the streets and for me to be cleaning, when I see somebody throw something it made me come to them like come on, let’s clean this community up. We’re doing it, why would you throw it down on the ground, you see the garbage can here, you see us picking it up. You’re either gonna throw more work on us or help us and throw it in the garbage (A. Jones, personal communication, March 2014).”

Findings are divided into four sections — Program Characteristics, Positive Youth Development Outcomes, Community Development Outcomes, and Concluding Analysis from Findings.

**Program Characteristics**

The results from the youth questionnaires provided evidence for whether the programs and community improvement projects, described above, have a supportive group-based belief system, strong core activities, a relational environment and an opportunity role structure. Interviews with staff, youth and organizational partners gave qualitative data to support the findings from youth questionnaires and added an analysis on leadership strengths and setting maintenance and change. These were the variables described by Masten as most needed to provide a setting for youth that promotes psychological empowerment.

Most youth agreed or strongly agreed that the Brownsville Community Justice Center provided the characteristics of an empowering environment. The categories that resonated most with youth were relational environment — 36.8% of youth strongly agreed — and group-based belief system — 26.3% of youth strongly agreed. Although group-based belief system was a category that resonated the most with youth, the statement “the program helped me to achieve my goals” only received 15.8% of youth to strongly agree. Interviews with youth showed a generally positive response with one youth stating:

“It helped me education-wise, when I came in here I took the TABE test and it showed me that my writing skills were low and we did the Learning Lab and they helped me with my writing. When I came back and took the exit TABE my writing scores went up and as well as everything was good. My writing skills actually improved and that’s basically what I wanted to get out of that (A. Jones).”

Other youth stated that they were able to receive employment either with the organization or due to the organization’s support.

One youth who struggled with his goal achievement stated:

“They did everything they could. I was thinking with the GED program — I know for me now as I’m continuing to get my GED, I’m learning what I need to get my GED. I’ve been in a couple programs and I need more one-on-one attention — I would need a lot of attention. And they don’t
necessarily have that upstairs [at partner organization], but then again, she gave me a lot of help. She basically gave me the one-on-one attention I sort of needed but it wasn’t enough cause she had to do it with everybody else also. I never mentioned it [to my case manager] cause I just learned that now cause I’m in this other program and they don’t give you no help. So now I’m realizing, oh yeah that’s what I need (Youth participant).”

Statement related to opportunity role structure received the widest variety of responses, in particular the statement, “I have a say in what we do in the activities.” This is consistent with interviews with staff and youth who stated that at the start of Justice Community, youth contributed to the design of core activities, but the program has shifted to have a set structure:

“We tried at the beginning really having them, sit in this room and talk about what kind of projects they wanted to do and issues they wanted to take on, and it was almost too much — it made more sense to have something that was somewhat planned for them. Also there was a fair amount of cynicism on whether or not they could make a difference or what they could do, and it helped to get going with something to help them see that they could make a difference than starting from scratch (B. Smith).”

Even so, another opportunity role structure statement, “There are opportunities for me to take on leadership roles and responsibilities” was the most positively received with 55% of youth strongly agreeing with the statement. This was supported by youth interviews and the findings from questionnaires.

**Positive Youth Development Outcomes**

The remainder of the youth questionnaire was regarding positive youth development outcomes, including psychological empowerment and the 5 Cs. Youth interviews supported the findings from questionnaires.

**Psychological Empowerment.** Surveys included a total of eight statements about Sociopolitical Control — four specifically about leadership competence, belief of one’s ability to organize and lead a group of people, and the remaining four about policy control, the belief of one’s ability to influence policy decisions. The questionnaire asked youth to reflect to how they felt before the program and how they feel currently. The totals for Sociopolitical Control showed that only 5.3% of youth would have strongly agreed with statements about both leadership competence and policy control before coming to the program. However, reflecting on how they felt the time of the survey, 36.85% of youth strongly agreed.

**Leadership Competence.** Statements regarding leadership competence included, “I prefer to be a leader rather than a follower,” “I can organize people to get things done,” “I like to work on solving a problem myself rather than wait and see if someone else will deal with it,” and “I like trying new things that are challenging to me.” When statements about leadership competence were summed, it showed that about 20% of youth would not have agreed with the statements regarding leadership competence before coming to the program and about 10.5% felt that they still did not agree with statements about leadership competence at the time that they took the survey. The percentage of youth who stated that they strongly agree with statements about leadership competence increased from 10.5% to 42.1%. The statement regarding leadership competence that most youth strongly agreed with at the time of the survey were, “I prefer to be a leader rather than a follower,” with 79% that strongly agreed. It is important to note that it also had the highest percent of agreement among the 5 Cs statements when comparing youth who strongly agreed with the overall statements regarding leadership competence.

In interviews, youth stated that they were encouraged to take on leadership roles, either in a small scale during community improvement projects, or through taking on opportunities at the organizations. For example, one youth spoke to the leadership opportunities that were offered between projects, stating:

“There’s been a few situations where myself personally, I’ve taken a leadership role when we were out doing street
Findings Related to Program Characteristics

Responses for program characteristic variables were added together to measure if participants felt that the program had a supportive group-based belief system, strong core activities, a relational environment and an opportunity role structure.

**Group-based belief system (n = 19)**
The staff uses a strengths-based approach that inspires change and increases awareness and motivation in youth.

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“My goal with [my case manager] was basically to leave here somebody. You know, have it be known everywhere else. I'm known places but I want to be known somewhere as positive, instead of a negative manner. So I did that with him and he actually gave me motivation to do my music more. I became a people person, I'm nice now. I don't really like fighting like I used to. I was to leave here a better man and I did leave here a better man.”

**Core activities (n = 19)**
Good quality activities that are engaging, prioritize an active learning style, and increases skill development.

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“I did gardening, mailbox painting, mural painting... The project with Groundswell was a mural on the interactions of people of the world, of the neighborhood and stuff like that. I did something in the community that can stay as long as it wants and it's something that I know I participated in so it makes me feel good that I can show others and tell others, listen hey look, you can do this too…”

**Relational Environment (n = 19)**
There is a support system in place that allows youth to develop caring relationships, feelings of belonging and a sense of community.

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“When you come into this building, you're like family -- they treat you like family. There's not one thing you can come in here and say, and they'll take it a different way. Everybody's human so we treat everybody like humans. Everybody's like family when you come into this building -- it's a family building.”

**Opportunity Role Structure (n = 20)**
The program has meaningful roles for youth that are accessible and multifunctional.

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“My role in Photovoice was the class assistant. I took the attendance, handed them the cameras. That was at the beginning. Towards the end of it that's when we really started interacting, engaging, giving them feedback on their pictures, helping them take the pictures. It was fun.”

The staff uses a strengths-based approach that inspires change and increases awareness and motivation in youth.
cleaning and when there was a lot of people they'd be like you got more experience than a lot of people that's out there, let's fall back a little bit, I'll watch the front of the group, you watch the back, we'll do this. Give me a little bit of a sense of leadership, let me take a little bit of control, tell people where we gonna go, where we gonna clean up (A. Jones)."  

Whereas, one youth was encouraged to take on a larger leadership role by acting as a class assistant for PhotoVoice. He stated that it was difficult for him in the beginning because he was not used to being a leader:  

“It was a little difficult giving feedback as a class assistant, cause I don’t know if people take it as criticism. So I was nervous — I had to watch how I say or how I do it but then they [later youth] started to develop or form, I was like, alright this is good. I worked my way through it, I know a lot of people when they had difficulty or they had problems with stuff they did ask for my help. I’m like, they keep asking me, I didn’t think I know but when I actually got to them and I knew that’s what it was, I was like, why keep downswimming like I don’t know? I got it done and that’s when they kept asking me for my help and I felt comfortable helping everybody (Youth participant).”

Policy Control. Statements regarding policy control included, “I have a good understanding of the issues that confront my community,” “I am able to participate in decision making for my community,” “I can make a difference in my community or school,” and “I actively participate in my community.” For policy control, about 30% responded with less than ‘agree’ for how they felt before being in the program and only 5% still felt that way at the time that they took the survey. Youth who stated that they strongly agree with policy control statements increased from 15.8% to 30%. Several youth indicated that they would try but they didn’t know what the impact would be or how they would approach or help in order to make change. “I believe I can try, I don’t believe that what I’m giving anybody would take. Cause this is a world where everybody think they could do everything on their own and they don’t need help (Youth participant).”

5 C’s of Positive Youth Development. Statements related to the 5 C’s of positive youth development showed that youth moved closer toward strongly agree for all five measures — competence, character, connection, caring and confidence.

Competence. Statements regarding competence, the social and cognitive abilities of youth to be effective in a variety of settings, included, “I make good decisions,” “I can handle problems that come up in my life,” “I have goals for my life,” and “I am interested in learning about careers I could have.” Fifteen percent of youth had the highest competence score before they came to the program, which increased to 45% of youth at the time of the survey. Out of all 5 C statements, the statement that most youth, at 55%, strongly agreed to before they came to the program was, “I am interested in learning about careers I could have.” Two statements also received high percentages for “I have goals in my life,” with 70% of youth strongly agreeing, and “I am interested in learning about careers I could have.” In interviews, youth stated that they improved on their educational and employment goals and one specifically discussed the ability to accomplish goals and tasks:  

“My goal was to finish cause I normally don’t finish a lot of things… I was always shy, I wasn’t a people person so when it comes to going into anybody’s community, I’d freeze up or it would be a bump in the road where I’d end up fighting and getting kicked out of something so I wouldn’t be able to finish it starting from high school. I’d go to school, I’d start the day but I wouldn’t finish it and after that I’d get kicked out. Didn’t finish that school, had to go to another one. I wasn’t staying the whole day in there, I’d come half of the time, most of the time I wouldn’t come at all. Then after that I got locked up from being hard headed, not listening, being lazy, after that it was just the same on there… I used to think that I couldn’t really finish lots of things but now I’m finishing all of a stuff (Youth participant).”

Character. Statements regarding character, an understanding of societal and cultural principles and values, included, “It is important for me to do the right thing,” “It is important for me to do my best,” “I am able to behave appropriately in most settings,” and “I have people in my life whom I look up to and admire.” Twenty percent of youth would have strongly agreed that with character statements before they came to the program. This increased at the time of the survey to 45% of youth strongly agreeing with character statements. In interviews, most youth related this to their increased ability to handle difficult situations. For example, one youth stated:  

“In a year of me being here I noticed that when I came I was a bit of a hot head and if you say something to me if I didn’t like it I was gonna blame it on you, I was gonna curse you out. I learned that everybody, the things they say, it’s basically something to help you and it’s up to you to take that in — break it down, mold it and use it for yourself (A. Jones).”

Connection. The statements provided for connection included, “Having friends is important to me,” “I feel connected to others in my community,” “I have adults in my life who care,” and “I feel connected to my parents or guardians.” The summed totals for connection, the positive bonds made with peers, adults and community, had the smallest growth in strongly agrees from 10% to 25%. It also had the least number of youth stating that they strongly agreed to any positive youth development statement for, “I feel connected to others in my community.” In contrast, statements regarding connection to adults and family received a relatively high percentage of youth to strongly agree to statements (55% and 60% respectively). However, one of the most memorable and discussed topics for youth were how field trips and activities helped youth to build strong peer bonds. One youth stated that:  

“The experiences that stand out a lot to me was when we went out to Six Flags, basically the recreation field trips that we took. It brought a lot of our members together that probably would have been in the streets going head to head at each other’s threats. Basically, the first trip we were all on that one bus and it was a lot of people from different neighborhoods, different gangs, and everything — and in all being on that bus — it brought us together as one. It’s like, now when we see each other in the streets, it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s my boy there. I don’t want to fight him no more, We all cool’ — and that was the experience right there. Why fight when we can be together? (A. Jones).”

Another youth person stated that, “Actually I’ve gained more respect and care from others that I’ve just known for a matter of short months. New friends of course, and I built relationships with them that I still have to this day (Youth participant).”

In interviews, youth reflected on the difficult circumstances of Brownsville and although community improvement projects played a large role in changing their perspective around possibilities, many youth still felt that connecting to people in Brownsville was something that they continued to struggle with. One youth stated that, “That’s when they kept asking me for my help and I felt comfortable helping everybody (Youth participant).”

POSITIVE YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
everybody is who they say they are. Everybody has a good side and everybody has a bad side. You just have to expose the good side and sometimes when you expose the good side, that’s what leads (S. Turner).

Confidence. Statements related to confidence included, “In general, I feel I am a worthy person,” “I can figure out right from wrong,” “I have close friendships,” and “I can do things that make a difference.” Before the program, only 15% of youth strongly agreed to confidence indicators, and at the time of the survey 60% of youth strongly agreed. Confidence, a positive feeling of self-worth and self-efficacy, had the most significant gains between the two time periods. It also had the highest percentage of youth to strongly agree out of all positive youth indicators.

In interviews, some youth were able to name confidence explicitly, and for others confidence was described without a name, for example, some youth stated that they never thought they could — now they can. Sean Turner, a youth participant, stated:

“It’s like someone gave you a pencil but instead of them giving me a pencil they gave me confidence. It was like, since I can do it in the office why not do it outside? Why not do it in my everyday life? That’s how it started. It’s like giving an artist a pencil and him drawing a masterpiece. They gave me confidence and turned me into a masterpiece I guess.”

There was also a young person who felt confident before entering the program describing herself as, “passionate, determined and strong (Youth participant).”

Community Development Outcomes

Maton’s community empowerment diagram (Figure 4) depicted an influence cycle that begins with an empowering community setting by an organization or program and leads to empowered members who have their own radiating influence to other empowered citizens and through external organizational activities. Through qualitative data gained through youth and staff interviews and interviews with organizational partners, the findings of this thesis show that there is a similar influence cycle for the Brownsville Community Justice Center that occurs that is shown in Figure 11.

The influence cycle of the Brownsville Community Justice Center has three realms of influence. First, the Brownsville Community Justice Center makes strategic connections to other nonprofit organizations in Brownsville with a mission or goal of community betterment. It is through the organizational partners that ideas for community improvement projects for youth are developed. Simultaneously, the organization is recruiting youth participants that are engaged in programming. These youth participants are key to the implementation of community improvement projects. It is primarily through these community improvement projects that 1) youth become empowered citizens, 2) the social networks of youth — family and friends — gain hope and change from youth participants, and 3) community members with no relationship to youth, gain hope and change by experiencing community improvement. These levels of influence are discussed in more detail below.

The Brownsville Community Justice Center is working toward long-term outcomes that include reduced crime and recidivism rates, increased public health, increased opportunities for employment and educational attainment, and increased resources that allow a community to provide for its residents. It is difficult to attribute

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<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Related to Positive Youth Development Outcomes (n = 20)</th>
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<td>1. I prefer to be a leader rather than a follower</td>
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<td>3. I like to work on solving a problem myself rather than wait and see if someone else will deal with it</td>
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<td>4. I like trying new things that are challenging to me</td>
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<td>5. I have a good understanding of the issues that confront my community</td>
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<td>7. I actively participate in my community</td>
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<td>8. I make good decisions</td>
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<td>9. I can handle problems that come up in my life</td>
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<td>10. I can think of a career I would like to have</td>
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<td>11. It is important for me to do my best</td>
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<td>20. I can handle problems that come up in my life</td>
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FIGURE 11—INFLUENCE CYCLE OF THE BROWNSVILLE COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER.
I am able to behave appropriately in most settings

Having friends is important to me

I feel connected to others in my community

I have adults in my life who care

I feel connected to my parents or guardians

I care about how my decisions affect other people

I try to encourage others when they are not as good as something as me

I can be counted on to help if someone needs me

I care about the feelings of my friends

In general, I feel I am a worthy person

I can figure out right from wrong

I have close friendships

I can do things that make a difference

Before the program

Outcomes (n = 20)

Survey Questions Related to Positive Youth Development

Now

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Coded as

Agree

Strongly agree

15

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Findings Related to Sociopolitical Control

Responses for sociopolitical control variables were added together to measure if participants felt that the program helped them to increase leadership competence and policy control.

### Leadership Competence (n = 19)

The belief of one’s ability to organize and lead a group of people.

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<td>10.3%</td>
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“It was a little difficult [giving feedback while in a leadership role], cause I don’t know if people take it as criticism. So I was nervous -- I had to watch how I say or how I do it but then they [other youth] started to develop or form. I was like, alright this is good. I worked my way through it. I know a lot of people when they had difficulty or they had problems with stuff they did ask for my help. I’m like, they keep asking me, I didn’t think I knew but when I actually got to them and I knew that’s what it was I was like, why keep downing myself I don’t know? I got it done and that’s when they kept asking me for help and I felt comfortable helping everybody.”

“There’s been a few situations where myself personally, I’ve taken a leadership role when we were out doing street cleaning and when there was a lot of people they’d be like you got more experience than a lot of people that’s out there, let’s fall back a little bit, I’ll watch the front of the group, you watch the back, we’ll switch off. Gave me a little bit of a leadership role, let me take a little bit of control, tell people where we gonna do, where we gonna go, where we gonna clean up.”

### Policy Control (n = 20; n = 19)

The belief of one’s ability to influence policy decisions.

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“Before no, before I did not at all [believe I could make a difference], I didn’t think I could do anything, but now that’s changed. I think I can change a little bit. Not everyone can make a big change, I just want a little one. I just want a little ripple in the ocean.”

“I definitely don’t care enough about my community to make a difference.”

“I saw a man that I knew when I used to live in NY before I moved to North Carolina. I knew him from the ages of 1 up until 15 and my whole life I knew him he was a wealthy man, and when I came back here I actually seen him sleeping in front of the check cashing place... that right there helped me realize that some people really need help and then I started helping the man out. I see him outside, I say you need some food, you need anything, I’ll give it to you -- you looked out for me as a child, it’s time for me to give back. Before I came to the Justice Center, I would see people in the street like that and you could ask me for change, I don’t got it, even if I had it in my pocket and now, it’s like, I see what’s really going on in this community.”

### Sociopolitical Control (n = 19)

The belief of one’s abilities in sociopolitical contexts, measured by leadership competence and policy control.

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Findings Related to PYD Outcomes

Responses for Positive Youth Development (PYD) variables were added together to measure if participants felt that the program helped to increase positive development in competence, character, connection, caring and confidence.

### Competence (n = 20)

The social and cognitive abilities of youth to be effective in a variety of settings.

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*When I came in here I took the TABE test and it showed me that my writing skills were low. We did the Learning Lab and they helped me with my writing. When I came back and took the exit TABE, my writing scores went up as well as everything else was good.*

*My goal was to finish cause I normally don’t finish a lot of things... I was always shy, I wasn’t a people person so when it comes to going into anybody’s community, I’d freeze up or it would be a bump in the road where I’d end up fighting or getting kicked out of something so I would never be able to finish it starting from high school. I’d go to school, I’d start the day but I wouldn’t finish it and after that I’d get kicked out. Didn’t finish that school, had to go to another one. I wasn’t staying the whole day in there, I’d come half of the time, most of the time I wouldn’t come at all. Then after that I got locked up from being hard headed, not listening, being lazy, after that it was just the same on there... I used to think that I couldn’t really finish lots of things but now I’m finishing a lot of stuff.*

*In a year of me being here I noticed that when I came I was a bit of a hot head and if you say something to me if I didn’t like it I was gonna blame it on you, I was gonna curse you out. I learned that everybody, the things that they say, it’s basically something to help you and it’s up to you to take that in – break it down, mold it and use it for yourself.*

*They had a long talk with me seeing as I was in serious trouble. They had to sit down and talk to me and they had me write down my do’s and don’ts. I had a lot of don’ts going on and they had me pick what I wanted to do differently. By me reading all my don’ts it made me see a lot differently. That just changed my whole persona.*

### Character (n = 20)

An understanding of societal and cultural principles and values; a sense of right and wrong.

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*In a year of me being here I noticed that when I came I was a bit of a hot head and if you say something to me if I didn’t like it I was gonna blame it on you, I was gonna curse you out. I learned that everybody, the things that they say, it’s basically something to help you and it’s up to you to take that in – break it down, mold it and use it for yourself.*

*They had a long talk with me seeing as I was in serious trouble. They had to sit down and talk to me and they had me write down my do’s and don’ts. I had a lot of don’ts going on and they had me pick what I wanted to do differently. By me reading all my don’ts it made me see a lot differently. That just changed my whole persona.*

### Connection (n = 20)

The positive bonds made with people and their community.

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*The experiences that stand out a lot to me was when we went out to Six Flags, basically the recreation field trips that we took. It brought a lot of our members together that probably would have been in the streets going head to head at each other’s throats. Basically, the first trip we were all on that one bus and it was a lot of people from different neighborhoods, different gangs, and everything – and us all being on that bus – it brought us together as one. It’s like, now when we see each other in the streets, it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s my boy there, I don’t want to fight him no more. We all cool,’ – and that was the experience right there. Why fight when we can be together?*
**Findings Related to PYD Outcomes**

Responses for Positive Youth Development (PYD) variables were added together to measure if participants felt that the program helped to increase positive development in competence, character, connection, caring and confidence.

- **Caring (n = 20)**
  The ability to sympathize or empathize with others.

- **Confidence (n = 20)**
  A positive feeling of self-worth and self-efficacy.

“Before I used to think that everybody wanted to be bad, everybody wanted to try to act like a gangster and do what they do – but I’ve come to see from this program that not everybody is who they say they are. Everybody has a good side and everybody has a bad side. You just have to expose the good side and sometimes when you expose the good side, that’s what leads.”

“When we was doing the food pantry, it made me see a lot different, like people who don’t have food or anything that’s struggling. Made me see a lot differently and I had a little connect with them cause I was them at one point in time.”

“I had very low self-esteem, I felt like everybody hated me, didn’t love me, and it just put myself - my mindset was more onto the streets than anything else. I mean, I didn’t finish school but I’d be like once I finish there’s nowhere for me to go. Then when I came here it just made me change a whole lot different. Like, I’m not into the streets anymore, I’m working more making sure me and my family is good.”

“Passionate, determined and strong [description of self before coming to the program].”

“It’s like someone gave you a pencil but instead of them giving me a pencil they gave me confidence. It was like, since I can do it in the office why not do it outside? Why not do it in my everyday life? That’s how it started. It’s like giving an artist a pencil and him drawing a masterpiece. They gave me confidence and it turned me into a masterpiece I guess.”
Brownsville Community Justice Center. As stated previously, activities that have a community focus are central to the Brownsville Community Justice Center’s work for two purposes. First, these activities increase the connection youth feel toward Brownsville, fostering a sense of pride. Second, there is an understanding that the narrative and perception of Brownsville is largely negative — believed by many youth and residents, people unfamiliar with the neighborhood, and media. However, by seeing youth engaged in positive activities and by having improved surroundings as a result of these projects, the narrative can shift to a positive one. A case manager of the Brownsville Community Justice Center, stated this intention within their community projects during his interview:

“Even adults can become disillusioned with — and we heard this from some of the parents that we’ve worked with — they can become disillusioned with just the prospects for the young people in the community to do something for themselves. Do positive things, because the adults in the community, now for an extended period of time dealt with some of the issues that the young people are facing. So, for some of the same reasons, the adults can now feel like, wait a minute our community can grow, our community can thrive, it can become better, we can participate in how we’re connecting our youth to these programs and helping our community in that larger sense. So I think for the larger community of Brownsville, [it’s] just to see that there are young people that are themselves devoted to helping the community, which in effect is helping where they live at the same time (Case manager).”

This supports the diagram of the Brownsville Community Justice Center’s influence cycle and that an important long-term outcome of their work is an empowered community.

Community Partnerships. The second step in the influence cycle of the Brownsville Community Justice Center is strong community partnerships. Through staff and youth interviews, it became clear that most, if not all, of the community improvement projects were done in collaboration with one or more partner organizations including the Pitkin BID, Groundswell, Bahshishah Ladies of Elegance, Brownsville Recreation Center, Brownsville Partnership, Holy House of Prayer, and Ebenezer Seventh Day Adventist Church. These projects are also funded and supported by many government entities.

Interviews with organizational partners indicate that these relationships are not only important but that they are necessary to increase capacity and to scale outcomes in a neighborhood that has been historically under-sourced (J. Kerney, personal communication, February 2014; D. Murphy). Murphy, the Executive Director of the Pitkin BID, also described these relationships as more valuable than financial resources, stating:

“The purpose for us was to succeed. We couldn’t succeed without people liking us and trusting us — and helping us. We needed their help and you can’t do it with money. First of all, we don’t have enough money to do it and there is kind of a psychology to working with people without the exchange of money. Where there’s something deeper and less tangible invested but just as real and even more lasting. Money, especially in this neighborhood, goes fast. There’s a lot of things to spend it on. Relationships, real friendships, real trust is something that is worth a lot more.”

Although these organizations have a different mission and theory of change than the Brownsville Community Justice Center, their vision of a healthy and safe community that supports residents is the same. The potential of these partnerships to create positive community change and development grow with every organization that becomes involved in that effort. By working with a multitude of organizations to increase youth involvement in their community, the capacity of youth in these planning initiatives continues to expand and they are able to learn the multiple facets of neighborhood improvement initiatives. It cannot be stressed enough in this thesis, the importance of this network of organizations in improving the lives of young people and residents through their work together in developing community improvement opportunities.

Community Projects. Once community partnerships are established, the next step in the influence cycle is the creation of community projects that have been shown to encourage the positive development of youth and have further potential to improve the community through these development projects. Finally, these development projects also have the potential to bring awareness to the surrounding community. The community service projects — sometimes shared between Youth Court and Justice Community — included painting two large murals, building four community gardens, planting trees along Pitkin Avenue and cleaning the sidewalks, helping at two local food pantries, assisting with community events or fairs, as well as other small painting and cleaning projects at other community locations (J. Lasky). These community projects were located on a map of Brownsville, along with organizations that are partners with the Brownsville Community Justice Center to gain an understanding of the reach and scope of these projects in comparison to neighborhood size.

This can be seen in Figure 12.

There were also additional projects and service activities that youth were engaged in that were outside of Brownsville that are not being considered for this thesis. As stated in the limitations, community surveys were difficult to obtain during the months of data collection. However, a recent community survey of 52 people conducted by Groundswell and Brownsville Community Justice Center staff regarding the ‘Intersections Humanized’ mural showed that 92% of survey respondents believed that the mural contributed to neighborhood pride. When residents were asked the top three messages of the mural, community, beauty, unity, positivity/positive thinking, diversity, respect, peace and change appeared the most. Finally, when asked about the feelings created by the mural, respondents stated that it made them feel uplifted, hopeful, proud, joyful, spirited, love and happy (Groundswell, 2014b).

Interviews with staff, organizational partners and youth also described a positive response from other youth and adults in the community. Kennedy of the Brownsville Partnership stated:

“For sure, I think that physically you see the difference with the murals that they create, with the activities that they do. They wear the purple shirts, you know, really making themselves visible and apparent to young people and to adults who are involved in the community, and those that aren’t. There’s such a lasting impression that’s left when other residents and other stakeholders see the work of the Brownsville Community Justice Center and they trust it and they value it — they speak on it. They tell their friends about it, they tell their kids about it, they tell their grandkids about it and their neighbors to come join.”

Community Youth. Youth appear in the influence diagram as both an input to community projects and an output as an empowered resident. Some of this is explored in the previous section that discussed positive youth development outcomes. However, it is important to remember that these youth have also lived in Brownsville and face the same challenges of disillusionment that other residents may experience. Therefore, qualitative data
from youth interviews was also used to gain an understanding of how youth perceptions and their connection to Brownsville may have changed as a result of these activities.

From the interviews, youth had positive experiences from community projects and almost all stated that it changed their relationship and understanding about Brownsville as a whole. For a couple youth, the change in understanding was due to a better awareness of their surroundings and that residents have been actively participating in the maintenance of Brownsville. For others, their relationship to the community changed through the program because they were able to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of people — that the people of Brownsville, including themselves, do not fit the narrative that’s been created.

However, youth perceptions about Brownsville and its residents as a whole still had a variety of responses, many of them conflicting, about the challenges of the neighborhood and who was to blame. For example one youth stated, “What’s wrong with Brownsville is the people in Brownsville,” and another stated: “I guess a lot of people have been through so much that it’s hard to change the people.” And some people have been doing it for years, so they don’t believe in help (Youth participant).” Another youth had similar concerns stating, “It’s only a certain amount of people who got that help who was given to them. There’s a large amount of people who don’t want the help, who never got it.” When asked about whether or not this young person could have an impact on the community, his response was, “I believe I can try. I don’t believe that what I’m given anybody would take. cause this is a world where everybody think they could do everything on their own and they don’t need help.”

Youth in interviews were also asked three words that they would use to describe Brownsville and to provide three of the most important issues of their community. Generally, the most important issues — violence, guns, gangs, police and arrests were most common — were consistent between youth understanding before coming to the program and at the time of the interview. However, in describing Brownsville, about half of the youth chose words that were either conflicting, about the challenges of the neighborhood and who was to blame. For example one youth stated:

“I mean, yeah, it changed my thinking a lot. I had no hope at all for us, but now I do. I never used to see anybody really have the hope in themselves or our period. So coming here, that opened my eyes to see that there are still people out there that have hope for us and who wants to help us (Youth participant).”

Community Defined. An exploration of how partner organizations and youth defined or understood the word ‘community’ was included among interview questions. The word ‘community’ can take on many definitions from spatial boundaries to definitions for social inclusion, Brownsville is a neighborhood that has strong boundaries and is excluded in many ways from the rest of New York City, and residents have an understanding that they live within these spatial, racial economic and social boundaries. An exploration was helpful to see how youth understood and valued ‘community’ and what sort of activities they’d like to see.

One youth defined community within its physical boundaries but many more youth defined community in a more abstract sense or included what their hopes for Brownsville. For example, one youth stated:

“Community to me means unity. Without the ‘comm’ in it. It’s supposed to be a place where everybody comes together and be’s together and does everything together as one. Instead of killing each other off, we’re all together trying to make a better life of each other. That’s what community means to me (Youth participant).”

Another youth stated:

“Community to me is somewhere where you feel safe. Someplace where even though you come home and don’t have to worry about who is gonna try to break into your house, or who is gonna shoot you, or what’s gonna happen to your kids outside. Community to me is somewhere where you know there don’t have to be so much cops and the way they treat you (Youth participant).”

Lastly, a young person stated that community is:

“A group of people that knows one another, helps one another and helps their environment, where they live, where they stay. Helps it to be a better place, that’s a community to me. Right now, me and you are a community cause we’re sitting together and we’re talking (Youth participant).”

Youth’s perspectives did not vary much from organization partners, who described community beyond its physical boundaries, and described it as people coming together ideologically and around a common cause or purpose. Kennedy from the Brownsville Partnership described community within the context of Brownsville that gives a beauty to the interactions of residents in times of good and bad:

“I would define community as a village. And that village mentality comes from the wording or the vision of our foundling director, Greg Jackson, who was the director of the Brownsville Recreation Center. Few years ago was the director of the Brownsville Partnership when we first started here and worked with us until he passed away. He always envisioned — he’s born and bred Brownsville — always envision Brownsville as a village. What would it look like for residents to really take hold and care for each other’s children? What would it look like to know the police, and the police to know you, and not in a negative way, in ‘I’m really checking out for your best interest?’ What would it be like for schools to truly support families and be connected to resources and be connected to events? And when something happens like Brownsville’s Old-Timers Day that’s when you see the most ‘community.’ You see people bringing on each other, taking each other’s kids to the BRC (Boston Recreation Center), you see food and dancing. It’s just a good time. I think community is just that — it’s really neighbors supporting each other even in times of conflict. That’s also when you see the most community — it’s in these very extreme circumstances — the best of times and the worst of times. But how do you sustain that in the meantime? Community looks like the worst of times in Brownsville — when there is a shooting and people come together and they’re speaking out against horrible things that they want to see changed and they feel fired up to change it, and they’re supported, and they’re connected and they’re nourished by Brownsville Old-Timer’s day, when people are dancing together, cooking, selling shirts, you know just having a good time.”

Concluding Analysis from Findings

By creating an empowering organizational setting and building strong community partners, the Brownsville Community Justice Center provides youth with opportunities to participate in community improvement projects and services that range from beautification projects, community service activities, defending youth from the juvenile justice system, and creating dialogue about the strengths of Brownsville. Within these projects, youth benefit from a finished product or outcome and an increased capacity to perform these activities in the future, which is the primary goal of
As a result from these findings, this thesis has developed a number of recommendations for the Brownsville Community Justice Center to increase the scope of its work. In addition, there are recommendations for the fields of city planning and community development to help them move toward working in a transformative way. Finally, there is a final suggestion on how the programs of the Brownsville Community Justice Center can be replicated so that other community-based organizations can provide both positive youth and community development.

Recommendations to the Brownsville Community Justice Center

1. **To create ongoing opportunities for youth to develop as community leaders and advocates.**
   
   During the program, youth become more aware of their potential to be leaders within Brownsville – and the organization does a great job at maintaining relationships with youth after they complete the program by connecting them to employment opportunities. But how can their development as community leaders be ongoing and continuous? This thesis recommends that, in addition to connecting youth with educational and employment opportunities, that the organization builds additional partnerships that can offer programming to youth so that they can continue to build as community leaders even after the end of the program.

2. **To develop a more comprehensive plan with the community.**
   
   The Municipal Art Society and the Brownsville Partnership have recently been developing a more comprehensive plan for Brownsville. It appears that they are using a transformative model and holding trainings with residents as a way to build the planning abilities and capacity of the community. This is a great opportunity to transfer power to residents during the planning process and it is recommended that the Brownsville Community Justice Center utilize this opportunity for their youth, so that youth can be engaged in the learning and decision-making process. Or even be engaged as these initiatives are being implemented.

3. **To find opportunities and partners that can challenge the structural and institutional obstacles in the neighborhood.**
   
   The Brownsville Community Justice Center relies heavily on its partnership with the 73rd Police Precinct and the Department of Probation. Although their programming is a way to divert youth away from the juvenile and criminal justice system, there are strong limitations to being able to challenge the work of these departments – and other government entities – due to their relationship and funding structure. There is only so much change that these organizations can do without challenging these institutions, and therefore it’s recommended that one of their partners is able to do advocacy and community organizing.
CONCLUSION

the recommendation is to make transformative planning a priority on these various levels of planning.

1. To recognize the intersection between social work and urban planning. There is crossover between the values of planning and social work. By recognizing the connection between an individual and their micro and ecosystems, planners can begin to think in a more transformative way.

Replicability of the Brownsville Community Justice Center Model

CCT’s project of the Brownsville Community Justice Center has been replicated several Justice Centers in New York City. There are two recommendations on how to create a similar influence cycle of positive youth and community development in other neighborhoods:

1. Bounded Geography. The Brownsville Community Justice Center is successful because they work within a very bounded geography, where the youth that are engaged in the program live in Brownsville or an adjacent neighborhood, which is unlike many programs in New York City that have youth from a variety of locations. The youth in the program also have an identity and an experience that is very tied to living in Brownsville so they are able to see increases in individual and community empowerment.

2. Organizational network. The Brownsville Community Justice has created an organizational network within Brownsville that has increased the capacity of what one organization can do. Their youth do not only participate in painting murals, but they are able to participate in a wide range of community improvement activities building on the strengths of a number of organizations.

It is the hopes of this thesis, that this research will bring attention to the role of community-based organizations, like the Brownsville Community Justice Center and its partners, and neighborhood youth in improving their local community. It is the hopes that these findings and recommendations can be used as an advocacy tool to encourage planners to create processes that introduce, engage, and incorporate residents in community development approaches so that they can be in positions to make informed decisions for their community.


RESOURCES


APPENDIX
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<td>2. Staff believe that I can achieve my goals</td>
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<td>3. The program has helped me to see my strengths</td>
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<td>4. The program has helped me to see my role and influence in the community</td>
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<td>5. The program activities are meaningful to me</td>
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<td>6. I receive feedback on my performance in program activities</td>
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<td>9. There are people and resources available in the organization if I need help</td>
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<td>11. I have built positive relationships with adults in the organization</td>
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<td>12. I have built positive relationships with my community</td>
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<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I have a say in what we do in the activities</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. There are opportunities to use my skills to benefit the program or community</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Think how you felt BEFORE you came to the program. Would you have agreed or disagreed with the statements below? How do you feel now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>BEFORE THE PROGRAM</th>
<th>NOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15. I am able to behave appropriately in most settings</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I have people in my life whom I look up to and admire</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Having friends is important to me</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I feel connected to others in my community</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I have adults in my life who care</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I feel connected to my parents or guardians</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I care about how my decisions affect other people</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I try to encourage others when they are not as good as something as me</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I can be counted on to help if someone needs me</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I care about the feelings of my friends</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. In general, I feel I am a worthy person</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I can figure out right from wrong</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I have close friendships</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I can do things that make a difference</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instructions:
Think how you felt BEFORE you came to the program. Would you have agreed or disagreed with the statements below? How do you feel now?