Opportunity For Unity Collaborative
Melissa Pearrow
Community Development

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Opportunity for Unity collaborative: building healthy communities by empowering young adults

Melissa M. Pearrow*

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No community is immune to the devastating effects of youth violence, although some are disproportionately affected—particularly 10 to 24 year old males of African-American and Hispanic descent. This study examines one community’s effort to reduce youth violence by hiring influential young adults and coordinating the work of community-based organizations that address the underpinnings of community violence (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, environmental injustice). The grassroots collaborative project targeted young adults with and without criminal histories to work with these agencies for positive social change. Results demonstrate that those tarnished with criminal records demonstrated significant gains in social capital and sense of empowerment, thus creating the potential for reduced future criminal behavior and strengthened communities.

Keywords: empowerment; social capital; community violence prevention

Throughout the United States, the rate of violence among young people has declined over the last decade, yet homicide continues to be the second leading cause of death for youth people aged 10 to 24 years (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2009). Although no community is immune to the devastating effects of youth violence, some are disproportionately affected. Homicide rates among 10 to 24 year old African-American males are three times the rate of same-aged Hispanic males and twenty times the rate of same aged White, non-Hispanic males (CDC, 2009). In 2007, the City of Boston experienced a decade high increase in homicides. Most startlingly was not the rate of violence in the city, but that 40% of the victims were under the age of 21. This surge was preceded by the “Boston Miracle”—a period of more than 29-months, ending in January 1998, in which no young people were victims of homicide. Consequently, the increase of community violence generated significant concern among community leaders and youth serving agencies. This study demonstrates how grassroots collaboration between community-based organizations (CBOs) positively enhanced the empowerment and social capital of young adults as they built community in urban neighborhoods while addressing the public health issue of community violence. It also demonstrates the impact on a highly vulnerable population, those beginning adulthood with a criminal history and/or previous court involvement.

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Empowerment and social capital

Empowerment is a prominent feature of healthy communities addressing social challenges (Wallerstein, 2006). The construct of empowerment assumes that a society consists of separate groups possessing different levels of power and control over resources, and that social problems stem not from individual deficits, but rather from the failure of the society to meet the needs of all its members (Gutierrez, 1990). 

Power is the ability to access and influence control over resources to improve deleterious environmental conditions (Chadiha, Adams, Biegel, Auslander, & Gutierrez, 2004). Empowerment, however, has been defined as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their life situations” (Gutierrez, 1994, p. 202). Thus, understanding power and powerlessness is a key to effective intervention and is the foundation for generating strategies to address powerlessness on individual, family, and social systems levels (Pinderhughes, 1983). Young people who feel powerless are at an increased risk of engaging in dysfunctional behaviors; thus, empowerment has been identified as a strategy to reduce engagement in high-risk behaviors, such as violence (Hazler & Carney, 2002; Pearrow & Pollack, 2009).

Empowerment is a construct that can be understood along a continuum (Rocha, 1997; Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman & Checkoway, 1995). On one end, there is individual capacity building, where people empower themselves on a personal level to deal with social status and racial and ethnic oppression, and is accomplished by developing coping abilities, taking a proactive approach to life, building collective relationships with families, groups, and communities, and critically understanding the sociopolitical environment (Chadiha et al., 2004; Lee, 2001; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). The other end occurs within families, organizations and communities with the focus on changing the community and creating a sense of collective well-being, providing mutual support to effect change, building coalitions and strengthening networks to improve the quality of community life (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Empowerment programs positively impact youth and families, whether conducted in community and school-based settings, and can help deter criminal activity among juvenile offenders (Bemak, 2005; Dembo, Schmeidler, & Wothke, 2003; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Pearrow, Desai, MacKay, & Chea You, 2010).

Similarly, social capital is a construct reflecting neighborhood and societal characteristics such as “interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and social engagement that foster community and social participation” (Carpriano, 2007, p. 639). According to Beaudoin (2007), “social capital is the actual or potential resources that stem from shared social connections and senses of reciprocity and trust, which, when put to use, can influence outcomes at both the individual and collective levels” (p. 947). Coleman (1988) introduced the concept of social capital, “paralleling the concepts of financial capital, physical capital, and human capital—but embodied in relations among persons” (p. S118), and demonstrated how families and communities access social networks that garner to advance their children’s chances of success.

The examination of social capital has more frequently been incorporated into research in Australian and Scandinavian countries, only recently garnering attention in the context of the United States. In urban and low-income communities in the US, social capital is an important factor in shaping individual outcomes and neighborhood context. Having social capital, specifically for young adults in
neighborhoods with overwhelming social issues (e.g., high poverty rates, single parent household, etc.), is linked with increased rates of school completion (Coleman, 1988), socioeconomic success (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995), as well as a decrease in delinquent behaviors (Mangino, 2009), including property crimes (Nakhaie & Sacco, 2009). Furthermore, limited social capital, manifested through weaker ties, can result in less cohesive interactions and collective efficacy to address community problems (Hanks, 2008).

How, then, are the constructs of empowerment and social capital perceived by young adults who live in communities plagued with social conditions of unhealthy environments? Are there effective strategies to promote social capital of community connections and increased empowerment? More specifically, how are these constructs manifested in young adults tarnished with criminal records? The project presented here examines a community strategy to address a prominent public health challenge—decreasing community violence—by strategically empowering young adults to positively contribute to their neighborhoods.

Methods

Background

In the summer of 2007, the Opportunity for Unity (O4U) Collaborative was piloted in a “hot spot” neighborhood in the City of Boston. The summer pilot project was conceived to reduce youth violence by coordinating the work of community-based organizations (CBOs) in one targeted neighborhood experiencing disproportionate rates of crime. The O4U Collaborative, with funding from the Boston Globe Foundation, supported four non-profit CBOs as they employed 28 young adults between the ages of 18 and 21. With feedback gathered from focus groups with community leaders, the project targeted young adults as this population experienced the greatest unmet needs while having considerable influence on the streets and in the neighborhoods. The O4U Collaborative specifically targeted a mix of young adults: those with and without criminal records. Those with a history of court and/or criminal involvement experienced limited employment opportunities, thus leaving them restricted opportunities to develop skills necessary for adult life. The participating CBOs engaged in a range of activities, including creating websites to support local social networking, academic and language tutoring for recent immigrant children, and media literacy. The formative evaluation of the pilot project demonstrated that the participating young adults had an increase in their sense of empowerment to make a difference in their neighborhood and in their desire to work with policy leaders to create positive social change. The young adults also reported that they learned new skills to prepare them for their future, were more aware of how their actions impacted others, and experienced a sense of pride in what they had done for their community. This background serves as the foundation for the second year of the O4U Collaborative—the basis of this study.

The second year of the O4U Collaborative expanded to coordinate CBOs from multiple neighborhoods in Boston rather than targeting one neighborhood. In an attempt to address the underlying causes of violence, applications were sought from youth-development agencies interested in broadening their programs to include young adults. Of the nine applicants, five were chosen based on their proven history of positive youth development programming and their organizational capacity to the 18 to 21 year age group. While each of these agencies engaged in similar efforts of
organizing and empowering youth to make positive contributions to the community, they had distinct foci in addressing the underlying causes of community violence (e.g., environmental injustice, domestic violence, limited employment opportunities for young adults). Each CBO hired six young adults and one agency adult staff trained and coordinated the young adults’ activities over the eight week period. Each CBO trained the young adults to communicate their initiatives within the broader community, and the funder of the Collaborative facilitated career training sessions (e.g., financial planning, professional presentation). Similar to the previous summer, the agencies hired young adults who might not be eligible for other jobs due to criminal records. The participating agencies and their work are listed in Table 1.

The summer’s programming consisted of weekly meetings of the CBOs’ adult staff as well as weekly meetings of all young adults. One of the participating community agencies, the Center for Teen Empowerment (TE), served as the primary coordinating body for the O4U 2008 Collaborative and facilitated the weekly meetings of both adult staff and young adults. The TE program, briefly reviewed here, is unlike traditional service-oriented youth programming and operates with the underlying belief that youth have the capacity to make meaningful change in their community. As such, it organizes youth by training them to be catalysts of institutional and social change and facilitates meetings using interactive methods to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Agency</th>
<th>Agency Focus</th>
<th>Youth Development Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project (REEP) <a href="http://www.ace-ej.org">www.ace-ej.org</a></td>
<td>Environmental Justice</td>
<td>Fosters youth development and leadership program that transforms a sense of powerlessness into leadership—a voice and a sense of agency—towards community activism in their struggle for clean, healthy neighborhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to Home (C2H) <a href="http://www.c2home.org">www.c2home.org</a></td>
<td>Domestic violence and sexual assault prevention</td>
<td>Educates youth leaders about the dynamics and root causes of domestic violence, its community impact, and receive training on facilitation, leadership and role modeling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breath of Life: Dorchester (BOLD) <a href="http://www.boldteens.org">www.boldteens.org</a>.</td>
<td>Environmental health</td>
<td>Strives to develop youth leaders that can address and assess environmental health concerns that improve air quality, reduce auto emissions, increase greenspaces and identify and reduce use of toxic products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester Bay Economic Development Center (DBEDC) <a href="http://www.dbedc.com">www.dbedc.com</a></td>
<td>Economic development</td>
<td>Builds youth power and leadership through community organizing in response to the perceived needs of the youth in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Empowerment (TE) <a href="http://www.teenempowerment.org">www.teenempowerment.org</a></td>
<td>Youth empowerment</td>
<td>Inspires young people to think deeply about the most difficult social problems facing their community, and gives them the tools they need to become organized and work with others in creating significant positive social change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
engage all participants (Pollack & Fusoni, 2005). For the Collaborative project, TE facilitated meetings of the CBO adult staff approximately one month prior to hiring the young adults. In these meetings, hiring strategies and goals were established. Once the project began, the hired young adults met to identify key issues in the community, place these issues within a larger social context, and developed two to three strategic action steps to address them. The training culminated in the young adults planning and executing a community event to address the targeted key issue of community violence by critically examining each of their agencies issue (e.g., dating relationships, police/youth relationships, environmental injustice). More information about the TE program and the interactive methods and engagement strategies are available in Fusoni (2005) and Pearrow and Pollack (2009).

Participants
The O4U 2008 Collaborative hired 30 young adults through the five selected CBOs and these young adults reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhoods. The majority of young adults were African-American (70%) and nearly one in five (18%) self-identified as multi-ethnic. There was nearly equal representation of males and females and the majority (86%) had at least a high school diploma or the equivalent. The age distribution of the participating young adults hired for the O4U Collaborative was relatively balanced with an average age of 19.35 years (see Table 2). In keeping with the goal of involving young people considered high-risk, approximately one third (29%) of the young adults had a history of being involved with the courts, and 18% had criminal records as adults.

Pre-test surveys were collected from all of the 30 young adults who participated in the Collaborative; however, only 17 of these young adults completed the post-test

Table 2. Characteristics of young adults: age, gender, ethnicity, education (N = 17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-ethnic</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete high school</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or technical college</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History of Court</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past court involvement</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal record</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
surveys. As only one of the young adults dropped out of the program, this reduced number of completed surveys was not related to poor job performance or inadequate support from the adult staff, but rather the timing of the final assessment. The final Collaborative event was held on the very last day of the program, and all parties believed that this event was of critical importance to the program’s impact. However, by the next work day, many of the young adults had obligations to return to school or had other job requirements; therefore, these findings are based only on the 17 young adults with completed pre- and post-test surveys. Comparisons of demographic data, using parametric (e.g., age) and non-parametric (e.g., gender) statistics, indicated that the 17 participants were reflective of the whole group in the areas of gender, age, level of education, and court involvement. There was a difference, however, based on the community site where they worked. Precautions to protect human subjects were verified by the University’s Institutional Review Board and confidentiality was maintained for participants.

Measures
Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to examine the program’s impact on the participating young adults. Self-report surveys were used to collect quantitative data on the young adults’ perceptions of social capital and empowerment, and observations of meetings and focus group interviews were gathered for the qualitative data. The following quantitative measures were used:

*Social capital.* The *Social Capital Questionnaire* (SCQ), created by Onyx and Bullen (2000), was used to measure the young adults’ perception of neighborhood and societal characteristics and connections within their community. Seven of the eight factors of this scale were used, including: Participation in Local Community, Social Action or Proactivity in Social Context, Feelings of Trust and Safety, Neighborhood Connection, Family and Friends’ Connection, Tolerance of Diversity, and Value of Life. The eighth factor, Work Connections, was inappropriate for this evaluation as the young adults had not begun their work together and these connections could not yet be established. The scores were calculated on a 4-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreement (4 = Yes, definitely, 3 = Yes, frequently, 2 = No, not much and 1 = No, not at all.) Onyx and Bullen (2000) constructed this scale based on an Australian sample, though adequate reliability, validity and replicability have been demonstrated in a US sample by O’Brien, Burdsal and Molgaard (2004).

*Empowerment.* As previously discussed, the construct of empowerment can be conceptualized at both individual and community levels. To examine the young adults’ sense of empowerment at the individual level, the *Youth Empowerment Scale* (YES: Paxton, Valois, & Drane, 2005) was used. The scale was designed for burgeoning adolescents, and with this population it has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Paxton et al., 2005). To assess the empowerment at the community level, the *Perceived Control Scale* (PCS) created by Schulz et al. (1995) was used. Scores for both of these measures are on 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreement (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree). For purposes of analysis, these two scales were combined to examine the broader construct of empowerment.
Demographics. Demographic information was collected from each young adult, including items such as race, age, ethnicity, level of education, and neighborhood of residence. Each participant was also asked to self-report on their history of a criminal record or previous court involvement.

Qualitative data was gathered to acquire the young adult’s perception of the summer’s collaborative project, and including observations and focus group interviews. Observations were conducted at each of the weekly meetings of the five CBOs staff and throughout the weekly meetings of the young adults. These observations assessed the quality of the group cohesion and the interactive engagement strategies of the TE program as the young adults collaborated for the final O4U 2008 community event. Observations were also conducted at each of the CBO sites to view the community events carried out by the young adults. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with groups of young adults at each of the CBOs to examine their perception (e.g., highs and lows) of the weekly meetings, each CBOs’ events, and the Collaborative’s final event. The interview also sought to determine the skills they personally developed and how they expected the summer’s work to impact their future opportunities.

Design and procedures

Observations began approximately six weeks prior to the project’s beginning when the CBOs’ agency staff met to organize hiring expectations and coordinate the pre-planned community activities of each agency (e.g., farmer’s market, park clean-ups, youth summit). Site visits were made at each of the CBOs as they were hiring of the young adults. Six young adults were hired by each CBO, and the entire group held their first meeting in early July. Pre-test surveys were administered at the initial meeting of the young adults of the O4U 2008 Collaborative. The evaluation was led by a researcher familiar with the work of the facilitating agency and was supported by two graduate assistants who administered pre- and post-test surveys, recorded observations of the weekly meetings and agency activities, and facilitated semi-structured interviews with the young adults.

It was hypothesized that the O4U Collaborative project would positively impact the young adults in the constructs of social capital and empowerment. To determine the program’s impact, pre- and post-test means were analyzed for significance using one-tailed paired samples t-tests. The analysis of the findings were organized to ascertain the project’s impact on the young adults as a group as well as for those targeted by the project (e.g., those with previous court involvement). Therefore, findings were compared for those who did not have any history of court involvement (NCI) with those who had a history of court involvement (CI). For the purposes of analysis, those with a history of being involved with the courts and those with criminal records as adults were collapsed into a court-involved (CI) category, which made up 35% of the participants.

Results

The participating young adults, as a whole, began the O4U Collaborative summer project indicating that they frequently participated and engaged in community activities reflected in their social capital (4-point scale: $M = 2.73$, $SD = .50$). The highest SCQ factor was Tolerance for Diversity ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .75$) and the
lowest factor was Feelings of Trust and Safety ($M = 2.49, SD = .51$). They were rather neutral in their sense of empowerment (5-point scale: $M = 3.42, SD = .61$). When examining the impact of the program to the entire group of young adults, the only significant gain was demonstrated in one factor of the SCQ—Participating in Local Community (e.g., have you ever attended a community event, or taken part in a community project?). The scores for this factor grew from a pre-test mean of 2.74 to the post-test findings of 3.07 ($t = 1.84; p = .04$; see Table 3).

When the NCI and CI groups of young adults were compared, however, the NCI group began the summer having already engaged in activities related to nearly all of the seven factors of the SCQ ($M = 2.90, SD = .40$), and reported a positive sense of empowerment ($M = 3.60, SD = .52$). The NCI group began the program having significantly higher mean scores in the composite SCQ ($t = 2.14; p = .04$), which was primarily attributed to the Participation in Local Community factor ($2.97$ vs $2.11$; $t = 1.94; p = .07$). Additionally, the lowest mean factor for those with CI was Participation in Local Community. When comparing their sense of empowerment, those without histories of court involvement came into the program with significantly higher scores ($3.60$ vs $2.98$; $t = 1.88; p = .04$).

At the end of the project, when comparing the pre- and post-test scores, the NCI group, did not demonstrate any significant gains over the course of the program. For the CI group, however, significant gains were demonstrated in the SCQ factors of Participation in Local Community ($t = 2.51; p = .04$) and Neighborhood Connections ($t = 2.35; p = .03$), as well as in the overall SCQ score ($t = 2.32; p = .03$). The CI group also demonstrated gains in their sense of empowerment, with differences approaching significance ($t = 2.05; p = .07$). Furthermore, by the end of the 8-week program, there were no significant differences between the NCI and CI groups (see Table 4).

Table 3. Paired samples $t$-test with all participants (n = 17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>2.74 (.84)</td>
<td>3.07 (.59)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.84*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>3.09 (.57)</td>
<td>3.06 (.43)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTS</td>
<td>2.49 (.51)</td>
<td>2.35 (.59)</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>2.64 (.75)</td>
<td>2.80 (.74)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFC</td>
<td>3.30 (.71)</td>
<td>3.24 (.52)</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TD</td>
<td>3.50 (.75)</td>
<td>3.65 (.52)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VL</td>
<td>2.71 (.69)</td>
<td>2.47 (.89)</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCQ</td>
<td>2.73 (.50)</td>
<td>2.93 (.34)</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND</td>
<td>3.29 (.95)</td>
<td>3.50 (.74)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM</td>
<td>3.52 (.55)</td>
<td>3.66 (.47)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>3.42 (.61)</td>
<td>3.59 (.54)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: PLC = Participation in local community; SA = Social action or proactivity in social context; FTS = Feelings of Trust and Safety; NC = Neighborhood connection; FFC = Family and friends connection; TD = Tolerance of diversity; VL = Value of life; SCQ = Social Capital Questionnaire Total (Note: On 4-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more agreement; Each item was answered on a scale where $4 = Yes, definitely$, $3 = Yes, frequently$, $2 = No, not much and 1 = No, not at all. Tabled values are the mean rating for each item and standard deviation). IND = individual-level empowerment; COM = community-level empowerment; EMP = empowerment (on 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more agreement (Note: Each item was answered on a scale where $5 = strongly agree$, $4 = agree$, $3 = neutral$, $2 = disagree$, and $1 = strongly disagree. Percents indicate combined agree and strongly agree responses). *$p < .05$ (one-tailed).
The qualitative findings, based on focus group interviews and observations, indicated that the young adults engaged in community organizing and social activism through their agency work, collaboratively engaging in an impressive array of community building activities. Four of the agencies conducted “walking tours” of their respective neighborhoods to identify the physical needs (e.g., appropriate sidewalks, adequate trash receptacles, sufficient handicap-accessible crosswalks), resulting in the young adults prioritizing improvements for their neighborhoods. These young adults created more “greenspaces” by planting trees, cleaned up area parks, organized a block party and engaged neighbors to survey their awareness of neighborhood needs, co-sponsored a Farmers’ Market in the parking lot of the community health center to improve access to fresh and quality produce, and met with local politicians to educate them about their neighborhood’s need for handicap-accessible crosswalks using photos and a PowerPoint presentation. One agency’s young adults engaged in a non-violent protest to discourage the purchase and use of tobacco products in the neighborhood. In the words of two young adults:

This was my first protest ever. We chanted and sang songs outside a convenience story selling tobacco products. I was scared at first but it went smoothly, professionally. My favorite part was showing passion about an issue. (CI)

Our agency tried to tackle different issues in the neighborhood. A highlight was in learning Community Organizing 101. We had someone experienced teach us about community organizing and that way when we met with the politicians we knew what we were talking about. (NCI)

The young adults used a variety of strategies to engage their peers and educate their community about how their agencies address broader public health issues, particularly community violence. Close 2 Home held their “Acting Out” event where the young people used prose, rap, and digital stories to discuss the impact of child abuse and domestic violence. They also created a literary magazine and completed the painting of an enormous, colorful mural at a nearby subway station to focus on the issue of domestic violence. BOLD hosted more than 30 young people and police offices and showed a popular movie on the topic of substance abuse, and then they engaged the attendees in an interactive discussion. Teen Empowerment conducted community dialogues at their neighborhood sites and also took dialogues into the community by walking through the neighborhood, doing outreach through their “Traveling Cyphers.” REEP hosted its annual “Environmental Justice Youth Summit” where hundreds of young people participated in workshops and performed spoken word and dance pieces on the topic of environmental issues. The young adults expressed a strong sense of pride in the work of their agencies as well as that of the Collaborative. One young adult stated:

I don’t usually feel comfortable in big groups, but because we were doing similar work I felt comfortable. And I liked seeing how the other agencies get their message across. (NCI)

To culminate the work of the summer, the young adults in the O4U Collaborative came together to host a three-hour event, entitled “Reach One, Teach One” held at a neighborhood high school. The young adults focused on the topic of community violence and each of the agencies highlighted their unique
Table 4. Paired samples t-test comparisons of Not Court Involved (NCI) and Court Involved (CI) groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Court Involved (n = 11)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Court Involved (n = 6)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>Post-Test</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>Post-Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>2.97 (.58)</td>
<td>3.11 (.57)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.23</td>
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Notes: PLC = Participation in local community; SA = Social action or proactivity in social context; FTS = Feelings of Trust and Safety; NC = Neighborhood connection; FFC = Family and friends connection; TD = Tolerance of diversity; VL = Value of life; SCQ = Social Capital Questionnaire Total (on 4-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more agreement (Note: Each item was answered on a scale where 4 = Yes, definitely, 3 = Yes, frequently, 2 = No, not much and 1 = No, not at all. Tabled values are the mean rating for each item and standard deviation.)
IND = individual-level empowerment; COM = community-level empowerment; EMP = empowerment (on 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more agreement (Note: Each item was answered on a scale where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Percents indicate combined agree and strongly agree responses).

*p < .05 (one-tailed).
approach to addressing and reducing violence (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, environmental toxins, inequities and power). The young adults shared their message through skits, poetry, spoken word, digital stories, and music. Approximately 200 individuals from the community were in attendance and the young adults indicated that the final event really helped pull together the work of their summer. The young adults offered the additional following statements about their work of the summer:

We brought energy and our perspectives of our everyday lives. We introduced a sense of hope into the picture for the younger generation and showed our leadership. (NCI)

Some of the people in the group are in college and others have kids. It was nice to work with different groups of people and see how we have the same background and are working hard to make change. (NCI)

I got the sense that we are not alone in it. (CI)

Discussion

This community-driven project presents an innovative strategy for engaging and empowering young adults as they create in positive social change. The O4U Collaborative led to significant gains by a particularly high-risk group of young adults—those with histories of court involvement and/or criminal activity. These vulnerable young adults significantly increased their social capital, specifically in their neighborhood connections and participation in the community, with nearly significant gains in their sense of empowerment. These findings are uniquely noteworthy in that the program did not make a similar impact on those who did not have court records yet lived in the same neighborhoods and shared many of the same demographic characteristics and community risk factors. Those involved with the court system came into the program having less community connections and involvement but made significant gains and in the end obtained a comparable sense of empowerment and connection to those not tarnished with a criminal record. Implicit in this study, though, is that even the participating young adults without court involvement would by many other standards be considered “high-risk.” All of these young adults live and work in urban neighborhoods that consist of high rates of crime and poverty and nearly all were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Thus, the impact of this program on the particularly vulnerable population of young adults holds promise in creating opportunities for social change that positively impacts communities—even in a relatively short period of time.

Though the number of participants in the project were small, the findings suggests that this ratio of 2:1 of low- and high-risk young adults is adequately effective in improving civic engagement and empowerment within urban communities. The small grouping and blend of participants allowed peer role models to demonstrate skills attainment and enough adult staff support to demonstrate how to address public health and community problems in a strategic manner. The positive social change focus of this project exposed those with restricted job options a range of opportunities for education and employment. Ultimately this created new career prospects that not only enhance social capital and sense of empowerment, but that also have the potential to reduce future crime—as we know that young adults who feel rewarded by their jobs are less likely to participate in a variety of crimes (Wadsworth, 2006). Thus, community-based strategies such as this can reduce
criminal behaviors while also increasing the capacity of upcoming leaders to address social and public health problems.

In the beginning of the program, the young adults’ by grouping (NCI vs CI) were strikingly different in their sense of empowerment. The young people with criminal records felt less connected to their community with limited ability to make a difference. This is a scenario for a life of hopelessness. Moreover, the young adults came into the summer with the perception that strength lies in the community but that they lacked their own ability to be proactive and build relationships with others. Yet, this study allowed for a critical look at how high-risk groups who feel less effective in addressing social issues can actively engage in positive strategies and build connections through community-based job while working for positive social change. The positive changes over the course of the summer highlighted the hopes of youth empowerment programs—“individual change helped create community change” (Jackson, 1996, p. 405). The gains demonstrated by these young adults in a relatively short period of time can provide new hope for constructive urban development rooted in community action. Empowerment is a critical aspect of effective social movements and increasing the capacity of young people to address social problems can result in more equitable access to resources and connections for sustainable change, thus manifesting the ideals of social justice. Furthermore, building social capital and connections between vulnerable young adults beginning their adult life can create sustained opportunities for future career trajectories.

**Limitations**

The limited access to all the young adults who participated in the program is a significant challenge for this study. This limitation primarily occurred due to timing factors, as all parties agreed that the attitudinal changes could not be assessed until the end of the summer “Reach One, Teach One” event. After this event, many of the participants returned to college or had other responsibilities that impacted their ability to complete the surveys. Additionally, a limitation is the relatively small size of the program. This is primarily due to the capacity of the community agencies and funding mechanisms available to support a program such as this, yet it highlights the need for continued strategies to replicate these findings. With replication with larger numbers, these findings and gains could be tested; though one of the strengths of this project was the close monitoring and support by the adult staff. Alternatively, the impact of this program could be compared to young adults with other summer employment opportunities. This could help ascertain the impact of programs affiliated with sociopolitical activity and community engagement to identify any distinct gains compared to traditional summer employment opportunities. Another limitation of this project was that it is based on the subjective findings of self-report surveys. The surveys assess the participants’ individual perceptions of social capital rather than the societal structures that implicitly reflect this contextual construct. While there are significant neighborhood differences in how individuals perceive networks and trust, or the foundations of social capital (Subramanian, Lochner, & Kawachi, 2003), this study suggests that activities that promote civic engagement can alter individual perceptions.

In summary, to address the burgeoning violence in urban communities, collective efforts to strategically target a vulnerable population are needed. “Youth
empowerment programs providing both necessary services and real opportunities can be among the most effective, and cost-effective strategies for the reduction of crime, violence, welfare dependency, and substance abuse in the inner-city” (Jackson, 1996, p. 406). Young adults are a critical resource to creating healthy communities, with the added benefit of increasing long-term capacity through the enhanced social capital and empowerment. This will require not only the grassroots efforts of community agencies that work with young people but also through policy structures that financially support prevention efforts that create new hope and opportunities for those frequently left behind. There is a need to address the call of Peterson and Zimmerman’s (2004) for more research on empowerment at the organizational level, in recognition that effective social movements and interventions require empowerment-related processes and outcomes across multiple levels. Community-level, collaborative partnerships are critical components of youth violence prevention (Griffith et al., 2008). Although this project initiated that process by empowering individuals as part of a community effort to organize community agencies to collaboratively address these social issues, more information is needed. These changes can be organized at the local level, as communities promote positive youth development, but also require state and federal funding agencies to support programs that demonstrate promise and hope.

References


