

October 31, 2005



Dear Colleague,

We are pleased to share with you the new companion pieces which are a part of the third installment of Occasional Papers released by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing — *At a Crossroads: Youth Organizing in the Midwest* by Melissa Spatz, and *Traditions and Innovations: Youth Organizing in the Southwest* by Daniel Hosang.

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These papers are part of a series examining the local and regional contexts that have inspired, shaped and challenged youth organizing practice. Each paper is the product of many minds and was developed by planning bodies representing a mix of local practitioner, intermediary and foundation perspectives. In this collaborative spirit, we hope that these papers become interactive platforms for further dialogue, reflection and healthy debate.

Both works represent a glimpse into the world of youth organizing in these regions. While they are groundbreaking, it is important to note that they are not comprehensive mappings; they cannot represent all of the work happening in the Midwest or the Southwest. There is not just one definition of youth organizing, one perspective, or one response to the myriad issues facing young people. Youth organizing is a dynamic, ever-evolving field, and these works represent an important foray into understanding what's happening in the Midwest and Southwest.

We hope that you seize the opportunity for debate and dialogue that will serve to add to and round out our understanding of youth social justice work. We strongly encourage discussions to surface additional discoveries, gaps or different perspectives that the FCYO would be excited to receive and disseminate in electronic addendums.

For those of you newer to youth organizing, we encourage you to read the other installments of our Occasional Paper Series which include foundational papers on youth organizing and regional looks at California and the South. They can be found on our website at www.fcyo.org.

We are eager to hear your thoughts and reactions and encourage you to share them with us.

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing

02

no.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

At A Crossroads:

Youth Organizing in the Midwest

ABOUT THE FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional and local foundations and youth organizing practitioners dedicated to advancing youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social justice. The mission of the FCYO is to substantially increase the philanthropic investment in and strengthen the organizational capacities of youth organizing groups across the country.

The main goals of the FCYO are to:

- Increase the level of funding directed towards youth organizing groups;
- Support youth organizing groups to develop stable and sustainable organizations; and
- Increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders and community organizations.

For more information about the FCYO, visit <http://www.fcyo.org>.

ABOUT THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Occasional Papers Series is edited and published by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, and conceived and developed in close partnership with a Committee of funders, intermediaries and youth organizing practitioners. The Committee for this paper included:

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Jake Lowen, Hope Street Youth Development
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This paper would not have been possible without the dedication, contributions and sharp insights of each Committee member. The FCYO offers its deepest thanks to them and all those who were interviewed or consulted. Thanks to the Girls' Best Friend Foundation for making stipends available for practitioners' time and commitment to this project, and to the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, Panta Rhea Foundation, and Needmor Fund for their generous support of the publication of this series.

At A Crossroads:

Youth Organizing in the Midwest

BY MELISSA SPATZ

no. 07

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SERIES PREFACE

Since 2000, the FCYO has supported youth organizing as part of our goal to develop the generations of leadership necessary to build and transform our communities for the better. The tenacious efforts of this field have helped to reframe discussions around our society's treatment of young people: Pressing public schools to provide quality opportunities to learn and develop civic-minded youth. Shifting the prison system's focus to support and develop, not just punish and demean court-involved youth. Negotiating terms of economic productivity to mutually profit businesses, communities and the environment for the long haul. Involving those most affected — youth and families — in the design and decision-making in each of these systems.

But while funding has been instrumental in supporting the successes of youth organizing, it has not kept pace in untapping its fuller potential.

In 2002, the FCYO began the Occasional Papers to respond to this gap, and promote learning and dialogue among foundations, community groups and other interested parties. Readers should revisit Papers 1 through 4 for grounding in youth organizing definitions and components, and its link to youth development.

This next installment uses those concepts as departure points for continuing our regional studies, which trace the logic of youth organizing's development in specific contexts, cultures and conditions. In 2004, we explored two places — the South and California. Whether a "region" has a coherent identity is debatable. Still, this place-based dissection brings us closer to work that by definition is grounded in and led by communities.

While each has its own emphases, Papers 7 and 8 about the Midwest and Southwest also explore the same leading questions: What context prompted and enabled youth organizing in the region? What distinct priorities and approaches of youth organizing emerged out of this context?

In *At a Crossroads: Youth Organizing in the Midwest*, Melissa Spatz challenges the notion of a homogenous Midwest, to map the contours of a growing and increasingly varied field in and beyond Chicago. In *Traditions and Innovations: Youth Organizing in the Southwest*, Daniel Hosang transports readers to the Southwest — rich in physical beauty, culture and activist history on one hand, and violence, contention and historical oppression on the other. Both authors identify the contributions and qualities of local organizing. By no means comprehensive, each paper examines this ever-evolving field from a given moment in time, and is deeply informed by youth, practitioners, intermediaries and funders.

While youth organizing approaches are fluid, its values of justice and equity remain constant. The FCYO's commitment to these values has further cemented our belief in youth organizing. Indeed, youth and their allies are holding up mirrors for us to reflect hard. They remind us that we live in distressing times, as they and their families face unrelenting assaults — in schools, homes, workplaces, jails and on streets. Let us focus in on these reflections, and listen to youth who tell us, "Youth deserve more. And we're willing to get out there to say it and prove it...We're trying to make things better too."

Patricia Soung
Program Director, Outreach and Education

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INTRODUCTION

Think about the Midwest¹, and youth organizing may not be the first image that comes to mind. Yet this is an exciting time for young people's efforts to organize for social justice and equity in the region. This is especially true in the last three years, as the region has witnessed both a spike and diversification in youth organizing—the strengthening of existing projects, development of new organizations and networks, and beginnings of collaborative work. At the same time, groups ranging from policy advocacy to youth development to adult organizing groups throughout the region are increasingly prioritizing and undertaking youth organizing projects. With this growth, youth organizing tools, techniques and analysis have evolved, advancing and challenging traditional models and understandings in youth development, community organizing, and other fields.

Despite this progress, youth organizing in the Midwest remains significantly under-resourced. With a scarcity of local youth organizing funders, and a relatively small percentage of national youth organizing dollars, Midwest organizations have done remarkably well in developing the field with few resources.

This paper examines youth organizing in the Midwest, beginning with a sketch of the backdrop that informs young people's lives and organizing aims. Because Chicago is the one home in the region to a multitude of youth organizing groups, the next section will look specifically at key factors and forces in Chicago shaping the local youth organizing landscape. The third section will briefly scan youth organizing efforts beyond Chicago. The paper concludes with a discussion of the future of youth organizing for the region, and an analysis of funding trends and recommendations.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the Midwest includes the following states: Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and Iowa. Some of these states - most notably, Kansas - are also considered part of the Great Plains, and groups interviewed acknowledged these overlapping definitions.

DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT THE MIDWEST

Many think of the Midwest as racially homogenous and politically conservative. But take a step back to look at the region and the results may be surprising.

With its wealth of minerals and ores, the Midwest had powered the Industrial Revolution as the country's leading industrial and manufacturing center by the late 19th century. By the early 1980s though, the eastern part of the region lost its economic dominance and earned the label "Rust Belt", as several major urban industries including automobiles and steel eliminated jobs and closed plants. While the region worked hard to shed its rust belt image, with some success in the 1990s, most manufacturing relocated to rural areas, forcing urban workers to compete for lower-paying positions. In recent times, the national economic downturn has only further depressed industry throughout Midwestern urban areas.

As the economy suffered over the last 20 years, families moved elsewhere in search of jobs. Immigration, however, helped to maintain and diversify the region's population. Between 1990 and 2000, the Midwest recorded a 62.1% increase in immigration, a rate higher than the national average and largely reflecting an influx of Mexican and Asian immigrants. Some states saw even sharper increases, including Minnesota (132.2%) and Wisconsin (76.9%).²

Yet diversity does not equate racial harmony or equality. Indeed, cities throughout the Midwest are among the most segregated in the nation. The 2000 census lists Detroit, Gary, Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis and Cleveland as six of the top 10 most segregated cities. While the causes of segregation are complex, social scientists attribute segregation to several root causes, including "entrenched attitudes about where people of certain races should live; economic disparities between whites and

² Council of State Governments, Midwestern Office, "Signs of the Times: Midwestern Demographic Trends and Their Implications for Public Policy" (2002)

The very first sit-in
of the Movement
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and led by African
American youth.

minorities; and a housing industry rife with institutionalized racism.”³ Young people experience segregation more acutely. In Chicago, for example, the under-18 population has a higher percentage of people of color, and is more segregated, than the general population.⁴

Finally, the current social and political conservatism in the Midwest belies a long history of progressive organizing. The Farmers’ Alliance, an organized agrarian movement in the 1880s, was active throughout the Great Plains, particularly Kansas, which also served as the hub for the populist movement at the turn of the century. Minnesota was also home to a variety of third parties and farmers’ movements, including the Peoples’ Party and several socialist parties. In cities throughout the Midwest, workers fought for their rights, including coordinated efforts to win an eight-hour workday, a fight that devolved into Chicago’s Haymarket riots of 1885.

More recently, cities throughout the Midwest were prominent stages of civil disobedience in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement. The very first sit-in of the Movement took place not in the Deep South, but at the Dockum drugstore in Wichita, Kansas, and was organized and led by African American youth. In 1963, organizers in Detroit, Michigan, lead a 250,000 person march and made the city a centerpiece of the Civil Rights Movement in the North; this was followed by a series of local protests, some youth-led. Three years later, Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Chicago, initiating a campaign against discrimination in housing, employment and education.

The Vietnam War set off another period of political activism, involving heavy leadership from young people throughout the Midwest. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, demonstrators marched in opposition to the war, and the city’s police infamously responded with violence, much of it covered by the media. Two years later, the National Guard opened fire on anti-war demonstrators at Kent State College in Ohio, killing four students.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 70s, Chicago served as a hub for radical and progressive movements. Fred Hampton opened a local office of the Black Panthers in 1968, holding rallies and popular education sessions and eventually negotiating a gang truce, before being killed at age 21 in a police raid. The Chicano rights movement took

³ Mendell, David. “Midwest Housing Divide Is Still Race.” Chicago Tribune. June 21, 2001.

⁴ Nancy McArdle, “Race, Place & Opportunity: Racial Change and Segregation in the Chicago Metropolitan Area: 1990 - 2000” Civil Rights Project at Harvard U. (2002).

“Youth activist groups are actually the voices of our communities, because a lot of the older adults are working full-time, working 2 or 3 jobs and taking care of children. Youth are the ones that really see what’s happening in our communities.”

hold here as well, and branches of La Raza Unida Party were opened in the city and elsewhere throughout the Midwest. Inspired by Latino youth in Los Angeles, students in Chicago’s Mexican Pilsen neighborhood staged a walkout from their dilapidated school in 1973, eventually winning approval and funding for a new school. Jane, the famous underground network that provided illegal abortions to over 11,000 women before *Roe v. Wade*, found its roots in the 1960s in Chicago as well.

In 1968 in Minneapolis, Native American activists founded the American Indian Movement, an activist organization committed to the civil rights of American Indians. While AIM’s most famous events include fervent activism at Wounded Knee in South Dakota and a 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island in California, other organized actions—including resistance to property seizures—took place in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the early 1970s.

This wealth of activist history, alongside demographic shifts, persistent segregation, economic decline and political contests, makes it less surprising that youth organizing in its current, different forms has taken root in the Midwest. As 29 percent of the region’s

population, young people recognize their role in joining adults to build a more socially, politically and economically just society.⁵ Nykia Carter, a youth leader at an anti-violence group in Chicago called the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team (YWAT), asserts, “Youth activist groups are actually the voices of our communities, because a lot of the older adults are working full-time, working 2 or 3 jobs and taking care of children. Youth are the ones that really see what’s happening in our communities. And I think therefore youth are bringing this reality out, with our cities, our states, our nation... We are the voice of today, tomorrow, our future.”

⁵ Paul R. Campbell, US Bureau of the Census, “Population Projections for States by Age, Sex, Race & Hispanic Origin: 1995-2005” (October 1996).

REGIONAL YOUTH ISSUES AND ORGANIZING—AT A GLANCE

Today's organizing efforts by young people throughout the Midwest are responses to persistent problems, many of which are too common nationwide. Below is a brief description of issues prioritized by the young people interviewed for this paper, and how they are experienced in the region.

Zero tolerance and incarceration: Throughout the region, all too popular “zero tolerance” school discipline policies have aggressively moved youth of color out of the school system and too often into incarceration. Insubordination is the most frequently cited reason, giving teachers and administrators wide discretion in determining what constitutes an offense. In one year alone, Chicago Public Schools reported over 3,000 expulsions, many accompanied by police arrest, for offenses as minor as snowball fights. Between 1995 and 2003, African American students made up 19% of the student population in Madison, Wisconsin, but accounted for over 50% of school suspensions. Gerald Thompson of the Youth Empowerment Program at the Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Ohio (COHHIO) contends, “The school is fighting against you staying in school. They’re supposed to be fighting for you.” Throughout the region, youth are promoting alternatives to suspension and expulsion, such as youth courts and peer mediation which deliver fairer, more appropriate and productive sentences to students.

School funding: School districts throughout the Midwest have responded to budget crises by cutting programs in low-income communities. Estimating a \$175 million deficit in 2006, Chicago Public Schools recently cut 800 teacher positions and froze school construction projects. Juan Cruz of Chicago's Albany Park Neighborhood Council, whose youth arm, Project Y, has organized around school safety, immigrant rights and youth services, sees the results. “They’re cutting after-school programs. We have fewer teachers at every public school, and our education is only getting worse.” COHHIO leader Devon Baldwin echoes: “There aren't enough teachers, so our classrooms are overcrowded... Cleveland is closing 10 schools next year, and laying off

more teachers.” Groups throughout the region are fighting for more equitable, increased school funding in low income and of color communities.

Violence: Youth consistently raise the prevalence of gang and gender-based violence in schools and communities. In a recent study, approximately 12 percent (12,000) of Chicago high school students reported being hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend, and 8.4 percent (8,400) had been physically forced to have sexual intercourse.⁶ Youth groups have worked to boost safety, including campaigns for improved street lighting and the creation of teen centers to provide safe spaces and youth programming. Violence persists in schools and on streets as well. According to Azusena Olaguez of the Southwest Youth Collaborative, as Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 initiative demolishes existing public schools and replaces them with 100 new facilities by 2010, the reshuffling of students to near and distant campuses has exacerbated tensions and violence across ethnic groups and gangs.

Teen pregnancy: Even as national teen birth rates have decreased, they remain high in many Midwestern cities. Kansas, Wichita’s rate of 92 births per 1,000 teenage girls far surpasses the national average of 47.7; the numbers are even higher in Milwaukee (114) and Cincinnati (112). Youth leader Mayadet Patitucci from Forefront, a leadership and civic action training program at Curie High School in Chicago, describes the occurrence of unprotected intercourse, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as “an epidemic of sorts”. In a region where several states receive federal abstinence-only funding well above the national average (impacting what is taught in classrooms), young people are urging their school districts to teach age-appropriate, medically accurate comprehensive sex education, including information about sexually transmitted diseases and healthy relationships.⁷

Voting: Five of the battleground states in the 2004 Presidential election—Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Ohio—were Midwestern. Recognizing the electoral impact on issues that matter to young people, youth under 18 in these states made it a priority to turn out younger voters. Sasha Bowers of COHHIO explained, “As youth, most of us can’t vote. So we have to get other people information about what’s going on so they can vote, because we get affected.” This work was successful: while 47% of voters under 24 turned out nationally, the five battleground states showed markedly higher percentages—notably, Minnesota at 69% and Wisconsin at 67%.

Jobs and the Economy: Economic decline and restructuring have stiffened competition for jobs and destabilized families. In Kansas, widespread job losses, especially in

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Surveillance Summaries*, May 21, 2004. MMWR 2004:53 (No.SS-2).

⁷ For example, several youth organizing groups are working together to win funds for comprehensive sex education through the Illinois Campaign for Responsible Sex Education. The campaign, spearheaded by the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health and Planned Parenthood, recently brought 130 youth to Springfield to meet with legislators.

the dominating aircraft manufacturing, have pushed adults into positions usually reserved for youth. When the city of Wichita canceled its youth summer jobs fair for the first time in 2003, Hope Street Youth Development launched a campaign to reinstate and protect summer employment opportunities for young people. Similarly, as industries have slumped in cities throughout Ohio, many permanent jobs have been restructured into temporary and day labor employment. The impact on families throughout the state has led COHHIO leaders to begin to address minimum wage issues.

Perceptions and Prejudice: Youth leader Jacinda Aguilera of Chicago's Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), whose youth component has worked to curb school violence, promote comprehensive sex education and increase after-school programs, described one of the most intractable issues facing youth today—social stigma: “The fact of being a youth in general, in a world where a lot of adults look down on you.” This general stigma is compounded by other attacks on their identity, as low-income, women, homeless, Muslim or immigrant, to name a few. In their analysis, the media often perpetuates negative assumptions and low expectations of them. Carneil Griffin at Mikva Challenge, a youth policy and advocacy group working to increase school funding and youth employment, believes, “Not only does the media enforce a lot of stereotypes of what young people should be doing, it suppresses young people's chance for a critical thought process...The media and other factors enforce ideas of what we're supposed to be.”

COMMON PRIORITIES

Models of youth organizing vary, developing differently within local contexts; moreover, older and more experienced groups generally are more able to articulate defined priorities and strategies than most new and emerging groups. Finally, as new groups join the field and collaboration becomes more commonplace, the tools and techniques of youth organizing increasingly diversify. However, the organizations engaged in youth organizing did share some common perspectives in defining their work.

First, young people must be at the center. As Tracy Benson, youth organizer at the Wexford Ridge Neighborhood Center in Madison, Wisconsin puts it, “The youth who are most impacted by issues must be the ones involved in coming up with a solution.” While adults provide critical support and guidance and help youth to develop the necessary skills, youth leaders drive the decisions and direct the priorities and execution of work. Emilya Whitis explains how YWAT youth “do research, hold events, and get a lot of information out to the community. The youth come up with the ideas, resources and planning.” Groups use a variety of approaches to formalize youth decision-making, including having youth serve on boards and committees, and, where funding permits, hiring youth as staff.

A related aim is to create democratic organizations that transform relationships among adults and young people, and reflect values of equity and inclusion. To Alex Poeter, Executive Director of BPNC, “youth organizing requires a deep belief that you cannot change things without viewing youth as equals in society.” Groups stressed that beyond their external work, their internal structures must reflect participatory decision-making and shared leadership. Jennifer Epps explains how Youth ROC (Reclaiming Our Cities), a Milwaukee group organizing for adequate school funding, is nonhierarchical: “It doesn’t matter if you’re a straight-A student or struggling and in need of tutoring; every student has the opportunity to participate.” COHHIO, for example, strikes a “balance of power” by having young people rotate through leadership roles to have an equal voice, without regard to their length of involvement.

Third, youth organizing prioritizes youth leadership development and empowerment. Young people develop critical thinking and analysis through political education, while building leadership skills. Jake Lowen, Youth Organizing Director at Hope Street Youth Development, explains, “Policy wins come and go. But the fact that you built the confidence of the leadership, and that they know they are capable of standing up, and have the right to stand up and have their voices heard, has a lasting impact.” Youth leader Danielle Andrews at Hope Street confirms, “I always thought I could never change anything. I used to complain and complain. Since I joined Hope Street, I can create change on my own. I don’t have to wait for an adult to help me.”

Finally, youth organizing addresses systemic problems.

“Policy wins come and go. But the fact that you built the confidence of the leadership, and that they know they are capable of standing up, and have the right to stand up and have their voices heard, has a lasting impact.”

Youth organizing connects young people’s individual development to policies, institutions and practices that affect youth more broadly. Carneil Griffin explains, “At Mikva, I’ve learned there’s a way to work through the system to get the change you want. So now not only do I see the problems, I have a way to change them systematically—not only with bandaid solutions or a new initiative that lasts for five minutes.” Young people learn to think beyond their own needs and situation, to consider those of their peers and upcoming generations of youth. Hope Street youth leader Jeanetta Green asserts, “Our hard work is really to make a better tomorrow for the youth coming up after us. Pretty soon we’ll be graduating and a lot of us will be off to college...but I have so many younger peers and I really want to improve things for them.” Alfred Jones from COHHIO agrees, “When we’re doing this now, we’re saving other people from having to go through the problems we went through.”

CHICAGO

First and foremost, Chicago must be understood as a city of neighborhoods, with an entrenched history of segregation and the “turf battles” that naturally follow. Community members often attest to feeling physically and psychologically isolated in their neighborhoods.

The city is also infamous for its well-tooled, centralized political system operating on patronage, known as the Chicago “machine.” From 1956–1976, Mayor Richard J. Daley ran Chicago with an iron fist. With firm control over the city council, virtually no decision was made without his approval. His son Richard M. Daley has served as Chicago’s current mayor since 1989, and like his father, maintains a stranglehold over municipal politics.

From 1983–1987, Chicago experienced a brief respite from the Daley Machine under Harold Washington, the city’s first and only African American mayor. Washington worked to open up the city budgeting process, encourage political participation and awareness among communities, and reform city government. He hired a large number of community activists for his administration, many of whom returned to community-based work after his death in 1987.

Chicago is also characterized by a relatively long history and wealth of community organizing groups. These groups are heavily influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky, who is often considered the “father of community organizing” and developed his approach in this city in the 1930s. Alinsky argued that low-income communities were disorganized, and could gain political influence if residents and institutions mobilized around a common purpose. Features of Alinsky’s approach include the view that self-interest is the primary motivator for members’ involvement; a strong focus on concrete policy victories; a stress on uncovering “conflict”, or exposing the injustice these communities face; and a conscious effort to build collective or “people” power to confront organized money and political power.

This “Alinsky approach” has offered an important framework, with tools, language and strategies for community-based organizations throughout Chicago and even the

nation. The city is heavily populated by dozens of grassroots organizations representing and demanding a decision-making role for low-income communities of color. These organizations have reformed many policies in areas from housing to education to criminal justice, and have developed a strong infrastructure for community participation. Many national organizing networks (including National People's Action, ACORN, Gamaliel, and the Industrial Areas Foundation) and intermediaries (such as the National Training & Information Center and Midwest Academy) are either based or have a strong presence in the city. To that extent, the Alinsky approach has provided one outlet and unique approach for youth organizing to develop in Chicago.

At the same time, critics have long pointed out that the Alinsky approach, as practiced for decades, often ignores the impact of racism, classism, ageism, sexism and homophobia both on the organizations and the issues they address. According to Mariame Kaba, an adult supporter at YWAT, the resulting Chicago model is “so incredibly focused on the technique and tooling of your work, as opposed to the end goal of why you're doing the work in the first place.”

THE (RE)EMERGENCE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

Young people's involvement in social justice work in Chicago dates back to the movements of the 1960s, and resurged citywide in the late 1980s in response to a number of issues, including public school reform. When groups successfully pushed the city to pass legislation creating local school councils (LSCs), providing for local control of budgets and principal selection, young people worked through a series of citywide coalitions to win student representation on the councils. While youth did not succeed in securing voting rights for students, they created orientation handbooks for student LSC members, organized to retain schools destined for shut-down, and sought alternatives to standardized testing for more comprehensive assessments of student performance. As AIDS became an epidemic, other peer education and activist groups promoted community awareness and established gay-straight alliances at schools. Throughout this period, young people in immigrant communities and communities of color were coalescing around their shared identities and forming small grassroots arts and leadership programs.

In the mid 1990s, a new series of “superpredator” laws stoked public panic about youth as dangerous criminals, and lowered the threshold for incarcerating young people across the nation; the results showed disproportionate increases in arrests and imprisonment of youth of color. In response, the Southwest Youth Collaborative (SWYC) began organizing youth in 1994, and formalized their efforts into the

Generation Y project two years later. SWYC formed a citywide Kids Not Criminals coalition to challenge two laws in particular: the Mob Action Law, prohibiting the assembly of two or more persons to engage in any unlawful or harmful activity (later deemed unconstitutional); and the Juvenile Transfer Law, which relaxed opportunities to try youth as adults in criminal court.

In the late 1990s, several community-based organizations without a history of working with youth reached a new level of organizational capacity and analysis, and expanded their organizing efforts to include education and school reform. This expansion compelled groups to learn ways to involve young people in a decision-making capacity. At the same time, young people energized by attending organizational and community meetings with their parents began to ask for youth-specific spaces and opportunities to contribute. In response, several organizations established stand-alone youth councils. Blocks Together, the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association all solidified youth organizing components in this period. These groups came together—later joined by the Albany Park Neighborhood Council (APNC)—to form Chicago Youth United, a coalition addressing a range of policies governing school security guard practices and behavior, and negative media representations of young people. As youth organizing grew and multiplied across the region, long-standing community organizing intermediaries like the National Training and Information Center gradually developed their own youth-appropriate training and support.

Working together, youth organizing groups throughout Chicago have:

- Passed a state law to allow undocumented immigrant students to receive instate tuition at public universities and colleges
- Improved policies for hiring and placement of school security guards
- Increased citywide funds for summer youth jobs

Several emerging organizations are now exploring new models of youth organizing in direct response to the need to challenge and adapt traditional organizing approaches. The Crib Collective, for example, emerges from a social entrepreneurship model and is injecting questions around self-sustainability and wealth-building into youth organizing discussions. The Young Women's Action Team (YWAT) focuses on gender-based violence and street-harassment, issues that traditional organizing groups perceive to be intangible—with no easily identifiable person or institution to hold accountable, or potential policy to reform—and therefore have hesitated to address.

Traditional youth development and civic engagement projects have also started to build organizing components. The Multicultural Youth Project, a multi-service

agency founded in 1995 to work with immigrant youth, initiated its organizing arm three years ago, focusing on immigrant rights in schools. Two south side community groups, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) and Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization (MAGIC), have delved into youth organizing, and recently launched a joint campaign to increase summer job opportunities for youth. In the last roughly three years, longer standing organizations like the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, a policy group, and the Mikva Challenge, a civic participation group, launched youth organizing efforts as well. These groups infuse expertise around specific issues and an ability to unite a large number of youth city-wide and even statewide.

In addition, a variety of youth arts and media groups—including Video Machete, Beyondmedia Education and Street Level Youth Media—partner with the field to support young people of color throughout the city in designing murals, performing street theater, holding poetry slams, and creating videos as part of their political organizing. These collaborations allow young people opportunities to explore and express their multiple identities while engaging in campaign work.

EVOLUTION OF CHICAGO YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth organizing in Chicago continues to grow and evolve rapidly, especially over the past three years. Dozens of groups are actively engaged in or beginning youth organizing, several established and emerging support groups and networks exist, and creative partnerships are increasingly common. Such expansion of youth organizing is helping to develop the field broadly in significant ways.

Values-Based Organizing

Older youth organizing groups are redefining their approach and developing a “values-based organizing” model to replace the solely issues-based frame they learned in the 1990s. As Jenny Arwade, Executive Director from the Albany Park Neighborhood Council, explains, “One of the changes that happened with our organization was shifting from being more issue-focused, to having more of a values-focused approach...We’re in the process of creating an organization where the core values are at the center.” Organizations aim to ensure that their response to any issue raised by the community reflects a shared, clearly identified set of values, rather than reactionary or solely results-oriented means.

These shifts have occurred for several reasons, including natural organizational development and learning over time; opportunities to learn from new and emerging groups about different organizing philosophies; and the arrival in Chicago of the California-based Applied Research Center, an intermediary that works with organizations to develop a racial justice analysis.

Focus on identity

Understanding the importance of young people's identity formation in relation to building a world free of racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and classism is becoming a defining feature of Chicago youth organizing. This focus on identity has two primary goals. First, organizers aim to develop confidence and pride among youth who too often live the consequences of racism, bigotry and intolerance. Second,

“We used to fit more within the frame of a Chicago traditional organizing approach... So we wouldn't talk about identity. Now we talk about identity and look at how different groups like for example, girls and boys, or different ethnicities, or people who are part of the GLBT community, are affected by the issues that we're addressing.”

groups are working to ensure that the organizing they engage in avoids replicating the unjust dynamics and tensions they aim to eliminate. The increasing emphasis placed on identity in youth organizing in Chicago is especially important given Saul Alinsky's impact on the city's organizing culture and its failure to examine how personal identities inform organizing methods and objectives. Alex Poeter explains the change for BPNC, “We used to fit more within the frame of a Chicago traditional organizing approach... So we wouldn't talk about identity. Now we talk about identity and look at how different groups like for example, girls and boys, or different ethnicities, or people who are part of the GLBT community, are affected by the issues that we're addressing.”

Bringing together the best that the Alinsky approach has to offer with the best of identity-based organizing has impacted groups' work in several ways. *First, groups have developed training approaches for youth and adults that examine identity.* Youth organizer Martine Caverl explains, “At Blocks Together, on the staff, whenever we create time for our internal evaluation, we talk about our own identity and the way we bring our identities to the work that we do.” In meetings among staff and youth, groups repeatedly return to discussing the role of their personal identities in relation to their analysis, practice and objectives around collective change.

Second, groups are reevaluating the tools and techniques of organizing. In particular, a developing gender analysis led YWAT to focus their membership on young women, while BPNC, Blocks

Together and the Southwest Youth Collaborative all reserved girl-specific spaces as part of their work. Understanding the risks and dynamics that young women face day-to-day influences not only the issues discussed, but the way organizing is practiced. Mariame Kaba at YWAT asks, “Why do we have to be boys to organize? Why do I have to go and knock on your door when I don’t want to do that? I don’t feel safe, it’s not what makes me feel okay, and that should be okay with you.” Another new project in Chicago, the Women & Girls’ Leadership Project, is working with groups to develop a gender-based organizing model, revisiting traditional organizing concepts such as the strict focus on actions in the public sphere, the use of anger as a motivating tool, and the use of traditional outreach methods that often fail to uncover issues of most importance to young women.

Finally, integrating an identity focus has informed issue analysis and subsequent campaign work. For example, an articulated commitment to racial justice has moved several groups that once promoted incarceration as a solution to community and youth violence to refocus their work on juvenile justice, alternatives to incarceration, and ex-offender rights. Similarly, groups have opened the door to campaigns around issues of sexuality and gender-based violence.

Collaboration

Collaboration in community organizing has been historically difficult in Chicago, a city heavily carved into specific “turfs” for community-based organizations, and an active hub for several organizing networks, each with its own outlook on the best way to organize. As Jennifer Tani, youth organizer at the Multicultural Youth Project laments, “Collaboration is difficult in organizing when organizations believe it is about building the organization rather than building movement. Issues of ownership, territory and membership cause divisions and prohibit real grassroots movement building.” Youth organizing groups are now challenging these divisions, agreeing about the need for collaboration beyond their network affiliates between organizations with different models. Jobi Petersen, director of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health and former Director of the Kaplan Foundation, notes, “So many groups that have invested in youth organizing in Chicago have challenged the adult assumption that this is our win, this is our work...If I went back to when I was a funder, I’d see this whole community organizing field backbiting and competing, this is ours, that’s yours. The youth work has just blown it all up.”

Youth organizing groups’ desire for collaboration is inspired partially by city-wide coalitions that cross neighborhood and network boundaries, and have involved several intergenerational organizing groups. These include the Balanced

Development Coalition, consisting of 16 groups fighting for affordable housing set-asides; the Developing Justice Coalition, involving 22 organizations and churches, which won passage of legislation to protect ex-offenders' rights; and the Grassroots Collaborative, uniting 12 organizations and unions in campaigns around living wage, immigrant rights and Walmart. APNC's Jenny Arwade explains, "People want to work with whoever to get our issues solved. We've seen that through different coalitions, whether youth or adult, it's allowed our organization to learn from other organizations about different kinds of organizing."

Youth organizing groups recognize the opportunity in collaboration for sharing models, practices and visions with one another. Jenny Arwade notes, "In the beginning, the interactions between different organizations were more around immediate collaboration, rather than learning from different styles and different cultures, and that's happening much more now." An example is a youth-led convening of young women from 17 organizations, held in early 2005 and facilitated by the Women & Girls' Leadership Project. Such collaborative efforts present important opportunities to connect organizations, introduce youth organizing to additional groups, and develop new approaches and models.

The increased willingness for collaboration is notable in a place where strict community organizing formulas abound. Mariame Kaba has been "struck by this deep entrenched interest in keeping certain techniques and tools alive. Your work was not legitimate unless you were employing X strategy." As groups relax strict adherence to certain methodologies, youth organizers are shifting to focus on their end goals. Alex Poeter comments, "There's a new awareness of the fact that the model-centered organizing approach has caused stagnation within the movement. More and more people are saying we have to move away from methodology, because the movement is a living organism and to be always evolving, we have to just get over ourselves."

Intergenerational collaborations especially have the potential to impact broader policy discussions and organizing approaches. Alex Poeter sees this change already materializing as youth organizers have worked with existing coalitions to "create space where youth and adults can collaborate on equal grounds and with mutual respect to impact public policy." At a recent 1,000 person rally held by the Grassroots Collaborative, aimed in part at encouraging voter registration in communities of color, BPNC youth leader Jacinda Aguilera reminded the crowd that young people, though they cannot vote, need to be heard and involved.

BEYOND CHICAGO: YOUTH ORGANIZING ELSEWHERE IN THE MIDWEST

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As in Chicago, the past three to five years have been an exciting period of growth for youth organizing throughout the region. This section offers a small sampling of projects taking place in the Midwest outside of Chicago, and the challenges they face. While much of these organizing efforts concentrate in cities, especially Detroit, Milwaukee, Wichita and Columbus, several groups are also working in rural communities, some through statewide campaigns.

Groups are emerging throughout the greater Midwest for similar reasons as their Chicago counterparts. In Ohio, two organizations—Communities United for Action in Cincinnati and the East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation in Akron—typify traditional community organizing groups that are now exploring youth organizing as an important strategy in their overall efforts. Deteriorating public schools, harsh treatment of youth and an expanding juvenile prison system have similarly spurred Youth ROC and Urban Underground in Milwaukee, the Wexford Ridge Neighborhood Center in Madison, and Youth United in Detroit to develop the leadership of young people to address these issues at a systemic level.

Native American youth organizing projects have also evolved throughout the region. Typically located in rural communities or on reservations, these groups emerge from an analysis of the impact of colonization on their culture and communities, and embrace a holistic approach that combines traditional organizing with spiritual, cultural and environmental activities. As Heather Milton-Lightening, Youth Organizing Director at the Indigenous Environmental Network, explains, “Youth organizing for us is a holistic picture. It’s not just specific campaign work or arts and hip hop. It’s a broader spectrum. We are taught to look at problem solving in a holistic sense from the time we’re little kids...we have to live what we’re saying.” Work in Native

communities around sustainable development and environmental justice reflects this holistic emphasis on individual, community and ecological well-being for the long-term.

Other cities are gradually exploring youth organizing as well. Writing about the Twin Cities, Karin Aguilar-San Juan at Macalester College notes, “The concept of youth organizing as a youth-centered, community-based approach to social justice is not yet widely recognized, clearly articulated, or firmly rooted here. However, a small, energetic, and vocal group of youth and adults is engaging in youth organizing. Their youth organizing activities combine community-organizing techniques and perspectives with a race-cognizant and anti-racist organizing agenda.”

Groups identified three factors that enabled them to explore and engage in youth organizing:

- *A high level of interest from young people.* For example, in Madison, Wisconsin, middle school students involved in an after-school program at the Wexford Ridge Neighborhood Center approached staff to expand the project both into high school and into youth organizing. Similarly, Youth United in Detroit grew out of a larger service agency, where a group of young people set organizing as a priority and submitted grant proposals to launch a project.
- *Adults committed to providing youth the space and power to organize around issues they identify, and to participate in organizational leadership, planning and decision-making.* At Youth ROC in Milwaukee, adults leading efforts to increase school funding developed a youth component after recognizing the need for student participation.
- *A variety of supports, guidance and resources, mainly through training intermediaries, networks and cross-organizational learning.* In developing new programs throughout the Midwest, many organizations have borrowed ideas from youth organizing groups on the East and West coasts (notably the Bay Area and Philadelphia), in Chicago, and from adult-led organizations in their cities or states. Midwest-based intermediaries such as the National Training & Information Center (NTIC) and the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) have trained groups in the skills and tactics of organizing. In some cases, intermediaries like NTIC have assisted groups in accessing and regrating funds as well.

DYNAMICS OF ISOLATION

Often the only organizing entities in their cities or towns, cut off from local intermediaries and networks, groups throughout the Midwest engage in youth organizing amidst real isolation. Aaron Fowler of Hope Street Youth Development explains, “You can shake a stick in Chicago, New York or the Bay Area and you’ll hit 6 organizers. You can build relationships, support and information networks there. But we have to actively seek that out when we’re in Wichita. There are no organizing networks. There’s no organizing culture. You have to have relationships across the country to support the work.” In addition, some organizers identify an “isolation of legacy”, as histories of activism are scarce, and those that exist are not widely known or taught. Without such inspiration, change in these settings seems near impossible to many youth.

In response, groups have created strong communities within their organizations, while building and maintaining relationships with networks and organizations beyond their cities through national gatherings. National People’s Action, an alliance of hundreds of community organizations, has connected youth with groups such as Hope Street and COHHIO to peers from Chicago and beyond through its national conference. Similarly, the Indigenous Environmental Network provides ongoing support and networking opportunities for Native American youth groups. Grantees of the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing also attest to the value of retreats. Fowler comments, “The Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing has been deliberate about providing conferences where groups can get together, and these have been beneficial to us. If other foundations could pull together grantees, and have conferences around best practices, that would be helpful.”

Ironically, opportunities for regional gatherings have been rarer. Groups identify only one recent, significant regional networking event—the Community Justice Network for Youth’s 2004 Stop the Rail to Jail conference, which united Milwaukee, Madison and Chicago youth around zero tolerance discipline policies and school funding. The scarcity of regional gatherings has made groups concerned about losing opportunities for national networking. As Angela Lariviere of COHHIO explains, “Youth really become in tune with other people’s issues because of national events, and that’s a secondary benefit of those events... We understand there isn’t money to fund everybody, but at least help us stay in the loop, because we benefit so much from meeting with other groups.”

Young people at Hope Street Youth Development, for instance, won agreements from the Wichita School district to implement alternatives to suspensions and change the district's zero tolerance policy. As a result, Wichita experienced a dramatic 47% reduction in expulsion rates in the 2003–2004 school year.

Organizations have turned to a range of other strategies to continue learning and end isolation, including peer exchanges with groups in other cities. Pamela Cornell Allen of Youth United explains why the organization traveled to Chicago in its first exploration of youth organizing: “There aren’t a lot of examples of organizing in Detroit. So the youth are familiar with human services agencies that run programs, and they’re familiar with advocacy, but moving to the level of organizing was something new. It took meeting other youth who were doing organizing for them to identify similarities between their communities, and say ‘They’re doing it, so I think we could do it too.’”

In addition, some groups connect youth across distant cities by working statewide, limiting the isolation they might otherwise face in small towns and rural areas. The Youth Empowerment Project of COHHIO and Youth ROC in Wisconsin are two examples of organizations working with youth statewide, primarily due to their statewide parent organizations and the need to address policies with statewide impact. Finally, in response to the “isolation of legacy” that some perceived, groups are researching and laying claim to their local legacy of youth organizing. For example, Hope Street Youth Development has created the “Dockum Leadership Awards”, rewarding young people for demonstrating leadership and tying their work to past activism.

It should be noted that some groups saw an upside to isolation. In a city less accustomed to the strategies and tactics of organizing, youth organizing often surprises public officials when it first becomes visible and public. Mayor Daley in Chicago is no stranger to the world of organizing, and has developed myriad opposition strategies, but mayors of small towns or local politicians in other cities may be more responsive to youth organizing proposals. Young people at Hope Street Youth Development, for instance, won agreements from the Wichita School district to implement alternatives to suspensions and change the district's zero tolerance policy. As a result, Wichita experienced a dramatic 47% reduction in expulsion rates in the 2003–2004 school year. Hope Street staff, which has been organizing youth since 1998, attribute this success in part to the relative lack of organizing in their city.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

The **current conservative political climate** in many Midwestern states, especially in more remote and less populated areas, further challenges grassroots organizing efforts, from defining tactics to limiting access to positive media attention. As Angela Lariviere explains, while groups in places like Chicago may use more public actions such as protests to raise awareness about issues and pressure local policymakers, Ohio's conservatism leads COHHIO to conclude that these public tactics backfire in their local communities. Instead, they heavily rely on relationship-building and negotiations with elected officials.

Like Chicago, **racial segregation** also heavily shapes youth organizing groups' work. In Milwaukee, racial segregation impacts organizing work from micro to macro levels, including determining where meetings should be held, identifying appropriate recruitment methods, and confronting the need to overcome racism. Youth ROC addresses the issue from the start. Students who join the organization sign a contract that states, "We are committed to a social justice ideology that seeks to end oppression in all forms," thereby agreeing "to challenge their pre-existing prejudices and work to unite and organize all students regardless of their race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, religion, or disability status." At COHHIO in Columbus, where a large Somali immigrant population live, staff members dedicate time with youth to discuss the city's rising tension between African Americans and new immigrants and refugees.

In order to analyze the dynamics and impact of racism on individuals, communities, public policies and public systems, many youth organizing efforts start from a racial justice framework. Karin Aguilar-San Juan writes, "As the Twin Cities metropolitan area becomes more racially diverse, the cultural logic of whiteness and white privilege—not to mention racial discourse in general—is more apt to be exposed and challenged." As in Chicago, groups address dimensions of identity, including race, as a key part of their work, mostly through informal conversations, formal campaign work, and the development of formalized racial justice training and curriculum.

FUTURE PRIORITIES OF YOUTH ORGANIZING IN THE MIDWEST

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Given that individual development of young people is central to youth organizing, many groups aim to create a holistic approach that cares for young people's complex developmental needs. These aims are often constrained by limited staff and funding. Jenny Arwade of APNC notes, "We get a lot of youth into our group dealing with severe circumstances in their lives, and we simply don't have the capacity to deal with that. Our youth organizer does as much one-on-one mentoring as he can and that still isn't enough."

Some organizers who have tried to build relationships with social service agencies have often been frustrated by the quality of their services, which may be culturally inappropriate, fail to treat young people with respect, and ultimately prove disempowering and counter to leadership development. Organizers are interested, but restricted by shoestring budgets, in developing services within their organizations. Mariame Kaba comments, "We have this great action piece, but what about the needs that exist if you're homeless, you're kicked out of your house, you don't have a place to go?...With more funding, you could conceivably hire somebody who was knowledgeable and equipped and who could find these spaces that exist that we could plug youth into."

DEVELOPMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The future growth of youth organizing in the Midwest, especially in urban settings, will necessarily involve the development of support networks that promote ongoing collaboration, battle isolation and enable groups to learn from one another. Chicago, with its density of organizing groups, is moving quickly to develop such opportunities, including the Chicago Summer Freedom School (CSFS), slated to open in summer 2007. CSFS would provide a diverse group of young people from across the city with opportunities to learn activism skills and movement history, as well as a space in

which to develop projects and campaigns. An exploratory study funded by the Girls' Best Friend Foundation concluded that there exists "the need and widespread support for such a project and the pledged commitment of youth and adults to working together to make it happen."

Beyond Chicago in particular, organizers underscore the need for regional networking to support local work, especially as the coming years continue to see the growing emergence of youth organizing activity. Hope Street's Aaron Fowler identified the "need to go beyond our network affiliations and recognize what's bigger than our families, to make sure youth organizing is strong and viable and has the support it needs to move forward. For Hope Street, it has to be more than just national, it has to include regional support."

Groups will need the support of intermediaries in organizing convenings, and in developing centralized systems that enable information sharing. Existing intermediaries have played and will continue to play an important role; at the same time, the scarcity of intermediaries ready or relevant to assisting youth organizing is a concern for groups throughout the region.

BUILDING A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Organizations throughout the region think of their work in the context of a national youth organizing movement, connected to a broader vision for change and social justice. Heather Milton-Lightening of the Indigenous Environmental Network comments, "We need to build a national youth organizing movement and bring people together across differences. We in the U.S. have a responsibility to do something in our own backyard. We've done that on a small scale in the Native American community, but it's not happening in the U.S. on a bigger level."

Some organizations hope to define a clear Midwestern approach to youth organizing, viewing the Midwest as providing the nuts-and-bolts, results-oriented approach that can work hand in hand with identity politics. Jake Lowen of Hope Street Youth Development views this as the future of national youth organizing: "Someday as a movement, we'll naturally bring those two models together to be really effective. The coasts are in a place to give us that analysis, we're in a place to give them those tactics."

FUNDING LANDSCAPE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lack of funding persists as a primary challenge to the work of youth organizing. Most youth organizing groups on the East and West coasts work with budgets over \$100,000, with many falling in the \$150,000 to \$350,000 range or higher. Midwest budgets skew much lower. The majority of groups in the region operate with budgets between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and many—particularly new and emerging groups—have significantly lower budgets. As a result, organizations often cope with little or no staff. APNC’s Jenny Arwade describes the consequence: “Our youth organizing position is half funded, and our decision last year was that we wanted to keep our youth organizing going full force. We didn’t want to let it die because young people actually matter and it’s their project. So we ended up with our staff working harder... which isn’t healthy for an organizational culture.”

In Chicago, organizations worry that as funding concentrates on very few, large organizations, and as existing resources for youth organizing overall tighten, growth opportunities for new and emerging groups become more limited. Elsewhere in the Midwest, organizations struggle to access funding at all, perceiving that most “Midwest” funding goes to Chicago. Aaron Fowler of Hope Street suggests, “Foundations need to be deliberate about building clusters in more than just the coastal or Chicago areas. Foundations often invest in regions that have reached a saturation point, because they want to build coalitions and alliances. But how can we in the Midwest reach the saturation point if the region doesn’t receive initial funding?”

New organizations, in particular those driven by young people, can find access to initial funding difficult, especially given the often obtuse language and culture of philanthropy. Mariame Kaba, herself a program officer at the Steans Family Foundation, believes foundations should “allow people to feel they can come to you with information about their projects, outside of the grant cycle. A lot of groups are intimidated and don’t know they can do this.”

An analysis of foundation support by the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing revealed simultaneous concern and hope for Midwest organizations.

Between 2004-05, an estimated 10% of national youth organizing funding went to the 11 states comprising the Midwest. Almost all of this funding went to groups in Chicago, with Midwest groups beyond Chicago receiving less than 1.5% of national youth organizing funding.

Only one foundation in the Midwest—Girls’ Best Friend Foundation—makes grants through an explicit youth organizing lens; this foundation will be closing its doors in 2008, leaving a future gap in foundation leadership and money for Chicago groups. At the same time, youth organizing has earned support from diverse sources, including foundations interested in community organizing, policy change, youth development and community development.

National foundations have supplied significant streams of funding for several Midwestern organizations, but to date, provide a relatively small percentage of their total grantmaking to the region. Between 2004-05, an estimated 10% of national youth organizing funding went to the 11 states comprising the Midwest. Almost all of this funding went to groups in Chicago, with Midwest groups beyond Chicago receiving less than 1.5% of national youth organizing funding. The added value of national funding in a less visible region can be significant, as such funding calls attention to local efforts and help leverage additional funding and resources locally and nationally.

Several foundations in Chicago have taken steps to unite in learning from one another and from local groups, meeting on a regular basis and sponsoring sessions at the local Donors Forum, in which program officers hear directly from young leaders and organizers about their work and discuss the growing field. After a recent Donors Forum session that surfaced youth development training as a need for youth organizers, the Girls Best Friend and Kaplan Foundations joined resources in early 2005 to bring the “Advancing Youth Development” training to Chicago and to sponsor ten youth organizers to attend.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

- **Look beyond the coasts, and beyond Chicago:** Take time to learn about programs throughout the Midwest, and increase funding available to programs in cities throughout the Midwest.
- **Continue to support Chicago:** With its density and diversity of groups and young people, Chicago remains the hub of youth organizing in the region, and offers tremendous learning and models for groups both regionally and nationally, especially as they broaden their reach through collaboration and fine-tune approaches

that cater to different populations.

- **Provide networking opportunities for groups:** When possible, provide opportunities for groups to come together—both grantees and non-grantees. This is particularly important to groups in the Midwest facing isolation.
- **Allow groups to set evaluation measurements that are useful and empowering for them.** Foundations should recognize that short and long-term measures of impact must account for realistic timeframes around building infrastructure, developing youth, and achieving systemic change. Moreover, foundation-sponsored capacity-building opportunities should build on valuable, one-stop evaluation trainings and consider participatory evaluation and research methods that develop young people’s critical thinking and analytic skills and allow groups to develop appropriate, helpful assessment tools and benchmarks.
- **Support the planning and development of new approaches:** While action-oriented work is important to fund, groups throughout the Midwest are now dedicating careful thought and time to refining their vision, principles, and practices. This intensive organizational reflection and planning is often seen as a lack of “activity,” and can result in loss of funding necessary to support the groundwork for later stage actions.
- **Make some funds available for smaller, less established organizations.** Emerging organizations are struggling with getting youth organizing projects off the ground. Even a small grant can go a long way for these groups, as Jennifer Epps points out: “A \$2,000 grant would fund one of our major projects for the entire year. It could fund our statewide youth summit, which could be the largest youth organizing event Wisconsin has ever seen.”
- **Make the funding process less intimidating for groups.** Where time permits, provide feedback to newer groups, and encourage groups to dialogue with you outside of funding cycles.
- **Simplify the process.** Groups with lesser capacity, particularly those run by young people, would benefit from a streamlined grant application process, including a standardized application form.
- **Acknowledge and challenge assumptions about young people’s capacity.** Some people may view youth organizing as a “practice run” for community organizing that is somehow less serious than the “real” work of adults. Others regard youth as a developmental training stage in preparation for adulthood, rather than a time for exercising “real” leadership. Recognize and challenge such assumptions that may yield fewer or smaller grants for youth organizing efforts.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has attempted to capture one moment in time in the rapidly evolving field of youth organizing in the Midwest. In the coming years, additional research should revisit the region to see how these developments unfold. A more thorough mapping of the field would benefit youth organizers and funders alike. Questions to be explored should include:

- How has the field developed, in terms of identity, collaboration and networking?
What factors are necessary to allow such development?
- Where have additional projects and infrastructures surfaced and in what context?
- How has the shift to values-based organizing affected the issues, tools and approaches that organizations use?
- To what extent can a Midwest youth organizing model be identified, and what are its characteristics?
- What has been the nature of rural organizing in the Midwest and how does it differ from the urban centers?

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Video Machete

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Organizations outside Chicago**Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio/ Youth Empowerment Program**

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www.urbanunderground.org

Wexford Ridge Neighborhood Center

Tracy Benson, Youth Organizer
7100 Flower Lane
Madison, WI 53717
(608) 833-4979

Youth ROC (Reclaiming Our Communities)

Jennifer Epps, Youth Organizer
Institute for Wisconsin's Future
1717 S. 12th Street, Suite 203
Milwaukee, WI 53204-3300
(414) 384-9094
www.wisconsinsfuture.org

Youth United c/o ACMH

Pamela Cornell-Allen, Youth Projects Coordinator
6900 McGraw
Detroit, MI 48210
(313) 895-2860
www.southwestyouth.com

Other Resources**Girls' Best Friend Foundation**

Alice Nottingham, Executive Director
900 North Franklin, Suite 210
Chicago, IL 60610
(312) 266-2842
www.girlsbestfriend.org

Karin San-Juan Aguilar, Professor of American Studies,
Macalester College
1600 Grand Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55105
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