



Promoting Youth Spaces through Community Mapping

by Kathrin C. Walker and Rebecca N. Saito

Research demonstrates that involvement in high-quality youth programs benefits young people personally, socially, and academically (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Yet many families—particularly low-income and minority families—are unsatisfied with the quality, affordability, and availability of options in their communities (Duffett & Johnson, 2004; Lochner, Allen, & Blyth, 2009). Participation

rates are especially low for youth who come from families and communities with lower incomes (Lochner et al., 2009; Pittman, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Yohalem, 2003; Saito, Benson, Blyth, & Sharma, 1995). In addition, growing evidence documents that rates of participation in youth development programs drop around age 12 or 13 and remain low (Farrell, 2008; Saito, 2009; Simpkins, Little, & Weiss, 2004). In many communities, opportunity gaps limit how many youth can benefit (Lochner et al., 2009; Saito, 2004). The limited number of available opportunities is one barrier to participation. Lack of awareness of pro-

grams that do exist is another persistent barrier (Saito, et al., 1995).

The Youth Action Crew (YAC) initiative in Minneapolis was designed to address these troubling gaps by identifying available youth development opportunities,

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creating maps to raise awareness of these opportunities, and defining local gaps in youth services. This community-based youth engagement project provided youth and adults with resources to identify, promote, and develop youth-friendly programs and places. This case study shows the potential of the YAC project as a model for such youth-led community mapping initiatives.

Methods

This article is based on a retrospective case study evaluation of the YAC initiative conducted in 2010 (Walker, 2011). It draws on an earlier formative evaluation conducted in 2006, which included four focus groups with YAC youth participants and crew leaders (Harris, Valrose, Martin, & Ishizaki, 2007). The purpose of the evaluation was to describe the YAC process, document its development and implementation, and summarize the accomplishments and impact of the YAC projects. Further, the evaluation presented lessons learned and recommendations to inform and guide future YAC initiatives and related efforts (Walker, 2011). The four key question areas of the evaluation were:

- **Background.** What are the YAC initiative's history, purpose, and framework?
- **Contributions.** What have the YAC projects contributed or accomplished? What was the initiative's impact?
- **Challenges.** What challenges have surfaced for YAC projects? What are the main barriers or limitations?
- **Implications.** What are the implications and future directions for work in this area? What is the potential of the YAC approach?

To address these evaluation questions, the evaluation included two methodological strands:

- **Document review.** A review of documents—reports, evaluations, presentations, program materials, training curricula, products, and others—provided a descriptive account of the history of YAC, the structure of the intervention, the various projects, and the resulting outcomes and impacts.
- **Stakeholder interviews.** Key stakeholders involved in the development, training, and delivery of YAC, as well as a selection of funders and crew leaders, were interviewed to capture issues, contributions, and challenges.

About the Youth Action Crew Initiative

YAC is a youth-led research, mapping, marketing, and community development initiative. Teams or “crews” of young people and the adults who support them canvass their neighborhood and interview youth and adult community members, create maps of youth-friendly places, and distribute the maps to parents and youth in order to promote youth participation in out-of-school time activities. Some YACs work further to promote the development of opportunities and resources to better serve the community's youth and families.

History

Asset-based community development has a long history. In Minneapolis, a number of events and activities served as key precursors to the YAC initiative. For example, Search Institute's study of youth development opportunities for youth ages 7–14 in Minneapolis found that roughly half of young people did not participate in youth development programs, largely because they did

not know what was available or did not have access to transportation (Saito et al., 1995).

The YAC initiative began as a pilot project to address the fact that youth often do not know what is available in their community. Rebecca Saito and Delroy Calhoun, as part of their work with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, created and piloted YAC in their own Minneapolis neighborhood in the summer of 2005. With new funding, three more Minneapolis neighborhoods embarked on YAC projects in 2006; seven additional neighborhoods were targeted in 2007.

One of the three projects begun in 2006, the Camden Youth Engagement Project, took the YAC model beyond research, mapping, and community awareness to include youth advocacy for additional community resources. This expanded version of the YAC came to be known as Community Youth Action Crew. Based on Camden's success, YAC projects expanded to include inner suburbs. The project has since expanded to include the first countywide YAC.

Purposes

The goals of YAC projects are to:

- Increase awareness of youth-oriented services and opportunities

Roughly half of young people did not participate in youth development programs, largely because they did not know what was available or did not have access to transportation.

- Create and disseminate marketing information about youth-friendly spaces
- Mobilize communities to promote youth-friendly programs and places

The aim, in other words, is to find out what is happening locally that is good for young people and to help more youth get involved in those activities, promoting the development of more options when possible.

Framework

The YAC model engages youth in research, community mapping, social marketing, and community development. It both informed and was informed by Saito and Sullivan's Rings of Engagement conceptual model (Sullivan, 2011), shown in Figure 1. The model differentiates four uses of the term *youth engagement*: participation, passion, voice, and collective leadership. For some, the focus of youth engagement is ensuring that young people *participate* in high-quality programs. Others think about youth engagement in terms of helping young people find things they are *passionate* about. Another notion of youth engagement emphasizes the value of *voice* and input—of youth having a say in matters that affect them. Finally, a hallmark of *collective leadership* can be seen when youth and adults share decision-making power and authority. The YAC model attends to all four understandings of the concept of youth engagement.

YAC is a process rather than a program. The YAC

curriculum (Saito, McBride, Griffin-Wiesner, & Gilgen, 2009) is flexible so as to be adapted to each community that uses it. However, a set of guiding principles underpin the approach. The YAC model is a youth-adult partnership that consists of:

- A crew of young people, ages 13–17
- An adult crew leader or team of leaders who mentor and supervise the crew
- A planning team that offers support, oversight, and guidance to the project as a whole

The crew members should be very familiar with the community to be mapped: they live, work, or go to school in the neighborhood. The model encourages providing stipends and transportation, as well as food, for all YAC meetings and trainings. Crew leaders should be adults in the community who have a history of effectively engaging young people and sharing power and authority with them. The planning team advises the crew leader and helps represent the project in the community.

The curriculum takes crews through a process that unfolds in a 10-week or 10-month period. The 10-week model consists of Phases 1–3, described below. The expanded 10-month model, Community Youth Action Crew (CYAC), focuses on Phase 4.

Phase 1: Youth as Researchers

Grounded in participatory and action research, YAC involves participants in inquiry with the aim of producing

Figure 1. Rings of Engagement



useful knowledge and action for social change. In Phase 1, young people gather and analyze data on the existence of youth-friendly opportunities and on public awareness of these opportunities. Youth interview young people, employers, youth program providers, and other adults to learn about community awareness of programs, youth participation, youth interests, and perceived barriers to participation. Crews also search out existing databases and other sources of information about programs and resources for youth.

Phase 2: Map Making

Community asset mapping is a data collection and communication process that has been promoted as a means of involving youth in participatory action research (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005). This strategy involves describing the current situation or environment, identifying gaps, and envisioning a better future.

In Phase 2, youth design and market a community map of youth-friendly spaces. Figure 2 shows the YAC map of the Whittier neighborhood of south Minneapolis. This first crew identified 21 youth-serving programs in their small neighborhood, 10 blocks square. However, almost none of the neighborhood youth the crew interviewed knew about these programs. Addressing this lack of knowledge is the next step in Phase 2. Youth give youth-friendly places a sign that says, “Youth Are Here” (Figure 3) as part of a marketing campaign designed to increase awareness of youth-friendly spaces among youth and families and, in turn, to encourage participation.

Phase 3: Marketing

The marketing phase involves getting the maps into the hands of young people and parents; calling attention to the data and the Youth Are Here signs and explaining what they mean; and speaking at community meetings,



Figure 2. Whittier Poster

as the Whittier YAC did in 2005 when crew members spoke to a packed house of over 100 neighbors who had gathered to hear a city council candidate.

Phase 4: Community Development

In Phase 4, youth bring attention to unmet needs for programming for neighborhood youth and the barriers that keep youth from participating in existing programs. They then promote the development of appropriate resources to better serve youth and families. Youth mobilize adults



to transform neighborhood services and allocate resources to better meet the needs of young people. Phase 4 is the hallmark of the CYAC model.

YAC at Work

The work of five crews illustrates the development and potential of the YAC model.

Camden Youth Engagement Project

In 2006, a newly-formed collaborative—the Youth Engagement Project (YEP)—agreed to apply the first two phases of the YAC model in the Camden community of North Minneapolis. The YEP crew identified community assets and produced and marketed maps showing youth-friendly places in the neighborhood. This was the first crew to design “pocket maps” that fit in a pocket or purse. Ironically, the Camden neighborhood had thousands of young people and no afterschool or evening programs for teens. This fact spurred YEP to expand on the YAC model to include Phase 4, the community development piece, to work on filling gaps in youth services. YEP transitioned from a project to a program that continues to promote and produce activities for young people.

Brooklyn Park Community Youth Action Crew

In 2008, 20 Brooklyn Park youth participated in a CYAC project. Of the 1,000 youth interviewed, 75 percent did not participate in any kind of youth program. The most frequently cited reason was “don’t know what’s available.” Crew members shared these findings with community leaders at a series of summits which led to the develop-



Figure 3

ment of the *Champions for Youth Call to Action*, an action plan targeting six strategic goals to increase [involvement and a stronger youth voice in the community. The Brooklyn Youth Council, comprising youth from Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, was established to serve as an advisory, planning, and communicating body in partnership with the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth and each city’s adult coalition. Opportunities for youth in the Brooklyn have increased. A new youth center opened in 2009, staffed in part by former crew members. Youth also updated the online map and designed marketing tools, such as rave cards, for the new center.

Richfield and Bloomington Youth Action Crews

Bloomington Public Health sponsored the Richfield Youth Action Crew.

Of the 290 youth surveyed, nearly a third had never participated in youth programs and nearly half of those did not know what was available. The crew’s map raised awareness of existing opportunities. In addition, the Richfield YAC, having identified a need to address how youth were perceived in the community, created a video called *See Us, Hear Us, Engage Us*, which they shared with community groups including the city council and school board.

The Richfield model was then replicated and adapted in the neighboring city of Bloomington. Richfield YAC youth trained Bloomington YAC youth in interviewing and presentation skills. The Bloomington YAC had more time and a broader focus, adding a component on making healthy choices and survey questions about whether youth had caring adults in their lives. The crew surveyed 570 youth, 52 businesses, and 22 organizations. At the time of the 2010 evaluation, members of the Richfield YAC were working on PSAs and other outreach and social marketing efforts.

Carver County

More than 25 middle and high school students from across Carver County gathered for the first county-wide

CYAC, sponsored by the Carver County Health Partnership. In the course of four months, Carver County's five teams conducted interviews with over 1,600 youth and about 100 interviews with community members throughout the county. These data informed the creation of a county-wide map. The Carver County CYAC is incorporating both suburban and rural youth experiences; the two vary widely in terms of resources, programs, activities, and access to [transportation]. The University of Minnesota Extension's Youth Work Institute is integrating the Carver County Health Partnership's findings and recommendations to help create a replicable model for other counties.

YAC's Impact

As the YAC initiative has evolved, it has had several significant successes and contributed to others. Just as YAC did not develop in isolation from preceding efforts, so YAC and its offshoots have had a ripple effect on other efforts. The main areas in which YAC has had an impact are:

- Community awareness
- Community development
- Youth development
- Adult development
- Training development

Community Awareness

Across all years and locations, YAC projects consistently identified the fact that youth did not know about available opportunities as the largest barrier to participation. YAC projects used maps of programs and youth-friendly places in their marketing efforts to raise awareness of opportunities for young people, particularly teens. In neighborhoods that had a lot of opportunities, YAC projects raised awareness of existing youth programs. In opportunity-depleted communities, YAC projects raised awareness of the need.

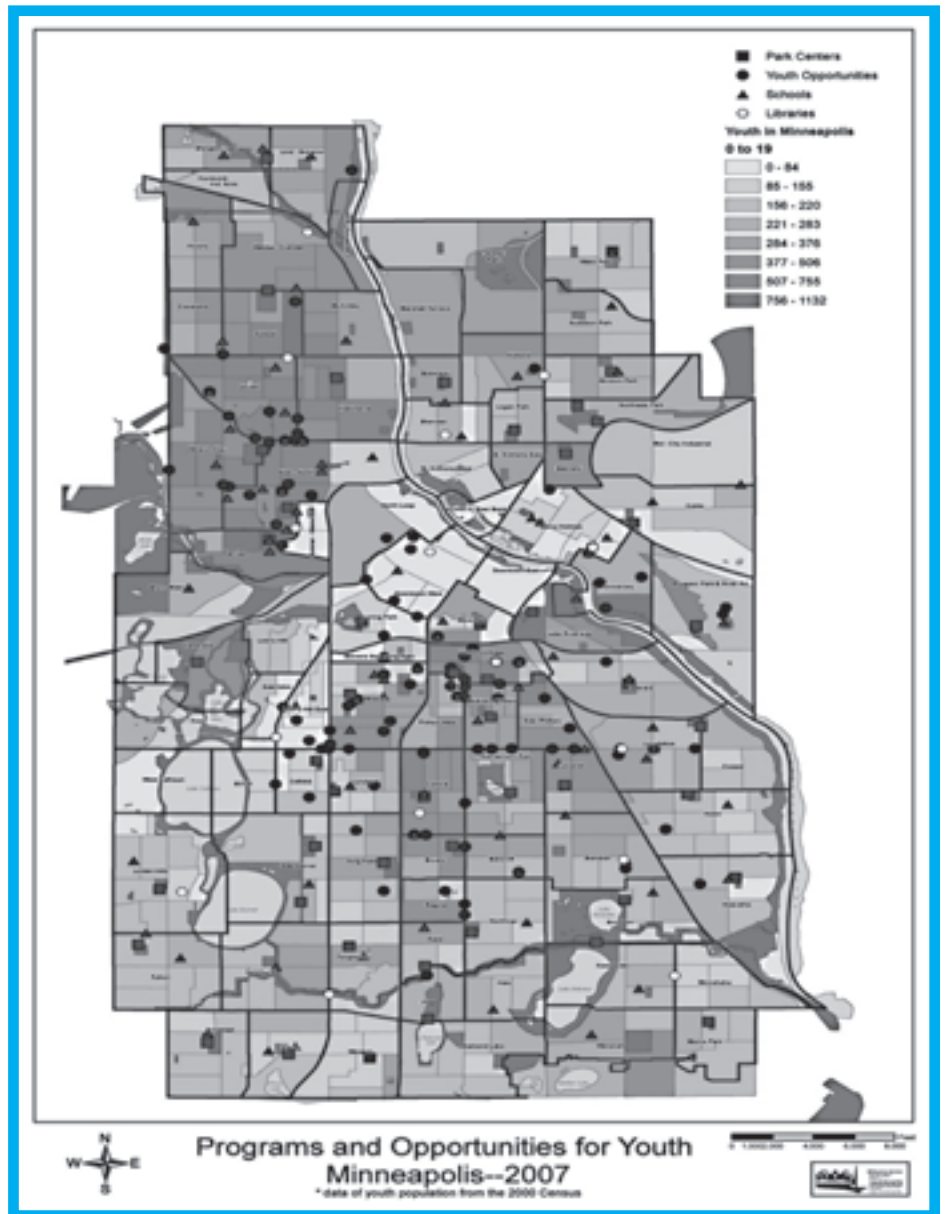


Figure 4. Citywide Map

Maps

YAC neighborhood maps have proven to be a useful source of information for youth, parents, and policymakers. One community leader described in an interview how the maps “generate buzz” in the community, raise awareness of the importance of youth-friendly spaces, and put youth “on the radar.” In 2007, YAC crews identified over 350 youth programs in Minneapolis. These data were used to create a citywide map of Programs and Opportunities for Youth (Figure 4) that not only identified where programs were located but also showed which Minneapolis neighborhoods had the highest percentages of children and youth, as indicated by darker colors. Some parts of the city with the largest proportions of children and youth had few if any youth programs. This map powerfully illustrated the



gaps between where youth lived and where youth development opportunities existed.

Marketing

The Youth Are Here sign is a recognizable marketing tool. An evaluation of one project began to assess the impact of the marketing strategy. Intercept interviews conducted in public settings with area residents found that over half (57 percent, n = 23) were aware of the neighborhood map of youth assets (Hennepin County's Research, Planning and Development Department, 2008).

Community Development

In response to the availability and awareness gaps, stakeholders have launched a variety of efforts to better meet the needs, address the barriers, and promote more youth-friendly spaces.

Transportation

Lack of safe and reliable transportation is a major barrier preventing youth from participating in youth programs. This was especially true in Camden, where thousands of teens had no access to programs and activities in the evenings and on weekends. To address this barrier, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board created two Youth Are Here bus routes serving North and South Minneapolis. The buses, which carried a youth worker on-board, provided free transportation to parks, libraries, and other youth programs. According to a summary of

the inaugural year, during a 10-week period in 2007, 5,199 North Minneapolis youth and 1,409 South Minneapolis youth rode the buses. The North Minneapolis Youth Are Here bus route continues to this day, a concrete and sustained outcome of the YAC project. Similarly, the Brooklyn Youth Council raised funds to purchase a van to help address the transportation barrier.

Program Development

With ongoing adult support, youth commitment, and additional funding, the Camden crew extended the original YAC model by continuing to employ a youth crew to plan and organize activities for youth in their community. A new fiscal agent and

a new collaborative project of several neighborhood associations was established to develop a strategic plan, give additional support, and provide funding to sustain efforts. This evolution from project to program is a testament to Camden's sustained commitment to youth engagement.

Investments in Youth

After the Brooklyn Park crew identified a lack of opportunities, a local youth development organization developed an action plan targeting six strategic goals to increase youth involvement and build a stronger youth voice in the community. The crew's work and the action plan contributed to the creation of new youth-friendly spaces in the Brooklins. Stakeholders reported in interviews that Brooklyn Park tripled the funds invested in young people. A new funding stream for engaging older youth has funded several YACs.

Youth Development

While all stakeholders prioritized community development as the primary purpose of YAC, they also recognized the powerful im-



pact participation has on young people themselves. YAC participants valued the opportunity to get involved and better the community (Harris et al., 2007). When youth are involved as change agents, they gain important skills and competencies.

Youth Employment

The YAC initiative is a youth employment opportunity; youth are paid a stipend for fulfilling their commitment to the project, which includes participating in meetings, trainings, and activities. As a youth employment model, YAC helps young people develop 21st century leadership skills with real-world applications, including initiative, responsibility, teamwork, and public speaking. Numerous stakeholders underscored the significance of the fact that the project was an employment opportunity that recognized the contributions of young people (Walker, 2011).

Youth Engagement

The YAC initiative is based on a model of youth engagement characterized by participation, passion, voice, and collective leadership (Sullivan, 2011). Participation in YAC touched on all these dimensions. It provided a vehicle for young people to participate in a semi-formal youth program, to explore new skills and passions, and to use their voices to make a meaningful difference in influencing their communities. In many cases the crews served as advisors to inform decisions and policies.

Adult Development

Another outcome of YAC was its impact on adults and on how they perceived young people. Data collected by and from youth proved to be powerful tools when youth sought to inform community leaders and help policymakers make strategic decisions. As one stakeholder put it in an interview, “It’s harder for adults to say ‘no’ when young people present quality data.” Minneapolis crews presented their findings to city leaders such as the mayor, police chief, and superintendent at two citywide town hall forums. Similarly, stakeholders described how powerful it was when the Brooklyn Park crew shared its findings with community leaders at a series of summits. One stakeholder said in an interview that the YAC initiative helped to change the culture of the city of Minneapolis and “how we do business with and for young people.”

Training Development

Based on lessons learned from the Minneapolis YACs as well as the subsequent CYACs that took the model even

further, a Youth Action Crew Toolkit and training were developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development’s Youth Work Institute. Future plans include providing training to other groups interested in conducting YAC projects.

Lessons Learned

In addition to these notable contributions, the YAC model also faced challenges. The lessons learned from these challenges can help to inform future work in this area.

Selecting and Supporting Crew Leaders

YAC is a time-intensive process that requires a commitment of dedicated staff time. Getting the right adults in place to effectively serve as crew leaders posed a challenge. In some cases, the project’s responsibilities were added to already full plates, so that staff were less committed than crews needed them to be. In other cases, staff members who lacked a strong youth development orientation were not a good fit.

It is essential to hire the right people. As a stakeholder noted in an interview, “A great crew leader is the glue.” Characteristics of a great crew leader include those of a strong youth worker: strong relationship skills, critical thinking abilities, and a solid community and youth development orientation. Further, staff need to be paid for time dedicated to the role of crew leader. Finally, to incorporate reflection and early identification of issues, we recommend that sites use monthly process reports, as the Minneapolis CYACs did. In addition to enhancing project quality, such reports generate information staff can use to update supervisors and showcase their efforts.

Selecting and Employing Crew Members

Youth crew members should be interviewed and selected as for any other job. Having young people take the initiative to seek out and apply for this opportunity appears to increase their accountability. Further, hiring youth who are from the community is key to increasing and sustaining their investment. Finally, crews should include a mix of involved youth who know what’s available in the community and uninvolved youth who know how to reach other disengaged youth.

Collecting and Using Data

Young people provide important “key informant” perspectives on their communities and the programs that serve them. Involving youth thus contributes to the collection of comprehensive and useful data. Further, young

people are experts when it comes to knowing where young people who aren't engaged in youth programs hang out; they thus can collect data from such uninvolved youth and later give them maps. Some YACs found that crew members can see results quickly and interact with the data more easily if they use such online data tools as SurveyMonkey.

While the maps provide a useful snapshot of community-level information, the data have limitations. Some communities put their maps online and update them, while other communities' maps quickly grow out of date. Further, though some core questions were asked across all communities, aggregating the data across communities is problematic since each crew used different processes and criteria for including youth-friendly opportunities on their maps. The maps and data serve as a valuable local resource to raise awareness and educate people, but the data cannot be used over time or across communities. Exploration is underway to determine the feasibility of building a Google Maps application that would enable young people to use their cell phones to look up information on youth programs.

Building the Planning Team and Engaging Community Partners

Adult readiness is often the biggest obstacle to success for YACs. Adults need to be ready to be receptive to and to act upon the data. One stakeholder said that adults in the community showed "polite interest," but no community champions stepped up to take action on the identified need for a "hang-out spot" for teens.

Several stakeholders stressed the importance of having the right community partners on board. In the most successful instances, the planning team that initially established funding for the community mapping project continued to work together and sought additional funding to continue to plan and facilitate activities for youth.

YACs Past and Future

Without the YAC initiative, stakeholders repeatedly stressed, the landscape for Minneapolis youth would be different. YAC projects and related efforts raised community awareness of youth opportunities and contributed to the development of greater access to and support for such programs. The youth involved gained important

leadership skills as they worked toward making a meaningful difference in their communities. Adult community leaders were affected by and moved to act on the findings of many YAC projects. Lessons from the various iterations of the project led to the development of a Youth Action Crew Toolkit, which can support the dissemination of this community and youth engagement service-learning project.

Future research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the contextual, demographic, and community variables that affect the likelihood that older youth from lower-income communities will participate in youth development programs and opportunities.

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