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IRVINE

Students 'Taking Action' in LA Schools: An Ethnographic Case Study of Youth Organizing

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Criminology, Law and Society

by

Analicia Mejia Mesinas

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Elliott P. Currie, Chair  
Professor Susan Bibler Coutin  
Associate Professor Ann M. Hironaka

2020



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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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August 2020

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#### **PUBLICATIONS**

##### *Peer Reviewed*

Earl, Jennifer, Heather Hurwitz, **Analicia Mejia Mesinas**, Margaret Tolan and Ashley Arlotti. 2013. "This Protest Will Be Tweeted: Twitter and Protest Policing during the Pittsburgh G20". *Information, Communication, and Society*, 16(4), 459–478.

##### *Book Chapters*

**Mejia Mesinas, Analicia**. 2018. "Students Taking Action in Los Angeles Schools: An Ethnographic Case Study of Student Activism in the United States". In *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*, edited by Sarah Pickard and Judith Bessant. Palgrave Macmillan.

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Cheryl L. Maxson (Primary Investigator), Charlotte E. Bradstreet, Danny Gascón, Julie Gerlinger, Jessica Grebenkemper, Darin Haerle, Jacob Kang-Brown, **Analicia Mejia Mesinas**, Marisa Omori, Shannon Reid & Daniel Scott. 2011. *Gangs and Violence in California's Youth Correctional Facilities: A Research Foundation for Developing*

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2016      Graduate Student Researcher. Family Jail Study (2016). Principal Investigator: Kristin Turney, UCI, Department of Sociology.



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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Students ‘Taking Action’ in LA Schools: An Ethnographic Case Study of Youth Organizing

by

Analia Meja Mesinas

Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology, Law and Society

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Elliott P. Currie, Chair

This dissertation project provides an ethnographic case study of a group of high school student organizers that challenged the increased use of police in American public schools and the criminalization of school discipline in Los Angeles, California. Indeed, there now exists growing body of work on the criminalization of youth and the school to prison pipeline. However, there has been much less focus on the mobilization of students and young people against these issues. I draw on two years of participant observation research that I conducted from 2015 to 2017 with a social movement community organization in Los Angeles, and on 15 in-depth semi structured interviews with high school student organizers. I rely on the voices and perspectives of youth to three central questions: (1) what were the actions students took during their time with The Center; (2) how and why did students become involved with The Center; and (3) how were these students transformed by their actions. This research also aims to reorient the ways in which young people are understood and positioned within social science research. I view young people as experts of their own lives, with perspectives and experiences that are essential for the development of social theory. I focus on the voices and experiences of students who have

traditionally been given little space within the extant literature on school security and punishment. I argue that the students in my case study engaged in powerful community activism that deeply impacted their critical consciousness, political perspectives, and future outlooks.

## Introduction

*“My name is Edna Lizbeth Chavez, and I am from South Los Angeles, California, el sur de Los Angeles... I am here to honor the Florida students that lost their lives and to stand with the Parkland students. I am here today, to honor Ricardo. I am here today to honor Stephon Clark. I am here today to uplift my South L.A. community! Policymakers, listen up. Arming teachers will not work! More security in our schools does not work! Zero-tolerance policies do not work! They make us feel like criminals. We should feel empowered and supported in our schools.”*

- Edna Chavez, 17 years old, March 24, 2017, March For Our Lives  
Demonstration, Washington DC.

On March 24, 2017, Edna Chavez, a seventeen year old high school student from South Los Angeles, delivered a moving speech on the intersecting issues of gun violence and school safety at the student-led March for our Lives Demonstration in Washington DC (Democracy Now, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Organized by student survivors of the Parkland, Florida mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which left 17 people killed, the “March for our Lives” demonstrations represented one of the largest youth-led “single day of protest against gun violence in history” (March For Our Lives). As young people across the US marched in support of tighter gun restrictions in the US, Edna’s speech also seriously cautioned against traditional responses to gun violence, like increased police and security.

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<sup>1</sup> Edna Chavez was not a research participant. Her speech was made publicly at the March for our Lives Demonstration on March 24, 2017.

This dissertation project provides an ethnographic case study of the actions, efforts, experiences and perspectives of a group of high school student organizers in Los Angeles, California that collectively organized to confront contemporary zero tolerance policies and the increased use of police in American public schools, and challenged the criminalization of school discipline. I draw on two years of participant observation research that I conducted from 2015 to 2017 with youth organizers from The Community Action Center (hereafter, The Center)<sup>2</sup>, a grassroots social movement organization in Los Angeles, and on 15 in-depth semi structured interviews with high school student organizers. I rely on the voices and perspectives of youth to three central questions: (1) what were the actions students took during their time with The Center; (2) how and why did students become involved with The Center; and (3) how were these students transformed by their actions.

Following the 2020 police killings of George Floyd in Minneapolis (Hill et al., 2020) and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky (Oppel Jr. and Taylor, 2020), and the wave of “Black Lives Matter” protests across the US and abroad (Catsillo, 2020), it may now seem unsurprising to hear about young people advocating against increased policing in schools. However, at the time of Edna’s speech in 2017 increased policing, surveillance, and punishment were often typical responses to school safety. Thus, Edna’s speech is especially significant because she represents a rich and vibrant youth led movement within Los Angeles with a long history of organizing within their local communities that is often overlooked. Upon hearing Edna’s speech we might begin to ask: who is Edna Chavez, how and why did she become engaged in community activism, what life experiences, if any, may have led her to become involved, or what does she think about her

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

work, how has she come to understand her political actions and broader social movements? As demonstrations and street protests in support of “Black Lives Matter” have resurfaced around the globe (Catsillo, 2020), questions like these are essential for our understanding of social movements and youth and student activism.

### *Setting the Context: Criminalization of Youth*

Since the 1999 school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, officials and national policy makers have reinforced policies and practices aimed to address school safety. In 1994, the Gun Free Schools Act and the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act were signed into law (Brand, 2015; Skiba, 2000). These policies, now commonly known and referred to as “zero tolerance policies,” required each state to develop and implement programs and policies that would immediately punish students, often through suspensions and expulsions, for the possession of a weapon or firearm on school grounds. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act also mandated that schools coordinate with police and other juvenile justice agencies to ensure safety (Kupchik, 2010; Simon, 2007). Fueled by these concerns for school safety, American public schools are now commonly characterized as high security environments, with punitive policies and practices, and permanent police presence and other surveillance technologies (Bracy, 2010; Hirschfield, 2008; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Kupchik, 2010; Kupchik & Monohan, 2006; Lyons & Drew, 2006; Monahan & Torres, 2010; Rios, 2011; Simon, 2007;).

The growth of zero tolerance policies, use of police, and other technologies of the criminal justice system in schools—alongside the unparalleled growth of America’s prison system (Davis, 2003) — has sparked new conversations and research in the fields of criminology, sociology, and legal studies around schools’ role in the construction and reproduction of youth criminalization, especially for Black and Latino youth (Giroux, 2003;

Hirschfield, 2008; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Kupchik, 2010; Kupchik & Monohan, 2006; Lyons & Drew, 2006; Monahan & Torres, 2010; Simon, 2007; Theriot, 2009; Wun, 2014).

Research has shown that many punitive school disciplinary policies and practices have come to subjugate students to a variety of experiences that symbolically, and overtly, treat them like suspicious criminals (Rios, 2011; Skiba 2000).

Although federal school suspension and expulsion policies, formally categorized as zero tolerance, were purportedly created to address serious school incidents of danger and violence (Wun, 2014), in practice these policies have led to increased punishment for much more minor, day to day episodes of misbehavior (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Jackson, 2012; Wun, 2014), potentially contributing to a “school to prison pipeline” (Wald & Losen, 2003). In schools today, student misbehavior, like talking back to teachers, commonly triggers contact with school police officers, and also often results in a citation and/or arrest (Na & Gottfredson, 2013).

### *Remaining Gaps*

Scholars have developed a rich and robust literature on the criminalization of youth and the school to prison pipeline. While this growing body of research that has worked to describe, explain, and assess the impacts of the growth of punitive school security and punishment practices in schools, there is much less work that focuses on the mobilization of students and young people against these issues, and the carceral state more broadly (Goddard and Myers, 2018; Monahan & Torres, 2010). For example, in their discussion on the work of youth-led grassroots organizations, Goddard and Myers explain:

“While they have largely escaped the attention of criminologists (and the social sciences generally), a number of youth-led grassroots organizations have mobilized against the carceral state and innumerable non-custodial forms of punishment such as fines, proactive police stops, registries of suspected gang members, and civil injunctions. For some time now, young people in these organizations have politically engaged with, among other issues, the criminalization of school discipline, racialized policing practices and the devastating effects that mass incarceration has had on poor communities of color. (pg. 298).

Indeed, over the last two decades, community organizations, young people, and student activists have worked collectively to call attention to issues like “the school to prison pipeline” and challenge the ongoing criminalization of young people in schools. Key to this movement are the actions of students who share their personal experiences in an effort to achieve educational and community reforms.

Additionally, while young people continue to be key figures of social movements and social movement research (Earl, Maher and Thomas, 2017), the activism of young people of color, especially high school students, and the experiences that inform the resistance of young people of color, are often overlooked, miscategorized, or criminalized (Jason 2018). For instance, academics and community activists, Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) argue that:

“Research on African-American and Latina/o youth has been dominated by studies that focus on ‘problem’ adolescent behavior. Typically, they explain youth crime, delinquency, and violence as individual pathological behavior or cultural adaptations stemming from social disorganization in their communities” (pg. 693).



The vast literature on juvenile delinquency often reduces youth issues to problem behaviors while ignoring crucial youth voices and perspectives (Clay, 2012; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Morrill et al., 2000). What perspectives or behaviors might we fail to notice, or what questions might we fail to ask, if we continue to overlook the actions and agency of young people, young students, and especially students of color? If social scientific research does not take into account the voices, perspectives, and experiences of young people, especially young students of color, who are critical of contemporary policing practices and are actively involved in local community and school activism, our understanding of juvenile justice and youth activism remains both limited and obscured.

### *Dissertation Overview*

This dissertation project builds on and contributes to existing social science research across the areas of criminology, sociology, education, and youth studies. My work emphasizes the rich and varied ways in which high school students have actively and politically engaged within their local schools and communities to challenge the growth of police in schools. I explore how and why students are drawn to local community activism, how activism connects to students' personal and social identities, their lived experiences, and their critical orientations. I illustrate the actions, efforts and perspectives of student organizers, and utilize a grounded theory approach to underscore the political and personal transformation that young people experience as they engage in community organizing and political activism. I argue that the students in my case study engaged in powerful community activism that deeply impacted their personal consciousness, political perspectives, and future outlooks. Students also provided important descriptions of and lessons for youth community organizing and political engagement.

My work also aims to reorient the ways in which young people are understood and positioned within social science research. I view young people as experts of their own lives, with perspectives and experiences that are essential for the development of social theory. I focus on the voices and experiences of students who have traditionally been given little space within the extant literature on school security and punishment (Bracy, 2010). Such work can help us understand the behaviors, motivations, and political engagement of young people, which also significantly contributes to our understandings of youth behavior, especially their political engagement, local community activism, and the development of broader social movements.

### *Development of Project*

I was introduced to the work of The Center in 2013, at an information session on school criminalization at the University of California, Irvine. During this event, high school student activists shared their experiences with criminalizing policies and practices at their schools. I remember the story told by a 15-year-old, Latino high school student named Tony, who explained that he felt harassed by officers at his school. He told the audience that when he was a freshman, he was given three or four “truancy tickets” that required him to pay a lot of money in fines. At that time, Tony explained, truancy tickets, or citations, typically resulted in up to \$250 in student fines, up to \$1,000 in court fees, and mandatory court appearances that threatened the possibility of incarceration (Community Rights Campaign, 2013). Tony explained that he eventually dropped out of his high school because “it was easier to avoid tickets that way” He also mentioned that he had recently started attending a continuation school in order to earn his high school diploma. At this new school, he learned about The Center and joined their campaign.

Tony’s presentation deeply moved me. At the end of his talk, I greeted Tony and talked with him for some time about my interest in school criminalization. Tony explained that he was

part of a movement against the criminalization of students and had shared his story at a number of community presentations – a tactic developed by the student activists to raise awareness about the aggressive policing practices that were criminalizing students in LAUSD schools. He wanted others to see that he was not a criminal, but his school was treating him like one. Part of his activism was to share his personal narrative in order to reveal the problematic nature of LAUSD school policies. For Tony, and his group of student activists, personal narratives were a key tactic for change.

During our conversation, I explained my own experiences with school disciplinary policies and practices at my public high school and my interest in exploring the issues of youth criminalization in my academic research. Tony welcomed my research interest and at the end of our conversation he invited me to attend meetings at The Center, where I began to volunteer. As I familiarized myself with the work of The Center, I established a rapport with the lead organizers and, given my ongoing research interests, I selected The Center as the site for my dissertation project. I obtained IRB approval for participant observation with The Center and in-depth semi-structured interviews with the high school student organizers.

#### *The Community Action Center (The Center)*

The Center was founded in the late 1980's and operates as a youth and adult led, grassroots, social movement organization in Los Angeles. The work of The Center is organized around a set of interrelated but distinct political campaigns rooted in the discriminatory experiences of underrepresented, poor-and working-class community members of Los Angeles. During the early 1990's, The Center organized a major campaign calling for affordable and reliable access to public transportation (see Reft, 2015). The Center's community mobilization around this issue also brought to light a related set of issues specific to predominantly Black and

Latino working class students who attended LA public schools and used public transportation to get to and from school. These issues included: an unreliable public transportation system, challenges in accessing affordable student bus passes, and a growing number of police citations for tardiness and truancy. The identification of these issues and their connections to longstanding conflicts between the police and the majority Black and Latino working class residents of Los Angeles (Jennings, 2015) led to a number of strategic efforts by The Center targeting experiences of students with police in schools, the criminalization of school discipline, and growth of the prison state.

### *Taking Action in LAUSD Schools*

In 2007, The Center launched its long-term campaign to challenge mass incarceration across the state of California. The goal of the campaign was to introduce students to key concepts of community organizing in order to build a youth-led local movement for school reform in Los Angeles. The campaign focused on the growth of punitive policing taking place within LAUSD schools (Sullivan, 2007) that also contributed to a school to prison pipeline (Community Rights Campaign, 2013). The work focused on LAUSD school disciplinary practices and the experiences of students in schools.

The campaign identified LAUSD high schools as critical sites for student activism. To organize high school students within their schools, the campaign established school clubs called “Taking Action” across a number of LAUSD high schools. These high school clubs generated a space for students to examine their experiences within their schools, connect school disciplinary practices to broader issues of punishment, and develop strategies for change.

The campaign also developed more intensive Youth Organizer Training Programs to provide its high school student activists with more formalized training in community organizing and social movement building tactics. Youth Organizer Training Programs were typically held twice a year, during the spring and summer school breaks, each bringing together anywhere from 15-20 high school students. Since students most often organized within their respective high schools during the academic school year, the training programs also provide opportunities for students who attend different schools to come together and build a collective movement across the LAUSD school district.

Following the launch of this effort in 2007, The Center called attention to a wide number of aggressive policing tactics of the Los Angeles Schools Police Department (LASPD), including truancy sweeps, citations, and arrests of students—the majority of whom were Black and Latino. According to a report from The Center, which examined citations and arrests in LA public schools, the LASPD gave out about 11,700 tickets to students in 2008, most commonly for charges of possession of marijuana, disturbing the peace, or possession of tobacco (“Black, Brown, and Overpoliced in L.A. Schools” 2013). Additionally, during the 2011-2012 school year, LASPD issued about 9,000 arrests and citations; 93% of which involved Black and Latino students (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The report also found that the number one cause of police referrals of students to the juvenile courts was for violations of municipal daytime curfew laws, which also resulted in \$250 tickets, up to \$1000 in court fees, and mandatory court appearances that threatened the possibility of incarceration for parents.

### *Project Evolution*

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<sup>3</sup> While Latino student make up about 73% of the LAUSD student population, Black students make up only eight percent (Los Angeles Unified Fingertip Facts 2019-2010).

I began my participant observations with the Center during the summer of 2015. I originally aimed to study and understand the perspectives of students who encountered criminalizing policies and practices in schools. My work intended to provide a case study that examined youth perspectives on school policies and methods of student resistance to punitive school practices. I was also interested in the ways students navigated their school environments, how they understood their schools' disciplinary and security practices, and how they challenged school policies.

During my participant observations, students became involved in a new campaign that targeted the militarization of the LAUSD school police. I observed the ways that students talked about their campaign, organized within their schools and communities, connected the militarization of police to larger processes of criminalization and mass incarceration. I also recognized that students were at the front lines of a grass roots social movement that challenged LAUSD policies and policing practices. I noticed the ways that students strategized and brainstormed key actions for their campaign, developed demands for change, attended LAUSD school board meetings, met with LAUSD school officials, and planned a number of public demonstrations.

As I began to conduct interviews with student organizers, I asked students to tell me about their work, their engagement with The Center, and their interest in community activism. I recognized that students' lived experiences and their personal identities were often at the core of how students came to talk about themselves and their actions. I recognized that there were significant meanings and deep complexities at the core of their political activism. I also noticed that students often noted significant transformation and growth as a result of their involvement with The Center.

Therefore, as my time in the field increased, the focus and central questions of the project shifted: the process of activism, the engagement and actions of students became central to my research. Additionally, my case study evolved to focus on three central questions: (1) how and why did students become involved with The Center, (2) what kind of work did students engage in; and (3) what were the lessons and insights students developed as a result of their work.

The political engagement and community activism of young people has generated much interest among scholars across a number of disciplines and research areas, including social movements and youth studies. This work often looks at the role of young people, particularly college students in generating national social movements, or ways in which young people are recruited to join social movements, and even the changing nature of young people's activism. However, much of this work often fails to explore the ways in which young people discuss their motivations and interest in community activist work.

Therefore, while working to understand the ways youth navigate and resist the policies and practices that contribute to youth criminalization in their schools and communities, this project, more importantly, works from the voices of the students I interviewed to build grounded theory about the transformative effect of engaging in action. As students attended meetings and trainings, became organizers, and planned and attended events, they also engaged in a process of personal and political transformation.

### *Dissertation Outline*

This dissertation provides an ethnographic case study of the political activism of the high school students organizers of The Center that challenged the criminalization of school discipline and militarization of policing within LAUSD schools. I draw on my two years of participant

observations, as well as interviews I conducted with 15 student organizers to examine the processes, roots, and impacts of activism for these students. I draw attention to the actions students took during their involvement with The Center and the Taking Action campaign. I rely on the voices and perspectives of youth to address (1) how and why students became involved with The Center, (2) the perspectives and insights students arrived with, and (3) the lessons and insights they developed as a result of their work. I argue that students' identities, their lived experiences, and critical insights are essential to understanding youth activism. Additionally, young people are operating as active political actors (not passive bystanders), and demonstrate complicated understandings of their social and political worlds. This work also recognizes that youth activism is not static. As youth engage in this process, they also are engaged in a process of personal and political transformation that is significant for our academic understanding of youth people and their social and political actions.

I begin with my methodology in Chapter 1. To contextualize this process, I detail my research design, specifically my two years of participant observations and my interviews with 15 student organizers. I discuss my site for observations in more detail, including a more thorough description of The Center and the aims of its campaign. I also discuss how I became involved with The Center, and how my involvement led to the development of this dissertation project. After discussing my participant observations with the center describe my interviews and data analysis. This chapter illustrates the processes of qualitative research design that I followed and demonstrates my methodological commitment to developing a sound ethnographic case study of a group of high school student organizers in Los Angeles. It also emphasizes my commitment to honoring the voices, experiences, and perspective of the young people who took a part in this project.



Chapter 2 provides a case study of the major campaign and the efforts of the organization during my data collection. During the time of my data collection, the student organizers of The Center learned of a federal military surplus program, called the 1033 program, that provided military grade weapons to the Los Angeles Schools Police Department. I detail the successful student led campaign demanding that the district terminate their involvement with the 1033 program and return all military weapons. This chapter sheds light on the mobilization efforts of these students against the militarization of their school police department. I also demonstrate the ways in which young people came to interpret this policy as problematic and dangerous. In highlighting their successful campaign, the chapter demonstrates the powerful actions of high school students in demanding change and the need for policy makers to think critically about the implementation and meaning of safety in schools.

In chapter 3, I turn to my analysis of my interviews with student organizers to explore the roots of student's engagement with The Center and their activism, more broadly. I focus on the conditions of students' lives, including their neighborhoods and communities, as well as the experiences that students identified as significant for their participation with the Taking Action program. I illustrate the ways in which young people's experiences and identities shape their critical consciousness and curiosity for organizing. Thus, my interviews with the student organizers revealed that their involvement with The Center was rooted in their individual and multifaceted identities as young students of color living and growing up in Los Angeles. Additionally, as the students who took part in my interviews moved through their social, communal, and political environments they also began to observe a number of social problems and develop a hunger for change. While the fields of sociology, criminology, and psychology have often identified social problems as causes of delinquency and crime, this chapter works to

show how the same conditions can also lead students to respond in critical and political ways. As the chapter demonstrates, the young people who took part in my interviews revealed a critical sense of resiliency and motivation for social action and change that was integral to who they were and how they thought about themselves.

Finally, in chapter 4 I focus on the ways in which students talked about their work as community organizers. Relying on my student interviews, I interrogate what it meant for students to go out into the community and mobilize for social change. As I demonstrate in the chapter, students provided rich and contoured descriptions of the process, challenges, and goals of community organizing that are essential for our understanding of social movements. These descriptions provide important texture to scholarly understandings of community organizing, and also contextualize the ways in which students came to understand their work. They reveal the complexity of what it means to work within the community and impact change. Additionally, as students reflected upon their activism, they also identified a process of personal transformation and growth that came as a result of their engagement in community organizing. I argue that engagement in political action can have a strong transformative effect on the consciousness of young people.

I end the dissertation with a brief concluding chapter that summarizes key themes that came out of this research project. As I highlight key themes I also discuss the importance of qualitative work in the area of youth and school criminalization and the ongoing need for centering youth- based perspectives in the academic literature. I also discuss the limitations of this project and plans for future research.

## Chapter 1: Research Methodology

In this dissertation, I examine the intersections of youth criminalization and youth activism by studying the actions, perspectives, and political consciousness of a group of high school student activists working with a grassroots social movement organization in Los Angeles utilizing an ethnographic case study. More specifically, I draw on two years of participant observation with The Community Action Center (The Center) and 15 semi-structured interviews with youth organizers of The Center. I demonstrate the myriad ways in which high school student organizers of The Center navigate and resist structural policies and practices that systematically regulate the lives of marginalized youth; what Victor Rios has termed the Youth Control Complex (Rios, 2011). Additionally, through a grounded theory approach, I develop a theoretical explanation for the actions and processes of high school student organizers with The Center who operate as politically active engaged citizens, with evolving dynamic understandings of their social and political worlds (Creswell, 2013).

### *Project Origins*

In 2013, I was introduced to the work of The Center at an informational session highlighting the growing use of truancy tickets and the implementation of more general criminalizing practices across LAUSD public schools (Morales, 2009). The presentation closely aligned with my broad research interests in the criminalization of Black and Latino youth, zero tolerance policies, and the school to prison pipeline (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008; Giroux, 2003; Hirschfield, 2008; Rios 2011; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2003). I saw the opportunity to explore these issues in real time, on the ground, alongside the students and families that have become directly impacted. Additionally, and in many ways more importantly,

it was also an opportunity to engage outside of the academic walls and work alongside community members for educational and criminal justice reform.

In 2014, I became a member and Volunteer of The Center. In one of the first meetings I attended, I was introduced to The Center's campaign to call attention to the expansion of the carceral state within LAUSD public schools and put an end to the school to prison pipeline. The campaign identified LAUSD high schools as critical sites for identifying and developing "student organizers" across a number of LAUSD schools. The campaign focused on the experiences of students in schools in order to challenge the use of zero tolerance policies in LAUSD schools, the growth of the Los Angeles Schools Police Department (LASPD), and the especially high rates of suspensions, expulsions, and truancy tickets.

My volunteer work with The Center typically consisted of attending "member strategizing meetings", which took place on the first Saturday of each month. At these meetings, students, staff, and community members, all referred to as community organizers, came together to discuss LAUSD policies and practices, share student experiences, prioritize demands, and strategize for action events. During these meetings, I had the opportunity to learn more about The work of The Center as an organization and its vision for their campaign in LAUSD schools. I developed relationships with youth organizers and staff, and participated in a variety of organizing and action efforts, including community outreach and student-led demonstrations in front of LAUSD headquarters. Given the vision of the campaign to "stop and reverse the mass incarceration of people in the United States" (CRC 2013 p. 1), the strategies, actions, and discussions were always contextualized within the larger framework of mass incarceration, issues of race and inequality (both internationally and within the U.S.), police violence against black and brown bodies, and the growing Black Lives Matter movement.

After about a year of membership and volunteer work with The Center, I began to conceptualize this research project. I saw an opportunity to expand academic understandings of youth criminalization and focus on the ways in which young people understand zero tolerance policies, the school to prison pipeline, and the criminalization of youth more broadly. I also saw the opportunity to further develop this literature by focusing more specifically on the work of the young people involved with The Center, their perspectives, and their actions (Monahan & Torres, 2010). I wanted to know more about these young people, including why they participated in this work, how they came to think about the work that they did, and how the work impacted their own perspectives and ideas.

I spoke with both the students and the staff organizers, including the executive director, about these research questions and the nature of my graduate studies. I wanted to ensure that I had the consent and support of the organization and its members to develop a study around their work. Additionally, while I made sure to clearly identify myself as a doctoral student studying Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine during my time as a volunteer, it was important to clearly communicate that my role as a volunteer would be changing to a participant observer and researcher. Indeed, I was encouraged by the support I received across all levels of the organization (director, student members, and staff).

### *Participant Observations*

I began my participant observations with The Center in the summer of 2015 when I was invited to attend and observe their Youth Organizer Summer Training Program. This month-long program is organized by the Center and facilitated by the “youth organizer” staff. The program is designed to provide a political education to about 15 LAUSD high school students each summer and train them in the skills of community organizing. In this way, the training program provides

a space for young people to think about and talk through the issues of their schools and communities, and it teaches students a political framework so that they may connect these things to more broadly defined structural issues, like race, class and gender.

As a participant observer, I attended the summer training and participated alongside the high school students in all of the programmatic activities. Given my previous time spent volunteering with the organization, I had already established a positive rapport with staff and some of the high school training attendees. However, it was also important to note that my role as a volunteer had now shifted to a researcher. Following my IRB protocol, during the summer training orientation, I informed the training attendants of my research interest in student experiences with youth criminalization and the efforts of young people working to challenge these practices. I reminded students that I was a graduate student at UC Irvine and explained that I had begun working on my dissertation research project focused on the campaign. I also explained that I would be attending the meetings as a “participant observer,” maintaining my role as an active member of the group but also collecting field notes as data for my research project (Creswell, 2013).

After the lead staff organizers expressed their support for my work, I provided students with the opportunity to ask me any questions about the “field notes” I would be jotting and the “data” I would be collecting. Since the students did not have any explicit questions, I informed them that no personal information would be collected or disclosed and I also explained that there were some rules and regulations guiding my research and data collection— that I needed their verbal consent to conduct any and all of my participant observations and that they had a right to inform me, at any time, if they did not want me to perform observations or take notes. Finally, given that some of the students were under 18 and considered to be minors, I provided each

student with a study information sheet and a parental notification letter informing their parents of my research project. Following my IRB protocol, I included my personal contact information on all of these documents and explained that parents could contact me at any time to discuss any questions or request that observations be withheld. All students provided verbal consent to my participant observations, and some eagerly expressed interest in participating in my future interviews.

The Youth Organizer Training Program was scheduled over a month time period, with five-hour training sessions that took place three days a week. I attended each session as a participant observer, participating fully in all of the trainings alongside the high school students, meanwhile taking extensive field notes. My field notes included details about the training curriculum, student discussions and debates, and community organizing activities. I took jottings on the assigned readings, activities, and discussions that occurred-- sometimes the jottings included quick and brief key words that I could build upon in my field notes, while other times I was able to take more extensive jottings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Additionally, at the end of each day I reviewed all of my jotting to construct a set of more complete field notes. Not only did my field notes include details on the observations I made, they also included reflections on the particular things I noticed, including discussions and behaviors I took part in and observed. As a participant observer, my goal was to develop field notes that would work towards an intimate understanding of the students' participation, engagement, and interactions, and the myriad ways in which they came to discuss, make sense of, and think about their training as youth organizers (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Following my participant observations with the Summer Youth Organizer Training, I was invited to continue my research with The Center. This expanded my participant observations to

the day to day activities of the campaign, and also to events, demonstrations, and activities planned by the staff and youth organizing members. To begin this next stage of participant observations, I provided organizational leaders with a courtesy letter and study information sheet for their records. Additionally, staff posted the study information sheet on the “announcement board” in their office to remind student and staff organizers of my research project and to ensure that my research identity and agenda was clear.

Over the course of two years, I “dropped into” the office about two to three days per week to conduct my participant observations. While in the first two to three months of my participant observations, I would provide staff with a list of dates that I planned to be in the office; this eventually tapered off and I was able to adopt a more informal structure. This included planning office visits a week in advance to much more informal planning and notifications. For instance, some weeks I would receive a mobile text message from staff member asking, “are you coming in today” or “can you come in today, we need your help.” I also assume my previous time spent as a volunteer really aided with this process.

It is important to note that after about a couple of months in the field, I was considered an insider by The Center’s lead staff. I operated on a first name basis with all staff and high school student organizers. I was also consistently informed of events they planned and often received requests for my assistance with projects. Youth and adult staff members also expressed their curiosity about my research project, experiences with academia, and my decision to obtain a Ph.D. As I noted in my field notes, “it’s as if these very informal almost unrelated conversations and interactions that randomly occur at the office provide some of the most fruitful opportunities for, and also validation of, my immersion with the group.”



Additionally, while the physical office operated as a site for many after school campaign related meetings and trainings with the high school student organizers, it also existed as a much more informal space for students to spend time after school. It was a common practice for student members to drop in to the center during the week on non-meeting days. As I noted in my early field notes:

*The focus of the campaign is to challenge punitive policies and practices across LAUSD through the development and training of high school student organizers. High school students who become members are trained to talk about the issues that impact them and their communities, talk to others in their communities, and strategize actions for change. However, it seems like the training in community organizing is also occurring through many of these informal day to day interactions. Students often show up the center, on their own or with a friend, after school to talk together, hang out, and use the computer, but also to talk with staff about a variety of issues, like their homework or other school projects, their families, and even personal issues of family and mental health. It is clear that these much more informal interactions and practices (between students themselves and between students and staff) provide significant opportunity for connections, community building, and mentorship.*

Although I came to feel welcomed as a volunteer and member of The Center, it remained important to consistently remind members of my role as a participant observer and researcher. Importantly, I also reminded students of their anonymity and protection of privacy. Additionally, my time spent as a volunteer and ongoing presence at the office during my participant

observations demonstrated my commitment to the mission and vision of the campaign, and it was often easy (for both me and others) to forget or overlook the fact that I was still jotting notes and writing field notes on the things I observed.

In her discussion of ethnographic practices and research contexts, Susan Coutin (2002) notes, “To view fieldwork as merely or even primarily research can underestimate the complexity and embeddedness of social interaction and overestimate the power of ethnographers” (pg. 109). As I indicated in my field notes, after about three months in the field, “members are becoming more like peers, colleagues, and close acquaintances, than research participants.” However, to honor and respect the vulnerability of the high school students, I focused my jottings specifically on the scope of my research interest. While I discussed the day to day actions and interactions amongst and between staff and high school student members, I did not include details of the more intimate and specific discussions that often took place. My observations and reconstructed field notes were focused on day to day, more or less behind the scenes, activities and actions that took place in the office, and the behaviors, tactics, and approaches demonstrated by staff members and youth organizers which occur within a social movement campaign.

I also made sure to implement strategies that would remind myself and others that I was conducting research. To do this, I developed a ritualized practice to disclose my identity as a researcher. At the beginning of each visit, as I would get settled into the office, I would greet everyone and casually say “I’m conducting research today.” I kept copies of the Study Information Sheet in the office and reminded others that it could be reviewed at any time. I also explained that my interest was in exploring youth perspectives around experiences with youth criminalization; I was not focused so much on their personal life stories, especially sensitive and

personal information that I either overheard or that may have been disclosed to me, but rather their connections between their experiences with school criminalization policies and practices and their actions within the campaign. If I ever was unsure about my notes, I made sure to check with the individuals to ensure that I had their permission to record the information shared in my notes. I also informed participants that personal characteristics or any identifying information would not be included in my notes. Finally, I used a notebook to write my jottings in order to maintain visibility of my notes.

While the boundary of my identity as a group member and academic research remained fluid, the line between my role as a volunteer and member of The Center and my role as a staff member was bright and clear. I never accepted money for the compensation of my time. On a couple of occasions, I was offered gas money for volunteer efforts, like picking up supplies, or dropping off supplies at an event. However, I consistently expressed that I was a volunteer and researcher and was therefore unable to accept financial compensation. I explained that I had also received some funds to support my graduate student research efforts from the National Science Foundation (Graduate Research Fellowship Program) and a couple of other university sponsored grants. Lastly, I also did not sit in on staff meetings where grant funding, budgeting, hiring, and any other business meetings took place. Not only were these details out of the scope of my research project, I was also committed to respecting the privacy of the management and operation of The Center as a non-profit organization.

### *Interviews*

Following about a year and a half of field work, I began to recruit participants for the interview phase of my project. To avoid the possibility of limiting my interview participants to only those with whom I may have interacted the most, or who were at the office most often, I

only made my interview participant recruitment announcements during the monthly formal membership wide meetings. I attended a total of three monthly meetings during January, February, and March of 2017 and completed a total of 15 semi structured one on one interviews with youth and staff organizers of The Center. Additionally, during my recruitment, I provided an interview-specific study information sheet and request that students talk with me individually if they were interested in being interviewed. I also provided a Parent Consent Form to all students who expressed their interest; all students were required to provide me with a signed parental consent form before I could schedule and conduct an interview.

I conducted my first interview in May 2017 with Ivan<sup>4</sup>, an 18 year old senior high school student. From this time to September 2017, I completed a total of 15 semi structured individual interviews with youth organizers of the campaign. This included three staff members (three females and two males), eight high school students from two different high schools (six females and two males) and four youth organizers that had recently graduated from high school (two males and two females). The high school students were either in their junior or senior year (4 juniors and 4 seniors), with five students from one school (three seniors and two juniors) and the additional three (two juniors and one senior) from another high school.

The ages of my interview participants ranged from 25-40 for staff members, and 16- 20 for youth organizers. Additionally, all of my research participants racially identified as either Black or Latino (amongst all of my interview participants, four identified as Black, 10 identified as Latino, and one identified as “other” or “mixed race”). At the time of my research, Taking Action school clubs primarily operated in schools located in the South Los Angeles area of the

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

district. Therefore, while all students lived within the greater Los Angeles area, the majority lived in the South LA area.

All interviews took place in person at the physical office of The Center. Most interviews were conducted privately in a one on one setting in the conference room, with an occasional interview occurring in a staff member's personal office when the conference room was unavailable. Interviews were also semi structured; I drafted an interview guide which included a set of "open ended and general" starting questions focused on students' experiences with the center, I also allowed for the interview to go in the direction taken by the interview participant (Creswell, 2013 p. 163). My interview questions asked students to discuss their involvement with the campaign, including why they joined, why they keep coming back, what they like about the campaign, and the goals of their actions. I asked students to discuss, in their own words, the goals of the campaign, including its strategies and actions, and their personal definitions of community organizing, the school to prison pipeline, and the criminalization of youth. These initial open-ended questions provided a guiding framework for the focus on my interviews and allowed for more targeted follow up questions and discussions.

Finally, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. On average, interviews lasted for about an hour and a half. The shortest interview took about an hour and fifteen minutes and the longest about two hours. Given the rapport and connections I built during my participant observation phase, I anticipated that interviews would be characterized as very informal and conversational. However, I noticed that the use of the audio recorder slightly affected this dynamic and my identity as a researcher who was collecting data was much more explicit. Particularly at the beginning of each interview, my role as a researcher, as opposed to group member and insider, became much more salient. Students often looked at the recorder and would

answer introductory questions in a short, concise, and what seemed like a scripted manner. One participant in particular even said that she was “a little shy” at the beginning of the interview-- something that had not been previously explicitly stated to me while I was conducting my participant observations. As I became aware of this trend, I made an explicit effort to develop and maintain a conversational style throughout my interviews with the high school student organizers. I took time to acknowledge the “awkwardness of the recorder” and I explained to students that my goal was to develop a more natural and less rigid conversation. I also reminded interview participants of their anonymity and made sure to ask a variety of unscripted clarifying questions. Indeed, the interview style naturally shifted after about 10 minutes into my interviews (on average); students began to provide much longer responses, they stopped looking at the audio recorder, and instead made much more eye contact with me.

### *Data Analysis*

In his textbook on qualitative research design, Creswell (2013) notes, “The process of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process--they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project” (p. 182). Following this approach, the analysis of my field notes was ongoing. During the participant observation phase of this project, there was not a clear boundary between data collection and data analysis. Given my extended length of time in the field, I often took time to look through and read my field notes. In doing so, I was able to explore early insights and looked for the emergence of patterns and themes. This process allowed me to develop what Emerson, Fritz, and Shaw (1995) describe as “initial memos,” memos that focused on discrete phenomena, topics, and categories that emerged from my field notes. I used these initial topics, categories, and themes to inform my interview questions and shape the development of my interview guide.

Following the completion of my interviews, the analysis phase of my project became much more explicit and refined; I terminated my time in the field as a participant observer and my process for analysis became much more systematic and focused.<sup>5</sup> My goal in this phase was to complete my analysis of my data in order to generate an explanation of the experiences, perspectives, and political actions of high school community organizers who worked with The Center from my data. In my effort to develop these youth based perspectives, my notes, memos, and analysis “gave priority to developing rather than to verifying analytic propositions” (Creswell, 2013, p.143; see also Glaser & Strauss, 1999). First, I read through each interview to generate initial open codes that emerged. As I read each interview, I took notes on key concepts and larger thoughts and processes that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006). I also took time to meet with my dissertation chair to discuss many of these key concepts, processes, and ideas.

Following my meetings with my dissertation chair, I began my systematic process of coding by reviewing all interviews and assigning my analytic codes to my data. I coded each interview by hand, applying each of my open codes to my interview data. As Creswell (2013) explains, “the process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184). Following my coding process, I read through all of the data within each code to generate a smaller set of themes to inform my writing and dissertation chapters.

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<sup>5</sup> I did continue to participate with The Center on occasion as a volunteer, but not as a researcher; I no longer collected data or conducted research.

During my writing process, I often returned to my coded interviews and fieldnotes. This ongoing process allowed for descriptions, themes, and further analysis to develop as I drafted and completed each chapter.

In the next chapter, I will provide a case study of the major campaign that took place during my field work. To contextualize this work, I provide additional background on the Los Angeles School District and shed lights on its zero tolerance policies. As these policies took hold, many community organizations, parents, and students began efforts to challenge the culture of punishment and ongoing criminalization of students that came to characterize the district. However, as I began my participant observations with The Center, headline news revealed that the Los Angeles School Police Department was in possession of military grade weapons. Thus, I follow the efforts of the student organizers to “get rid of the weapons” and shed light on the ways in which students came to understand and critique the militarization in schools.



## **Chapter 2: A Case Study of Students Taking Action in Los Angeles Schools**

On June 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 the Los Angeles Unified School District's Board of Education voted to cut \$25 million from its annual school police budget (Burke, 2010). The historic decision, passed by a 4-3 board member vote, came after weeks of local rallies and demonstrations held outside of the district's headquarters by students, parents, teachers, and community organizations calling for an "end to LA school police" (Kohli & Blume, 2020). While these demonstrations were largely connected to the broader "Black Lives Matter" movement, they also represented a culmination of almost two decades of youth-led efforts to end the over policing of students in schools (Anderson, 2015; Community Rights Campaign and Dignity in Schools, 2010).

Critical theorist Henry A. Giroux argues that young people are facing a "War on Youth" (Giroux, 2013; see also Giroux, 2016). The expansion of "law and order" policing, including "tough on crime" laws, have subjected young people to a "youth control complex" that scrutinizes and criminalizes young people and their behaviors (Rios, 2011; Simon, 2007). In addition to the growing use of school police, students, especially students of color, face a significant set of policies and practices, like "zero tolerance", used to monitor, surveil, punish, and criminalize their misbehavior; these include use of security cameras, random searches, metal detectors, and identification cards (Skiba, 2000; Kupchik and Monahan, 2006). Contemporary school disciplinary policies in the United States rest on the idea that students should be punished for the violation of specific school rules, that students should be provided with no leniency in the delivery of punishment, and that punishment should involve law enforcement officials (Kafka, 2011). As Giroux argues:

"As the United States increasingly models its schools after prisons and subjects children to a criminal legal system marked by severe class and racial inequities, it

becomes clear that such children are no longer viewed as a social investment but as suspects” (Giroux, 2016).

Research has consistently shown that that these policies and practices do not contribute to safer school environments (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Instead, the use of police in schools is more closely linked to increased referrals to law enforcement for “non-serious violent behaviors” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Nance, 2016). More specifically, Black students are arrested on school grounds at “disproportionately high levels” (Blad & Harwin, 2017).

As empirical examinations of school policies and practices by social scientists, legal advocacy organizations, and community organizations has grown, so too have the efforts of students to build a movement against the criminalization of students and the use of police in schools. From Los Angeles, California (Costana-Chock, 2012) and Oakland, California (McBride, 2020), to Chicago, Illinois and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Anderson, 2015) to New York (Ellin, 2016), there is a rich and deep history of student led resistance across a number of local communities in the US.

Social movement literature has traditionally recognized the critical roles of young people to the success of social movements (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). This research has also emphasized the actions of students, as well as environments of school campuses as vital components to the development, growth, and success of historical movements (Biggs, 2006; Draper, 1965; Earl, Maher, & Elliott 2017; Enriquez, 2014; Klatch, 1999; Soule, 1997). However, this work often focuses on the actions of college students and the college campus environments that provide fertile soil for social action. Thus, the actions, roles, perspectives and experiences of high school students, especially students of color are often overlooked and discounted. Additionally, some scholars have argued that young people of today

are no longer politically engaged (Delli Carpini, 2000; Mann, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Wilkins, 2000). As I demonstrate in this chapter, high school students have also played pivotal roles in the organization and success of social movements. Additionally, as calls to “defund the police” continue to receive unprecedented levels of recognition, local youth led movements that in many ways paved the way to “the Largest Movement in U.S. History” (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, 2020), must especially be documented and analyzed in our academic literature.

This chapter provides an ethnographic case study of the political activism of students who are challenging the criminalization of school discipline in Los Angeles. I draw on my two years of participant and 15 interviews with student organizers of a Los Angeles based social movement organization, called The Center. I focus on the efforts and voices of the youth organizers, and detail the ways student activists have confronted zero tolerance policies and the increased use of police. I begin with a background of the policies and practices of Los Angeles Unified School District and discuss the expansion of “zero tolerance policies” and police in their schools. I then shift my focus to the actions of student organizers from The Center. I provide a brief historical account of the development of the student led movement efforts, before I shift my focus to the student led campaign calling for an end to the militarization of the district’s school police that took place during my fieldwork. I argue that, over the last decade, student activism has been vigorous, successful and critical to reforming school policies and practices in Los Angeles public schools.

### *The Los Angeles School District (LAUSD)*

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest public school district in the United States (Los Angeles Unified Fingertip Facts 2019-2010). According to the “Los Angeles Unified Fingertip Facts” 2019-2020 data, the district enrolls more than 670,000

students across kindergarten through 12th grade; Latino students make up the vast majority of the student population (about 73 percent); White students make up about 10 percent of the population; Black students make up about 8 percent; and Asian American students about 4 percent. Additionally, approximately 80 percent of students within the district qualify for free or reduced price meals, a measure typically used to examine the poverty level. The district reported an “all-time high” graduation rate of 79 percent for the 2019 academic class (Stokes, 2019), and LAUSD board member, Monica Garcia, noted recently that “46% of Black students fall below the national average” on national test scores (NBC Los Angeles News, 2020).

LAUSD is also home to the largest independent school police department in the nation (Los Angeles Unified School District). The department was created in 1948 and currently employs over 400 sworn and gun carrying officers, as well as about 100 non-sworn school safety officers and about 30 civilian staff (Los Angeles Unified School District). As the primary law enforcement agency operating within LAUSD, dedicated to “providing a safe and crime-free school environment,” the district provides the police department with a roughly \$70 million budget (Burke, 2020).<sup>6</sup> Although definitions for “safe environments” are not detailed or defined on their webpages, the school police’s current stated mission is to “assist students, teachers, administrators and other staff in providing a safe and tranquil environment in which the educational process can take place” (Los Angeles School Police Department).

The LASPD webpage states, “the goal of the LASPD team is to address the quality of life issues that impact student safety and the ability of the students and staff to enjoy a safe learning environment free from the fear of crime” (Los Angeles School Police Department). However,

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<sup>6</sup> This does not include the budget cut of \$25 million voted for in June of 2020.

over the course of the school police department's history, the LASPD has distinguished LAUSD schools as fertile sites for the development and implementation of a broad set of policing policies and practices, like zero tolerance, that have significantly contributed to wide ranging pre-prison conditions, and the ongoing criminalization of LAUSD students, who are predominantly Black and Latino (Kafka, 2011; Sojoyner, 2013). These policies mandate the delivery of strict punishments, often in the form of suspension, expulsion, and legal citations for students' violations of school rules (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). The ongoing enforcement of zero tolerance policies has historically transformed LAUSD schools into highly policed and punitive environments, which consistently subjugated students to intensified scrutiny and surveillance, essentially treating students as criminals (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

### *Police and Surveillance in Schools*

Since the launch of zero tolerance policies in schools, police officers have come to take up a much more visible and permanent place within schools. Although the presence of police in schools is not new, school policing, as an area of law enforcement, has recently become one of the fastest growing (Hirschfield, 2008). The formalization of School Police Officers, also known as School Resource Officers (SRO's), grew out of a community policing program in Michigan, during the 1950's, which placed community police officers within the local schools (Girouard, 2001). The term SRO later became officially defined as "a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations" (Girouard, 2001).

In Los Angeles, LAUSD students regularly encountered police officers within their schools, and some schools began to use metal detectors. For example, during my interviews, Brittney, 17 years old, and a high school junior at Williams High School<sup>7</sup> explained:

*Yes, for my school, there was actually a week where they was recording, the police officers were recording themselves just patting down people randomly. Then making students more late to even attend school, because it took 30 minutes for their thing, and then yet you lost your first period.*

As Brittney explains, these types of security practices subjected students to an increased surveillance and treated students like suspected criminals. Additionally, students acknowledged that these policies significantly interfered with their learning, often causing them to be late to class and a general sense of frustration.

It was also not uncommon for police officers to issue legal citations, or tickets, to students for the violation of school policies (Community Rights Campaign, 2013). For instance, Ashely recalled an experience she had during her sophomore year of high school. During this incident, Ashley was suspected to be in possession of a permanent marker— an item that is forbidden on school premises and classified as contraband (Kohli, 2019) — while she was walking in the hallway on her way to her class. She explained:

*They tried to say I had a marker they found on the floor and they said it was mine. Then they tried to give me a ticket, and it kept me like ... they patted me down out of nowhere I was like, 'Wait, what did I do? I didn't do nothing. I was just trying to get to class.' Then they kept me out of class for two periods, and then I'm like*

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms; All student and high school names have been changed for anonymity.

*'I'm missing my class, I'm missing my education, this is not right'. Then the principal came in, "Like oh, well you shouldn't have this."*

Across the LAUSD citations were often given to students who were involved in relatively minor offenses on school campuses (Frey, 2014). Although Ashley was able to avoid a citation in this situation, school officers still patted her down, searched her belongings, and kept her out of her classes until she was able to meet with her school principal—an experience she described as both “humiliating” and “frustrating”.

As Ashley points out, in these kinds of encounters students were often assumed to be guilty prior to any investigation and also faced a constant threat of punishment in school. Indeed, an investigation of student and parent experiences with LAUSD policies conducted in 2007 revealed that students often felt intimidated and threatened by heavy police presence in their schools (Sullivan, 2007). Additionally, parents and students reported that police officers often used excessive force during minor disciplinary encounters with the students, including slamming them onto the ground or into the wall and, in some cases, spraying them with mace (Sullivan, 2007).

While this project is focused on policies and practices in Los Angeles, national data shows evidence that these practices are not unique to one area. A report by the Advancement Project and the Civil rights Project (2000) documents:

“...the overzealous approach to promoting safety being assimilated in public schools in many districts across the country. Principals and administrators are no longer using literal interpretations of their states and districts Zero Tolerance policies, and they are no longer willing to use the discretionary clauses found in many of these provisions. Instead they are using highly creative interpretations of

the ill-conceived laws and using them to suspend and expel children based on relatively minor, non-violent offenses... A great deal of statistical and anecdotal evidence supports the conclusion that children are being unfairly suspended and arbitrarily kicked out of school for incidents that could have been very easily handled using alternative methods” (pg. v).

In the media, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has released a list of “punishments we wish were made up” (2013). Examples from include: “a sixteen-year-old California student [who] had her wrist broken by school security and was arrested over spilled cake”; “a 16-year-old student in Florida [who] was arrested and expelled for an explosive ‘science experiment’ on school grounds”; and “ a 15-year-old student in Wisconsin who was handcuffed in front of his entire school, arrested, and charged for “stealing” \$2.60 worth of chicken nuggets from the school cafeteria.” While these examples are not representative of all cases, they highlight the problematic ways in which school discipline and punishment are currently enforced, and reveal very real possibilities for students in schools.

### *Organizing for Reform and Demanding Change*

As zero tolerance policies and aggressive school policing tactics have grown across the nation, educational policy reformers and civil rights organizations have also called attention to the growing rates of punishment across American schools. In Los Angeles, students, parents, and local social justice organizations argued that school policies developed a “school to prison pipeline” and demanded new approaches to school discipline. This work gained major traction in 2007, when the LAUSD governing board acknowledged the disparate rates of punishment within LAUSD schools and passed the Resolution to Support Equal Protection and Civil Rights for all Students in all Los Angeles Unified School District Schools (Board of Education of the City of



Los Angeles, 2007). In the resolution, the school board declared LAUSD's commitment to social and racial justice, and pledged to remedy the inequitable treatment of students.

While the resolution ordered all LAUSD officials to take immediate action to identify and reform inequitable school practices, including collaborating with parents and community organizations to develop fair and just policies and practices that protect the civil rights of its students, empirical examinations found “lackluster implementation in many schools coupled with, among other things, continued unacceptably high and disproportionate disciplinary rates for African American students” (CADRE, Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc, & Public Counsel Law Center, 2010, p. 2). Since then, students, parents, and community activists have continued to challenge the over-policing of students in LA schools: however, collaboration between LAUSD, community organizations, and student activists to implement these new policies has been contentious. Activists have emphasized the need to end the aggressive enforcement of zero tolerance policies, while the LAUSD governing board has focused on the need to maintain safe school environments.

In the section that follows, I narrow my focus to the work of The Center, the organization where I conducted my participant observations, and their campaign against the overcriminalization of students in LAUSD schools. Founded in 1989, The Center operates as a social movement organization dedicated to issues of social and environmental justice within the Los Angeles community. The work of The Center is organized around a set of interrelated but distinct political campaigns rooted in the discriminatory experiences of underrepresented, poor- and working-class community members. Following the launch of a community campaign calling for affordable and reliable access to public transportation in the 1990s, members began to identify the unique experiences and needs of high school students, including unreliable public

transportation as students travelled to and from school, as well as police citations for tardiness and truancy. As members identified these issues a new campaign focused on the experiences and students in schools emerged. While many organizations in Los Angeles have been dedicated to reforming LAUSD school practices, The Center's long-term campaign allows for a historically rich case study of student activism.

### *Youth Led Movement to Reform LAUSD Schools*

In 2007, the Center launched a campaign specifically focused on the connections between the punitive experiences of students in schools and the larger context of mass incarceration. Following the launch of this campaign in 2007, student members developed "Taking Action" clubs within LAUSD high school campuses to recruit additional student members, discuss student experiences, and develop tangible action strategies.

One of the first actions included the development of an online student blog that that narrated individualized experiences across LAUSD schools (Labor Community Strategy Center, 2009). These stories, written by Taking Action club members and documented during Taking Action club meetings, publicly shared student narratives and LAUSD practices to an online public audience (Hing, 2009). For example, the blog told the story of Nancy, a Latina, LAUSD high school sophomore (16 years of age) who was arrested on her way to school. Nancy used public transportation to get to school each morning and was handcuffed by a police officer one block away from school. The officer told her that she was being arrested because she was breaking daytime curfew laws and needed to be in school. Los Angeles municipal curfew laws legally prohibited students under the age of 18 to be in any public place during school hours. Minors found in public areas without parental supervision were ticketed by police officers.

Nancy's blog post explained that she tried to tell the officer that she was on her way to school but was running late. She also revealed the fear she experienced the day she encountered the police officer, and the disappointment she felt when the officer cuffed her hands behind her back. Blog posts with narratives like Nancy's documented the intimidating nature of interactions between LAUSD students and police officers.

To build on the blog posts, student activists conducted a number of student surveys asking participants about their experiences with and opinions of school disciplinary practices, including zero tolerance policies. Devon, a student organizer I interviewed, emphasized the importance of documenting student opinions and perspectives. He explained:

*I felt like students' voices needs to be heard, and I actually ask students one on one sometimes like how do they feel about it, or what if they could see change, what they vision, or just to feel like they have a voice instead of just being shamed.*

Indeed, a major goal of the campaign was to prioritize the experiences and perspectives of students. Student surveys were consistent with the online blog posts, and revealed a culture of criminalization largely stemming from the constant ticketing and arrest of students. Surveys revealed also that the number one cause of student referrals to the juvenile courts was for violations of municipal daytime curfew and school truancy (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

Daytime curfew and school truancy laws were originally established to encourage school attendance and reduce school truancy. However, students' narratives revealed that the aggressive enforcement of these policies more often had the opposite effect; these policies harshly punished

and criminalized students, especially low income, Black and Latino students. Ivan put it this way:

*Somebody I knew got a ticket for being late and I felt like it was unfair. How are you gonna ticket somebody for trying to go to school and learn? That makes you like pushing them away from school. So, it's like, if I'm coming to school late and I'm getting a ticket, why should I come to school? I might as well stay home. Like, now you don't wanna go to school 'cause you don't want to run into the police again, or you don't know what's gonna happen. It makes you not wanna go to school. You like, lose interest.*

As Ivan explains, ‘zero tolerance’ policies and practices significantly impacted students’ motivation for school attendance. Fearing the possibility of facing legal citations for tardiness or truancy, and risking suspensions and expulsion, students often felt it was safer to avoid their school campuses altogether. Narratives like these emphasized the problems with the culture of punishment operating within LAUSD schools; they called into question the purpose and function of such policies within school environments.

Building on these personalized narratives, student activists working with the Center also targeted the LAUSD governing school board and local elected officials to demand changes in the policies and practices that negatively impacted LAUSD students.

Student activists attended and presented at a number of LAUSD school board meetings and requested meetings with their school representatives. During their presentations, students would share their experiences, discuss results from their campus surveys, and would make

specific calls for change. During our interview, Brittney recounted her meetings with LAUSD Board Members. She explained:

*Like going to the LAUSD board meetings and then meeting with the counsel ... council members. Yeah, like meeting with the members. It's like we never got to meet with them [before Taking Action]. And we got to talk to them and then we see, like, this is how they really see our schools. It was like we never seen them on our campus, so how can you judge a school you've never been to? You know? Or if you wonder why it's like this, why you never like, take the chance to like, talk to the students?*

Indeed, students capitalized on their opportunities to meet with board members—asking tough questions and demanding accountability. As Brittney points out here, students often felt as if district officials were not in touch with the everyday issues and challenges students faced on their school campuses. Therefore, students emphasized their roles as key experts on their own lives, continuously relying on their own lived experiences, as well as the experiences of their peers, and sharing their stories to ensure that their concerns and calls for change were prioritized.

In 2011, LAUSD officials began to meet some of the demands of student activists and adopted strategies for new approaches to school discipline. The Los Angeles School Police Department adopted new restrictions for the enforcement of truancy and daytime curfew laws (Hing, 2011). More specifically, the department announced that it would no longer give out tickets to students within the first 90 minutes of the school day, in order to eliminate the ticketing of students on their way to school and encourage school attendance (Ferris, 2012).

Student advocates celebrated this new practice but argued that more comprehensive policies were needed to limit aggressive policing practices (Community Rights Campaign, 2013). To call attention to this demand, the students published a policy report comparing LAUSD school police data from the 2012-2013 to the 2011-2012 school years. The report revealed that although school police tickets and citations were reduced by 50 percent, Latino and Black students were still much more likely to be ticketed and/or arrested than White students (Community Rights Campaign, 2013). For instance, Latino students were twice as likely to be ticketed and arrested than a White student, while Black students were almost six times more likely to be ticketed and arrested than a White student (Community Rights Campaign, 2013).

Following continued collaborations with students and organizations, in 2013 LAUSD adopted the School Discipline Policy and School Climate Bill of Rights (Los Angeles Unified School, 2016). This resolution was developed by a coalition of community organizations in Los Angeles and championed by LAUSD school board members as a means to minimize the use of zero tolerance policies and implement the use of positive behavior interventions. On the day that LAUSD board members were scheduled to discuss and vote on this plan, youth activists across Los Angeles held a rally outside of LAUSD headquarters to encourage the successful adoption of the plan. Almost 300 students, parents, and community partners attended the rally to show their support (Fight for the Soul of the Cities).

### *Military Weapons in LAUSD Schools*

In 2014, the Los Angeles School Police Department also adopted new protocols for enforcement, citations, and arrests on LAUSD school campuses (Zipperman, 2014; Watanabe, 2014). These protocols placed limits on the use of official arrests and legal citations in schools, in an effort to align police practices with the School Discipline Policy and School Climate Bill of

Rights. However, only a month after the LASPD announced their new policies, news reports also revealed official data showing police participation in a military program that provided surplus weapons to local police departments – including departments affiliated with schools (Musgrave, 2014; Pamer and Romero, 2014). In response to learning about the military weapons, Betsy commented:

*But when it comes down to, oh, they got shotguns in the backseat. They got AK's under the chairs. They got grenade launchers in the trunk. They got different types of Glocks in the dashboards. It's like no, that's doing too much. That's too dangerous. They can have a gun. Maybe a couple. They can have some guns. But it's like, they got war zone guns out here. Guns that's painted in all the video games. It just doesn't seem right.*

Through the Department of Defense Excess Military Equipment Program, more commonly referred to as the 1033 program, the LASPD received 61 M-16 assault rifles, three grenade launchers, and a mine-resistant protective vehicle (Chokshi, 2014). This program is known as the 1033 program because it was authorized in Section 1033 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 1997.

The unexpected discovery of LASPD's possession of these weapons created serious concerns for activists about the prospect that weapons would be used to arm police in schools (Legal Defense Fund, 2014). To ease public concern both the LASPD Chief of Police and LAUSD superintendent explained that the weapons would only be used in extraordinary cases of armed threats presenting life-threatening circumstances (Associated Press, 2014). Unconvinced

by this response, students demanded an immediate end to this program in LAUSD schools and called for the removal of all military weapons

### *Building a Critique of the 1033 Program*

To focus their efforts on the militarization of school police, students examined the history of LAUSD school policies and practices and developed critical analyses of school discipline, student criminalization, and the role of police in schools. Following this work, students engaged in close readings and discussions of a number of news articles and reports providing information about the 1033 program. During my observations, I sat quietly listening to the dialogue between students. Manuel, an 18-year-old high school student expressed his concerns about police violence in schools to the group:

*I just don't understand why they have these military weapons. Here we are reading stories about students who were punished by police officers, and I know what that's like. I've been thrown on the ground and told to obey orders. And, I am glad. I feel good to know that they [LAUSD] changed their policies, but I can't say that it never happens anymore. It still happens, and I know that, for real. So now, really, a gun is supposed to make me feel safe? Where is the logic in that? (Fieldnotes, July 15 2015).*

Manuel's interrogation of LAUSD's participation in the "1033 program" reveals the contradiction between new school policies, like the Student Bill of Rights, and police possession of military weapons. He questions school police officers' need for these weapons and the purpose of these weapons in schools. Manuel also emphasizes the point that these weapons are normally used by the US military during times of war and challenges conventional notions of safety to



justify the possession of these weapons. He questions how he can be expected to feel safe given his experiences and the militarization of school police. After Manuel presented his thoughts, Britney shared her views with the group:

*Schools are not war zones, why do they [LAUSD] think they need these weapons? I know they are gonna tell us that it's to protect us from school shootings, but that kind of stuff doesn't happen at my school. Giving the police weapons doesn't fix the problem from the root. And when White kids go and shoot up schools, they respond and say that they were sick, it's because they didn't have enough counseling. So why not give us counselors instead of weapons? (Fieldnotes, July 15, 2015).*

Britney's response reinforces Manuel's confusion. Both Manuel and Britney are not convinced that the militarization of school police will contribute to more safety. Britney, however, identifies racial differences in police responses to acts of violence. She points to the lack of treatment-based resources offered to members in her community, like counselling – resources that she believes are immediately offered to White students who may engage in acts of violence. This comment provides an additional layer of analysis; for Britney, race plays a critical role in the range of police responses to violent behavior. She demands that more resources be provided to her school, rather than weapons.

The comments of Manuel and Britney demonstrate many of the grave concerns shared by the student activists when discussing the 1033 program, including disappointment, fear, and outrage. Fueled by these emotions, student activists prepared for a day of activism at the LAUSD headquarters that would take place during one of the regularly scheduled LAUSD Board Meetings. Students wanted to hold a rally outside of LAUSD headquarters to publicly

demonstrate their disapproval of the 1033 program. They wanted to inform LAUSD officials that they had become aware of the 1033 program and to notify LAUSD officials of their plans to actively resist the program until it was terminated.

### *Planning for Action*

To prepare for the rally, students developed posters and large signs demanding an end to the 1033 program. As students engaged in this work, Jessica, a 15 year old high school student, expressed her concerns to me:

*These are military weapons. They [The Los Angeles School Police Department] have these weapons, so they [LAUSD officials] got to see them. I haven't seen the weapons, and just because I might not see them doesn't mean they are not there. When people finally see the weapons, I think it will scare them. That's why we are making pictures of these weapons; they got to see them (Fieldnotes, July 21 2015).*

Jessica reflected a general concern within the student body about the firearms and the need to demand their removal. For Jessica and others, abstract discussions of these weapons did not lead to sufficient understandings of students' concerns and fears. Rather, student activists also had to utilize visual images to call attention to their concerns; visual images provided a powerful tool to communicate concerns and challenge political arguments that defended the 1033 program. To leverage visual imagery, students drew pictures of military tanks, grenades, and M-16 assault rifles on the posters and signs that they planned to carry during their rally. Students also included drawings of police officers with the weapons, and included sketches of young people standing in front of a school, with their hands up.

In addition to this artwork, student organizers planned to wear costume bulletproof vests during their demonstration. “We are not bulletproof” a student declared, “LAUSD school officials need to know that these weapons can actually paralyze me and kill me” (Fieldnotes, July 17, 2015). The costume bulletproof vest was a prop that could demonstrate the violent nature of military weapons; military weapons are used to kill people, and students needed protection. Students planned to use these props in order to challenge frameworks used by LAUSD officials to defend punitive policies for student safety. Students hoped the props would invoke strong emotional reactions, including notions of discomfort and fear.

#### *Students Demonstrate at LAUSD headquarters*

On July 30 2016, the final day of the Youth Organizer Training Program, students arrived at LAUSD headquarters and took action. Wearing their costume bulletproof vests, students organized themselves into groups of three to four people and passed out fliers outside of the LAUSD headquarters building. The fliers provided a brief overview of the 1033 program and outlined the student demands to end this program. As people passed by the LAUSD building, students approached people asking, “Have you heard about the 1033 program?” For about 30 minutes, students organized to educate others about the program and gather support for their demands.

Then, just before the start of the board meeting, students came together as a large group and began to demonstrate. They marched up and down the street chanting in protest of the 1033 program. In their bulletproof vests, students held up large signs that said “END 1033” and “My school is not a war zone,” and chanted phrases like, “Back to school, no weapons” and “Students ain’t bullet proof” (Fieldnotes, July 30 2015). As Betsy recounted:

*And I remember we were standing outside marching, and we had fake bullet proof vests on, cause we were saying students ain't bulletproof. Just like that. That was our angle. They ain't bulletproof. And we were all outside, chanting, chanting for like an hour. Like, you know? We were just chanting like a bunch of stuff.*

After about an hour of chanting, students made their way into the board meeting. During the meeting, staff members testified to the LAUSD board and presented their concerns. As the staff made their way up to the front of the room, all of the student activists stood up in solidarity. Following the testimony of the staff members, students locked arms and began to chant. As students chanted “Back to school, no weapons,” police officers slowly approached the students. However, the school board president stopped the officers and said, “You can let them go on.” Students stood together and chanted for about fifteen minutes before they were interrupted by comments from the LAUSD board members.

One board member defended the use of the weapons in schools. The board member explained that he had been an educator since the 1960s and had worked in very tough neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty and gang violence. He argued that he had yet to see the use of these military weapons in the schools, but has personally witnessed gang violence in schools. He welcomed the concerns of students, but told students that in the end, he believed that in the case of “an emergency,” he wanted school police officers to be prepared.

Students were not pleased by this response. As soon as the board member finished his comments the students resumed their chants. Another board member then tried to work with the students by taking a quite different approach. She began by applauding their efforts, explaining

that their work demonstrated much bravery. She also referenced the district’s dramatic decrease in punishment, and affirmed that it was their actions that were directly responsible for that fact. She concluded by declaring she was unaware of this program, and pledged to look into the matter and take up the issue. As she spoke, she stood up and walked over to the group of students. She then shouted, “You all have much to be proud of, and I will continue to work with you students to ensure your safety. Thank you for being here.” One of the staff organizers approached her, thanked her for her comments, and announced to the group, “Well, looks like we have to continue to fight for this.”

### *Maintaining Momentum*

A month after the demonstration at the LAUSD school board meeting, students began the new academic school year. Over the course of the academic year, student activists continued to organize within their schools. Student organizers met weekly to organize strategies to increase public awareness of the 1033 program, and demand its termination. This included delivering presentations in schools and encouraging teachers and students to discuss the 1033 program. In addition, student activists met with LAUSD Board Officials to maintain a constructive dialogue around this issue.

Student activists also incorporated the use of social media. Social media provided young activists with a fun way to document their actions, communicate their concerns, and continue their momentum in their fight against the 1033 program. Using a variety of social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, students developed individualized accounts dedicated to the campaign against the 1033 program. Once the accounts were established, they used the social media pages to announce upcoming events and actions, share pictures of student activism, and convey concerns with the 1033 program. Through the use of social media, students were able to

encourage a continued political dialogue amongst their peers around the existence of the 1033 program. Students viewed social media as a resourceful tool to further communicate their concerns, build support for their cause, and ultimately, continue to put pressure on school officials.

In the final months of the 2016 academic school year, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board of Education President released a public statement that reported an official termination of LAUSD participation with the 1033 program. The statement was also followed by a letter of apology written by the Board President and addressed to The Center and its student members. The letter acknowledged the efforts of the student organizers and provided an apology for the district's participation with the 1033 program.

Upon reception of the letter, students held a pizza party during their Taking Action club meeting to celebrate the success of their campaign. During the meeting, Devon volunteered to read the letter aloud. Devon smiled and cheered as he read the letter. During my interview with Devon, he reflected on the day he read the letter aloud. A smile appeared on his face again as he spoke about the success of his efforts and the campaign. He stated:

*Just knowing that I had a voice made the whole, entire year of waiting and pressing, like the whole process, it made it worthwhile. It's not just them telling us that they were sending the weapons back, but [we] got an apology letter, that to me like ... It just kind of justifies what we were doing.*

As Devon notes, students were very relieved that school officers no longer had access to military weapons. However, the letter of apology was also especially symbolic for these students. It acknowledged their voices and validated their commitment and efforts. In many ways, students felt as if they were finally seen and heard. Another student, Ivan, also commented:

*It [the letter of apology] finally gave it life. I still have a copy of it. I keep a copy of it. It's like, I fought the system and it was like and it worked. Taking Action allowed me to do that. Taking Action allowed me to realize I have a voice. That what I feel matters.*

Indeed, the letter of apology was both meaningful and symbolic to many of the students. It served as an important artifact that officially verified the success of the campaign and the agency students can harbor when they utilize their voices, perspectives, and collective power.

Following the letter from the Board President, the Los Angeles School Police Chief also provided a letter to The Center to clarify information regarding the department's possession of military weapons. In the letter the Police Chief also acknowledged the department's lack of consideration for important concerns during the initial development of the program. Most importantly, the police department provided an official inventory of all of the weapons received and then returned the arms to the Department of Defense.

Importantly, the 1033 program, which provided military weapons to local authorities across the nation, received nationwide resistance, especially following the spread of images showing the use of military equipment by police in response to growing protests following the death of Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri (Bennett, 2017). While local departments are still legally permitted to request and obtain some military weapons, the Obama administration developed policy changes that would create "some restrictions and conditions" for the request and transfer of equipment (Barrett, 2020). Indeed, these changes further emphasize the importance in recognizing and understanding contributions of young people within their local communities.

*Conclusion*

Over the last decade community organizations and youth activists have worked to actively challenge and reform problematic, contemporary school policies. This chapter provided an ethnographic case study of a student led efforts to challenge punitive school policies and the criminalization of students across the Los Angeles Unified School District. I relied on two years of participant observations with The Center and interviews with 15 student organizers to illustrate the ways in which these students organized within their school campuses to amplify their voices and confront zero tolerance policies, the criminalization of students, and the militarization of school police.

As I have argued, student activists have played a critical role in the transformation of LAUSD policies and practices throughout the last decade and the actions of these students cannot be ignored. Indeed, the perspectives and actions of these students are important for the understanding of youth activism and broader social movements. As research on school practices and the criminalization of schools continues to develop, the mobilization of young people against these practices must also play a key role in our analyses.

In the next chapter, I shift my focus to how and why students were drawn to this work in the first place, what I call “roots of their activism”. Relying on my interviews with student organizers, I explore the ways in which student engagement was strongly connected to each student’s identities, their experiences at home and within their communities. I argue that student actions reflected who they were, and how they understood themselves within the world they lived in. I look at what enabled some students to take action, to mobilize within their schools and communities, and then, what happened within them when they did take action.



### Chapter 3: Roots of their Involvement

*I was standing silently in my high school cafeteria, the location designated for On Campus Suspension (OCS), where students are sent when they show up late to class. I was wearing my school uniform and picture identification card around my neck, both of which were required to enter the school, and I had to remain standing silent for the entire suspension period. The campus administrator took my attendance and told me that I had to stay in the cafeteria until the class period ended, because returning to class would be a disruption to my classmates. I was told that if I continued to be tardy, I would receive a citation from a police officer for truancy. As I stood in the cafeteria, school officers slowly brought in additional students who were found outside of a classroom after the class bell was rung—some of whom were given citations for “chronic truancy”. Standing there, in silence, I had mixed emotions. Mad, upset and frustrated, I couldn’t help but think, “What is the point of this?” I just wanted to get back to class.*

I begin with this personal anecdote to shed light on some of my own previous experiences that led to the development of my research interest and this project. In many ways this became a first personal fieldnote that documented the observations I made within my school environment. As a young college bound student, school was supposed to be a safe haven, a place where I imagined I would be pushed to learn and explore the world around me. However, I began to observe patterns that signaled that something else was happening in my school environment. As a student, I was very dubious of my school environment and my day to day experiences with school personnel. I grew tired and bored of rigid school rules that kept me out of the classroom. I wanted to learn, but I also began to doubt if learning was possible at my school. In many ways the development of this doubt also became a seed that planted my critical curiosity. Not yet formally trained in educational, social scientific or criminological theories, I

thought often about my experiences in school and began to question why schools operated the way that they did and I knew something needed to change.

Of course, this narrative cannot represent all student experiences. Rather, it provides insight on my own curiosities as a young high school student. While this curiosity is clearly connected to my academic pursuits of using social science to investigate the world around me, it also catalyzed my questions and concerns about student experiences with contemporary punishment practices and paved the way for my participation in community organizing efforts that targeted issues of youth criminalization across schools and communities. This personal connection is relevant to this dissertation because it leads to a broader question about how and why young people become involved in social action. A fundamental purpose of this project is to understand the narratives and motivations of the student activists in my case study. Why were these students drawn to this kind of activism?

In the previous chapter I documented the efforts of the youth organizers and detailed the students' successful campaign against the 1033 program. In this chapter, I shift my focus to the student organizers themselves. I rely on my interviews with students to explore the roots of these students' involvement with The Center and the Taking Action Club. I examine the experiences, identities, and perspectives that students discussed when detailing their motivations for joining The Center, and I demonstrate the ways in which students' motivations for joining reflected meaningful and defining characteristics of each student. I argue that students' identities, their connections to their communities and their experiences within those communities and within their schools lead students to a deep sense of curiosity, a yearning for social change, and this general orientation then provides a fertile soil for political agency and activism.

*Youth and Activism*

Young people are key figures in social movement research. However, some contemporary discussions of young people have questioned the extent of their political engagement (Delli Carpini, 2000; Mann, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Wilkins, 2000; see also Earl, Maher & Elliott, 2017). To counter this claim, others have argued that in our contemporary era significant numbers of young people are “participating politically in numerous creative ways that address directly and indirectly the multifarious socio-economic, political, democratic, constitutional and environmental crises that have shaped and are shaping the world in which they live today” (Pickard and Bessant, 2018, p. 2). This has become evident through a growing number of scholarly projects that identify and document the varied ways young people are engaged in political action through protest, online social activity, engagement with community organizations, volunteering, and also through the integration of politics in their daily lives (Dalton, 2016; Conner & Rosen, 2016; Harris, Wyn, & Younes 2010; Pickard and Bessant, 2018; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Within this context, there is a growing wave of research on what Earl, Maher and Thomas (2017) identify as “new generation of youth involved in social justice activism, drawing on intersectional approaches to youth and racial identities” (pg. 6; see also Clay, 2012; Kwon, 2013; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002). For instance, in her ethnographic study of youth activism in Oakland, California, Andreeana Clay (2012) explores the ways in which youth of color come to understand themselves, their communities, and their experiences through their community activism. While Clay focused on how young people came to define their work and identify themselves as community activists, she also found that the youth in her study built “on their prior experiences and race, class, and gender identities to

construct their identities as activists” (pg. 182). As Clay and other scholars have shown, youth of color have a history of community activism, and this activism often develops as a result of a number of lived experiences rooted at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Therefore, this chapter contributes to this literature by focusing on the identities, experiences, and motivations of the high school student organizers with the Center. In moving away from the students' actions and moving closer to who they are, I uncover the roots at the core of the involvement of the student organizers in my study. To do this, I divide the chapter into 3 key sections that are driven from key themes that came out of my interview data. The first theme involves the complicated significance of “home” for these student activists. This section explores the ways in which students came to identify their neighborhood and communities as key pillars for their activism. The second theme examines the role of students’ identities, including race, immigration status, gender, and class. I explore experiences connected to these identities that students pointed to and reflected upon during their discussion of their activist work. The final theme focuses on a critical orientation students identified within themselves that they felt was missing in traditional learning environments. I analyze the ways that this critical nature became a significant force for students’ activism and their participation with the center.

I use these themes to argue that student engagement with The Center, and the social action this engagement produced, was rooted in the individual and multifaceted identities and experiences as young students of color living and growing up in Los Angeles. While the themes are separated here for purposes of clarity, it is important to note that these themes often merged together. Therefore, my goal is to reveal the complicated mix of identity, experiences, and perspectives that are at the root of student organizing for the youth in my case study.

### *The Complex Significance of Home*

*“I was born and raised in South Los Angeles. I’ve been there my whole life.”*

*-Julia, age 18, interview participant<sup>8</sup>*

I met Julia in the summer of 2016, when I attended a Youth Organizer Summer Training Program as a participant observer. On the first day of the training I arrived early ready to start my field work. I eagerly entered the medium sized conference room where about 20 chairs were placed in a circle. As the training began, the group took part in a number of “ice-breaker” activities to allow for introductions. It was during this time that I came to learn more about Julia. Julia self identifies as a Latina and Salvadoran woman. At the time of the training, Julia was about to enter her junior year of high school. As she introduced herself, she noted that she was new to the organization, but also excited to “talk about the issues and get involved”. Over the course of my participant observations, I got to spend time with Julia and build rapport with her and other students. Julia was typically outgoing and vocal; during Taking Action meetings she spoke often about her experiences. She attended Taking Action Meetings regularly and eventually helped to plan a variety of community organizing events with other Taking Action students. Julia was also very friendly and outgoing; it was not unusual to catch her in a circle of her peers, talking and laughing, singing, or dancing.

My interview with Julia took place about a year and a half after I first met her. At the time of the interview she had just graduated from high school and was in the process of completing a summer internship with The Center. During the interview, I asked Julia to tell me a little bit about herself. In response to this question she strongly emphasized her home, South Central, Los Angeles, the place she was “born and raised.”

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym. All names have been changed for anonymity.

Interviews with my student participants of The Center revealed that the place of home played one of the most significant roles in shaping how students came to talk about themselves, the world around them, and their motivation for involvement with community activism. In speaking about their homes, students connected deeply to the communities where they grew up and revealed a great sense of pride. However, students' pride was not simply predicated on positive and joyful experiences or descriptions of their home communities—rather, it was much more complicated. The places where students grew up were often fraught with a number of social problems; poverty, homelessness, crime, and trauma were hard to ignore. Even as students mentioned and described these social problems, however, they also did not come to entirely represent their place of home. For these students, home was a meaningful place, a place of resiliency, where hardships and prosperity coexisted. For example, Julia explained:

*...and like, my parents never like showed me, let me see the bad side of LA. Like, there were always, from gangs to homelessness, even though we lived in a neighborhood who was fairly popular with that, that had a lot of gang violence and homelessness and poverty. They were always trying to show me the good side of it. They never tried to expose me to gang violence and all that because they didn't want me to be a part of that.*

Julia points to the presence of opposing dynamics, the existence of features both “good” and “bad,” that make up the city of Los Angeles. From an early age she was aware not just of the existence of a number of social problems, but also of the fact that her parents actively tried to shield her from these issues. As Julia talked about her community (and its social conditions) to “tell me about herself” it became clear that the experiences and understandings students formed

from the dynamics and characteristics of their home communities and neighborhoods were especially significant.

The city of Los Angeles, often referred to as LA, is one of the largest cities in the US. It is often recognized in popular culture for the fame and glamour of its entertainment industry. Other times, Los Angeles is acknowledged for its strong cultural and racial diversity. Julia makes very clear, however, that for some people Los Angeles can be a city with a number of social problems, including high costs of living, increasingly segregated and unequal neighborhoods and communities, high rates of poverty and homelessness, gangs, and high crime.

Indeed, this contrast between the glamour of Los Angeles and the ongoing social, economic and racial struggles of the city reveals a deep sense of inequality that exists in specific pockets or neighborhoods within the city. As Julia continued, she explained:

*I mean, I would always hear the gunshots in my neighborhood. They were always like a block away or two. I would always hear how, I would always see how the homeless population just building. Especially downtown, skid row. On the weekends, sometimes I'll go to the alleys with my family and I'll just pass by skid row. I'll just see one block how many people was already full. Just imagine the whole thing, it's crazy.*

It is clear that Julia's exposure and proximity to a number of social issues deeply impacted her understanding of the world and her development. As she details characteristics of her community it becomes clear why she begins with the place she was "born and raised" as the starting point for telling me about herself. For Julia, the sounds of gun shots and sights of homeless encampments were a part of her common daily experience in her community. However, as she details these

experiences, Julia also notes that there is an irregularity, an abnormality to her proximity to these issues: she recognizes that not all people grow up in an environment like hers. Although students revealed a great sense of pride in where they grew up, they also recognized a troubling set of social conditions that they were exposed to. They identified structural inequalities and understood that these kinds of living conditions as abnormal.

Additionally, as students talked about their home communities, they also identified experiences with institutions, like police, that criminalized them. For instance, Devon, a Black male, was 19 years old at the time of my interview with him. I met Devon about a year prior to my interview with him, during my participant observations at the office of The Center, where Devon regularly dropped by after school. During my interview, Devon explained to me, “The office was mostly a place I could go to, umm like you know to like use the computers, uhh, yeah I did my homework their a lot, and too, yeah, I liked to be able to help out and stuff.” Through my interactions with Devon I learned that his home life was not always stable. He lived with his grandmother during his early childhood, and often bounced from home to home throughout his time in high school, after his grandmother became ill.

Like Julia, Devon also presented a very complicated relationship with his sense of home. As a Black male, however, he also had to endure a number of frustrating and frightening encounters with police officers within his community. He explained to me:

*Where I lived at... Like, I moved near my senior year, and I stayed like by [redacted] swap meet. And then, since I moved over there, I always had an interaction with a cop, and it's never been a good one. It was uncomfortable. It made me mad because its like I couldn't do nothing cause I couldn't do nothing about it.*



I noted the frustration in Devon's voice as he spoke about his encounters with police. Devon understood police to be a fundamental component of his neighborhood environment—an unsettling fact for Devon. It was clear that the presence of police deeply shaped Devon's experience in his community and, as he stated, was “just another thing I had to survive”.

The area of South Los Angeles, where Julia and Devon live, is also historically referred to as South Central LA and largely recognized as an area that is home to a large African American population. Due to red-lining housing policies of the 1930's (Reft, 2017), and a history of racism and over-policing of the area by the Los Angeles Police Department (Bates, 2017), South Central became popularly defined by a number of social problems. In an effort to change the image of the area, the LA City Council “officially renamed the 16-square-mile mega-community South Los Angeles” (Romero, 2017). This name change is also connected to a number of changes in the area, including the fact that it was a historically Black community that saw an influx of Latin@ residents in the 1980's (Sotelo & Thomson-Hernandez, 2016) and more contemporary challenges around the gentrification of the area (Jennings, 2016). However, as my student interviews made clear, these changes have not eliminated the many social problems present and visible to its community members within pockets of the community. For instance, Amanda explained:

*Because I was in [South] Central LA, so it wasn't white dominated it was more Latino, and the black community, so it was more policing there. Every corner there's a liquor store, there's no Farmer Joe's, there's nothing really around, there's just liquor stores, and fast food. They already have the image right there for the black community. There are people who can't get jobs... There are like*

*gangs and homeless, you know... and It made me, it really made think, like how come its always like this in our own communities?*

Amanda, a black female, entering her senior year of high school, was 17 years old during the time of my interview with her. Amanda acknowledged a number of racial and class disparities between her own community, characterized with a large number of Black and Latino residents, and other more “well off” communities. She points to differences in nutrition, access to fresh produce, employment opportunities and homelessness, and notes their impact on herself. As she makes clear, these differences do not go unnoticed. Instead, they cause her to “think” and to ask “why”.

Social problems like poverty, homelessness, and crime in communities often highly populated by immigrants and people of color have long been the subject of scientific inquiry, especially within fields like sociology and criminology. In addition, contemporary discussions across the fields of psychology and education have also begun to recognize the ways in which exposure to poverty, violence, including gun violence and gang violence, and other social problems can cause harm and trauma, and can impact the healthy development of young people. While the inquiries of these fields have often been fueled by an interest in addressing and treating social problems, a focus on these issues can also blind us to the ways in which people may also respond with action and agency to those problems. This is not to suggest that harm and trauma should be ignored, but rather, to allow for a more wide-ranging analysis that also identifies the agency and promise of young people and their communities. As my interviews have demonstrated, this tension is often apparent when one looks closely at students’ accounts of their lived experiences in their communities.

Betsy, another student organizer, and Los Angeles native, who was 17 years old at the time of my interview with her, also emphasized the significance and complexity of her home. As opposed to Julia who was born and raised in the same place, the place of home became significant for Betsy because of a transition that she experienced in her childhood. She explains:

*I lived in Watts for a long time, well four or five years. I moved out when I was six, but it felt like a really long time because of everything I had experienced, and then I moved out and I went to Culver City, which was completely different from Watts. I've been living in Culver City ever since, And It's just ... that transition itself has really like impacted me. Like Just seeing one environment to a different kind of environment.*

In 2006, Betsy and her family moved from the area of Watts into a public housing community located in Culver City, California. While Watts, also located in South Los Angeles, is often associated with a history of gang violence and community unrest (Meakin, 2003), Culver City, on the other hand, is largely recognized for its rich history of filmmaking studios and vast array of dining establishments often frequented by many Los Angeles natives and visiting tourists.

Located about 15 miles west of South Los Angeles, the contrast between Culver City and Watts became especially impactful for Betsy:

*[When in Watts] I remember a lot thinking I was going to get shot. I was like five and I would see people fighting, and I was like, I hope he doesn't pull out a gun. I remember just thinking like... When there would be conflicts, like, I hope nothing happens to my dad because there would be times when my dad would have to go out and I was just in fear.*

Indeed, Betsy does not ignore the chaotic nature of her upbringing and development. Rather, she clearly acknowledges the significant turmoil, stress, and possible trauma that she experienced as a young child in Watts. She explains:

*Yeah, it was just like, a lot. Like some of it I didn't even understand until now that I'm looking back on it. We had to be forced out because we were going to be taken away from my mom, and she was going to go to like a psychiatric ward, and we went to Culver City and it was just completely different. People would say good morning and good afternoon to you when you would walk by. It was calm.*

For Betsy, the move to Culver City provided a new way of navigating through the world: a sense of calmness and friendliness that were not characteristics of her experience in Watts. In discussing her experience in her new community, Betsy also demonstrated her critical thinking. As she acknowledged the complicated struggles she faced as a child, she also makes clear that her challenges did not entirely disappear after a move to a new place. Instead, the new place brought new, albeit significantly different, challenges that Betsy had to face:

*Immediately, when I came to the other school, I already had girls that didn't want to talk to me, and I always found that funny how at this dysfunctional neighborhood [in Watts], I was able to make more friends than I did in that neighborhood where, you know, we didn't have things like much of a gang problem anymore.*

Although Betsy had to confront serious concerns for her safety and the safety of her family while living in Watts, she was able to establish deep connections and a strong sense of friendship. In Culver City, however, a place that may appear much more “stable” on the outside, Betsy had a

much harder time. Her new home may have been safer, but it was also not a place without its own set of social problems and “dysfunction”. This is especially significant because Betsy provides a critical and insightful analysis of this experience. After moving to Culver City, Betsy did not develop an over-simplistic and binary analysis of the city. Though Culver City may have appeared as a safe and nurturing community, Betsy acknowledged a number of challenges she had to face in this new town: she was living in a public housing community in the middle of a largely suburban middle class neighborhood, attending a new school largely attended by residents of the suburban Culver City area, and navigating a number of deeply personal and financial hardships.

While it can be important to underscore the trauma that Betsy experienced, Betsy also emphasized a motivating drive and resistance that grew out of her experiences. Her upbringing in Watts greatly contributed to her sense of self that she was unwilling to ignore. She explained:

*That kind of pushed me to be honest about who I was because I knew where I came from. I know I come from the projects, I know I'm poor, I don't own a house like my friends do. Instead of trying to hide myself, it kind of made me be more open and be like, yeah, I'm poor. I don't have the nice clothes, I don't have money for food. That's the thing I remember doing a lot, I always borrowed money from people that I never paid back.*

Betsy makes clear that her conviction to embrace her true self became even stronger within this new suburban school context. Although her home life was difficult, she was also unapologetic about her social realities. She may have struggled with food insecurity and poverty, especially in comparison to her new peers, but she was unwilling to be ashamed of the social facts that were fundamental to her lived experiences. Instead, Betsy embraced herself and her social position in

this new context. And in this new suburban context, she was also able to engage in small, but significant, acts of resistance.

Indeed, as students addressed the complexities of their home communities and their connections to where they came from, they also revealed a sense of agency around their experiences and a commitment to possibilities for social change. Students did not just mention the social issues that they faced within their communities. Instead, they talked about how these issues impacted them and caused them to “think” deeper and to ask “why”. Julia underscored this when she explained how she was impacted by the issue of homelessness in her community. She explained:

*Seeing that, [gang violence and homelessness] it impacted me in ways to like know it's there... Just 'cause like, it wasn't happening to me, [does not mean] it's not happening in the world, you know. I was able to see how it affected those people.*

Julia may not have personally experienced homelessness, she was not a gang member, and she grew up with the support of her “big Salvadorian family.” However, her proximity to these issues deeply impacted her: they pushed her to think outside of herself, to develop a keen sense of awareness of these issues and their significance in our society, and also lead her to maintain a deep sense of empathy for experiences of others that might be different from her own. She continued:

*So, I was able to see how it affect those people too. Cuz I noticed a lot of people were like, "Oh, they're homeless, they're drug addicts." That's not the case at all cause now it's really hard to maintain a home, especially in South Los Angeles.*

*Now it's getting harder by the minute and if you lose your house, you're not gonna find a good price, how would you pay for your house here, now. Because I noticed like, as a little kid I just always saw it. You know, its like, what could I do about it?*

As Julia deconstructs the structural complexities embedded within issues of housing, contemporary costs of living, issues of addiction and poverty, she also begins to directly consider herself, her agency, and her potential as an agent of change. This line of questioning is especially significant because it demonstrates a sense of resistance and a yearning for activism and social change. This also stands in direct opposition to depictions of young people, especially young people of color, as self-centered, developmentally immature, and uninterested in social change (for discussion see Pickard & Bessant, 2018).

As students confronted their difficult social realities, they also began to develop a critical consciousness around the social problems of their communities. This curiosity led them not only to ask about why these issues existed in their communities, but also turn inward and ask how they individually could affect some kind of social change. As Julia put it:

*I really do believe there's people who at a younger age, they see the issues. They want to fix it already. There's people who are doing things about it and I think that's amazing. Just by where they live, in their neighborhood. For instance, for me, how I saw gang violence a lot, they probably see things and are impacted for change.*

Clearly from Julia's perspective, young people are impacted by a number of issues in their community and for a variety of reasons are driven to making a difference within their

community. Too often, however, the efforts of young people, and their perspectives, are often overlooked or ignored. While it is clear that an environment of poverty can also have negative impacts on the well-being and overall development of young people, these are not the only outcomes. Young people also demonstrate resilience, agency, and a drive to do something about the social conditions of their environments.

However, the neighborhoods and communities of students were not the only significant factors at the roots of student involvement in activism; student's racial, cultural, legal and gender identities also played a key role. In the next section, I transition to the ways in which, in the context of their social environments, students also connected to their personal identities. I will show the variety of ways in which students also reflected upon significant experiences that helped shape how they came to think about themselves and their social worlds. As I will show, these experiences became significant aspects of the development of their activism.

### *The Power of Identity*

*My mom came from Mexico. I'm a Mexican-American. I'm very proud of that, very proud of that background.*

*- Ivan, 18 years old, interview participant*

Ivan was 18 years old at the time of my interview and a very active participant in Taking Action. I first met Ivan during a Spring Break Youth Organizing Training School, organized by The Center. Each year, during spring break the center organized and hosted this youth organizing training program to provide high school students with a foundation in political education and community organizing. At the time of my participant observations, Ivan worked as an intern with The Center and helped to lead the spring break training program. Ivan was a cheerful and



charismatic young teen. As a new participant to the program, Ivan eagerly welcomed me and asked me about my interest in the program. After I talked with him about my research project, Ivan took time to explain the work of The Center. He talked about the 1033 program and the importance of using restorative justice models in schools. I was immediately impressed with Ivan's cheerful demeanor and dedication to The Center.

During my interview with Ivan, he began with the story of his mother. As Ivan continued to introduce himself to me, he explained:

*I'm first generation here... I would say, out of all of my friends, or like those I'm cool with, they'll all tell you I'm really involved in terms of my culture and my identity. I take it to heart, where I come from and who I am.*

Ivan discussed his pride for his cultural and familial roots, and it was clear that this identity as a Mexican American significantly shaped the way he thought about himself. Ivan wanted me to know that he was the first in his family to grow up in the USA. He explained that his mother came from Mexico and raised him as a single parent. These facts about Ivan's life, his background, and his connection to his mother's cultural and familial ancestry provided a very strong anchor for who he is and how he navigates the world.

Psychological research points to the time of adolescence and the teenage years as the periods when individuals first begin to significantly think about their identity. Psychologist Jane Kroger defines identity as "that entity which enables one to move with direction and effectiveness, to find meaningful outlets for the actualization of one's interests, talents, and values within a social milieu" (Kroger, 2015, pg. 66). While the literature on identity development within the field of psychology points to a variety of models, including biology,

culture, and history, to explain and define identity (Kroger, 2015), I focus here on the ways in which the students I interviewed draw upon a variety of experiences that shaped how they came to understand themselves and the social world in which they lived.

As students discussed their identities and experiences in my interviews, it became clear that their identities were also foundational to the development of their social, political and critical consciousness. For instance, as Ivan talked more about his mother, he explained:

*My mom's undocumented... So when I was little, like, we would go to the marches and to the rallies and stuff. But, I mean, I knew about them because my mom would take me. She was never involved in organizations, she just heard about it on the radio and she would just go.*

In 2006, the federal legislation was proposed that would have made it a felony to be undocumented in the United States. In response hundreds of thousands of people marched and demonstrated in cities across the US to support the rights of immigrants (Engler and Engler, 2016). In Los Angeles specifically, an estimated 500,000 people demonstrated in support (Watanabe and Becerra, 2006). The marches were partly organized and advertised through the Catholic Church's campaign to support immigrant rights and defy legislation, if passed.

Ivan was a young child during the time of these demonstrations. However, it was clear that attending the marches to support the rights of undocumented people in the USA was especially meaningful for him. In addition to instilling a sense of solidarity and pride for his mother's immigration status, and his own identity as a first generation Mexican-American, it also planted a seed in him around the importance of political action. Ivan does note that his mother

may not have been actively involved with an organization, but she was still able to attend and contribute to the movement in some way.

There is a clear relationship between Ivan's strong sense of self, his engagement in Taking Action, and early exposure to protest and activism. However, during my interviews students also pointed to challenging experiences that were rooted in their identities as marginalized members of the community as pivotal to their social and political development. For instance, Brittney, a biracial woman, recent high school graduate and student intern at The Center, explained:

*... because I realize I should love myself, but at the time I didn't. Because I'm mixed, being mixed has kind of had its own troubles. I couldn't really fit into either society... I was stuck in the middle, pretending to be something I'm not at the moment, And then, [pause] it was just hard.*

I met Brittney during her senior year of high school. I learned that Brittney joined the organization during her Sophomore year of high school and was very heavily involved with The Center. In my interview with her, Brittney explained that she identified as a “mixed and biracial”; the daughter to a Black father and white mother.

During my participant observations, I observed Brittney to be a committed leader. She consistently took part in community organizing events and played a key leadership role at her high school. As a college bound high school student, Brittney was a kind, charming, and vocal student activist. However, during my interview, she revealed a vulnerability that was not explicitly apparent during my participant observations.

Research in the area of youth development and psychology also points to adolescence as a challenging and stressful stage of life (Kroger, 2007). During this time, young people often experience many changes, including physical, cognitive, and emotional-social development. Peers and peer acceptance become especially important during this time and understanding one's self-identity can be a complicated and difficult process. For Brittney, her lived experience as a bi-racial Black woman came with many personal challenges. As she explains, she struggled with authentic self-love and acceptance and often felt torn, living between two worlds. She explained:

*At the time, I was just feeling lost in myself. That was a big reason why [I joined taking action]. We read a lot, she [the lead organizer] opened our minds to actually think like intellectuals, early stages to really critical think, and actually understand what's happening upon us, to really connect what's going on with the system itself. Also, so that I could fight for people who can't fight for themselves, or choose not to fight for themselves. because at the end of the day you're making a better impact on somebody's life.*

Brittney's experience sheds light on often turbulent adolescent years that are referenced within the psychological and developmental perspectives. However, she also points to this as significant in the development of her political identity and critical consciousness. As Brittney explains, it was in the midst of this struggle that she was searching for a place to be accepted, understood, and a reason to keep going:

Another student activist, Carlos, also was the first in his family to grow up in the USA. A child of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador, Carlos spent many summer days and nights going to work with his parents selling food on street corners. As Carlos introduced himself to me, he said, "So, family's Salvadorian. I was born here. I come from a cooking family. We

cooked. My family had cooked our whole life.” For Carlos, his experiences vending food on the streets with his family deeply shaped his understanding of himself and also led to a critical understanding of law, police and safety.

In the 1980s, “large scale migration to the United States from Central America began, as hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans fled north from civil war, repression, and economic devastation” (Gzesh, 2006). As refugees settled in areas of Los Angeles, many families turned to street vending as a means for self-employment and sustainability (Alzuphar & Beach, 2019; Rosales, 2013). However, as this informal economy grew, the city and county of Los Angeles passed a number of “strict anti-vending ordinances” and utilized police forces to initiate “crack downs” (Rosales, 2013, p. 698). As a result, street vendors faced significant harassment and criminalization from police (Alzuphar & Beach, 2019). Vendors were often issued citations, heavy fines, and confiscation of their property by police.<sup>9</sup>

As the child of undocumented street vendors, Carlos lived with many fears while he was out in the street. These fears not only came from his parents’ legal status, but also from negative experiences with police officers due to their line of work. He explained:

*Seeing what happened to my parents [as undocumented street vendors]. I didn't know what to do with it. I just held it in, because I knew what cops are capable of doing. You know, it wasn't like, “Okay, they may help you out. You want to sell? This is the way we go about it. You need a worker permit.” There's no such thing [of] worker permits for fucking street vendors at the time.*

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<sup>9</sup> In 2018 the Governor of California signed a bill known as the “Safe Vending Act” that would legalize the vending of food on street corners and sidewalks (Los Angeles County Consumer and Business Affairs Fact Sheet).

As Carlos talked about this experience, I also noted in my fieldnotes that he was beginning to become upset. His voice started to escalate and he began to use curse words in his story. As he worked through his memories of trauma, Carlos shed an important light on his experience as the child of undocumented parents. He was angry about his parents' experiences with police and their limited ability to conduct business legally.

Although Carlos may have just been a young child at the time, he clearly understood the imbalance of power between himself, his family, and police. This caused a sense of frustration and powerlessness in his ability to change his or his family's circumstances. One incident in particular heavily impacted Carlos. He went on to explain:

*... the most intense moment, where my mom told me "Go fucking hide," because if they knew that I was working with my mom, child services [would be called]. I wasn't supposed to be fucking 13, 14 studying in the streets.... But even talking about it now [long pause] because I remember exactly like hiding, because there was a little school, and then there was a big house, and it had stairs, and there was a tree next to it, so I could hide right there, and my mom would go like, "Go hide up there," and she was like "I'll meet you in a minute." And my dad would look at me, he was like, "No. Go with another person. Pretend you're her son, you know?"*

This experience reveals a significant amount of fear and trauma Carlos had to live with. As a young boy getting caught by police while vending in the street and being taken from his parents were very real possibilities. Scholars have worked to examine the problematic nature of heavy policing, the separation of families, and the criminalization of the lives of immigrants (Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011; Douglas and Sáenz, 2013; Provine and Doty, 2011). However,

Carlos provides additional insight in his narrative; he draws attention to the ways in which his identity and subjective positionality specifically shaped his experiences and critique of police and legal policies more broadly.

Similar to the narratives of Julia, Betsy, and Ivan, Carlos acknowledges the trauma of these experiences but also views this experience as meaningful. Carlos also reveals a set of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that he had to develop at an early age to survive. These narratives demonstrate the complicated nature of the experiences that came from the identities of these students. While some were troubled by experiences that are shaped by the issues within their communities, their legal status, their family history, and their identities, they are also not entirely broken or demoralized by these things. Rather, as they reveal in their interviews, they often become especially critical, sometimes angry, but also thoughtful. For example, when I asked him how such a traumatic event shaped the trajectory of his life, Carlos responded, “I think it made me a better person, you know? I think I'm more aware of what's going on”.

Brittney also revealed a similar sentiment. As she reflected upon her experience as a bi-racial Black woman, she explained, “I just feel like it made me a conscious person umm... and it just, allowed for me to like to know myself and to like want to make a difference because I was pushed, or like it pushed me to be secure in myself too”. As students shared their experiences and perspectives with me, it became clear that these experiences were also connected to new questions and a search for structured and political analyses that could help them to make sense of their experiences and could provide a tangible opportunity to take part in social change.

While I do not think Carlos or Brittney are implying that harm and trauma from these events were insignificant, they do demonstrate how their own social identities and positionalities

helped them to use these experiences to shape a critical consciousness and an early awareness of social injustice. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that the development of a critical consciousness was necessary for individuals to understand and transform the structurally oppressive conditions of our society. He emphasized the awareness of oppression as essential to the development of critical consciousness and the practice of freedom. Viewed in this way, students' social, political, cultural and legal identities played a significant role in the commencement of their critical consciousness.

Importantly, students also self-identified themselves as critical thinkers; young people with a certain kind of curiosity about the world, and who had been that way for as long as they could remember, well before they became involved in The Center. That is to say, students also demonstrated an awareness of their critical consciousness. In the next section I focus on the ways in which the students I interviewed identified themselves as critical thinkers. While students also acknowledged personal growth and transformation as a result of their experience with The Center, which I address in the next chapter, critical thinking also became a key identity that many of the young people held onto as they explained how they become involved with The Center, and motivated their ongoing involvement with community organizing.

### *Searching for Critical Perspectives*

*I knew that something was different, like I knew that they [her school teachers] weren't teaching me about my history but I didn't understand why. That's one of the reasons why [I joined].*

- Ashley, 17 years old, high school student organizer

Ashley joined The Center and began to attend Taking Action meetings at her high school during her sophomore year; she was in her senior year at the time of my interview with her. Her



experience as a Black woman and high school student often led to frustrating and challenging experiences in her school.

Freire (1970) noted that awareness of structural oppression was “necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation” (p. 49). Thus, critical consciousness means much more than just identifying oneself as oppressed, it is also about the *struggle* for freedom attained through an ongoing process of dialogue and a recreation of knowledge. As Ashley reveals in her quote above, many of the students I interviewed also expressed a longing for more from their schools; a sort of frustration with the disconnect between their experiences and their formal learning and a yearning for more critical discussion, and she senses that something is missing.

Although she could not always explain why, Ashley makes clear that she experienced a need that remained untapped. Ashley continued to explain, “High school was difficult because I knew how smart I was, but people didn't like how smart I was. People were trying to, like ... I don't know how to say it, like, tried to blame me for how smart I am.” As a Black woman, Ashley struggled to be recognized or seen as the intelligent student believed that she was. While she was aware that historical narratives that connected to her experience as a black woman were lacking in her education, she also maintained a sense of confusion, and perplexity, about why this was the case. As she stated to me, she did not “understand why.”

Indeed, many students who I interviewed identified a similar sense of curiosity, an ongoing “why” question and a critique of the world they lived in. This curiosity was often framed as an individual trait, something that distinguished themselves from others around them. For example, as Julia reflected on who she was, she mentioned:

*I've always been the person to just think about like, why did I do that? Why did I*

*react that way? Just try and figure out, even like why I like a certain color. I don't know why those things, I don't know a lot of the why's to what I do. So, that's always made me just question why I think it. So, it doesn't just make me question myself, but it makes me question everybody and everything around me.*

Although she is not quite sure why this need existed, Julia emphasizes a personal curiosity, a need to think deeply about the world around her. Importantly, she emphasized that this curiosity is not equivalent to self-doubt. Rather, it is a fundamental personality trait that is unique to her.

In a similar vein, Brittney also identified herself as a person who is critical of the world around her. This emerged from her lack of engagement with television and other aspects of popular culture. As she saw it, her detachment from these things allowed for her to develop her own, independent perspectives to emerge. She explained:

*I'm grateful I wasn't really watching television, because television was the main source of I call like the idiot box, and more music. There's some people [musicians] that try to be radical about it, but yet they still fall into a system of degrading women. Calling each other like the N word. I'm like, is that really uniting, or really just deteriorating the whole concept of what's acceptable to ... its' degrading.*

Here Brittney goes a bit further providing a critique of popular culture. In her perspective, popular television and music can prevent important interrogations and analysis about issues of race and class—interrogations she, and others like her, are yearning to have. As Brittney points to some of the problematic elements in film and music, she also distinguishes herself from others. Indeed, as students identified their own skeptical nature, they also differentiated

themselves from the behaviors of others. For instance, as Ashley elaborated on her experiences in school she went on to explain:

*Yeah, because people don't want to be ... people are closed minded, so whatever they feel like is not benefiting [themselves], they're not going to go for it. They don't want to hear it. I'd rather have the truth, like if something is wrong, like tell me, so I can see if I want to shape the change, and I do.*

Ashley maintains that as a Black woman there are often hard truths that may be difficult to personally or emotionally confront. She maintains that others may want to focus on more positive aspects or possibilities of their lives. However, unlike her peers, she prefers, rather demands, an unfiltered “truth”. While it may not be an easy pill to swallow, for her, wrestling with the truth can lead to individual agency.

While some students explained that their critical orientation was a fundamental part of who they were, other students connected their analytical frameworks to more specific personal experiences as well. For instance, during my interview Brittney disclosed that she was placed in the foster care system for some time. For her, this experience “in the system” drastically impacted her world view. However, she was not defeated by it, instead it enabled her to build and develop a more institutional and systemic critique of the foster care system. She explained:

*After I came, like my grandmother got custody of me, so 2010, that's what made me realize like even about the foster care system how it correlates with more so of the system. There's kids there that's getting tortured, it's just like it's not fair, there's no voices.*

Although Brittney was eventually able to eventually leave the foster care system, her experience

in the system clearly had a lasting impact. She connected her experience and her trauma to the experiences and trauma of others in the foster care system and developed a structural critique from what could have been a very defeating and demoralizing experience. Brittney recognized the inequities and the lack of agency embedded within these systems.

As students navigated their questions and wrestled to make sense of their social worlds, my interviews also revealed the ways in which traditional environments, particularly schools, were not sufficient in nurturing their critical nature. For example, Carlos explained, “I feel like when you go through school, that isn't really pro-student, I think it's really hard. And I feel like people become angry and they don't know how to voice that anger.” Here Carlos is referring specifically to his anger over zero tolerance policies, the increasing use of police in schools, and the growing criminalization of students within the Los Angeles Public School system (Kafka, 2011). Carlos highlights an especially important element—the anger and frustration that comes from having to navigate a number of experiences in the community and especially in schools. As Carlos points out that “not all students know how to voice that anger” he is also more subtly revealing that some students may be searching for opportunities to learn how to understand, navigate, and channel the anger.

As students voiced their frustrations with their school environments and emphasized their critical outlooks, they also were not always aware of how to transition their critiques and frustrations into action. Ivan especially made this point clear when he stated: “So when I was little... I knew there were organizations that did this type of work, but I just didn't know how to get involved.” While Ivan attended pro-immigration demonstrations and marches with his mother as a child, he was very much aware of the existence and importance of civic action, but he also felt disconnected prior to his involvement with The Center. As he explains, he was

unsure of how to connect with community organizations were doing this kind of work. Thus, it was not just that students identified themselves as critical and curious young people, these students were also in search of stimulating spaces where they could explicitly and thoroughly explore these questions in more detail.

Additionally, my interviews reveal that many students believed that schools ought to be such spaces—that schools should provide opportunities for them to ask challenging questions, but in fact, students explained that schools turned out to function very differently. For example, while talking about her school experience, Julia also noted:

*Yes, that was like, the school, like high school, and middle school, it's supposed to be there for a learning environment. What exactly are we learning? How to be policed at a young age, how to be a criminal at a young age, that is what they're teaching us.*

Like others, Julia notes that there is a contradiction in the function of schools. She argues that if students have questions and curiosities, then it can be presumed that schools should be the place where students can find solace. However, as she specifically points out, in her experience, rather than provide a space for curiosity and critical thinking, schools have become a place for obedience and control. This leads to a sense of frustration with their school environments.

As students discussed their frustrations with their traditional learning environments, it became clear that The Center provided something that the school did not. For instance, as Devon came to spend more time at The Center he also began to reconsider his education. He questioned his school curriculum and wondered about important information he was not getting in his classes. He explained:

*It [The Center] was very different, it made me think differently of my classes, and how vague they were about certain situations compared to, we actually got deep to the root and how it made us feel, and how our ancestors, like what they had to went through, instead of get white washed. We learned about a lot of political activists and I learned about a lot of them in school too, but it's just the work that The Center does... I didn't learn about a lot about that in school.*

For many students, The Center became the place where explicit connections between individuals' identities, their backgrounds and their experiences with things like poverty, segregation and over-policing of communities were explicitly discussed.

Julia also demonstrated a similar sentiment. Her experience with Taking Action, a program of The Center, fascinated her and she found comfort in knowing spaces for critical conversations and learning existed. She explained:

*I would see the taking actions and kind of like, "Oh, that's cool. All right." I don't have that space to talk about it in my area with people. And I was kind of like, It was mind blowing 'cause people actually talk about this. It's not just me in my head, it's not just me and my sisters at home saying these things. Its more people saying it. So I definitely need to keep coming 'cause I didn't feel alone anymore.*

Given the critical nature and experiences of these students it was clear that they wanted to learn more about issued of race, society, class and gender. They yearned for a kind of political education that they felt was missing from school.

It is important to note, however, that not all students were drawn to The Center because of an active and explicit search for a critical space. For example, Jessica, another Black student,

explained:

*I remember I would walk past the classroom and see peeps and stuff. It wasn't a bunch of people. But umm, I remember one day, like, she [the lead organizer of Taking Action] seen us, and it was like me and my other friends. And she was like, oh, Black women, she was like, come in, come in, come in. And we were like (nods and smiles- also a black woman), and we saw pizza.*

In this quote Jessica is referring to the Taking Action school club meetings during which staff work to help facilitate on-campus organizations with students. Since meetings typically took place during school lunch, staff would often bring pizza for the club members. While I do not mean to suggest that Jessica did not have critical questions about the world around her prior to joining, I do intend to reveal the nuances around becoming involved with The Center. Jessica may have been unsure of what she would find. However, she does highlight the importance of being seen and welcomed as Black woman. This invitation, along with some pizza, was enough for Jessica to join the lunch meeting.

It may have been by chance that Jessica became engaged with the Taking Action program, but there was an immediate acknowledgement of the opportunity to think critically about who she was and the world in which she was living. As students drew connections between their backgrounds, experiences, and critical frameworks they also shed light on the ways in which this framework often became a motivating force for their participation with the center.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I turned to interviews with the student organizers of The Center to draw

attention to who these students are and uncover the “roots of their involvement”. Because young people are often key figures in social movements, it is important to understand the perspectives, identities, and experiences that often pave the way for student activism. My interviews with the student organizers revealed that young people do not simply rely on the actions of adults to stimulate their activism, nor are they passive apolitical youth merely responding to the demands of adult organizers. Rather, many of the students who I interviewed thought deeply about who they were and where they lived prior to joining the organization. Their home neighborhoods and communities filled them with rich, and often challenging experiences that fueled curiosity, frustration, sometimes anger, but also agency.

Students identities were also foundational to their activism. They connected their experiences to their identities and were deeply shaped by their own race, legal status, class, and gender. Finally, students thought about themselves as unique, independent and critical thinkers. Students often expressed frustration with traditional learning environments and were in search of perspectives, ideas, and concepts that connected to their own identities and experiences. While I have separated each of these themes in these chapter, they do not necessary operate in isolation—together these themes work to demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which social action is connected to experiences, observations, curiosities, and desires for thought, truth, and change.

In the next chapter I turn to students’ engagement with The Center and the effects of their involvement. Relying on my interviews, I look at the ways that students came to talk about their “community organizing” work with The Center and interrogate the meanings and lessons students provide for community organizing. As students talked about their time as community organizers, they also revealed the impact organizing had on them and the transformations that



took place as a result of their organizing. I agree that, through the work of organizing students came to develop a deep consciousness about the meaning of organizing, and about themselves as organizers.

## Chapter 5: The Meanings of Organizing

In the previous chapter, students acknowledged that prior to joining The Center there was something unique about themselves; an independent and critical way of thinking about the world in which they lived. These ideas were typically rooted in their personal experiences at home and in their communities. Frustrated with their traditional educational environment, students identified themselves as in search of more nurturing and stimulating environments that welcomed their “wokeness,” and therefore found a sense of comfort upon joining The Center. However, the story does not end there. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which these students talked about their organizing work with The Center. Relying on my student interviews, I illustrate the ways in which students came to think about the work they were doing in their schools and communities, and through that work also went through a meaningful process of transformation and growth.

During my interviews, in addition to asking students how and why they came to join The Center, I also asked students to reflect upon their time at The Center, to talk about the things they had learned, and how their work with Taking Action impacted them. As students answered this question, many of them acknowledged that, while they felt like there were issues, like poverty, inequality, and access to resources, that often went unaddressed in their communities prior to joining the center, there was still so much they did not know prior to joining. For example, one student organizer, Betsy, explained, “I felt like it was important for me to join Taking Action because it woke me up inside, kind of.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, Betsy had already identified herself as a person who was cognizant of the dynamic of her community and curious about the ways in which poverty and violence intersected in her home and community life. However, here, Betsy reveals an

additional component, an acknowledgement that her time with The Center had an effect on her, some sort of impact that moved her to think even more deeply than she had previously been able to. Curious to get a better sense of her statement, I followed with the question: “What does that mean?”. Betsy then responded,

*Now that I look back on who I was before Taking Action, I feel like I was oblivious to what really was going on in my community, and what was going on within the school system. I knew that something was different, like I knew that they weren't teaching me about my history, but I didn't understand why. I didn't understand how it was keeping me from uprising and thinking for myself. That's one of the reasons why. Also, so that I could fight for people who can't fight for themselves or choose not to fight for themselves.*

Although Betsy originally provided great insight about the complexities of her neighborhood, here she also acknowledges a sense of change, a growth that came due to her time with The Center. Betsy speaks to the ways in which The Center helped to transform her understanding of the world. She confirms her general curiosity and puzzlement prior to joining The Center, but she also makes clear that her critique only went so far. While she was aware that things were different in her community, she also acknowledges that she was unable to access the tools, resources, and language to explain why. However, as a result of her time with The Center she was able to more critically make sense of the world around her, and this shift provided Betsy with a great sense of agency and obligation to herself and her community.

Betsy clearly highlights a number of important themes that I will discuss in this chapter. First, an acknowledgement of an experience of learning and change that took place as she engaged in her work with The Center. She also recognizes that once she was able to join the

organization she engaged in a significant amount of work in and for her community. Finally, she notes a deepening of thought and clearer understanding of how to effect change. In this chapter, I focus on these three themes to examine the experiences, lessons, and transformations of the student organizers I interviewed.

### *Understanding Youth Community Organizing Work*

In chapter two, I provide a case study of the major campaign that took place during my participant observations. However, my interviews with students about their time with The Center revealed that the work they did was also about so much more than the success of the campaign. To get a better sense of their work and its meaning to them, I asked students to describe and explain the work they did as members of Taking Action. In one of my first interviews, as I began to ask this question, Jessica succinctly answered, “I organized”.

Delgado and Staples (2008) define community organizing as, “a process through which people sharing similar concerns can unite to achieve positive change, community betterment and political empowerment” (p.19; see also Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Their research finds that youth-led community organizing generally promotes positive social and political development for young people (Delgado & Staples, 2008). However, research in this area typically falls into the category of program evaluation, in which the quality and quantity of youth participation is measured (Checkoway, 2011). Research also tends to focus on community outcomes of youth engagement (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). But less is known about how young people experience this process of organizing and its effects on the youth themselves. As Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) note, “despite its potential as a field of practice, youth participation remains an underdeveloped field of study” (pg. 21).

Thus, I became very intrigued by Jessica's succinct and quick answer. I thought to myself, what did she mean by this? Although I was clearly aware that The Center used a community organizing approach to drive its actions, it became especially important to get a better sense of how students, themselves, came to understand this work; what was it about this model that became so influential for these students?

Jessica later followed up her response by saying, "...I would, speak at meetings and stuff. And, a couple of times, like I like draw little banners and stuff for them. I would do like, a lot of things. Like, summer intern. I would always come to monthly meetings". During my participant observations, I indeed viewed a variety of these actions. In addition to attending taking action meetings, many of the students often gave classroom and community presentations, they went out into the community to speak about their campaigns, they created artwork and posters, and even held demonstrations. But I wanted to know more than just the list of what they did. I wanted to know: *what did it mean to organize?* And, what did it mean for them to identify as organizers? I was curious to know what this process was like and how these actions came to transform their perspectives.

Thus, to get a better sense of this, during my interview with Jessica I continued my questioning by asking, "OK so, can you tell me what organizing means? When you say, I would organize, what does that mean?"

She then responded, "Organizing is like, you go out in the streets and you inform people about what's going on." While Jessica initially highlighted important actions like voicing her perspectives and interning with the organization in her first response, her response to my follow up question points to additional efforts that could have been overly simplified in this one word, "organize". More than attending meetings and contributing artwork, Jessica makes clear that

community organizing was about being in the community, talking to people and playing a role in communicating with others about what was going in their lives.

As I continued to ask students to define community organizing, many of them underscored a number of key elements that came to provide rich meanings to the concept of organizing. These descriptions provide important details to scholarly understandings of community organizing, and they also contextualize the ways in which students came to understand their own work with The Center. They reveal the complexity of what it means to work within the community and impact change. For example, while Jessica emphasized being in the community to inform others, another student, Julio, emphasizes the notion of bringing people together in order to unite around a common cause. Julio explained:

*Organizing is basically any form to get people together to a ground so you can see how people ... Or even if you don't have anything to agree on yet, you're getting people together because you need to agree on something. If you're trying to fix it you should be trying to learn something. If you're talking to people door to door. Or like how we do it on the bus, online or whatever. Whatever your method is, you're trying to get people together on something and that's what organizing is.*

Julio insightfully explains that finding common ground may not come naturally; is not a simple or entirely straightforward process. However, in setting this out, he also reveals an especially meaningful tenet of community organizing: while the goal may be to unite around a common cause, the first step is really about reaching out to the community and bringing people of the community together. Julio also reveals a second vital tenet of community organizing: the importance of learning together. He makes clear that successful organizing should not be limited

to changing laws, institutions, or structures. Rather, social change is achieved when the community learns together. In explaining this he reveals that learning is as ongoing process, a skill that can be imparted to those who students organize.

Moving beyond the aspects of teaching and learning as a community, other students also emphasized the importance of inspiring others to become engaged and take action too. In this way, students began commenting not just on the goals of organizing, but also on the role and responsibilities of an organizer. For example, another student, Maria, pointed out:

*An organizer goes out and informs the community of the injustice taking place around them. Those people grow by not only helping others to grow but also allowing themselves to grow when they're going out and talking to people. They're not just the people in the forefront, the people trying to get people to fight for themselves. They're not just fighting for others and taking credit.*

Maria makes clear that community organizers play a key role in providing critical perspectives to community members. These perspectives should illuminate the inequality or injustice that is either unseen or overlooked. However, as Maria focuses on the role of the organizer, she draws attention to the transformative process that comes as a result of organizing. Just as the organizer plays a key role in educating others, the organizer is also learning from the community she is reaching out to. Additionally, at the end of her response she makes clear that the goal of this process is not to allow the organizer to individually fight on the behalf of others, nor should the organizer take sole responsibility for any progress that is made. Rather, it is the job of the organizer to teach and invite others into the fight for change. In this way, Maria also reveals another crucial element of community organizing: a community organizer is successful when she is able to invite others into the struggle—not so an organizer can fight for those in their

community, but so that the community can participate in fighting for themselves.

Additionally, although community organizing can be driven by a larger interest in social change, students also recognized a difference between specific social action goals and the longer-term goal of raising of peoples' awareness and agency. While students often went out into the community to talk about their campaign in schools, they also addressed the importance of discussing community issues with those they organized. This became especially important because as Brittney points out, communities are rich with hard working and thoughtful individuals who are invested in making a change. She explained:

*Yeah, like [community organizing], it's bigger than what it is. Just because we're fighting to you, little things, like the 1033 Program, it's trying to protect our community in a way. It's trying to make it better than what it is. Like, better than what people always say, "Oh South Central is ghetto." It's not just ghetto, there's a lot of smart people here. There's a lot of people who want to fix the problems here. It's just they don't know how.*

As Brittney specifically references the campaign in schools, she first makes clear that her community organizing work, and the campaign itself, cannot be oversimplified. She explains that the 1033 campaign (as discussed in chapter 2) was about much more than just safety in schools, it was also about something much larger. As she saw it, the campaign was also about protecting and building the community, recognizing the value that existed within the community, listening to each other, sharing perspectives, and investing in each other's wellbeing.

Brittney also notes that when a community organizes together, the community is able to evolve, to grow, and to nurture the brilliance that already exists. Here Brittney speaks to the



deficit perspective that is often taken when describing communities like South Los Angeles, where issues of inequality, poverty, crime and delinquency often overshadow the rich diversity and talent of the community. Brittney makes clear that this is especially important because the absence of progress and change is not due to a lack of desire or motivation, but instead about the lack of tools or awareness and understanding in how to strategically leverage existing community desire and motivation for change.

However, this does not mean to imply that organizing is a simple and easy task, or that it did not come with its own sets of challenges. In the next section I provide a discussion of the ways in which students also addressed some of the challenges of organizing, the hard work that it takes, and the lessons that were learned through these challenges.

### *Challenges in Youth Community Organizing*

As students talked about their community organizing work, they also revealed a number of significant challenges and obstacles that they faced as organizers. These obstacles ranged from the time commitment and labor that went into organizing, to the resistance and sometimes opposition they faced from community members. However, an important finding that came out of my interviews was, that as students talked about these challenges, they also explained the ways in which they worked through and learned from these challenges.

One of the first challenges that was discussed involved the “hard work” that went into community organizing efforts. During my interviews students often emphasized the dedication and commitment that was essential for their organizing. While they were very proud of the work that they did, many students also acknowledged the many hours and effort that were necessary. For instance, one student, Brittney, reflected on her participation with the Youth Organizer

Summer Training Program. While she was very much passionate about her work with The Center, her participation in the program also required a big commitment. She explained:

*Doing the summer program is [exclaims]. It's a lot because you couldn't dedicate your entire summer to doing the program, there were only three days out of the week. It's smack dab in the middle of the day, so when you wake up you have no time to do what you wanna do cause you're getting ready to go to the office. Once you get out, it's like you're too tired to do anything else. So it's kind of difficult, but at the same time you're doing it for a purpose beyond the time that you're there. Getting people's stories and organizing the community is way better than free time. Except possibly sleeping all day and sitting in the house, you're not gonna be doing something greater than that.*

For Brittney, attending and completing the summer program was a real challenge. As she explained to me, summers were her time to stay home and relax. She very much enjoyed the freedom she had during the summer to hang out with friends or stay home and sleep. While the summer program may have placed a significant demand on her time and energy, she also explains that she fundamentally understood that she was engaged in something meaningful and significant. She was invested in the larger project of social change, and while the demand on her time may have been challenging, it also provided her with great purpose.

Research in the field of community organizing has identified many of these challenges (see e.g. Delgado & Staples, 2008; Williams, 2003). However, this research rarely provides young people the opportunity to identify their own sets of challenges while engaged in community organizing. This insight is important because it provides additional perspectives that come directly from the student organizers on the process of community organizing. It also sheds

light on some very normal aspects of organizing that might be overlooked. For example, while out organizing, students often had to overcome feelings of nervousness or anxiety when approaching community members and talking about their experiences and campaign. Would people in the community be receptive to the things they wanted to say? Could they get others to join them in their efforts? What if the person they spoke with disagreed with them? While the organization often provided these students with organizer trainings to help prepare them for these kinds of interactions, all of these questions became very real concerns and obstacles that students had to face and overcome while out in the community, and it was important for me to allow students to also share these experiences and reflect upon them.

As I asked students to talk to me about the challenges of organizing, many of them swiftly responded with personal stories and experiences of awkward, sometimes nerve wracking and often uncomfortable interactions. Amanda, for example, revealed this when she began to describe her work as a community organizer. She emphasizes that students often have to confront a range of emotions while organizing. She explained:

*By organizing people... we would go out in the community and talk to people... Sometimes it's hard because there's people who don't want to talk to you, sometimes I would be nervous 'cause it would be intense but once I did it, I felt good afterwards. I would be nervous every once in a while, but I always let it go... but there's people who hold a good conversation with you. It could be a 30-minute conversation and you guys are still talking. I mean it's still big though. Cause it's one thing to like, talk to your friends at school. But like, to go and talk to strangers about this stuff. That's a big thing.*

As Amanda describes this effort, she also makes clear this work is not easy and it does not

always result in a positive experience. She explains that organizing is much different than simply sharing information with a friend. Sometimes, people are just not interested in engaging with you. Additionally, she points out that organizers often feel a very real sense of uncertainty and anxiety. However, she also notes that the conflicting emotions that do often come with organizing are also very rarely permanent and they are most likely to end in more positive emotions and feelings of accomplishment.

Another obstacle that students often confronted was encountering differences of opinion, especially across generations. Alyssa made this clear when she spoke about difficult encounters with older adults in her community. While speaking about issues that affected students in school not all community members were receptive to her views. For example, she explained:

*Organizing is like, you go out in the streets and you inform people about what's going on. How students feel in school. And it was always like, older people who like, older Black people, or older Hispanic people who were like, well, if they're acting up, they need to get shot.... Yeah, like, that is the coldest shit you could ever say. So, because they gang bang or because they smoke weed, they need to get shot. Because they have a smart mouth and they talk back to the police, they need to get shot.*

Alyssa had to confront the reality that some people within her community believed that a person deserved to be shot (and perhaps killed by the police) for involvement in gang violence, or the illegally use of cannabis, misbehavior in school, or even showing disrespect to the police. This very striking story emphasizes the very real discomfort students also may encounter while out organizing: that students had to confront perspectives that supported the use of violence against them.

Additionally, this reveals the importance of acknowledging that perspectives within communities are not homogenous; not all community members share similar opinions about the problems in their communities and the policies that might address them. Thus, as students came to understand the diversity of opinions that existed in their communities, they also had to prepare themselves for a variety of opinions that may have differed from their own.

Deeply moved by Alyssa's experience, I went on to ask her what it was like for her to hear those perspectives. I imagined some responses from community members could have caused a great set of hesitation and uncertainty, an additional layer of frustration and maybe even fear. She went on to explain:

*It's not like they were brainwashed. Like I said, everybody's raised different. Everybody sees stuff different. Especially older people. You can't talk them out of how they feel. If people eat a cup of coffee and a donut every day, they're gonna eat a cup of coffee and a donut every day. And it's gonna be hard for you to try and give them a omelet or something. So with them, it was like, they didn't even want to listen. Just like, no, no, no. You're wrong. You're wrong. They're just, they're raised different. They see stuff different. Some people are like, some people have this slave mindset. Like, oh, if you do something wrong, you're supposed to get punished. But it's like, where is the line of, it wasn't that bad. It's not that bad of a punishment.*

Even as a 17 year old student organizer, Alyssa's response demonstrates a deep sense of maturity and understanding that is essential for organizing. While it may have been extremely hard to recognize that some people in the community advocate for the use of force against students, she also poignantly makes clear that each person comes with their own sets of experiences and

beliefs, and as an organizer sometimes it is best to recognize the deep entrenchment of each person's social and political perspectives. She also insightfully connects this perspective with larger narratives of police control, punishment and slavery. In this way, Alyssa reveals that a clear understanding of history can provide substantive armor for organizers. While she acknowledged the perspective as problematic, she makes clear that once contextualized, the perspective is not necessarily very surprising given the history of slavery in this country.

Like Alyssa, another student, Kevin, also provided his perspective about encountering those who may not be receptive to their message. However, in explaining the reasons why some may not understand, Kevin also underscored the importance of his work in the community. He believed that, while some may not understand, students still deserve to live in and help contribute to a community that prioritizes their safety and wellbeing. He explained:

*It's hard to transform some people's minds when they've been, I don't want to say brainwashed, but yeah. To fit in the society when we weren't born to fit into this society, because the society is not like the norm. This is not how people were meant to be treated, people aren't supposed to be harassed by cops. People aren't supposed to be ashamed of the color of their skin. People should not have to look around the corners to see if I could turn this corner, and not have a cop pull me over.*

Kevin makes clear that organizers did not go out into the community as naïve young people who believed they were going to fully influence each person they spoke with. Instead, Kevin explains that he was very much aware of how hard it can be to change opinions and beliefs, especially of those of older generations who may have been raised with a different set of values and perspectives. However, as Kevin points out, organizers also refused to be limited by these

perspectives.

Students held closely to their visions of social justice, which only further reinforced the need to advocate, organize, and fight for a safer and more equitable society. As Kevin continued in his interview with me, he reminded me, like others, that this work is not easy. However, he pointed out that the cost of organizing does come with rewards. He explained:

*At times it gets frustrating, but there's times like, "Man, why did I come today?" But then you have to realize that there's people looking up to you, regardless of how it's getting there. There's actually people who want to be inform[ed], but they just don't know how to ask for help. You have to somehow reach to those, so it's rewarding but frustrating at the same time.*

As an organizer, Kevin believes in the importance of his work. He believes it is important to reach out to community members and inform them of the work of the organization. He emphasizes the heterogeneity of perspectives within the community, and prefers to focus on the perspectives that may be welcoming, or even in search of, his visions for his community. Thus, while it was clear that student organizers were very much aware that they were not going to get the support from everyone, they also firmly believed they needed to try anyway— because sometimes they were successful.

Additionally, students often relied on specific tactics they would use when they encountered opposing viewpoints from community members while organizing. One tactic was to engage in a dialogue where both the organizer and community member had the opportunity to share their experiences and perspective. Devon explained:

*... and a lot of people disagree and some people that disagreed, we asked them*

*[what] would [it take to] agree? And then we told them how we feel and a lot of them changed their minds. They were like, oh, I didn't see it that way. They didn't see how we seen it, so they got a look from our view and then they changed their mind.*

Here Devon shows that in some cases, organizers were able to influence and shape the perspectives of those who might have initially disagreed. When a dialogue was developed, students were able to find points of agreement with community members who may have originally opposed with their perspectives. As Devon discusses this tactic, he reveals the importance of providing opportunities for community members to voice their opinions. He emphasizes that organizing is a two-way street, where both perspectives need to be heard and understood. Additionally, Devon points out that it was important for him to explain not only how he was affected by specific policies but what the change meant for the organizer personally. As Devon told me, this often resulted in a very positive experience because the community member may not have initially considered the student's point of view. This further emphasizes the importance of each student organizers voice and perspective—if they can share their experiences and beliefs with others, they might be successful in influencing change.

In addition to facing opposing perspectives, student organizers were also challenged by the fact that sometimes community members and peers were simply either too busy or too tired to be supportive. This did not necessarily mean the organizer was met with a negative response or a lack of support, but organizers also frequently had to face the reality of everyday challenges within the community. Sometimes community members were too caught up in their day to day demands and therefore, unable to fully support and engage with the organizers. This was especially true in communities like South Los Angeles, where families struggled with poverty



and a high cost of living. While this challenge was different from those who may have disagreed with their perspective, it also provided a different set of obstacles that hindered student organizers' ability to fully engage with their community. For example, during her sophomore year of high school, Jessica, a student organizer, was working to collect signed petitions from students at her school and was struck by the reactions she received from her school peers. She went on to explain:

*For me, when I first started. It was getting out and getting petitions signed [that was the hardest part]. Yeah. Because you had ... Like I met a student. She was like... you know, when somebody walks up to you and is trying to get you to sign something. She's like, I just had a long day. I'm tired. I don't wanna talk to nobody. just wanna go home and relax.*

Like others, Jessica first emphasizes the hard work of organizing. She reinforces the idea that although organizing can be important and impactful, it also is a lot of hard work. However, she also points out that part of the hard work comes not only with the energy that is needed for an organizer to go around school and gather petitions, but also in recognizing that each interaction also requires attention, time, and energy from the person who is being organized. This is important because it underscores additional ways in which organizing really operates as a two-way street. While the organizer bears a major burden in putting themselves out there, the organizer must also recognize that they too are asking for effort from their peers and their community, and sometimes an organizer can be turned down for this reason.

In addition to getting their peers to sign petitions, many of the student organizers also worked to recruit and invite others to join their efforts. Indeed, these students were very much aware that that the success of their campaign depended in large part on the organizers' ability to

get the word out, invite others to join in on the movement, attend demonstrations and organizational meetings. However, as another student, Ivan, pointed out during his interviews, while these goals are important, there were challenges that community members also faced that made it difficult for this to happen. He explains:

*With us, it was trying to get people to come to our rallies, trying to get people involved. Like I said, we were successful with five people who would join in. But at least people would know, you know? I understand that it's late, people have a job, a lot of people have two or three jobs. But at least I know that I told somebody and somebody knows. It's like, whether they do something about it or not, that's up to them.*

Ivan points to a number of circumstances that might be present in a person's life that can make it challenging to get involved. In addressing this challenge however, he makes clear that the community is filled with very hardworking people who, for a number of reasons, are typically very busy (and tired) working to make ends meet, often having to take on more than one job.

In pointing this out, Ivan is highlighting additional elements that are crucial to community organizing. Ivan does not dismiss the goal of encouraging others to get involved or take action. However, he does point out that recruiting community members is only one aspect of his work. Community organizing is also about getting out into the community, understanding the complexity of the community, and informing others of their goals, their campaign, and their vision for their community. And while the organizer and community members both face significant obstacles within their own community, an organizer also upholds a sense of duty to the community. Ivan explained:

*It's important because there's people in the community who are like, "I'm tired of seeing homelessness. I'm tired of seeing people just wandering the streets."*

*There's people who are thinking about the solutions, but they're not doing anything about it because they're focused on their life. They still need to survive in their community. They need to find how they're going to survive, because at the end of the day, you feel like you're by yourself. But if you don't go out looking for help, sometimes the help could go look for you.*

As a member of the community himself, Ivan points out that community members want change too; even if community members are not formally trained as organizers or are unable to go out and attend events or demonstrations, they too understand the issues within the community and are thoughtful about what can be done. As an organizer, Ivan recognizes the wealth of thought that is present within the community that is often untapped: it is not that people aren't thinking about solutions, but more that they might not in a position to do much about it. Importantly, Ivan also points to the nature of community life in places like South Los Angeles or other low-income areas, where community members are also working through their own sets of struggles, be it with resources, work, and other demands on their time. The conditions of their lives add to another layer of the challenges in successfully organizing these communities. Some may be too overburdened by their own social conditions to join an organization, attend meetings and events; for some, just working enough hours to pay rent and put food on the table can be incredible feats. However, this where the powerful role of the community organizer comes in: the organizer recognizes the diversity in ideas that exists and goes out to find folks, to talk with them, and to bring help to them when they are unable to seek it for themselves.

Thus, as students reflected upon the challenges they faced, it also became clear that many

of them recognized the many layers involved in successful community organizing and promoting social change. On the one hand, the student organizers were directly motivated by their campaign against the 1033 program. They organized, developed demands, and demonstrated so that their demands could be heard and implemented. On the other hand, however, it was also about much more than their demands. It was about being out in the community, talking to their peers, and understanding community members and creating a degree of critical awareness in them as well. It was about the importance of planting the seeds for agency, activism and social change in their own communities. As Jessica put it, *“I tried to make sure I engaged students, and really have a ... like enriched conversation, like actually maybe come to the meeting, if they don't they don't. At least I planted the seed. I planted the seed, showed them a different vision of how the system is everywhere.”*

As students went out and “planted seeds” within their community, they also emphasized that organizing is also about respecting the agency of their peers and community members to make their own choices. As another student, Betsy, also put it, *“It's not like trying to ... I'm not trying to like, control their opinion, but I just want them to really look at it before they make a decision.”* As Betsy emphasizes, it is not just an understanding of individual autonomy, but also the importance of respecting each person’s trajectory of getting to a place of understanding. She explains that organizing cannot be successful if the opinions of others are controlled, or even too easily influenced. Instead, the goal of community organizing is also to provide one’s community with the space and tools to think through a set of decisions so that they can, on their own accord, decide how to move forward with the information. Another student, Devon, also makes this especially clear:

*Making people aware that there was something going on. Umm... Whether they*

*decided to act up on it or not, like, you know, that's up to them but organizing to me at least was like ... If I could tell somebody, at least for a day, that you know, at like one person for a day, you know what happened ... A person a day, that's cool, that's organizing.*

Devon understands that his role is not to control the decisions of those in the community. Instead, as Devon explains organizing is about informing others and providing others with the opportunity, the agency, and the choice to further engage. And the success of an organizer comes from their own ability, or even willingness, to simply reach others, talk to them, and inform. Additionally, this does not mean that an organizer should focus exclusively on reaching a large number of individuals each day, rather that there is immense power in focusing on a person at a time, one day at a time. Viewed in this way, students understood the slow and long-term process that embodies the work of organizing for social change.

As students discussed this work, it also became clear that they also changed and transformed as a result of their involvement in organizing. In the next and final section of this chapter I focus on the ways in which students reflected upon their own experiences as organizers and the ways in which they moved from frustrated young students to hard working and hopeful community activists. They became better equipped at understanding the structure and dynamic of their communities, were able to envision avenues for change, and identified themselves as committed activists dedicated to a lifelong vision for social change.

### *Growing and Learning as Youth Organizers*

Upon reflection on their work with The Center, students identified a great sense of personal transformation and growth within themselves. Although students had previously self-

identified themselves as unique and critical, they also believed that they maintained fairly limited understandings of the world, of themselves, and of their communities prior to joining The Center. While the total length of time that each student participated with The Center varied (all of the students I interviewed had participated with The Center for at least a year and on average the students were involved for about two years), all students talked at length about a variety of lessons learned and the personal and political self-growth that they believed they experienced as a result of their time with The Center. Jessica, for example, explained:

*Yes, it's like getting messages in your own neighborhood that you really don't see because you're blind, like it's a blind eye. You can't see it with your naked eye, you have to really dig deep down and try to figure out why certain things are popping into your neighborhood, why you have a billion and ten Starbucks but don't have any black-owned, or any black/Latino-owned coffee shops.*

Jessica points to an important element to her understanding of herself prior to joining the organization. She points to subtle messages that she felt she received in her neighborhood—messages that she was unaware she was learning. However, she also reveals that she was able to remove her blinders as a result of her time with The Center. For example, she references the growth of corporations in her community, a process also linked to gentrification. She also asks about the relationship between the growth of corporate business in her community and the lack of business ownership by people of the community themselves. In this way, Jessica speaks to the ways her thought process evolved after joining the organization and the new questions she began to ask. Thus, even though students acknowledged their curiosity and critical thinking as a fundamental root of their engagement with The Center, these students were aware of how much they learned, how much they grew as political activists, and how much (even as critical thinkers)

they did not know prior to joining The Center.

Part of the growth that students acknowledged also came from their ability to gain and develop deeper understandings of their own racial identities. As students of color— in addition to their concerns about their community— many students struggled with their own identities and lived experiences. Brittney, for example, also talked about her own experience as a Black woman and the challenges she faced in light of racialized messages and stereotypes. However, participation with The Center provided her an opportunity to more directly engage with her own racial identities and behaviors. She explained:

*Because, it's like we were in this little bubble and we really weren't concerned about anything. Like me, I used to like perm my hair and stuff. Like, serious. I used to not, I use to hate being black. It was like, so disgusting to me. I didn't want to be anything like it. I would see people act ghetto. I was like, uh, I don't even want to be black, like they're disgusting, they disgrace black people. And then finally, I started accepting myself when I started talking to [the lead organizer of The Center].*

Brittney argues that, prior to joining the organization, she lived in a sheltered world where she had few concerns. And in a very vulnerable moment Brittney explains a very challenging struggle, as a Black woman, with accepting and loving herself. First, she points to her hair, what can be understood as her sense of self and her sense of beauty. As a black woman, she talks about perming or chemically straightening her hair. On the one hand, she infers her hair straightening was perhaps something she did not think much of because of the “bubble” she lived in. However, she also goes on to reveal something deeper: a brutal honesty about hating “Black people”.

As she explains her anguish, Brittney points to the stereotypical behaviors that too often confine the Black identity in this country. In addition, this hatred moved beyond her discussion about her hair to a discussion about herself—a hatred for herself because of her blackness. Scholars have provided important literature on the black experience within the United States, often pointing to what it means to grow up with black skin (and black hair) in a white world (Owens, 2006). However, Brittney also reveals something meaningful for herself: first, an awareness of this internalized hatred; and secondly, a self-acceptance that finally came as a result of her time with The Center, where discussions of race and gender were prioritized.

Additionally, as students sought to create change in their schools, they too were undergoing a process of personal development and transformation. Maria spoke about this as she discussed her time with the 1033 campaign. Maria joined the organization during her sophomore year of high school and was a senior during the time of my interview. As she explained during her interview with me, her time with the organization also allowed for a number of opportunities that she may not have otherwise been exposed to. As a youth representative of The Center's executive committee Maria was able to travel to new parts of the state and collaborate with other organizations and organizers. Maria explained:

*With the 1033 [campaign], I was talking about these things that a lot of people my age weren't talking about and weren't doing. So I got to a lot of places. I got to go to Sac town a couple times. With the lawyers. Yeah, I was proud .... So I think that exposed me to a lot. I went to see other organizations all throughout California. I got to visit ... That impacted me the most, but my whole experience in general really changed me because I experienced LA. I never really been to downtown, I've never been to Korea town or (outside of Watts) any of these areas. So just*



*being there opened my world. I was forced to take the bus to so many places so just that alone was like, it opened up so many things, but then seeing not just the city, but even more places and people come from different city and organizations, which all happened during the 1033, when I was like 17.*

As Maria recognizes that opportunities and experiences that she may not have engaged in otherwise, she also points to her exposure to places that were much closer to home as especially significant. She points to her use of public transportation and her travel to new cities, within her home of Los Angeles, that took her outside of her neighborhood “bubble”. As she describes this, she recognizes the privilege of these experiences, and her opportunity to grow in her understanding of her community.

Thus, as students worked to make changes in their community, they too were transforming as young people, community members and citizens. For some students, it was the ways in which The Center allowed them to more critically understand themselves and the world around them. For others, it was also about learning the power of their voices. Ivan put it this way:

*I learned a lot. The importance of having a voice, the importance of having something that you believe in, the importance of human beings in general. Like, how important it is to just acknowledge each other, as human beings, before anything else. I feel like, in the group Taking Action, I learned how to look at people as humans, rather than just people. And, yeah, just having a voice. Having an opinion about things.*

Ivan provides a better picture of the ways in which The Center invited students into their

program, welcomed ideas, and helped them to understand the importance and value they all brought. For Ivan, this translated in a very meaningful experience in which he felt valued as a person, as a human with thoughts ideas and a voice—a voice that mattered both personally and politically. This in turn allowed him to value not just his own ideas and opinions, but also the existence and voice of others; the intrinsic value individuals hold simply because they exist in the world, as living human beings. He continued:

*So that was something that I learned for sure. And that I have a voice. And that I matter. Honestly that's something Taking Action allowed for me, right?*

*Traditional schooling it's like you're taught, you're lectured. Where Taking Action was more of a conversation. Right, Like, how do you feel about this? Sometimes there would be a little bit of disagreements. What about this or that? And, yeah, just having a voice. Having an opinion about things. So, yeah, they believed opinions matter.*

As Ivan further elaborates, he also specifically draws a comparison between The Center and his school environment (which is also similar to the ways in which students critique schools in the previous chapter). He points to dynamics within each environments that respectively embraced or hindered his learning. For him, there was a great value in the act of conversation, the ability to both give voice to one's own thoughts and ideas and listen to the perspectives of others—something he believed was missing from the traditional classroom environment. As other students have also discussed, many students did not feel like their voices were encouraged until they joined The Center and began to participate in Taking Action.

Ivan also makes clear that The Center was not a place where everyone iterated the same ideas. Rather, in processing ideas, beliefs, and thoughts, a variety of perspectives were presented,

and in some cases disagreements would emerge. This emphasizes that a heterogeneity of ideas existed not just in the community, but also was present across the members of The Center. That is, The Center was not a place where all ideas and messages were always agreed upon in consensus. Ivan explains that students at The Center had a variety of perspectives that were not always in line with one another. Although this may have caused disagreements, the disagreements did not negate his experience. Instead, this dynamic was a key part of his personal and intellectual growth. Ivan learned to value the perspective of others, even if they were not always in alignment with his own beliefs.

Additionally, having the space to talk about their experiences, voice their perspectives and listen to the perspectives of others provided many of these students a platform and avenue to become directly involved in seeking change. For instance, Julio explained:

*It was always just, like, I knew something was wrong, I knew things were wrong, I knew there were systems in place that were against me, but it was okay that they're there. It was never, like ... I was taught how to speak against it, or speak it, or speak of how I felt. Taking Action gave me a platform to really articulate what I believe in, and how I believe, and how I felt about things.*

Julio first makes clear that he was very much aware of the fact that a number of social problems existed. However, he then acknowledges that his awareness did not equate to complete understanding. Instead, his awareness was simply that—and his acknowledgement of social problems did not necessarily evoke any meaningful response or reaction. Therefore, similar to the reflections of other students, Julio explains that knowing “something was wrong” was not enough. For Julio, simply knowing can also lead to a blind acceptance. Instead, he needed to learn how to resist this acceptance. As Julio comes to admit this, he then begins to reference the

ways in which his time with The Center allowed to develop a response. This response allowed him to move from a passive bystander to an active organizer, one who went out into the community and was directly involved in affecting social change. Through his voice Julio was also able to reflect upon his beliefs, communicate his values, his feelings, and take action to support them.

While students arrived at The Center with a variety of perspectives and understandings about the world, each of them acknowledged that as a result of their work with The Center their thinking evolved deeply. This evolution was not just about the specific lessons students were able to learn, but also about how they came to make sense of the value of knowing. In other words, it was also about a deepening of their understanding of how they could catalyze what they came to know and take action. Ashley put it this way: *“I think Taking Action was definitely a turning point, in terms of me just being in there and just letting things go by, like a lot of people do, and really getting involved. Really feeling like I was part of something”*.

Ashley specifically notes that her involvement in taking action marked a key transition in her life experience. She communicates that in the past she was much more apathetic; she may not have liked the things taking place in her community or in her life, but she was not really doing much about it. However, like others, her time with The Center marked a shift from a sense of passivity to more direct action. She attended meetings, participated in trainings, joined demonstrations, and organized within her community. Additionally, Ashley points out that while she began to take action, she did not do so alone. Rather, she became a part of something larger, something that was ongoing, something powerful.

Additionally, other students discussed the ways in which The Center motivated them to think, not just about how they were able to “take action” in the current moment, but also in the

future. As students talked about their future, in relation to their organizing, they revealed that there also was a transformation in their sense of self: an understanding of themselves as people with a future purpose and a vision. Julia helps to demonstrate this idea of organizing as a long-term commitment and personal identity. She explained:

*There's a few things. I learned that I'm impatient. I've learned that there's a lot of work to be done in this area. I also have learned that I can't give up because I did it in high school, I have to continue to do this outside of high school when I'm in college.*

Julia's understanding of herself as "impatient" is directly related to the large amount of need in her community, the complexity and the slow pace of achieving change. Therefore, as Julia reveals her desire to create change in her community, she also is acknowledging that change comes slowly. It is this slow pace that leads her to learn about her own impatience. As Julia acknowledges this, she begins to explain that her actions cannot be limited to her time in high school. She reveals a commitment to activism as a long-term goal.

Additionally, many students also drew connections to their time with The Center and the possibility, and importance, of a college education. For instance, Devon explained:

*Within in school, it made me understand that I wanted to pursue a higher education. Because that's really the only way I'm going to be able to make an impact is like, if I don't have a name, no one cares about what I say.*

Although a college education is still considered to be valuable for a number of life course outcomes, many students of Devon's generation have become more skeptical about attending college after high school because of the increasing costs of college and universities as well as an

increasing awareness of student debt (Minz, 2019). While Devon does not specifically mention the cost of college, he does reveal that his time with The Center led to a meaningful understanding of the importance of a college education. In other words, although he knew he should *want* to further his education by attending college, he also was not entirely sure why he should do that. However, during his time with the organization he came to draw an important connection between establishing himself as a credible person and making an impact. He understands that his impact on the world is much more powerful if it comes from a person with credibility—and clearly, education is a part of building his credibility.

Thus, as students revealed their deep commitment to community justice and social activism it became clear that this commitment was not limited to their time in high school. Instead, as students were committed to something larger, they also became much more motivated to seek a higher education. In a similar vein, Carlos also talked about the ways in which his participation with The Center helped him to think beyond the present moment and consider opportunities in college. He explained:

*So, Taking Action helped me to realize that I wanted to do something more than just high school. I want to go to a higher education. I want to be able to enlighten others, to teach others. Each one, teach one. I'm a firm believer in that.*

Similar to Devon, Carlos also points to The Center as influential in his desire to one day attend college. Like the other students, engaging in community activism was not something Carlos believed was limited to his high school experience. As he points out here, his desire to do more especially shaped his motivation for a higher education. More specifically, he talks about his aspirations to teach and influence others. As he goes on to explain, he sees a very powerful effect

in an individual's ability to share knowledge and information. And for him, access to higher education play a significant role in that process.

Therefore, as my interviews revealed, for these students the abstract goal of attending college was not on its own sufficient. While it is the case that the students understood the general value of a college degree, many of them were unable to buy into this idea until they could connect the importance of higher education with their own priorities and motivations for activism and social change. For many of these students, going to college was about more than acquiring a college degree, it was also about how a college degree could allow them to continue to address the needs of their communities, educate others, and affect change.

### *Conclusion*

As research on youth organizing and community participation has grown, the experiences, challenges, and transformations that young people encounter as they engage in this work is rarely examined. In this chapter, I relied on my interviews with the student organizers to get a better understanding of the work students performed as organizers, emphasizing the personal and political transformations students experienced as they engaged in this work.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the process of community organizing was especially significant for these students: it was about leveraging their voices and perspectives to connect with community members, talking with others about social, economic, and political issues that were impacting their lives, and engaging in strategic actions dedicated towards social change. Additionally, students did not hold simple and idealistic perspectives about this work. Rather, students recognized the challenges and demands that went into their efforts—it took commitment, a confrontation of anxiety and fear, and an acknowledgment of diverse and varied

perspectives within their community.

Importantly, as students engaged in this work they developed and embraced an identity *as organizers*: they became committed to both immediate and long-term social change. Indeed, Paulo Freire recognized this process in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). As Erl-Amin et al. (2017) note:

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) conceived of critical consciousness while working with adult laborers in Brazil. Freire realized that inequality is sustained when the people most affected by it are unable to decode their social conditions. Freire proposed a cycle of critical consciousness development that involved gaining knowledge about the systems and structures that create and sustain inequity (critical analysis), developing a sense of power or capability (sense of agency), and ultimately committing to take action against oppressive conditions (critical action).

Thus, this chapter demonstrates the how the students in my case study were able to evolve as critical thinkers and actors through their work with The Center as community organizers. For these students, the emergence of this “critically conscious” identity meant that they were able to transition from frustrated young people—with limited lens of understandings and tools for actions— to critically conscious activists with tools to recognize, identify, and take action against hegemonic processes within our society (Freire 1970).



## Conclusion

Research has emphasized the key roles of young people and students in social movements (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017), but we know much less about how and why students become activists, and what happens to these students, their sense of themselves and their sense of the world around them when they do mobilize. This ethnographic case study begins with these questions to tell a story about a group of high school student organizers in Los Angeles that have challenged punitive school policies, the criminalization of school discipline, and the militarization of police. This concluding chapter first revisits the theoretical framework of the dissertation, then summarizes the key themes and findings from each chapter. I will also discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this project, and provide a discussion of future directions for the study of youth political activism.

As discussed in the Introduction, this project originally aimed to study experiences of young people in schools. Stemming in part from my own school experiences with punishment, and the emergence of research on the school to prison pipeline, I wanted to know how students thought about and responded to contemporary school disciplinary practices and the presence of police officers in schools. I was also influenced by what Morrill et al. (2000) frame as the “youth centered approach,” and define as an approach that puts the voices, perspectives, and experiences of youth at the center of social inquiry. Given the emergence of scholarship on the topic of “school criminalization,” my project would also integrate this youth centered approach to develop a more complete understanding of how these practices unfold, impact students, and take shape in schools.

In 2015, I began participant observations with The Center, a social movement organization in Los Angeles, that trained high school students across the Los Angeles public

school district as community organizers and initiated a youth led campaign that challenged the district's "zero tolerance" policies and criminalization of students. Over the course of two years, I volunteered with the organization as a participant observer. Two to three times a week I would go to The Center's office during after school hours to assist students and staff with the campaign, take fieldnotes, and sometimes just "hang out". I also attended training sessions, campaign meetings, and organized in the community with students. I took part in planned rallies and demonstrations and other organizational events. As I spent time in the field, I developed a strong rapport with students and staff. I learned more about the history of the organization, their campaigns, and their philosophy of community organizing.

In his discussion of qualitative research Creswell (2007) notes that "our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem" (p. 43). Indeed, as I engaged in my participant observations with The Center and completed interviews with student organizers, new themes began to emerge across my data, shifting the aim and scope of my project began from the experiences of young people in school to the experiences of young people as community organizers.

During my fieldwork the student campaign began to target the militarization of the LAUSD Police. My observations began to focus on the ways students organized around this issue and successfully campaigned to "get rid of the weapons". These observations were further reinforced when I began my interviews with students. Upon initial analysis of my interviews, I noticed that the process of activism, the actions students took, the reasons they became involved and the impact that their involvement had were all especially significant for these students, and these themes began to shape the focus of the dissertation.

### *Key Themes and Findings*

While my key questions shifted, the youth centered approach remained central to the project. Indeed, the voices of young people were at the forefront of this project. Their words, their experiences and their perspectives were foundational for the development and writing of each chapter. In this way, young people were not just passive subjects of my research. Instead, they were the key drivers of this project, actively informing my findings and discussions. This also acknowledges that young people are capable of identifying key processes at play in their lives. Too often are young people overlooked or not given the autonomy to be the experts of their lives. I argue that our understandings of the social world can be significantly expanded when the voices of young people are given authority and recognition.

Additionally, as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, throughout the last two decades young people have been at the forefront of a youth led movement that challenges the criminalization of students in schools. Particularly in Los Angeles, which is the second largest school district in the nation, young students have been especially active and successful in calling into question what it means and looks like to be safe in schools. If we are to understand these more recent calls by students, parents, and community activists to remove police in schools in districts across the country (Balingit, Strauss & Bellware, 2020) we must consider the rich history of student activism that has helped to build the current moment.

However, observing the actions of students and documenting the work they do is not enough. We must also consider how students become activists and what happens when they do. Chapters 3 and 4 begin to address these questions by focusing on the ways the students in my case study talk about themselves and their involvement with The Center. As I illustrate in chapter 3, students' political activism is intimately connected to social conditions of their environments. The students in my study were deeply impacted by their home lives and the neighborhoods

where they grew up. The social, racial, and political identity of students was also deeply fundamental. These places and identities led to a rich set of experiences and responses that planted seeds of curiosity, pride, agency, frustration, and even anger that rooted their engagement with The Center.

When looked at in this way, political activism can be a very powerful tool for transforming these initial but unfocused experiences into a sense of purpose and plan for action. This was especially reinforced in Chapter 4, which demonstrated the ways the students of my study were able to grow and evolve as activists and organizers as a result of their time with The Center. Importantly, students were very much aware of this transformation. In other words, taking action, organizing in the community, and demanding change was especially meaningful for these students because it provided an opportunity for them to develop as critical thinkers who were able to leverage their voices, connect with others, and impact change. As interviews with students revealed, students adopted identities *as organizers*; critically conscious activists committed long term and ongoing political action.

### *Limitations*

While this project helps to shed light on the young people leading local efforts to challenge the criminalization of youth in schools, an area of research that has often been overlooked, there still some limitations. First, it is important to acknowledge that The Center is only one of many organizations working with young people on issues in schools in Los Angeles and across the US. While my case study of The Center allowed for meaningful rapport with students and staff, I cannot assume that this organization and its student members, and their experiences, are representative of all other organizations. However, this ethnographic case study can provide important starting points for research on other organizations and other areas.

Secondly, my research was not longitudinal in nature. Although I highlighted the transformations students identified as a result of their time with the center, these evolutions were limited to a relatively short period of time. It is possible that the ways students are impacted by their work can continue to evolve over time or may even fade. Indeed, this sheds an important light on the ways young people are impacted by their activism. Thus, research on youth activism should also consider longitudinal approaches.

### *Future Research*

During the month of June, 2020, millions of people took to the streets with calls for police reform, defunding and in some cases the abolition of police, including school police (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel 2020; Catsillo, 2020; Hill et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to unfold, and students, teachers, communities and schools continue to question and resist the presence of police on campus, future research on the roles, experiences and perspectives of young people is imperative.

Indeed, the recent moment provides a rich opportunity for this work to continue and new questions to explore. As a growing number of young people are engaging in social action, research should continue to explore how and why young people become involved in activism and what happens when they do. How do young people make sense of the current moment, why are they marching in the streets, and what are they calling for?

Research should also explore the tactics students use for actions, how they develop those tactics, how they might be informed by historical movements, and how they generate new approaches to action. Additionally, research might also consider ways in which young people are responded to, by school officials, board members, teachers, and school administrators, when they

take action; how are the actions of young people understood and perceived by adults and those in positions of power? Finally, given the youth-centered approach of this project, future work might consider utilizing a participatory action approach, whereby young people also generate and take part in the conceptualization of research questions, collection and analysis of data, and dissemination of findings.

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