

From Youth Organizers to Social Justice Activists?:  
The Experiences of Youth Organizers Transitioning into  
Adulthood

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## About this Report

This report presents the findings of a collaborative research project between a research team at UMASS Boston and three youth justice groups in Boston: the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), The City School, and the Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project (REEP) – a program of Alternatives for Community and Environment. Professor Mark R. Warren led the UMASS team, which consisted of five doctoral students: Hozami Helwani, Sandeep Jani, Luke Kupscznk, Lindsay Morgia, and Kimberly Frazier-Booth. Lindsay Morgia served as project coordinator. The research team is housed in a university course called The Practicum in Community Based Research. The practicum is designed to offer apprenticeship training in community-based, collaborative research to PhD students.

Our partners included Najma Nazy’at from BYOP, Seth Kirshenbaum from The City School, and Dave Jenkins from REEP.

The project was conceived and designed by this collaboration. However, the UMASS team conducted the research and writing of the report. We continue to discuss our findings and analysis with our partners. As such, this report should be considered a work-in-progress. We hope it will stimulate discussion concerning the leadership pipeline across the field of youth organizing. The UMASS team (and not our partners) is solely responsible for its contents.

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# **From Youth Organizers to Social Justice Activists?:**

## **The Experiences of Youth Organizers Transitioning into Adulthood**

Boston is home to a rich array of youth organizing groups, including the three partner organizations in this study: the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), the Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project (REEP), and The City School. While each of these groups has some special focus, all are committed to supporting young people to develop as leaders in their communities committed to social justice. They teach critical thinking and leadership skills, and support young people as they organize their peers in collective action around issues that affect their lives – like youth employment, access to mass transportation, environmental justice and for better educational opportunities. Beyond any particular issues, the groups are committed to helping youth – especially youth of color from low-income communities – build power and assert their voice in ways that advance social and racial justice for youth and their communities.

These groups focus their work on secondary school age students both in and out of school. Young people can begin participating in these groups in middle school and leave when they graduate from high school, typically around the age of 18. Youth that have “graduated” from these organizations are referred to as alumni. While young people receive intensive forms of support while they are youth organizers, what happens to them after they graduate? How does what they learn during their time as youth organizers affect the achievement of their personal and professional goals? Do they remain committed to and active in social justice work after they graduate?

### **Introduction**

Our partners have observed certain trends among their alumni in relationship to their post-graduate experience. Some alumni remain deeply connected to social justice work into adulthood. However, others drop out of social justice work completely, and still others fall somewhere in between. There is also a range of experiences in terms of what alumni do professionally and personally after they graduate, such as attending college, working full or part-time, or struggling to find employment. Our community partners wanted to better understand how the alumni’s experiences transitioning out of youth organizing might have influenced their personal, professional and social justice paths after high school. Our partners also wanted to better understand how they might improve their programming to help support these young people as they transition out of their organizations and into young adulthood.

We had three goals when we originally designed the research project. Primarily, we sought to understand the factors and processes that help alumni stay connected to social justice work into adulthood. Second, we sought to understand the factors and processes that help alumni

achieve their personal and professional goals. We recognized there may be some overlap in these two areas of development. Finally, we wanted to understand what our partner organizations could do better or differently to help young people achieve their personal or professional goals and stay connected to social justice work after graduating from their respective programs.

Through conversations with our community partners, we developed the following research questions:

1. How do alumni from the Boston Youth Justice Movement describe and understand their experiences transitioning out of youth organizing groups and into their lives as young adults?
2. How do alumni describe the goals they are pursuing in life, including whether and how they are participating in social justice work?
3. What kinds of factors and processes, both during the time in the organization and after their participation, help young people formulate and achieve these goals and continue to participate in social justice work? Conversely, what factors and process might discourage future social justice work or formation of other goals?
4. What lessons can be learned from the experiences of alumni for youth justice groups so that they can better prepare and support young people for successful lives and continued participation and leadership in social justice work?

In the end, we were not able to answer all of these questions. We ended up focusing less on the achievement of personal and professional goals, although that remained part of the study. We focused a lot on the experiences of young people transitioning out of youth organizing and seeking to remain connected to the world of youth organizing and to social justice work. The patterns we uncovered in analyzing these experiences helped shape the lessons and recommendations we offer in the last section of this report. We hope that these findings will not only be useful for our three partners, but also for any youth organizing groups that are interested in understanding ways that they can help their young alumni stay connected to social justice work into young adulthood.

## **Background: A Leadership Pipeline**

Like our partners, many organizers and stakeholders in the field of youth organizing have recently been focused on what is called the leadership pipeline. The pipeline refers to “pathways and opportunities for social justice leadership development for young people during and after their high school years” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 2). Youth organizing is recognized as a key vehicle for young people, typically youth of color from low-income communities, to develop as leaders committed to social justice. Youth organizing groups want to develop better systems for building this pipeline: improving the process through which young people enter the organization, develop as leaders through their experiences in the organizations, and then transition out to continue as social justice leaders as adults (FCYO, 2015).

However, much of the youth organizing literature has focused on the benefits and skills youth acquire while they are actively engaged in youth organizing (Conner, 2011, Delgado and Staples, 2008, Ginwright and James, 2002, Ginwright, 2010, Rogers, Mediratta, and Shah, 2012,

Torres-Fleming, Valdes, and Pillai, 2010). These benefits are particularly important for youth of color, who often find themselves excluded from political processes and disconnected from political institutions (Rogers et. al., 2012, Ginwright and James, 2002). However, only recently have a few studies looked at whether or not these skills and benefits carry over into a young person's adult life.

One study suggests that youth organizing does positively influence later career and academic choices and promote civic engagement in adulthood (Conner, 2011). Another study suggests that involvement in organizing does not guarantee later political engagement nevertheless, it did find that half of youth organizers remained involved in social justice work after graduation (Terriquez, 2015) In some places like California with an expansive social movement infrastructure, many youth activists become connected to other social movements like the labor or immigrant rights movements (Terriquez, 2015). No research, however, has examined the experiences of young people post-graduation to specifically identify the factors and processes that encourage or discourage continued participation in social justice work and the formulation and attainment of personal and professional goals. This research project will add to this emerging literature by describing the experiences of a set of former youth organizers in Boston as they transition out of youth organizing and into lives as adults committed to social justice values.

Youth organizing is different from other types of social justice organizing because at some point (usually at the time of graduation from high school), organizers "age out" of their programs. Delgado and Staples (2008) suggest that it is important for youth organizing groups to maintain relationships with their alumni, noting that social justice work does not stop once a young person turns 18. However, there is very little research that suggests the best ways for these groups to support their alumni after they age out, either as social justice leaders or as healthy and successful adults. Ginwright (2010) offers some suggestions for creating leadership pipelines for youth organizers, including internship opportunities, mentoring, and employment training. However, these suggestions are based upon investigations of the innovative practices of a small number of youth organizing groups, not interviews with youth to better understand their lived experiences. This research will suggest ways that organizations like BYOP, REEP, and The City School can better support their youth based on the experiences reported by and the needs identified by youth themselves. This information can help strengthen these organizations now and can also provide valuable lessons for other youth organizing groups that are also seeking to strengthen the leadership pipeline into adulthood.

Finally, in addition to adding to the existing literature on youth organizing, the practicum in community-based research has two other goals. First, it is our hope that this research will be useful to our partners as they consider ways to support their current youth as they transition out of youth organizing and think about future alumni engagement. Secondly, this course gives doctoral students the opportunity to learn about what it means to do community-based research. We hope that this experience has encouraged members of the research team to consider community-engaged research in their future scholarly work.

## Research Methods

The UMass Boston research team conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with alumni from BYOP, REEP, and The City School to talk about their experiences after graduating from their youth organizing groups. These interviews generally lasted between 60-90 minutes and took place at the offices of BYOP, REEP, and The City School, and at other locations. The research team and our partners developed the interview questions together. Our three partners also helped the research team identify alumni that might be willing to participate in the project. We had initially planned to interview alumni that graduated between 2005 and 2012 so that we could speak with alumni that were at least 2 years “out” of their time in youth organizing. However, a couple of alumni that we interviewed are more recent graduates, but still provided important insights into social justice work in young adulthood.

In addition to identifying alumni and providing contact information, the partners also identified whether or not each alumnus was still involved in social justice work. Our goal was to capture a group of alumni with varying degrees of involvement in social justice work as adults. All interview participants signed a consent form indicating that they were willing to be interviewed for this project, gave permission to use their real names in this report, and were willing to have the interviews recorded. Each interview was transcribed either by a member of the research team or by a professional transcriber. The team then analyzed the interviews using the qualitative analysis software program maxQDA and identified relevant themes that addressed the above research questions. These themes form the basis of this report.

After conducting interviews with alumni, a few members of the research team also conducted a focus group with two of the partners, Dave Jenkins from REEP and Seth Kirshenbaum from The City School. The purpose of the focus group was to better understand the partners’ conception of what it means to do social justice work, how they see the goals of their respective organizations, and the steps they take – or do not take – to support youth organizers as they transition out of youth organizing. The recording of the focus group was transcribed and the relevant findings were incorporated into the analysis. We shared the initial findings of the research with two of our partners Seth Kirshenbaum from The City School and Najma Nazy’ at from BYOP at a meeting in early April 2015. The partners gave us valuable feedback and further explanation of their views which we captured in notes and incorporated into this report. Finally, the UMASS Boston research team presented the findings of this research at a community meeting on May 14, 2015 at The City School. The meeting was open to our partners, interview participants, and any community members interested in attending. Comments captured in notes from that discussion were also incorporated into this final report.

It is important to note that this research comes with limitations. First, we had a small number of participants for the alumni interviews. While this means that we were able to go in-depth into each participant’s story, it also means that we may not have captured the diversity of alumni experiences after graduating from their youth organizing programs. In addition, the partners identified a list of potential participants for this project that were considered core members of their youth organizing groups. The partners shared the alumni’s contact information out of their personal contact lists. Six of the alumni are also either staff members or current interns with their former youth organizing group. It is possible that both the role these alumni played in their

organizations as youth and the relationships they maintain with the current staff of these organizations could have implications for the results of this work. For instance, we might have seen different results if we had included alumni who were not considered core members or did not maintain some kind of contact with the staff of their youth organizing group upon graduation from high school.

Consequently, we consider this study a preliminary one. We believe that we have some important findings to share, but they should be considered suggestive not definitive. Further research can build upon these findings to help the field of youth organizing better support youth organizers as they transition out and strengthen a leadership pipeline.

## **Finding a Home, Finding a Voice**

In order to better understand the experiences of young people transitioning out of youth organizing groups, we wanted to first understand what alumni identified as powerful in their experiences during their time in those groups. We found that many alumni reported that participating in youth organizing helped them find a home and find their voice. According to City School alumna Aslin Perez,

I was in a very hard place in my life, 15-years-old trying to figure out who I am, what I want to do with my life. I hated school. I hated a lot of things, so I was in this era of like, “What am I going to do?” ...I continued to go [to The City School], and a sense of belonging started to come along, a sense of like, “I need to be here; this is something that I need at the moment.”

Few of the 20 alumni participants in our research initially came to our partner organizations with an interest in social justice. For almost half, their first contact with these groups was at the suggestion of friends or family members who were already involved in some sort of organizing and who invited them to tag along. About a quarter say they were looking for work. Three talk about being in some sort of trouble and their group being their last option before facing either disciplinary action or academic failure. Aslin Perez’s experience may be typical. She says that friends who worked at The City School brought her to a few seminars and, at first, “I hated it. I was like bored, etc., and I didn’t understand why they wanted me to go.” But she stayed “and a sense belonging started to come along, a sense of like, ‘I need to be here; this is something that I need at the moment.’”

Regardless of how the alumni got involved, nearly all of those interviewed said BYOP, The City School and REEP became places where they could be comfortable, find the support of peers and adult mentors, and to learn to speak up. They gained powerful leadership skills and most alumni came to see themselves as leaders in their groups and in their communities. In the end, finding a home in their organizations helped young people grow into confident adults concerned about the world around them.

## **Finding a Home: Organizing Family, Structure and Support**

Many alumni reported that the partner organizations were places where they could find support, sometimes support that they could not find elsewhere. For BYOP alumni in particular, organizing and its attendant relationships *must* come from a place of love, something five of the six interviewees from BYOP stated outright. But this sentiment was not exclusively expressed by BYOP alumni. For City School alumna Aslin Perez the most important thing she got from organizing was

...relationships and bonding. I think that was key, especially when there are so many people who have just done so much for me, and I can say the same for them, like they've done so much for me, and it wasn't materialistic... young people who actually loved and adored me, and I loved and adored them. And then adults who actually were considerate, and weren't like teachers, but more of like educators who actually cared about how I felt after being educated.

This idea of love and support was something the research team identified as finding a “home,” a place youth knew they could come to and find a supportive network. The organizations provided things some alumni may have been lacking in their lives. For some, this was support during difficult personal times. Others found the structure they have been lacking in their lives. The youth organization was a place where the alumni felt truly connected to community, to something bigger than themselves. Zoe Peters, a City School alumna, describes the home-like setting this way:

We are always in and out the door at City School. We are always coming back and forth. Because for a lot of us, it is the door we first come through. It is the door we come back to check in with. “Is this the right [thing] we got to be doing, because I don't know?” Or like, “can I hangout? Because I love it here,”

While some alumni use images reminiscent of home, other alumni use the metaphor of “family” to describe the atmosphere of the organizations, places where staff and youth organizers sincerely cared for one another. Handel Dixon, a REEP alumnus, puts it this way:

I can come down here and we could be in meetings for hours, trainings and stuff like that. But at the end of the day, we all tell each other goodnight and tell them probably to get home safe, 'cause it's basically a family here.

Echoing this idea of youth organizations being “family,” Cindy Printempts from BYOP explains that her biological family knows “I have another family, and it's a social justice family, and they understand that connection.” Alumni use this idea of family to describe the space where young people found a voice and developed leadership skills, but its use extends to the friends and mentors alumni found in the group. Dana Mendes of BYOP, like many other youth, go so far as to call Najma Nazy'at his “organizing mama.” This idea of family relates closely to the supports that young people found in the organization, a topic discussed more thoroughly in the *Supports and Obstacles to Social Justice Work in Adulthood* section of this paper.

The youth organizations became a refuge for some young people who were facing problems or high levels of stress in their daily lives. Many were amazed by how supportive the

staff and their fellow youth organizers were in the most trying of times. BYOP was a strong pillar of support for Shaleyah Armstrong while her mom was going through a separation. Her story describes what several other youth found in their organizing groups.

...a lot of times I didn't want to go home, because it was a lot of dark depression around at home, and when I would come here they would make me happy; they would make me smile; they would make me laugh...

Shaleyah says BYOP staff took a similar approach when she hit a "rough patch" at school, offering to talk to teachers or the principal.

They were really willing to making sure that nothing prevented me from doing what I wanted to do, because I wanted to be in school; I wanted to be happy at home...it was really a hard time for me, so they really were the people that I depended on, even though I didn't know them that well. It was that comfortable of a setting, and a safe space, that I really was just like, "I don't know why I feel like I can trust these strangers."

It was through this support that BYOP became an alternative home for Shaleyah.

...they gave me a place to come when I didn't want to go home, or a place to do my homework, or when I didn't have that quiet time at home, or a place when I was just really stressed. It was like copping out, be on the computer, do what you need to do in order to feel at home, and they were always welcoming to all my friends, and stuff that I brought over here with me, and they were just like, "The more the merrier."

Some alumni found the groups provided refuge from the traditional power dynamics of school. The youth organizations' education models espouse the teaching of systems of injustices and structural inequality, enabling alumni to have a new lens through which they could view their own education. Dana Mendes, a BYOP alumnus, points out how Najma Nazy'at pushed the youth organizers to do well in school, but to also understand there are things that are beyond their control.

There had been plenty of times Najma had come to my school to meet with my principal about something that had gone on with a young person, so education and knowledge is something that has always been important to BYOP... BYOP definitely bolsters the need for young people to do well in school, but also to realize that if you are not doing well in school, it is not necessarily your fault.

Often alumni explain that they found a home in youth organizing because it added structure to their lives. They further describe being a part of an organization to which they felt beholden in ways they did not feel towards family or school. There were expectations set by the organization and fellow youth organizers the alumni knew they had to meet every time they walked through the door. Allison Colonna, a City School alumna, seems to suggest that for some, this sense of structure was important even if the social justice work was not.

...even if maybe activism isn't your thing, it is still an after school program so you have somewhere to go and you can be with friends and have homework time. And if you are lazy and you go to this place we are going to be like, "No. Do your homework." So it gives you structure and a place to be and something to believe in.

Many alumni recount how the staff and their fellow youth workers helped ease the doubts and insecurities they experienced as teens. Many of the female interviewees described these as times they were afraid. Wei Wang, a City School alumna remembers the first time she was asked to facilitate a group. A coordinator sat beside her, guided her and reassured her, "don't be afraid," and "you're fine." Shaleyah Armstrong from BYOP remembers being told "you've got this." Nevina Smallpiece from the City School says not only did she receive "encouragement," she "got a lot of other personal support." Allison Colonna from The City School shared a story of how Seth Kirshenbaum once gave her support when she felt exhausted.

...sometimes I get depressed and I am like, "Oh I am really lazy. I am not working hard and my value is going down." Or something like that. I wasn't feeling like giving 100% [one] day and I was like, "I feel like I am giving 30, 40...I don't even know." And Seth just looked at me and said, "Even when you think you are only giving 30 that is still someone else's 150. You work that hard. You do a really good job." And I felt really good.

Male interviewees had similar stories of support even though they did not contextualize their experiences as coming from a place of nervousness or fear. Handel Dixon from REEP states it simply, "I came and they taught me."

### **Finding a Voice: Speaking Up, Building Confidence and Developing Leadership**

Nearly every alumni who participated in this study said that as they began to feel at home in their organizations, finding family and support, they began to discover that they had a voice. This idea of voice is captured by a number of skills that young people developed as a result of being involved with youth organizing, including developing as leaders.

Almost half of the participants explicitly use the word "voice", to describe their experiences, but their descriptions are consistent with other alumni who similarly describe gaining confidence to take action when noticing injustices in their communities. As they found their voices, young people began to articulate concerns and build relationships that led to collective action.

When asked about the most important thing he got out of youth organizing, Tyree Ware, a REEP alumnus, said "confidence". Many young people expressed a similar sentiment. The home-like environment that the organizations provided enabled the alumni to grow and find their niche. The organization became a place where they could come and work on the things that interested them and become experts. Tyree explains,

I got just different skills from like talking to people, socializing, and networking. It taught me how to research a lot... it taught me how to just care for humanity, I would say... organizing is just doing the right thing as a human being. So, I feel like it just made me open my eyes more to just the humanity

REEP instilled a sense of confidence that enabled Tyree to articulate the problems he and his neighbors in Dorchester were experiencing from the overexposure of toxins and other environmental hazards.

...I didn't really know they had a title on what we was doing, environmental justice and social justice. I didn't see it as that. I just seen it as problems, so I never really seen it as a movement until I actually came [to REEP].

Hakim Sutherland and Carlos Moreno both point out that they were very shy before joining REEP. Aslin Perez, a City School alumna, says she was raised in a very conservative Latino home, where the women were expected to be reserved and were looked down upon when they spoke up. Through The City School, Aslin developed the confidence to exert her voice in her home and effectively communicate with her family. "I have the tools now; I know how to reach out to my family, and be okay with it, and I have people who are supporting me, especially youth organizing."

Alumni discuss how these organizations helped them go from being passive about afflictions facing them and their communities, to having the agency to make others listen to their ideas for affecting change. Nevina Smallpiece an alumna of The City School says most succinctly and directly, "without [youth organizing], I wouldn't have been so outspoken." Handel Dixon of REEP expands upon this idea, "if it wasn't for organizations like these letting people know that yes we do have a voice and we do matter. If it wasn't for people and the organizations like REEP, we wouldn't be around." Again and again alumni describe how their voices came from knowing their experiences were not isolated, that their input was valued and that they were supported by the organization.

### Carlos's Story

Carlos Moreno's experience illustrates how youth organizing provides a space for young people to find their voice. Carlos immigrated to the United States as a teenager without speaking fluent English. Carlos left Cape Verde with his family when he was 15. He had few opportunities to speak English which he attributed to his shyness and lack of close friends. But when he joined REEP, "I felt like I broke out of that shell." In REEP he found a supportive environment where his input was valued and he developed an interest in environmental justice and organizing. He describes his mentor, Marlena Rose, in familial terms.

My first boss at REEP became like a mother to me because she was so close and I really looked up to her in terms of her values and the things that she has done and obstacles that she has gone through in her life personally and professionally.

Marlena was a large impetus for Carlos finding his voice.

I think she challenged me to challenge myself; to really push myself to the limit and become a little bit more and become great. And she also deeply cared about how I am personally doing inside and outside of work.

Before joining REEP, Carlos felt intimidated both inside and outside of school. But at REEP he was put in situations where he had to speak up and be articulate, like in door-to-door campaigning and facilitating meetings. The more he read and learned about environmental injustices and organizing, the more confidence he found in expressing his own thoughts. Like many alumni, Carlos discovered that youth-led campaigns could be successful and that helped his confidence grow.

I had no idea that you can go to City Hall and just request a meeting with your representative or request a meeting with your senator. That was something very small, but it is a tool that you learn in the organizing to develop leadership and inspire other people to take action. ...that was really helpful for me because it instilled something in me that said you can actually go out there and change something..... A lot of people in low income, especially communities of color live in fear ...life is just the way it is and you are just going to live in it.

As he discovered his voice, Carlos modeled his actions from other organizers in REEP, and became a role model himself for other young people.

...they were like, "Oh I really like your facilitation skills. How did you learn that?" And so I would share some of my pointers and then the relationship grew from there.... I think the reason I became close to other people is because I knew what skills I wanted to gain. And because I started following those skills, in other words, following my passion in a sense, other people gravitated towards [me], "yeah I really like how Carlos talks" or "I really like how Carlos facilitates, I really like how Carlos carries himself; I want to be like that a little bit."

For the youth we interviewed, finding a voice seems to be deeply entwined with developing organizing skills and leadership. Cindy Printempts of BYOP explains,

I was able to be identified as a leader with a lot of the different folks who were working with me, who I call my mentors now. They were able to help mold me. So it was never, like, “Oh, this organizing is this whole thing that’s a job where you work on your resume.” It’s more to do with something that’s inside of you...

Practically all of the interviewees said through their organizations they discovered that they had some sort of leadership skill, which had a direct influence on their willingness and ability to speak up. Those with a natural tendency to use their voice learned how to channel it through their youth organizing groups. Dana Mendes of BYOP asserts, “You couldn’t not be a leader.” In fact, according to Dana, “If you didn’t have what it takes to really be the thing that is going to be able to push a campaign forward, then it would cause a little bit of issue.”

Youth who participated in this project emphasized different aspects of leadership but all understood leadership in a collective way. Whitney Ogbesoyen, an alumna of both REEP and the City School, says

Everyone has their own different perceptions of leadership. But I feel like a leader is not only on top, but then puts themselves on the bottom and be able to help and support and build the work to make their life a little bit easier too.

For Royal Nunes of the City School, leadership is “about working together with a team to carry out a specific mission” as well as doing important work for one’s own neighborhood. Shane Bass, also from the City School says leadership is, “being able to educate other young people with the knowledge that was given.” BYOP and Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) alumna Teena Marie Johnson says being a leader meant stepping up when needed. “Other folks could have said, ‘Oh, that doesn’t make you a leader.’ I’m like, ‘Okay, but I’m a leader to myself.’ And I just think we all had our different strengths, like Colin was really good for that, and Aisha was really good for that, so we all were leaders...” “I feel like if I wasn’t a leader, I became a leader,” adds Tyree Ware. But it is not only about *his* development, “just being at REEP we encourage each other. We push each other, so we’re leading each other, so we’re never following at all.”

The role and responsibilities of being a leader seem to have helped young people find their voice. Many discovered their abilities as they ran meetings and planned actions. But as indicated previously, this identity was developed in the context of being in a family with the support of peers and staff. Carlos says he never really saw himself as a leader. “I think in other people’s eyes they might call me a leader, given all that has been accomplished. I just thought I was a part of a team.”

### **Loss of Leadership, Loss of Voice**

While young people developed a profound sense of power and responsibility inside the supportive home of their youth organizing groups, many alumni report struggling to maintain their voice when they leave their organizations. Those who felt that they maintained their voice also tended to maintain their ties to youth organizing, like Aslin Perez, who says, “now I’m actually on staff at the City School. So, I worked my way up there.”

But, on their own outside of the groups, many alumni feel that after graduation, they lose their voice, their confidence, or both. Wei Wang from The City School felt the loss of her organizing family as she started college.

All of a sudden I feel like I have no more family you know. And it’s like college is a big step, a big community. My school is huge. And all of a sudden I’m like, Oh I couldn’t talk to Ruby [my mentor] no more... I realized I could! But I feel like ‘cause I’m no longer in the organization and I’m not there every day any more, things sort of you know fell apart.

Cindy Printemps said that after leaving BYOP she lacked direction. She questioned, “Where do I go? What do I do? Who do I build with?” For Wendy Adriou-Merlain of BYOP, “Once I went to UMass Amherst, I don’t think I stayed in touch, and sometimes it gets kind of depressing.” Allison Colonna of The City School sums up the sadness that many alumni experience after leaving their groups.

It was hard but all the other things after that it didn’t really help me at all because I wasn’t thinking about it anymore. It was past. It was an experience that was done and now I am in my own life now and doing other things.

## **Transitioning Out of Youth Organizing**

Alumni of Boston youth justice organizations who participated in this study pursued a variety of paths immediately after leaving high school. Of the 20 participants, six worked with a social justice group and nine went to college. Three others continued to work or intern with their social justice group while simultaneously attending college. Among the college attendees, one dropped out after a semester and another left after two years to return to youth justice work. Two participants did not immediately attend school or seek employment after high school.

Whatever path they took, the majority of alumni participants relate feeling unprepared for their post-graduation experiences. Those who transitioned into mainstream institutions – such as college or nonprofit work – report not feeling valued within these new spaces. Others discussed having conflicts with the culture of those institutions. Additionally, some of those who continued to practice community organizing as adults felt like they were unaware of what adult organizing is like and the ways in which it can differ from youth organizing. In some cases, these struggles to adapt were compounded by alumni feeling unwelcome at their former youth organizations. One alumnus who currently works for a partner organization even says he feels “left out” by the group, and is only aware of what is going on because he works in the parent organization of the group.

## **Transitioning into Adult Roles**

Almost half of the participants in this study express a frustration with adapting to their work or education post-graduation. These alumni found that their identities as social justice activists conflicted with the cultures in other settings. Zoe Peters, a white alumna of the City School, explains:

I think one thing that's tricky about a lot of these organizations is that they teach you how messed up the world is and then they're like: good luck...working your bartending job, good luck going to UMASS Boston. But you're like: but racism is a system of privilege that benefits white people. How do you hold that reality in all these other spaces?

Zoe says that many of her friends of color “can’t handle it” once they go into college. This sentiment is echoed by alumni of color. Wendy Adriou-Merlain of BYOP attended Massasoit Community College but initially found it very difficult to identify with anyone. She says it was difficult not to “lose sight of” her social justice beliefs. It was only after being inducted into the honor society at school that Wendy became more comfortable in the college setting. After finishing community college and working for a while, she enrolled in UMass Amherst. Cindy Printemps, of BYOP says that after being empowered as a youth organizer, she found her critical perspective was not readily accepted in the world beyond BYOP. She describes a class scenario this way. “I had someone who’s over here, and like challenging me, and I’m challenging them right back, and I’m like – actually, this still exists, and they’re like – actually, we don’t know where you got this education from.”

Of the nine participants who went to college, four expressed this kind of difficulty. Royal Nunes of the City School had wanted to study criminal justice but felt alienated by a culture that did not understand the plight of people living in neighborhoods like his own Dorchester. Consequently, he left after two years to return to the City School, where he still works.

Some alumni who went to college talk about trying to connect with social justice organizations but having to find these connections on their own. City School alumna Wei Wang said that she found a social justice organization on campus by chance. “The organization went to my campus for recruitment and I just walk by the desk, and I was like – oh this is like a social justice organization or nonprofit.” Allain Cherenfant also from the City School, remembered some rare instances of college organizations reaching out to youth organizers before they transitioned out, like when students from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government came to visit. For him, their visit helped illuminate a variety of career or activist paths.

So, yeah, you can do like a doctor, but then, like, you can be a funder, or you can be a social worker, and after the office closes go to a rally, or you can be involved like planning it out. You can show up [and] you can do the volunteer stuff. You can also do the paid stuff, it just made it all look real and possible.

Some alumni who pursued jobs in the nonprofit world encountered challenges similar to those experienced by the alumni who went to college. Two alumni explicitly referenced difficulty with non-profit culture and another two with their jobs. In some cases, these individuals felt like the skills and leadership capabilities they had developed through organizing were not appreciated. For example, Chrislene DeJean, an alumna of BYOP, laments that as a family planner with a nonprofit organization her “creative work” was not valued or supported. She feels like nonprofit spaces are “not made for that...it’s made for you to have certain outputs.” Yet, Chrislene feels like the presence of former youth organizers is important. “When folks age out, there are CDCs that exist, there are NDCs, community organizations that lack youth people’s presence and they need to be challenged by young folks in the community.”<sup>1</sup>

Even some who found positions in organizing groups expressed frustrations. For example, BYOP alumnus Dana Mendes explains that as a youth he did not understand how different adult organizing would be, or even how to go about it. “I think that when I graduated,” he says, “I didn’t necessarily see, outside of volunteering my time at BYOP, I didn’t see many different avenues for me to continue organizing.” Additionally he “never really knew what adult organizing was or how different it was.” Consequently, he thinks that organizations could help answer those questions in an empowering way.

I think just having the conversation early on. Like we had done before, “youth organizing is not adult organizing and adult organizing is taking the next step further. Adult organizing is something that looks like this, this, and this, which doesn’t look like this, this, and this in youth organizing.” But... also to be able to do so in a way that is still empowered. As you are an adult now, you do have more power in terms of what you can get done as an individual. But the fact still remains that collective is better; that organizing comes with people... emphasizing that the structures may be different but the skills are the same and that, if it is something that people are interested in, that there are avenues for people to continue to do so.

Hakim Sutherland, an alumnus of REEP who has continued working for ACE – its parent organization, expresses the same sentiment more broadly. He says that he wishes someone had talked with him about “what do you... want to do after high school?” He says he needed a path so that “it wouldn’t have been as hard of a transition.” Altogether, nine alumni explicitly call for youth justice organizations to do something formal to transition graduates into adult social justice work or to give them advice on how to do so.

Despite these frustrations, most alumni feel that they have been helped by skills learned in youth organizing, such as public speaking and leadership. Almost every alumni cites some kind of lesson learned from organizing. In some cases, these lessons are personal and pertain to aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, or gender identity. For example, Cindy Printempts from BYOP says that her experiences there “taught me to reconnect with being a woman and just like show me there’s other women in history who gained leadership and look what they’ve done with it and been able to show me examples.” Others have felt this kind of basic inspiration associated with their gender, sexual orientation, race, and culture. Some alumni felt empowered

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<sup>1</sup> CDCs refers to Community Development Corporations; NDCs refer to Neighborhood Development Corporations.

by more concrete skills. For example, Hakim Sutherland, of REEP, feels that his experiences with youth organizing gave him the confidence and practice to be an effective public speaker. The lessons and skills gained by alumni from their organizing experiences are reflected throughout the other sections of this report, but here we want to emphasize that for many these lessons and skills did help ease their transitions.

### **Maintaining Ties to Youth Justice Groups**

In addition to struggling with their transition to adulthood in mainstream institutions as well as in social justice groups, many alumni also struggled with feeling left out by their former youth organizing groups. Of the 20 participants, 12 addressed this specifically. Three describe feeling pushed away. Allison Colonna, of the City School says that after graduating “we weren’t really allowed back so we had no place to go again.” Another three do not personally identify with Allison’s experience, but say that their organizations have treated others this way. An additional three describe feeling sad or frustrated over having lost touch. Nevertheless, those who suggested feeling alienated from their groups also expressed a strong desire to go back if there was a place to which they could go. Alison feels that “we didn’t really have a role to play in the program anymore,” even though she also understands that this situation was intended “so that younger people could have the same chance [as her] to be a leader.” Even though Hakim Sutherland works at ACE, which is REEP’s parent organization, he feels “left out in a sense,” and “wouldn’t know the majority of things that I know that REEP is doing this year” if he wasn’t working in the same building.

While not ubiquitous, this feeling of not being “allowed back” seems to be strongly felt by some. On the other hand, Whitney Ogbesoyen, another REEP alumna, does not feel this way. She describes contact with REEP through Facebook, Twitter, and regular phone calls. However, she admits that she might “be an anomaly.” She is also a very recent graduate, and we did find that, in general, alumni maintained stronger ties the closer they were to graduation.

Many alumni from each organization say that, when offered the opportunity, they do come back and stay connected to the groups and their work. However, these opportunities are not offered consistently and they seem to dissipate over time the longer the time since alumni have graduated. At one point, some BYOP alumni tried to help build ongoing ties to both the organization and the work by creating an alumni association called BYOP ARC. Chrislene DeJean explains that the group even had a weekend retreat. “[W]e were trying to build this alumni thing— we’re all in different states and places— to build this community. It was kind of like, we wanted it, but it was kinda too late for that [because] we didn’t establish that before we left BYOP towards the end of our time here.”

One alumna, Teena Marie Johnson, did describe what she thought was a very successful model of an organization staying connected with alumni. Her experience with youth organizing began with The Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC). If students are out of town, she explains, BSAC gives them the message, to “...do your thing when you’re here; just make sure you let us know.” The organization also has someone who is designated to maintain alumni relations as part of her job description. Teena Marie points out that, because “BSAC does a great job in keeping alumni connected; there’s a great alumni network that can come in and help us.”

In the end, we found that many alumni struggle as they leave the safe and supportive home they had in their youth organizing group and enter mainstream institutions like colleges where their social justice values are no longer widely shared. They feel unprepared for these challenges and left on their own to maintain their critical voice and find new avenues for social justice work. Even those who enter social justice work after graduation feel unprepared for the different ways that adults organize versus youth. The alumni who continue to work in the youth organizing world appear to face fewer challenges as, of course, they maintain close ties to their organizing homes. Others struggle to maintain connections, with some even reporting that they feel “left out” of the spaces they used to call home.

## **Social Justice Definitions and Social Justice Activities**

Since our project concerns whether youth organizers continue to do social justice work as adults, we needed to consider what is meant by social justice work. Social justice scholars and activists often consider social justice work to mean participation in collective action that addresses structures or systems of oppression. In the course of this project, we wanted to understand how alumni from youth organizing groups currently define social justice work as young adults. We found that alumni had many different definitions of social justice work and learned of the many different kinds of activities that alumni say “count” as social justice work. In this section, we will discuss how our partners define social justice work, how the alumni define it for themselves, and the differences that emerge in definitions by alumni from different youth organizing groups. This section will also highlight the kinds of activities that both partners and alumni say “count” as social justice work, and discuss the differences within those designations.

### **Partner Definitions**

We asked each of our three partners to define what it means to do social justice work. For all three of our partners, what unites their definitions is a sense that social justice work should challenge inequities and existing oppressive social structures. Dave Jenkins of REEP has a broad definition of social justice work, which he defines as asking if we are “moving the needle on shifting structures, and culture, and impacting systems of oppression at all.” Dave also makes a distinction between social justice work and organizing work. While many types of activities can fall under his definition of social justice work, organizing involves “building a formal base of power with other people in order to address systemic oppression.”

Seth Kirshenbaum largely agrees with Dave’s analysis, but also emphasizes that social justice work entails “community leadership for freedom, for liberation, for justice.” Seth hopes that when alumni leave The City School, they understand the world through a critical lens and understand “the world...really is about power.” Finally, Najma Nazy’at from BYOP shared her definition of social justice work at the presentation of initial findings in early April. For her, social justice work means that people are meeting “the injustice everyday” in areas like housing, education, land use, and health. Social justice activists are ready to fight everyday against injustice with an understanding of the context of social problems and the systemic nature of

oppression. For Najma, social justice work is outside the norm, is not mainstream, and is particularly concerned with the needs of people, families, and communities of color.

**Alumni Definitions**

The research team asked each of the alumni to define what it means to do social justice work. The definitions are rich and varied, but fall into a set of categories or themes that we explain in this section. Table 1 illustrates these themes.

Interestingly, despite the partners’ focus on changing social structures, only three of the alumni define social justice work as changing or dismantling structures that are oppressive to communities. The definitions of these three alumni are closest to those expressed by our partners in terms of how they incorporate changing oppressive social structure. Allain Cherenfant, an alumnus of The City School, describes social justice work as “being very creative about what you can bring to the structures that are super rigid.” Two other alumni from BYOP and REEP also discuss the need to change social structures as a part of their social justice definition.

Table 1: Themes from Alumni Definitions of Social Justice Work

<p><b>Fixing Problems/ Changing Structures</b>  <i>"Any work that bolsters the community and the people who you care about and doing so around issues that are pressing for them."</i>            – Dana Mendes            BYOP</p>	<p><b>Education and Empowerment</b>  <i>"How do we educate people on what exists today; the fact that racism still exists, the fact that classism still exists, the fact that we are living through justification."</i>            - Whitney Ogbesoyen            REEP and The City School</p>	<p><b>Youth-Focused</b>  <i>"...being able to get out there and advocate for the youth of the city of Boston."</i>            -Shane Bass            The City School</p>
<p><b>Equity</b>  <i>"Social justice is about equal employment. Equal education. Equal resources in neighborhoods."</i>            – Wei Wang            The City School</p>	<p><b>Worldview</b>  <i>"To do social justice work you need to live in this world...you need to be present."</i>            - Cindy Printempts            BYOP</p>	<p><b>Collaboration</b>  <i>"Realizing that you're in a community with your peers, realizing that, once again, justice is an ongoing battle."</i>            - Shaleyah Armstrong            BYOP</p>

However, the most common theme that emerges from the alumni definitions of social justice work is the notion of fixing problems in the community. Almost half of the alumni spoke about the importance of fixing problems in communities as a part of social justice work. It was especially common among REEP alumni; four out of five spoke of fixing community problems in their definitions. These community problems can be small or large-scale issues, whatever it is

that the community needs remedied in order to improve the lives of those living there. Dana Mendes's quote in Table 1 exemplifies this theme.

Seven of the alumni speak of the role of education, empowerment, or a combination of the two as important in defining what it means to do social justice work. These alumni define social justice work as educating people about social problems and the causes of said problems, and then empowering them with skills and knowledge to create change in their own communities. This emphasis on education reflects Najma Nazy'at's idea that understanding the context of social problems is necessary in order to do social justice work. These alumni represent all three youth organizing groups and have different degrees of involvement with social justice work today.

Interestingly, five alumni have an explicitly youth-focused definition of social justice work. For them, social justice work means teaching young people the skills they need to create change in their community. Nevina Smallpiece of The City School describes it as "youth empowerment, youth justice, fighting for the rights of the youth." A youth-focused definition also includes advocating on behalf of youth in the city, which is exemplified in Shane Bass's quote in Table 1. The alumni that expressed a youth-focused definition come from either BYOP or The City School. Four identify as still being involved in social justice work, while one, Allain Cherenfant of The City School, sees himself in more of a gray area as we discuss below.

While the three major themes are fixing problems, education and empowerment, and a youth-focused definition of social justice work, three other minor themes emerge from our interviews. For instance, three alumni explicitly include issues of equity in their definition of social justice, as exemplified by the quote from Wei Wang from The City School. Three alumni also defined social justice in a way that can best be described as a "worldview." These alumni define social justice work as being an integral part of their being or as being "present" in the world, as noted in the quote from Cindy Printempts from BYOP in the table above. Finally, two alumni discuss the importance of collaboration in doing social justice work. Collaboration means both working "in a community with your peers," as Shaleyah Armstrong of BYOP describes it, and working with others who come from different perspectives.

### **Alumni Definitions by Organization**

In addition to looking at the alumni's definitions holistically, the research team also wanted to see if alumni definitions vary by youth organizing group. It does appear that the way alumni define social justice work is influenced by the organization they worked with as youth. For instance, the five REEP alumni have much more concise definitions, often given in a short sentence or two, which emphasize fixing problems in communities. Social justice work is about taking action against perceived injustice. In addition, REEP alumni tend to emphasize empathy and believe that social justice work can be done in multiple ways, not just through organizing. Hakim Sutherland, a REEP alumnus defines social justice and social justice work this way:

Creating positive change in people's lives, having the compassion and heart and the willingness to actually help people...your social justice work is whatever

brings you the most joy and happiness while at the same time realizing that people are affected...how do you help those people?

While alumni from REEP emphasize fixing problems in communities, the six alumni from BYOP and the one alumni from BYOP and BSAC emphasize creating, building, and fighting for communities. In fact, four out of the six BYOP alumni explicitly use the word “community” in their social justice definitions. Half of the BYOP alumni also emphasize education and empowerment, which aligns well with Najma Nazy’at’s emphasis on understanding the context of social problems. Two alumni also use words like “fighting for what’s right” or describing the work as an “ongoing battle”, which reflect a core tenet of Najma’s definition, which is fighting against injustice every day.

Finally, what stands out most about the nine City School alumni is the lack of thematic consistency in their definitions. Four alumni have youth-focused definitions, two define social justice as a worldview, two others emphasize education and empowerment, while still two others talk about the importance of changing social structures. Interestingly, none of them include a power analysis or talk about creating leadership for communities in the way that Seth defines social justice work. This variation could stem from the fact that we simply had more City School alumni participate in this year’s project. Some of the City School alumni also came to the organization from feeder organizations, which may have influenced the alumni’s understanding of social justice work before they participated in City School’s programming.<sup>2</sup>

### **What “Counts” as Social Justice Work?**

When approaching this project, the UMass Boston research team and our community partners expected that when we asked the alumni whether or not they were still involved in social justice work, we would get a simple “yes” or “no” answer. In fact, our partners had pre-identified alumni as involved in social justice work or not involved, using criteria that follows along the discussion above. In other words, social justice work involves collective efforts to challenge systems of oppression, especially but not exclusively through organizing. What we found, however, is that some alumni counted other activity as social justice work. Some who were involved in service provision counted themselves as doing social justice work. A couple argued that they were doing social justice work simply because they took a social justice perspective to everything they do. In the end, it turns out that what counts as social justice work is less clear and more debatable than we thought, even among our partners.

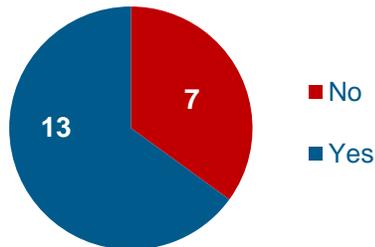
To begin to illuminate some of these issues, the pie charts below show how the partners initially described the alumni’s social justice involvement and how the alumni described themselves. Six alumni described their current involvement in social justice work differently than the partners. Four alumni that were identified as not being involved in the work said that they are currently involved. Allain Cherenfant from The City School was originally identified as being involved, but reported seeing himself in more of a gray area. He was working in a service-oriented nonprofit that he described as being “adjacent” to social justice work, but not quite the

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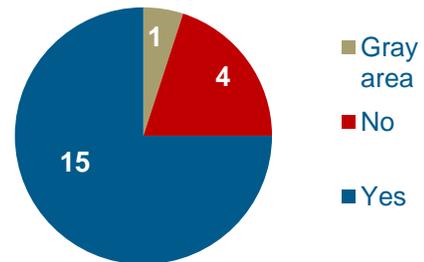
<sup>2</sup> We should also note that alumni are influenced by the views of a number of people as they participate in our partner organizations, not just Seth, Dave and Najma, and that their definitions are likely influenced by their life experiences after graduation as well.

same thing. Finally, Joshua Roe was identified as being currently involved in social justice work but reported that he did not believe his role as a social worker constituted social justice work.

**Current Participation in SJ Work:  
Partner Designation**



**Current Participation in SJ Work:  
Alumni Self-Identification**



### **Partners' Description of Social Justice Activities**

When we asked our partners what kinds of activities would count as social justice work, they emphasized that social justice work generally means working in organizations that are seeking to challenge systems of oppression. Organizing groups clearly count. However, there was some discussion and debate about what other kinds of organizations and activities would count for social justice work, particularly whether service provision constitutes social justice work. Najma Nazy'at of BYOP made it clear that in her view direct social service provision, or even simply bringing a social justice lens to different kinds of occupations, does not count as social justice work. While he is supportive of the various endeavors City School alumni are engaged in, Seth Kirshenbaum is hesitant to regard some of them as social justice work.

There's folks who go into business, so my personal opinion is you could go anywhere, and hold those values, and still engage politically...so if they're working on it, I think it's fine, personally, but I know a lot of people in our world don't feel the same way; at least, that's been my experience.

Dave Jenkins from REEP, while prioritizing organizing as a key form of social justice work, is open to considering a wider array of activities. Rather than focusing on the means of achieving social justice, Dave sees that work can be considered social justice if the end result is challenging current systems of oppression.

My inclination is that a lot counts; my way of thinking about this work is: are you moving the needle on shifting structures, culture, and impacting systems of oppression at all? And that happens in really individual and collective ways.

Dave regards service provision work as social justice work, if the organization is seeking to challenge systemic oppression and the service provision work has an organizing element connected to it. He points out that without the organizing element, service provision work could simply be reinforcing the systems of injustices, because "... some social services are

institutionalized and oppressive...” While Dave has a broader criterion for social justice work, he has a much more concise definition of what is considered organizing work.

I would define that a little more tightly than I would social justice work more generally. For young people to be involved in organizing work, building power, building a formal base of power with other people in order to address systemic oppression... building power with a group of people in a horizontal way to directly impact structures of oppression.”

In the end, we found that all three community partners consider social justice activity to be work that seeks to change current political, social, and cultural structures in ways that primarily involve organizing. However, we also found that there was some grey area and debate about what other kinds of activities under certain conditions might also count as social justice work.

**Alumni Social Justice Activities**

The work the alumni are currently engaged in can be divided into two kinds: organizing and service provision. The first category is closest to what the partner organizations deem to be social justice work. These alumni are actively involved in organizing and campaigning on various social justice issues. The organizing alumni are either paid staff members for their respective organization, or they work as volunteers. The second group engaged in social justice work via service provision. This means that they are involved with a nonprofit, for-profit, or public entity which is providing some sort of social service to the community. Examples of the kinds of activities alumni are currently engaged with that they consider to be social justice work can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2: Examples of Alumni Social Justice Activities**

Organizing	Social Service Provision
Staff member at The City School	Case manager for homeless individuals
Staff member at REEP	Internship working with inmates at a prison
Volunteer or intern with REEP	Financial services for low-income communities
Volunteer with BYOP	Basketball coach/youth advocate
Staff member, Youth on Board	
Independent organizer connected to various social justice organizations and projects throughout the city	
Staff member of arts-oriented social justice organization	

Eleven of the twenty alumni we interviewed participate in organizing groups, which counts as social justice work by everyone's definition. Almost all of these organize in their former youth organizing group, which suggests that the alumni that are still engaged in organizing maintained a close relationship with the staff members and organizations after graduation. Some work as staff for these organizations while others continue as volunteers. While the primary relationship is with their former youth organizing group, many of the alumni currently involved in youth organizing are active beyond the walls of their respective organizations. Many are involved in community building and coalition building with other youth organizing groups in the city. As Tyree Ware of REEP explains,

I don't really have time to be a part of any other groups, but I'd say the groups I work with, because all we got is transit campaign, so the Youth Affordability Coalition, that's 21 different groups, so BSAC, BYOP, the City School, Beantown, Bikes Not Bombs; those are just a few that I can name off the top of my head...

Many alumni testify to the long lasting impact of their participation in organizing as youth. Aslin Perez from City School declares that organizing was "not a phase; it will never be a phase; it's part of my identity."

Only a couple of alumni are involved with social justice groups outside of youth organizing, such as Christlene DeJean, who recently started with an arts-based social justice organization called Intelligent Mischief. Many alumni said that it is difficult for young adults to find jobs with social justice organizations after graduation, which may be why so many return to their youth organizing groups.

Within this group of organizers, some alumni made clear distinctions between organizing work and direct service provision. These alumni were more likely to reflect the partner's view that, often times, social service provision does not count as social justice work. Christlene of BYOP clearly states that her work at ABCD, unlike her organizing work, is a service provision and not social justice.

So I work at ABCD which is a service oriented organization. A lot of times people think that service oriented organizations are social justice oriented. No they're not – they are very different. It is top down, it is hierarchical, it's coming from the belief that I have this power that will transform this community but not thinking that the community can transform themselves, I'm giving you this skill and you can use it, have agency to use it, whatever you want. So it's not an equal exchange at all, there's no reciprocity.

To some degree, it is not surprising that these alumni are more aligned with what the partners consider to be social justice activities, given that they are still very closely connected to their youth organizing groups. This may reflect the close relationship that these alumni have with our partners individually and with their youth organizing groups.

Five of the alumni are engaged in more traditional service provision work, but they consider this work to be social justice work because they approach their work with a social justice lens. This is a group that has been impacted by their youth justice work through shaping their world view. While they may not be working as organizers, this group still wants to make a positive impact on their communities. As an example, Wei Wang from The City School is using her internship at a prison to get a better insight on the situation of prisoners:

I want to learn how to become a youth facilitator, facilitating groups. Become a youth educator for the innocent kids. I think starting at a younger age they will learn, and can really avoid getting too involved with jail system, getting into trouble. And that might mess up their entire life, right?

Shane Bass of The City School considers his work as a basketball coach to be social justice work because he is “able to speak to young people on a regular basis” and serve in a mentoring capacity. Shane is also still connected to many youth groups in Boston and political organizations in Boston and sees his social justice work as being able to “advocate for the youth of the city.” In addition, Dana Mendes of BYOP sees his work as social justice work because he is “providing for those in need in the communities that I belong to.” Dana is currently a case manager for homeless individuals and families.

Both Wendy Adriou-Merlain from BYOP and Carlos Moreno from REEP have developed an interest in finance and financial services. However their interest is not to be working on Wall Street; rather, they want to help marginalized communities to be better served by financial institutions. In Wendy’s case, she took a job at a financial service company in Quincy, MA, where she noticed the clientele is primarily suburban, white, and middle & upper middle class. She feels that these kinds of services are needed in low income minority communities, where residents do not have access to financial information and services.

...our market is middle-class income folks, right? And so, you have a certain specific market that you’re targeting, but it made me start thinking, well, wait, low-income folks have to retire someday, too.... I went in as it was supposed to be a job, and generate income for myself, but instead I’m identifying, and like, okay, something’s off. There’s a whole group of people that’s left out...I feel like it’s always something that whatever I do, I cannot be hurting somebody else. I think that’s what helps me stay, so even though it’s not like necessarily campaigning, but no matter what job I have, it has to be for the better of something.

Carlos became interested in finance after taking courses in the subject in college. He worked at Harbor One Credit Union and later worked for a financial service company in Roxbury that focused on improving financial literacy among residents. Carlos is seeking to apply his degree in finance to better serve communities, which have been traditionally been underserved.

...in terms of the type of work I will be doing. So it is going to be finance, most likely a financial planner. ...not to say that I am not interested in organizing anymore, because I am, but I want to jump into something that is new, that is

different... also want to learn a little bit more on how this field affects my life and other people's lives and other cultures.

The common thread among these five alumni is that they all actively apply lessons learned from youth organizing to different kinds of service provision work, and view their education and professional activities with a social justice lens. As it turns out, all of the alumni bring a social justice lens to the work they do and how they live their lives, which demonstrates the positive impact of participating in youth organizing. At the same time, while many alumni have stayed connected to social justice work, typically in the youth organizing world, others find their way to service-oriented work and it remains debatable whether this "counts" as social justice work.

## **Supports and Obstacles to Social Justice Work in Adulthood**

In this section, we discuss the supports that alumni say help them stay connected to social justice work in adulthood and the obstacles they face. The most commonly cited supports include friends and mentors, especially those mentors who helped guide them during their time as youth organizers. Issues of burnout, financial instability, and family issues are some of the more common obstacles that the alumni discuss.

### **Friends as Supports**

The most commonly mentioned source of support for alumni are their friendships. Thirteen of the alumni say that their friends are an important source of support for them in their social justice work as adults. Almost all of the alumni that mention the importance of friends self-identify as being involved in social justice work today. This finding is not surprising, given some of the existing literature on young adulthood, which indicates that relationships with peers become increasingly important and provide a key source of support during this time period (Arnett, 2007 and Arnett, 2008).

Most alumni have a mix of friends that do and do not engage in social justice work. However, even those friends who do not participate in the work are still generally supportive of the alumni's engagement. That said, a few of the alumni seem to be very intentional about creating a community of peers that all engage in social justice work and support one another in that work. When asked if her current friends engage in social justice work, Chrislene DeJean of BYOP says:

Yes, I feel like my community is pretty strong right now, cuz it's all about rebuilding that. I stopped becoming friends with a lot of Smith [College] friends, which is good. They're coming from a savior mentality, and for me I just can't deal with that right now, I don't have the patience for it, I'll reassess when I'm ready. But for me right now, the folks that I'm around are really social justice oriented and I feel like I have a good family now.

Of the alumni that say the majority or all of their friends are involved in social justice work, all are still actively involved in organizing, including three alumni from BYOP and others such as Tyree Ware from REEP and Royal Nunes from The City School.

### **Role of Mentors**

Another common source of support is adult mentors. Over half of the alumni say that their relationships with mentors are an important source of support in their social justice work as adults. Many of these mentor/mentee relationships began when the alumni were participating in youth organizing, and all three of our partners are listed as important mentors for many of the alumni. Mentor/mentee relationships provide both personal and emotional support for the alumni and also help them stay connected to their social justice work. For example, Cindy Printemps of BYOP calls Najma Nazy'at and a few other adult mentors her "libraries" of social justice knowledge. In addition, Carlos Moreno of REEP speaks of the importance of his mentor, Marlena Rose, and her impact on his personal and professional development.

I would say the reason...she means so much to me is because I think she challenged me to challenge myself; to really push myself to the limit and become a little bit more and become great. And she also deeply cared about how I am personally doing inside and outside of work.

Most of the alumni who mention the importance of mentors self-identify as still being involved in social justice work. However, a couple of alumni who are not connected still cite the importance of mentors in their lives as young adults, including Allison Colonna and Wei Wang from The City School. Allison mentioned Seth Kirshenbaum as being an important mentor, while Wei talked about a sociology professor who helped guide her during her time at UMass Amherst after she lost touch with her City School mentor, Ruby Reyes.

### **Other Supports: Current Youth and Open Space**

While we specifically asked about the role of friends and mentors, two other types of supports to social justice work emerge from the interviews. First, some alumni say that their relationships with current youth organizers and other young people in the city help them stay connected to social justice work as adults. These alumni tend to be either strongly connected to their former youth organizing group and/or have a particularly strong motivation to help young people in the city. Cindy Printemps of BYOP describes how young people keep her motivated to stay engaged in social justice work:

That was my rejuvenator... like you see baby youth, and they're not in the organizing world, but you smile at them; you have this other sense of loving for them.

In addition, a few other alumni say that simply knowing they are always welcome back to their youth organizing space helps them stay connected to the work. This is a common theme particularly for BYOP alumni still involved in social justice work. Shaleyah Armstrong from BYOP describes the importance of a welcoming space in this way:

I just feel like they encourage me by allowing me to know like, “You’re not a young person who went through the program anymore, but that doesn’t mean this is still not a space for you.” Because the place would be like, “All right, you graduated; there’s no reason for you to come around anymore.” But for them to be like, “Come back, and help the new young people,” or, “Come back and just let’s talk about it,” because they want to keep all the people; they never want to be like, “All right, see you when we see you.” They’re very much involved in keeping everyone in the mix, so I felt like that’s important.

### **Support from Family**

The research team explicitly asked alumni whether or not their families support their participation in social justice work. In some cases, alumni receive no support from family members. However, in about half of the cases, support from families can best be described as “Yes, but...,” especially after the youth graduate from high school. These families are generally supportive of the alumni in whatever they do, but often express concerns about the alumni’s engagement in social justice work. Common concerns include the alumni’s ability to support themselves financially or worries that the alumni’s involvement in social justice work is interfering with getting a college degree. Royal Nunes from The City School explains it this way:

I think it’s like family pressures and pressures of society to do certain things. You’re expected to go to school and get a degree and do this.

Some alumni also say that their families are supportive but do not really understand the social justice work that they do. While families’ confusion and concerns about social justice work do not appear to hinder alumni’s engagement, the role of families can be considered both a support in some ways but also an obstacle to social justice work as an adult.

### **Burnout as an Obstacle**

The most commonly used word by the alumni to explain why they or others aren’t currently involved in social justice work is “burnout.” Social justice work can be very difficult and demanding physically and emotionally. The work contains several kinds of stressors that can cause some alumni to “burnout” and step away from social justice work. Almost half of the alumni used the word ‘burnout’ explicitly and six used other words that describe sources of burnout like “frustration, “stressful work,” or “disillusion.” Zoe Peters from City School explains the complex emotions associated with social justice work,

There’s emotion that comes along with that, there’s anger, fear, and a lot sadness that come with that. In that sense it’s challenging.

Dana Mendes from BYOP feels that there are many things that “bring you down” because you do not always “feel like you have done something worth doing.”

Alumni described four specific stressors that they experienced doing social justice work as an adult that can lead to burnout. The first stressor is the challenge of juggling multiple tasks and responsibilities. It can be challenging to juggle the demands of social justice work in addition to a host of other new responsibilities the alumni has acquired by the virtue of becoming an adult. Wendy Adriou-Merlain from BYOP explains the situation.

It's very challenging time to figure out how to balance family, when you're a parent sometimes; you have to put food on the table, and trying to figure out, allocating the time that you need to allocate for the things that you feel passionate about, and at the same time to make a living. So, I feel like sometimes I have to choose between them.

Another stressor that can result in burnout is a prevalent feeling of frustration caused by lack of tangible results. Feelings of frustration can hinder an alumni effort to stay connected to social justice work and can cause the alumni to lose the enthusiasm needed to continue. It is as if, as Shaleyah Armstrong from BYOP puts it, there is

No light at the end of the tunnel, because once you fight for so long, it's just like, okay, I can't do this anymore. There's nothing that's coming from it.

Nevertheless, these feelings may not be strong enough to stop the alumni from rejoining social justice work later on after they take some time off. In the words of Royal Nunes from The City School,

They just gotta take some time and take care of themselves and make it in this world real quick and maybe, after they get out of it, they come back.

A third stressor involved in burnout is the low level of societal prestige associated with social justice work. The feeling of under-appreciation from society for social justice work is an important factor that contributes to burnout. As Royal explains:

Community organization where you go to rallies and do youth development isn't necessarily a field that is, like, highly recognized or anything like that.

Carlos Moreno from REEP echoes Royal's sentiment, saying that "There is a challenge of what it means to be an organizer from society's point of view."

Finally, disillusionment with social justice work is another powerful stressor for six of the alumni. Feeling of disillusionment could result from many different sources like coming to a realization that social justice work takes a very long time. As Aslin Perez from The City School describes it as, "It's hard when you're in this ideal world that you really want to come true." In addition, disillusionment can come from the recognition that social justice work could be operating under conditions set by private foundations and other funders. Teena Marie Johnson from BYOP and BSAC tells us:

Funders oftentimes are not going to just fund youth organizing. You have to be doing something very specific; I don't know, it's like they're helping in a way, because they're providing money, but then if you don't do what they say, it's like you're stuck; they make you feel really stuck in a way that's not conducive to young people thriving. It becomes more of an adult-led, youth-facilitated environment, versus an actual youth-led environment, because it's like, "Oh, these funders are only going to give money for working on charter schools, or working on student-centered learning," when that might not be what we want to work on, but if we don't, you know, that's the most challenging, annoying thing.

### **Financial Difficulties as an Obstacle**

The second most common obstacle to continuing on in social justice work is poor financial return. In spite of the fact that most of the alumni expressed how much they are passionate about social justice work and how much they would love to continue doing it, over half asserted that it is difficult to support themselves financially doing social justice work, especially if they have family members to support. According to Hakim Sutherland from REEP,

It just goes back to my issue with me actually being able to sustain myself and me being able to actually live and to survive by myself, especially when everything is so expensive and the cost of everything is so high, because at the end of the day, I'm not a teenager, I'm not a youth anymore.

Allain Cherenfant from The City School describes the financial challenges in this way,

I think money and to actually live off of the work you're doing is a concern for me. 'Cause I'd love to be able to get involved with a lot of projects, but I kinda can't if I have to pay bills.

Royal Nunes told us that he has to work at a second job in addition to his position at The City School in order to be able to sustain a decent living for him and his son.

### **Pursuing other Life Goals**

Eight of our alumni report that they have grown out of organizing. They are in a different phase of their life and want to pursue other goals. According to Allison Collona from The City School, "It was an experience that was done and now I am in my own life now and doing other things. So I didn't get back to any kind of social work."

### **Lack of Organizational Invitations to Come Back**

As mentioned earlier, while some alumni (especially those from BYOP) share a strong belief that they are always welcome to come back to their youth organizing space, seven alumni stated that organizations do not always invite alumni back to participate and that these organizations do not provide a physical or virtual space for alumni to be together. This makes it even harder to stay linked to social justice work in actuality or in spirit. Among those who feel

they are welcome to come back, some struggle with the lack of a clear role in these groups. Wei Wang from the City School knows that she could come back if she wants, but describes the conflicting feelings that come with returning,

... I don't have a position there, you know, like I'm not a youth worker no more, there's no particular solid position for me... I could visit as a guest... but like how could I?... [If they had] an actual program or position that would really bring people maybe back... maybe that would help them stay connected.

The next section will discuss the advice that alumni have for their youth organizing groups that will ease the transition into adulthood, strengthen their supports, and perhaps help alumni overcome these obstacles to social justice work in adulthood.

## Alumni Advice to Organizations

In all of the interviews, we gave alumni the opportunity to offer advice to youth organizing groups looking to better support young people as they transition out of the groups and into their young adulthood. The interview participants offer a wide range of suggestions, with the most common being to establish a role for alumni in some kind of support or leadership capacity within their youth organizing group and to continue mentoring alumni after they graduate. The purpose of this section is to attempt to crystalize alumni advice to organizations.

At least seven alumni suggest that organizations continue to mentor young people post-graduation in some way. Advised topics of mentorship include academic support and navigating institutions such as nonprofit organizations and colleges. Some suggest that this kind of support might help alumni maintain ties to social justice work. Zoe Peters of The City School says that upon entering college she wondered: "how do you hold that reality [social justice] in all these other spaces?" Another City School alumna, Royal Nunes, believes that providing "more support through, past high school" would "lead to creating more long term leaders." Whitney Ogbesoyen, who has remained involved with REEP as an alumna, values the fact that she still has mentors in the organization. For example, she attributes her success in college partially to her ongoing relationship with Dave Jenkins. Whitney explains: "It has been such a blessing to have someone that is still here today that pushes me to do better and wants nothing but the best for me." While resource constraints may limit the extent of mentoring that groups can provide, many alumni clearly value mentoring and speak to its role in building social justice leadership beyond graduation.

A second area of advice concerned alumni's ongoing connections and contributions to youth organizing groups post-graduation. Six alumni suggested that organizations create support or leadership roles for alumni to fill. Hakim Sutherland of REEP says that organizations should try "not letting your alumni go to waste." Interview participants believe that such a role would provide a way for them to remain involved in social justice and feel valued as individuals; at the same time, they would also be a great asset to youth organizing. For example, Chrislene DeJean of BYOP explains: "Right now what I think of is: what could past folks teach youth and how could youth teach past folks? How can that happen?" Hakim also alludes to this idea of inter-

generational teaching. He says that “there’s definitely a lot of alumni from REEP, that’s 20 years, or almost 20 years of knowledge.” Cindy Printemps, another BYOP alumni, suggests that “those [alumni] who have been trained who are willing to come back in a whole other way need to feel as though they can work with each other [with youth].” Nevertheless, although she supports a role for alumni in youth work, Cindy says the ideal would be that alumni spread their social justice beliefs to other spaces rather than come back.

Still, many alumni attest to how connections to former youth organizations helped them stay involved in social justice work. Royal Nunes says that “One of the reasons why I’ve stayed a leader here [at the City School] is because I was still working here while I was in college.” Wei Wang of The City School says that “more programs that the post-interns that graduated from the program could sort of continue to do for the organization – I think that would definitely help me focus even more and continue on that passion [for social justice].” She suggests that youth organizing groups provide a “post-graduate program that you could join for people like me.” Wei Wang, like Hakim and Chrislene, also feels that alumni have a lot to offer in return. She says that people who finish the program “have some sort of good insight about the organization and the mission and the goals that they try to accomplish.”

Alumni are aware that these kinds of support require resources to provide. Royal Nunes points out that this kind of continued support is “a resourcing capacity issue” and that in order to support all graduates, The City School would “need to hire, like five more staff.” Yet, he still stresses the value of connection and support.

A third area of advice focuses on supporting youths’ entrances into adult social justice organizations. In the section of this report on transitions, we discuss Dana Mendes’s frustration that BYOP did not teach him “what adult organizing looks like.” Additionally, he says that he “didn’t see many different avenues for me to continue organizing.” Dana is not alone in these frustrations, and four participants explicitly ask for organizations to either teach them about what adult organizing is like or to facilitate a connection between them and an adult social justice organization. Cindy Printemps captures these suggestions. She says that organizations should tell alumni “what are the next steps that we have to be able to tackle” and that they should be given “a warning” about adult life. She wonders why, when BYOP has an “introduction piece” to its training, it does not have “an exit piece...around like what you’re about to encounter.” A few alumni think that having some kind of formal “exit ceremony” or “alumni celebration” might achieve this goal.

Others want help connecting to organizations in addition to advice. Similar to those who suggest mentors for graduates, Cindy recommends “a life coach” who “can connect [alumni] with the different opportunities.” Allison Colonna, a City School alumna, says that such a person “could sit down and be like – here are social issues and what do you care about? Let me find a program for you or a group that you could be involved with.” Tyree Ware, who still works with REEP, says that although “it worked out” for him to stay involved, organizations need to work “out the transition of people, because I know I wasn’t the only youth organizer here, and I got this opportunity, and there’s a lot of youth organizers that I feel have the same potential as me.”

Some alumni wish that they were still in touch with all of their youth organizing peers, and at least four study participants explicitly suggest some sort of alumni network or community – most feasibly online. Christlene says that, while she and other alumni have a Facebook group, they are “still trying to figure out who we are on the internet” and that Facebook could be used as a place to “have conversations” presumably about social justice issues. She says that “could be a way that folks can talk about like – ‘oh my God, did you just hear what happened?’ and ‘how y’all feeling about this?’ and just checking in.” Handel Dixon, a REEP alumnus, agrees: “Once in a while do a massive e-mail [or] text...even everybody has Facebook.” He suggests that the organization should “keep everyone connected through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram [and] just use social media to your advantage.” Similarly, Allain Cherenfant of The City School says that alumni could connect with each other and with current organizers “whether it be e-mailing people and being like – ‘I want to meet up and talk about this’ and making a group.” He believes this could lead to action such as “starting a grassroots campaign or doing a walk-in or sit-in.” Others, like Whitney, do not single out the internet as a meeting place but simply encourage organizations to find some way of “having alumni come together.”

When we presented our findings to a community meeting sponsored by our partner organizations, some additional points were made:

- REEP does hold an exit ceremony for youth who are graduating; the group also established an alumni database although it has not been maintained due to lack of organizational capacity.
- One alumni desired a training for how to maintain one’s social justice identity in mainstream organizations.
- Groups could help build larger social justice networks for alumni to join.
- Some participants recommended that groups find ways to help alumni develop a sense of belonging to a larger social movement.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this section we summarize our findings and present our recommendations for how youth organizing groups can provide greater support for young people as they transition out of their groups and better prepare them to remain active in social justice work as adults. We discuss our findings and recommendations in four sections: transitioning out; creating community among alumni; creating a role for alumni in youth organizing groups; and defining social justice activism. We hope that these recommendations are helpful not only to BYOP, REEP, and the City School, but to any youth organizing groups that are thinking about ways that they can keep their alumni engaged in social justice work as they transition into adulthood.

### **Recommendation #1: Develop a program for transitioning out, and a graduation ceremony**

We found that young people discovered a safe and supportive community – a home – as they entered youth organizing groups. Caring adults mentored them, helping them to grow and develop as leaders, and provided support and advice to help them do well in school and solve personal problems. They also developed close friendships with other young people. They found their voice as they emerged as leaders in these communities that shared social justice values.

When they graduated, however, they lost this powerful community. Many felt left on their own to face mainstream institutions and culture without that supportive community. They felt unprepared for the challenges of carrying social justice values into mainstream colleges and even into nonprofit organizations. Some found connections to social justice organizations on their own, but many ended up disconnected from social justice work. Those who remain connected tended to find pathways back into organizing, often through connecting again to their former or a different youth organizing group. But some of these alumni felt unprepared for what it meant to organize as an adult rather than a young person.

Our youth justice partner groups all have an established process to initiate new young people into their organizations. We would recommend that they also establish a process to assist young people in transitioning out. This would first mean explicitly recognizing that the transition out of organizing is an important process that is challenging for young people. This program could include a set of activities that occur in the final year of participation in the organization, including opportunities to discuss how to navigate mainstream institutions with social justice values, how to find social justice groups and connect to them, and what it means to organize as an adult rather than a young person embedded in a youth organizing group. The groups could also sponsor visits to social justice groups and even develop a set of contacts for young people at various colleges in the area that alumni often attend. The program could culminate with a formal “rite of passage” graduation ceremony that marks this important transition in the lives of youth organizers.

## **Recommendation #2: Create an alumni association and utilize virtual meeting spaces**

Leaving the community of fellow youth organizers when they graduate, young people have to make new friends in their new situations. This is not atypical of students who graduate from high school, whether they go on to college or not. However, the community among peers that young people experienced in youth organizing was very special. Youth connected to each other around social justice values. They had a space to discuss what it meant to be an activist and find support as they faced the challenges of working for youth justice. Moreover, they shared intense and exciting experiences, like leading public actions including marches and rallies and sometimes participated in sit-ins and civil disobedience. Often young people experienced powerful transformative events with these peers.

Many alumni report struggling to find this kind of community again in their post-graduation lives. Moreover, they see value in continued connection to their original community of youth organizing peers, with whom they share social justice values and powerful, transformative experiences. In fact, we found that having friends who are social justice activists, or who support alumni’s efforts to work for social justice, is associated with continued participation in social justice work. Yet, currently, there is no established way for youth to stay connected to each other after they graduate from youth organizing.

We recommend that youth organizing groups establish an alumni association as a platform through which young people can continue to connect with their peers after graduation.

Alumni might organize a range of activities through the association. Some of these activities can directly support the work of the youth organizing groups, like any other alumni association. But these associations are also places through which alumni can find support as they develop into adulthood, including seeking ways to continue to participate in social justice work. Many alumni mentioned the use of online connections and virtual space as a way to continue to connect as well.

Given limited resources within youth organizing groups, alumni would have to step forward to organize most of these activities. However, investing enough resources to help create and sustain the association in the first place, might create the platform through which alumni can volunteer to organize these activities. In addition, perhaps a unified alumni association could be formed, combining alumni from across a range of organizing groups. There could be separate chapters for alumni from each group within this unified structure.

### **Recommendation #3: Create and define roles for alumni**

The time young people spent in their youth organizing group was a very special time for them and it created lasting commitments. Many alumni want to find ways to maintain ties to those groups (not just to their former friends) and help support them. While some alumni are invited to return through personal connections to their former mentors, others lack that opportunity. Moreover, the frequency of invitations to come back seems to lessen over time. If the alumni's adult mentor leaves the organization, then often no connection remains at all.

Alumni want to return to support their former groups both because they feel it sustains their identity as an organizer and person committed to social justice and because they feel they have something to offer young people coming up behind them. Even when alumni manage to return to participate in some group activity, however, they report that their role is unclear. As youth leaders, they had a well-defined role and were the center of attention. When they return as adults, things are different and many do not know where they stand.

The alumni association we recommend above can help create a structure for alumni to remain involved with their organizing group. This connection will not be so entirely dependent on personal relationships with former mentors, although those relationships may well remain very important for some. In addition, however, we recommend that youth organizing groups establish a clear role for alumni when they volunteer with their former groups. They could serve as mentors for current youth organizers, helping others to gain confidence and become self-reliant; they can help teaching organizing skills like how to organize rallies; they might even lead workshops on the issues we identify above concerning transitioning out of youth organizing.

### **Recommendation #4: Facilitate ongoing dialogue on social justice**

When we started this project, our partners and we assumed that we could categorize alumni as participating in social justice work or not. This assumption implied an agreed upon definition of what constituted working for social justice. As it turned out, we found a lot of grey

area. Our partners seemed to think that they knew social justice work when they saw it, but it was hard to define. If alumni were involved in youth organizing or other forms of organizing, then that clearly counted as social justice work. Work that challenged structures and systems of oppression counted too, although what kinds of work exactly met that criteria remained unspecified. Several alumni who did social service or volunteer work, however, claimed that they were doing social justice work, even though this did not match the partners' notion of social justice work of those of social justice scholars. However, our partners seemed to agree that sometimes service work might count, especially if it was connected to organizing.

In addition, many alumni clearly struggled with what it meant to live a life committed to social justice. The large majority of youth organizers are young people of color from low-income families, and they face a number of obstacles to economic and social success. Alumni report facing significant economic barriers, as social justice jobs were few and low-paid. In addition, when they worked as youth organizers during high school, most had few other responsibilities. Now, as adults, they struggled to balance social justice work with family obligations, college work or financial responsibilities. Moreover, mainstream culture does not value social justice work, and alumni sometimes faced pressure from family or friends to "get a real job," or at least to improve their financial situation.

We recommend that youth organizing groups facilitate ongoing discussion about the meaning of social justice work for youth organizers, alumni and adult staff as well. This can be started as part of regular programming for youth and can be continued through the structure of an alumni association. How does one pursue a life committed to social justice in an unjust world? What "counts" as social justice work? How does one handle the tensions and stresses of social justice work, including financial realities and family/life responsibilities? We are not suggesting that there are clear answers to these questions. Rather, we found that alumni have not had explicit conversations about these issues and would benefit from the opportunity to discuss these issues both during their time in youth organizing as well as after they graduate.

## **Final Thoughts**

One of the significant findings of this project is that participating in youth organizing had a powerful impact on young people whatever course they followed after graduation, and whether they continued to participate in social justice work or not. Through youth organizing, young people become critical thinkers who take their social justice values and try to apply them to all aspects of their lives. At the same time, most alumni do seem to struggle to find their paths in life as young adults committed to social justice in a mainstream world that is dominated by unjust systems of racial, economic and other forms of oppression. Perhaps this should not be a surprising finding. Yet, even as the youth organizing world listens closely to young people during their time as youth organizers, the field has not listened as closely to the experiences of young people as they transition out.

We recognize that many youth organizing groups struggle to gain the resources required to fulfill their main purpose of supporting young people when they organize as members of their groups. However, if an important goal of these groups is to help young people develop as critical

thinkers, leaders in their communities and social justice activists *for life*, then in some important ways, youth organizing groups cannot fulfill their mission without paying attention and devoting some resources to preparing and supporting young people after they graduate from these groups. Finding ways to continue to support youth as they transition out of youth organizing and into young adulthood is necessary for the youth organizing's leadership pipeline to fulfill its promise to foster a new generation of social justice organizers.

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**Appendix I:  
List of Interview Participants (Alumni)**

<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>YO Group</b>	<b>Year Graduated</b>
Wendy	Adriou-Merlain	BYOP	2009
Shaleyah	Armstrong	BYOP	2012
Christlene	DeJean	BYOP	2009
Teena Marie	Johnson	BYOP/BSAC	2008/2009
Dana	Mendes	BYOP	2009
Cindy	Printempts	BYOP	2009
Shane	Bass	City School	2008
Allain	Cherenfant	City School	2007
Allison	Colonna	City School	2008
Royal	Nunes	City School	2005
Aslin	Perez	City School	2012
Zoe	Peters	City School	2007
Joshua	Roe	City School	2009
Nevina	Smallpiece	City School	2009
Wei	Wang	City School	2011
Handel	Dixon	REEP	2008
Carlos	Moreno	REEP	2007
Hakim	Sutherland	REEP	2013
Tyree	Ware	REEP	2011
Whitney	Ogbesoyen	REEP and City School	2013

**Appendix II:  
Interview Questions  
Youth Justice Research Project**

- 1) Participation in Youth Justice Organizing
  - a. How did you first get involved with youth organizing?
  - b. What is the most important thing you got out of participating in youth organizing?
  - c. Would you say that you became a leader in your group during this time?
  - d. What does being a leader mean to you?
  - e. What kinds of supports did you receive that helped you become a leader?
  - f. What was your proudest moment during your work as a youth organizer?
  - g. Was there a particular moment or event during your experience as a youth organizer that made you want to continue in social justice work as an adult (or conversely, did something happen that made you decide this was not the path for you?)
  - h. How close were you to other youth organizers when you were involved?
  - i. Were they your friends or were your friends mostly other kids?
  - j. What does it mean to you to do social justice work?
  - k. When you were involved in the group, did you feel part of a bigger youth justice or social justice movement?
  - l. In what ways, if any, are you involved in social justice work today?
  - m. What are some of the challenges of doing social justice work now?
  - n. What helps you stay connected and involved with your social justice work (friends, family, mentors, etc.)?
- 2) Experiences Post-Graduation
  - a. What did you do immediately after graduating from your program? (Such as, attend college, work full or part-time, etc.)
  - b. Follow up: explore how experiences in youth organizing shaped those immediate decisions.
  - c. How did you get to where you are today?
  - d. Follow up: explore how youth organizing shaped the path to where alum is today.
  - e. Tell me about what you are doing now, academically or professionally.
    - i. Are you satisfied with where you are?
    - ii. Are you currently looking for other opportunities?
    - iii. If so, what kinds of opportunities are you looking for?
  - f. How would you describe your political views?
  - g. Have they changed since you left the group?
  - h. If yes, how so?
  - i. *If alum is not involved in social justice work and these questions have not already been answered:*
    - i. Have you ever had a desire to get involved with social justice work again?

1. (If yes) Were there particular challenges that you faced while trying to get reconnected?
  2. (If yes) Can you tell me what supports would you need to return to social justice work?
  3. (If no) Can you tell me why not?
- 3) Role of Relationships
- a. Did you have an adult mentor that influenced you during your time as an organizer?
  - b. Are you still in touch with friends from your youth organizing group?
  - c. Are your current friends involved in social justice work?
  - d. What did your family think about your work as a youth organizer?
  - e. What messages are you receiving from family members about what you should be doing now as an adult?
  - f. Are there any other groups that you are involved with, like churches?
- 4) Role of Youth Organizing Groups
- a. How would you describe the goals of the group?
  - b. Would you say the group was successful in meeting its goals?
  - c. Did you feel successful in your work in the group?
  - d. What did your organization do (if anything) to get you thinking about engaging in social justice work after graduation?
  - e. Are there things you wish your group would have done differently in this regard?
  - f. What messages did you receive, if any, about the importance of doing well in school during your time with the group?
  - g. What were some of the most difficult challenges you faced in your life after graduating from high school?
  - h. In what ways did your experiences with youth organizing (and your organization in particular) help you to face these challenges?
  - i. Are there any ways that your experiences with organizing made these challenges more difficult?
  - j. How did your experience in youth organizing influence the kind of person you are today?

Last questions: Remind the young person about the purpose of the research, which is to help our partner organizations figure out the elements that are important in helping youth stay connected to social justice work, and also what elements are important in helping youth achieve personal and professional goals after graduation.

- What do you think these organizations could be doing differently that would help youth achieve their goals and/or help them stay connected to social justice work?
- Do you have any additional thoughts on the most important things that you learned during your time as a youth organizer that have been most helpful to you?

### **Appendix III: Organizational Affiliations of Alumni after Graduation**

#### Colleges and Universities

- Bay State College
- Brandeis University
- Bunker Hill Community College
- Massasoit Community College
- Pine Manor College
- Regis College
- Simmons College
- Smith College
- Suffolk University
- UMass Amherst
- UMass Boston

#### Employers

- Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD)
- Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE - parent organization of REEP)
- Boston Alliance of Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Youth (BAGLY)
- The City School
- DJ (self-employed)
- Fitchburg State University
- Heading Home
- Hertz
- Independent organizer
- Multicultural AIDS Coalition
- Showcase SuperLux
- REEP
- Target
- Youth on Board