

BLOOM

Annual Report

Year Four: 2015-2016



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its launch in May 2012, the California Community Foundation's (CCF) Building a Lifetime of Options and Opportunities for Men (BLOOM) Initiative has positively impacted the lives of hundreds of youth within South Los Angeles in pursuit of its mission: to improve outcomes among 14 to 18 year-old Black male youth with past or current involvement with the Los Angeles County Probation system.

In its fourth year, BLOOM narrowed its strategy to focus on high school completion and reducing recidivism. Through strategic partnerships with the Brotherhood Crusade and Social Justice Learning Institute, BLOOM produced successful youth outcomes as evidenced by analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected for the purpose of this report.

Utilizing a process and outcomes focused evaluation approach, year four has yielded a number of promising findings including BLOOM's steadily rising participant enrollment and the development of relationships with an array of referral sources that is indicative of ongoing cooperation with community stakeholders. A variety of evaluation measures further demonstrated the educational development of BLOOM participants including: increased school attendance, decreased school suspensions and expulsions, and students advancing onto higher grades as well as into post-secondary education. The fact that upwards of 60% of BLOOM youth reported participating in at least half of the Initiative's activities attests to the popularity of BLOOM opportunities and its impact on participants.

In order to continue to improve BLOOM, this report concludes with a series of recommendations. Given BLOOM's transformative impact on their lives so far, many youth requested that BLOOM offer expanded services, ways to stay involved longer, and more diverse vocational opportunities. Additionally, the expansion of evidence-based practices and more intensive/hands-on strategies for high-risk youth could be achieved either by partners enhancing pre-existing services, or through BLOOM

contracting with an agency to provide these services. A review of the quantitative data collected by the BLOOM Initiative also offers opportunities for improvement including enhanced data collection techniques, increased the use of assessment tools, and tracking youth progress over time.

Highlights from the Year Four BLOOM evaluation include:

- Nearly 89% of BLOOM youth did not reoffend during the previous quarter for which data was collected;
- Almost 60% of BLOOM youth remain actively engaged in the BLOOM Initiative;
- The California Community Foundation Board of Directors approved a two year extension of BLOOM;
- BLOOM received its first grant from a national funder, the Citi Foundation Community Progress Makers grant, for \$500,000. This investment will allow CCF to deepen the organizational capacity of the service partners;
- The personal narratives of BLOOM youth revealed an individual commitment to personal growth and a group pattern of identity change.

INTRODUCTION

Through the work of youth advocates as well as policymakers, an ongoing re-examination of social service provision has emerged nationally, with ever-greater attention being paid to the opportunity gap that exists for Black male youth. When President Barack Obama first introduced the My Brother's Keeper Initiative in 2014, he described an unsettling truth about the status of minority youth in the United States:

[Fifty] years after Dr. King talked about his dream for America's children, the stubborn fact is that the life chances of the average black or brown child in this country lags behind by almost every measure, and is worse for boys and young men.¹

While a number of efforts have been made to address this issue, systemic inequities persist as political, educational, and economic conditions continue to create obstacles to both success and survival for Black youth compared to other racial groups: disproportionate arrest rates and police contact, lower educational opportunity and attainment on average, and higher proportions of Black youth living in poverty with limited access to meaningful employment paths. These challenges may be further compounded for youth living in urban areas with a high prevalence of crime, violence, and gang activity. All of these factors complicate an already complex landscape by creating special considerations for youth development and intervention efforts. However, Building a Lifetime of Options and Opportunities for Men (the BLOOM Initiative) was far ahead of these efforts – focusing on the challenges as well as the promise of young Black men beginning in 2012.

BLOOM attempts to bridge this opportunity gap by leading system-involved Black male youth toward educational attainment and healthy pathways. In order to examine BLOOM's potential as a scalable and replicable model for other cities and demographics, and to document its impact on target youth, a UCLA research team has continued to conduct evaluative research on the Initiative's operations in year four. This report will begin with a general explanation of BLOOM followed by a literature review and landscape analysis of similar intervention efforts for comparison purposes. Next,

¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014.

the scope and depth of the evaluation will be made explicit by explaining the research methods for the qualitative and quantitative research efforts, which explore the Initiative's operations and BLOOM youth outcomes. Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings will be documented, themes drawn from the qualitative data, and recommendations made accordingly.

BLOOM STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS

ABOUT BLOOM

The BLOOM (Building a Lifetime of Options and Opportunities for Men) Initiative, initially launched in May 2012 as a five-year, \$5 million investment by the California Community Foundation (CCF), aims at increasing educational opportunities for Black male youth in South Los Angeles. In June 2016, CCF's Board of Directors approved a two-year extension of BLOOM, transitioning the Initiative from the Foundation to the community by June 2019. BLOOM was created to mitigate disproportionate representation of Black male youth in the Los Angeles County Probation system and to provide youth with greater educational opportunities. Thus, BLOOM differentiates itself from similar efforts with the specificity of its focus population: probation-involved, Black male youth, between the ages of 14 and 18,² residing in South Los Angeles. The BLOOM Initiative offers programming for its target population through partnerships with community-based organizations with records of effective service provision. As a result of these efforts, the White House recognized the BLOOM Initiative as a candidate model to guide budding programs.³ Over the past four years, BLOOM has evolved to better meet the needs of BLOOM participants, improve programmatic practices and outcomes, and strengthen the capacity of its nonprofit partners. See Table 1 (Page 6) for a visual overview of BLOOM's grantee partners and activities for 2012 through 2016.

² In year five age of inclusion will be 12 to 19 years old.

³ BLOOM Webpage, 2016.

Table 1. BLOOM Grantee Partners 2012-2016 Overview

BLOOM Grantee Partners 2012-2016	Year 1						Year 2						Year 3			Year 4					
	Brotherhood Crusade	Community Coalition	LAGRANT Communications	Liberty Hill Foundation	Los Angeles Urban League	Youth Justice Coalition	Youth Mentoring Connection	Brotherhood Crusade	CRCDC*	Community Build	Community Coalition	Los Angeles Urban League	RHD**	Social Justice Learning Institute	West Angeles CDC/Goodwill***	Youth Justice Coalition	Brotherhood Crusade	Social Justice Learning Institute	West Angeles CDC/Goodwill	Brotherhood Crusade	Social Justice Learning Institute
	Academic Support	✓						✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
	Mentors / Role Models	✓			✓	✓		✓						✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
	Capacity Building				✓																
	Career Guidance	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Personal Development	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Promotes Accountability	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Policy Advocacy		✓				✓					✓					✓	✓			✓
	Strategic Messaging			✓																	

* Coalition for Responsible Community Development

** Resources for Human Development

*** Partnership between West Angeles Community Development Corporation and Goodwill of Southern California

YEAR ONE OPERATIONS

In its first year, BLOOM funded five direct service, community-based organizations: Brotherhood Crusade (BHC), Community Coalition (CoCo), Los Angeles Urban League, Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), and Youth Mentoring Connection. BLOOM also funded two additional organizations to reach its aims of re-shaping public perception and strengthening the organizational capacity of the five partners.⁴ In this inaugural year, involvement in the BLOOM Initiative positively impacted participants in a variety of ways: lessening their exposure to contact with the Department of Child and Family

⁴ UCLA Evaluation Team, 2013.

Services (DCFS), reducing contact with probation systems, and improving their school attendance. In the Initiative's first year, many strengths emerged, including the committed engagement of staff at the partner agencies, multiple and unexpected opportunities for participants created by BLOOM involvement, and the provision of a supportive and meaningful environment for BLOOM youth.⁵

YEAR TWO OPERATIONS

During its second year, BLOOM revised its core strategy to emphasize the areas of *education* and *job opportunity*. Seven community partners received funding to provide services to 449 BLOOM youth – 273 more youth than the prior year.⁶ These partners included the Brotherhood Crusade (BHC), Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD), Community Build, the Los Angeles Urban League, Resources for Human Development, Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), and West Angeles Community Development Corporation/Goodwill Industries of Southern California (WACDC/Goodwill).⁷ During its second year, the Initiative achieved significant improvements in the areas of school attendance, employment, and probation adherence; regular school attendance increased by 17% from year one of the Initiative, almost 10% of BLOOM youth participated in job training, and 90% of BLOOM youth had not violated the terms of their probation. Several of the goals from year one were reclassified as auxiliary activities: systems change, strategic communications, strengthening organizational competencies, and evaluation.⁸

YEAR THREE OPERATIONS

In its third year, BLOOM saw almost 400 youth enrolled in the Initiative. Among the participants, 84% were enrolled in school and 82% avoided re-offense. The Initiative's funding priorities for year three were:

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ In the first year of BLOOM, two-year grants were distributed. As such, the second year of BLOOM when grants were submitted Community Build, CRCD, SJLI, and WACDC joined first year grantees the Brotherhood Crusade, Los Angeles Urban League, and Resources for Human Development.

⁷ Howard, Leap, Blackmon, & Lea, 2014.

⁸ *Ibid.*

1. **Academic/Vocational Advancement:** Supporting efforts that facilitate academic advancement for youth resulting in high school completion and/or pursuit of post-secondary education.
2. **Mentoring:** Supporting sustained mentoring relationships between system-involved youth and adult male professionals to create new adventures for exploring career and educational options.

With this in mind, three grantee partners were funded: Brotherhood Crusade (BHC), Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), and West Angeles Community Development Corporation/Goodwill Industries (WACDC/Goodwill). Over the three years of the BLOOM Initiative, the percentage of BLOOM youth who were employed remained steady but did not change noticeably, leading to the finding that most BLOOMers were ultimately too young for substantive employment. In another set of findings, the percentage of youth adhering to the terms of their probation stayed consistent with previous years.⁹

YEAR FOUR OPERATIONS

In its fourth year, BLOOM included comprehensive youth development services including *academic advancement*, *mentoring* and *life skills*. The provision of BLOOM services and programming flowed through two community-based organizations: Brotherhood Crusade (BHC) and Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI). BLOOM partners received funding from the California Community Foundation (CCF) and, as in previous years, agency partnerships were collaborative rather than competitive. In collaboration with the Los Angeles County Probation Department, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), both agencies provided youth with programming that aligned with BLOOM's mission and focus population of Black males, aged 14 to 18, with Los Angeles County Probation system involvement. In its fourth year, BLOOM narrowed its focus to *high school completion* by investing in academic advancement and *life skills/educational mentorship*. In both agencies, academic advancement services supported participants

⁹ *Ibid.*

toward high school completion/GED, credit recovery, and best-fit post-secondary options. Life skills mentoring relationships with BLOOM staff and case managers allowed BLOOM participants to explore educational options and acquire the skills necessary to achieve success after high school. Each agency aimed to serve 100 new probation system-involved Black male youth, including cross-over youth,¹⁰ and to ensure 50 youth participated in the BLOOM Reintegration Academy at Cal Poly Pomona. This two-week college immersion program was offered to eligible BLOOM youth.¹¹

Brotherhood Crusade (BHC) and Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) are both nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles and their contributions to the youth advocacy landscape is evidence of their strength as collaborative partners and their alignment with BLOOM's mission and goals. A brief overview of the history and general activities of each agency helps to contextualize their contributions as BLOOM partners.

Brotherhood Crusade was founded in 1968 to enrich the lives of at-risk youth, seniors, homeless populations, economically disadvantaged families, and underserved individuals in South Los Angeles. The Brotherhood Crusade's approach represents an innovative philosophy, as funds raised from within the community are distributed directly back into the community through programming and supportive services. Brotherhood Crusade's youth services focus on five major domains:

1. Youth development programs
2. Financial literacy programs
3. Sports
4. Business enrichment, and
5. Community events.

¹⁰ Cross-over youth is a term used to identify those who have had contact with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

¹¹ The Reintegration Academy, n.d.

In line with its message of community progress, the programming offered to BLOOM youth through Brotherhood Crusade takes a strengths-based approach to intervention that focuses on “cultural awareness activities, vocational training and job placement and economic empowerment.”¹² Brotherhood Crusade furthered BLOOM goals of academic advancement and mentorship through a variety of programming and services including: leadership and career-based mentoring, academic support and tutoring, peer bonding opportunities (events, sports), life skills, and historical/cultural awareness.¹³

Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) works to improve the living conditions for communities of color in Inglewood, California. To achieve this goal, SJLI helps individuals build their capacity to assess injustices while drawing upon their own agency to advocate for educational and health equity. What began as a pilot program in 2006 and was formally established in 2008, the Black Male Youth Academy (BMYA) enrolls Black males in grades 9-12 to “explore topics such as Black male identity, African American history, and the Black diaspora”.¹⁴ A partnership with the Social Justice Learning Institute created a BLOOM cohort of SJLI’s Black Male Youth Academy. BLOOM-specific BMYA programming also includes educational field trips, academic and career counseling, life coaching, and brotherhood activities. BLOOMers – youth enrolled in BLOOM – participating in the BLOOM-BMYA work on positive self-identity and aspiration development while receiving academic and college assistance, employment training, and other needed services. Curriculum includes financial literacy as well as curriculum in Black “history, emancipation and civil rights.”¹⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW AND LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

As BLOOM has grown, the accompanying body of literature describing the relationship between intervention efforts and successful outcomes has also evolved. It is critical to examine the literature that pre-dates the BLOOM Initiative in order to understand both the landscape and need that have characterized youth justice and youth development

¹² Guidestar, 2016.

¹³ Brotherhood Crusade, n.d.

¹⁴ Social Justice Learning Institute, 2016.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

programming. Extant literature links productivity activities such as employment and academic advancement to increased achievement and decreased criminality. Analysis of this research and best practices in the field provide insight into the effectiveness of programs meeting the needs of BLOOM's target population.

Criminalization and Recidivism

Any review of the literature on youth development and juvenile justice would be incomplete without mention of how system contact and the criminalization of youth contribute to future recidivism. After contact with the juvenile justice system, there is a significant chance of repeated involvement with the system, with estimates greater than 50%.

System contact proves to be damaging and stigmatizing and many youth respond to mistreatment or trauma by acting out more frequently or more severely. In this way, punitive measures including incarceration create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby youth treated as "criminals" become predictably more prone to crime, violence, substance abuse, and other forms of delinquency.¹⁶

In the United States, literature focuses on the impact of system contact on youth of color and those with additional needs. System contact proves to be damaging and stigmatizing and many youth respond to mistreatment or trauma by acting out more frequently or more severely. In this way, punitive measures including incarceration create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby youth treated as "criminals" become predictably more prone to crime, violence, substance abuse, and other forms of delinquency.¹⁶ The youth involved in the BLOOM Initiative identify respectful treatment as an important part of feeling safe and engaging with the program.¹⁷ Furthermore, many of the youth in contact with the juvenile justice system are "cross-over youth," a term used to identify those who have had contact with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In addition, many of these youth have special mental health concerns, learning disabilities, and other needs; in Los Angeles, at least 30% of incarcerated youth require mental health services.¹⁸ System involvement is also impacted by individual socio-demographic factors, most notably, race. Even when controlling for variations in crime, minority youth receive harsher punishments. A history

¹⁶ Rios, 2006.

¹⁷ UCLA Evaluation Team, 2013.

¹⁸ McCroskey, 2006.

of contact with systems, school difficulties, disabilities, and substance abuse additionally predispose youth to involvement in the juvenile justice system.¹⁹ The youth most likely to be system-involved are also likely to have a host of other destabilizing factors at play in their lives; programs that aim to reduce recidivism, even if focused on one area, must recognize the diversity and complexity of challenges facing system-involved youth.

Considerations for Youth Programming

Effective approaches to youth programming are evidence-based, develop pro-social and academic skills, build lasting relationships with supportive adults, and address delinquency, trauma, mental health, and substance abuse issues. Much of the research on youth development focuses on risk factors for delinquency, criminality, and recidivism. Scholars urge advocates to consider oft-overlooked factors, including the structure of a community, family interventions, and the resources available to youth. Programs must consider neighborhood and family factors when creating community-

Scholars urge advocates to consider oft-overlooked factors, including the structure of a community, family interventions, and the resources available to youth. Programs must consider neighborhood and family factors when creating community-based youth programs and acknowledge the structural barriers to advancing academically and finding employment after youth come into contact with the justice system.²⁰

based youth programs and acknowledge the structural barriers to advancing academically and finding employment after youth come into contact with the justice system.²⁰

Abrams and Freisthler (2010) examine neighborhood risks to youth development, but also acknowledge that positive influences from youth services and programs can override neighborhood risks. In a similar vein, Abrams and Snyder (2010) discuss the need to consider family structure; their research suggests working with families proves more successful than individual-level interventions on their own.

These considerations inform evidence-based strategies and tailored services that improve the lives and academic outcomes of probation youth.

The literature also posits that successful programs consider the importance of client strengths in addition to social ties. Berg and Huebner (2010) emphasize the importance

¹⁹ Maschi et al., 2008. Mears & Travis, 2004.

²⁰ Abrams & Snyder, 2010. Mears & Travis, 2004.

of social ties as sources of strength and support for men with a history of frequent unemployment, offering the observation that social ties are an extremely important factor to consider in efforts to keep individuals developing rather than recidivating. While so many interventions focus on deficits, Kurtz and Linnemann (2006) advocate for the expansion of strengths-based practice into correctional and probation settings, noting that it is critical work with individuals still actively connected to the system. Rather than using a control perspective, or focusing on the individual's problems, strengths-based practices mobilize the individual's assets and resources to create positive change. Kurtz and Linnemann evaluated an intensive strengths-based case management program that linked youth with adult mentors who could provide "motivation, support, and [encourage] timely goal completion." According to their findings, the program's hands-on approach yielded a lower recidivism rate than comparison groups. Their findings are supported by additional research that similarly points to the benefits of individual case management, mentorship, and counseling in guiding youth to positive self-development when during intervention. Research suggests these types of interventions will be more effective among high-risk offenders, gang-involved, and minority youth, especially when interventions allow for consistent, sustained contact with clients over extended periods of time. This is an important finding with applicability to BLOOM, with so much of the Initiative's programming focused on strengths building and supportive mentorship relationships.

Other successful approaches to juvenile justice consider restorative justice approaches that "repair the harm done by the crime by bringing together the people most affected by the offense" with "dialogue, reparation, and accountability" serving as guiding tenets. The approaches to crime and delinquency reject punitive responses in favor of a "restorative process" that supports the victim and the offender while encouraging reintegration into the community.²¹ Restorative justice takes many forms, including victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, as well as peace circles that

²¹ Bradshaw, 2005.

“promote accountability, healing, and compassion through community participation in resolving conflicts”.²²

Youth Program Landscape

As a review of the literature reveals, extant research on youth intervention evidences the effectiveness of strengths-based programs, mentorship, restorative justice, academic support, and mentorship in promoting youth development and educational advancement. A review of the youth development program landscape provides context for an examination of BLOOM’s efforts. A number of preexisting and developing programs are relevant to the BLOOM Initiative. The Educational Talent Search (ETS), a federal education initiative, was born out of the Economic Opportunity Act during the 1960’s; this program improved youth outcomes by providing “academic, career, and financial aid counseling and support that would encourage high school graduation and facilitate entrance into higher education.”²³ While it is limited by the fact that it focuses on high achieving students, Ward’s case study of Connecticut’s GEAR UP Project revealed its usefulness as a *model* for academic advancement programs. The GEAR UP program includes curriculum that emphasizes “college awareness, positive identity development [and] values, commitment to learning” while “enhancing social competencies, strengthening community connections, and managing important school transitions.”²⁴ GEAR UP also includes a science-based program component, Maximizing Adolescent Academic eXcellence (The MAAX), which incorporates six aims to improve “educational engagement,” strengthen youths’ support networks, and academic aspirations and college awareness. The effectiveness of these approaches was evidenced in the qualitative data, which revealed increased student engagement in academics and higher education aspirations.²⁵

As if issuing a description of the development of the BLOOM Initiative, the research recommends a **strengths-based approach** with a wide range of intervention tactics including **academic** advancement and continuing education, **family** engagement, **mentorship**, and **case management** that recognizes **individual strengths** and fosters **social ties**.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ward, 2006. USDOE, 1996.

²⁴ Ward, 2006.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

A research study by Rodríguez & Conchas (2009) focused on a community-based truancy prevention program for Black and Latino/a middle school students; based on their analysis, “the program’s commitment to providing a safe space, incentive structures, institutional advocacy, and social networks” were the primary means by which positive youth transformation occurred. Research and evaluation of mentorship approaches to intervention, such as the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, has also been shown to be an effective means of youth intervention. In fact, a meta-analytic study of 73 independent evaluations of mentoring programs directed toward children and adolescents concluded that well-implemented mentorship programs can “affect multiple domains of youth functioning simultaneously” and can improve “selected outcomes of policy interest” including educational measures such as academic achievement test scores.²⁶ Research also points to programs such as Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) and Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) as models for highly effective in-school programs for academic advancement.²⁷

More recently, intervention efforts and programming geared toward specific populations started to arise to meet the needs of minority youth, females with justice system contact, as well as individuals with unique mental health or educational needs. Each of these groups have unique challenges and concerns when it comes to intervention efforts and thus, responses often face staggering disparities between minority and non-minority outcomes. Many successful programs in the Los Angeles area have seen positive youth outcomes by focusing on educational attainment, mentorship, community engagement, and advocacy. In addition, there is extensive community-based advocacy work that emphasizes the voices and contribution of youth leaders, particularly young men and women of color. These organizations complement the work of the BLOOM Initiative and are integral to its efforts.

²⁶ DuBois et al. 2011.

²⁷ Gándara et al., 1998. Swanson et al., 2000.

The Sons and Brothers Initiative (SBI) represents a large scale \$50 million, 7-year commitment funded by The California Endowment to intentionally and specifically address the needs of boys and young men of color throughout California. Launched in 2011, SBI concentrates on the dire issues faced by boys and men of color and is comprised of two coalitions: The Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition (BSS) and the Safety and Justice Coalition. While the coalitions both focus on dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, each has a different focus and strategic approach. BSS centers on improving the school and youth development outcomes of young boys and men of color and the Safety and Justice Coalition focuses on justice system improvement and youth development.

The efforts of BSS have strong resonance for the BLOOM Initiative. By changing education systems to provide students with the positive supports that help youth stay in school and graduate, BSS works toward the SBI goal of dramatically reducing the number of students being pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline. The BSS coalition is composed of 11 community organizations within the three geographic SBI sites that advocate for positive alternatives to suspensions and the reduction of youth criminalization within their communities. By leveraging a variety of organizations working toward the same goal, BSS effectively capitalizes on the extraordinary work and collaboration of those partners that are deeply dedicated to growth and improvement in the lives of the most vulnerable residents in their communities. There are specific community-based organizations and programs who work with BSS and whose efforts also form an important backdrop to BLOOM efforts including organizations such as the Community Coalition (CoCo) in South Los Angeles and its

partners, Inner City Struggle and the Community Rights Campaign.

This brief overview of the landscape provides a picture of the current community-based work that is strongly related to BLOOM. Alongside such community-based efforts, research on school climate, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the

Alongside community-based efforts, research on school climate, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the challenges facing system-involved youth acknowledges the variety of factors affecting recidivism and the success of specific intervention efforts.

challenges facing system-involved youth acknowledges the variety of factors affecting recidivism and the success of specific intervention efforts. In general, effective strategies increase youth productivity, improve access to advancement opportunities (academic or employment) and provide support through positive social relationships such as mentors. Nevertheless, the complex reality of youths' lives means that efficacious programs may need tailoring based on participants' gender, race, age, geographic region, and depth of system involvement. Continuing evaluation of specific programs and outcomes will reveal which aspects of these programs are working and what could be improved. As researchers clarify their understanding of existing programs and develop models for success, there will be an ongoing need for programming informed by this body of knowledge to serve system-involved youth. As if issuing a description of the development of the BLOOM Initiative, the research recommends a strengths-based approach with a wide range of intervention tactics including academic advancement and continuing education, family engagement, mentorship, and case management that recognizes individual strengths and fosters social ties.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

In line with extant literature on inner city public school education and the work of the organizations involved with community advocacy and ending the school-to-prison pipeline, many South Los Angeles youth experience school and educational climates that are discouraging at best and dangerous or marginalizing at worst.²⁸

Disproportionate statistics portray the world that boys and young men of color encounter within the school setting, reinforcing the urgency of system change: throughout California, African-Americans experience one of the highest rates of child poverty, reporting approximately 27%. Unfavorable education outcomes persist among this population as well: African-Americans over the age of 25 who reside in California are nearly twice as likely to be without a high school diploma as Whites. All of this contributes to the persistence of the school-to-prison pipeline as African American men experience a higher probability of going to prison over their lifetimes compared to any other group.

²⁸ Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014.

Many young men in South Los Angeles attend under-resourced schools that are understaffed and over-crowded. Despite the complex risk factors affecting inner city urban youth generally, and Black male youth specifically, teacher shortages often mean that a disproportionate number of teachers are under-qualified compared to teachers in more affluent schools.²⁹ Positive policy reform work and legislative improvements, such as the passage of Los Angeles Unified School District's Discipline Foundation Policy hold out the promise of more enlightened educational practices and the implementation of the restorative justice practices previously noted. While this was designed to reduce both suspensions and expulsions, the policy has been slow to come to fruition. The implementation and enforcement has been slow to reach schools that need it most, primarily those in South Los Angeles.³⁰ In order to reduce disparities faced by boys and

In order to reduce disparities faced by boys and young men of color in the classroom, it is critical to fight to reform disciplinary practices within education institutions.

young men of color in the classroom, it is critical to fight to reform disciplinary practices within education institutions. This work has been the focal point of several organizations with an advocacy, most notably the organizations aligned with the Sons and Brothers Initiative described above, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Youth Justice Coalition.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY PROBATION

During the past decade, responsibility for managing most system-involved youth has shifted from the State of California to its 58 counties.³¹ With 6,500 employees and an annual budget of more than \$800 million, the Los Angeles County Probation Department³² is responsible for the vast majority of youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system in the county, including those who have committed serious crimes and have complex needs. On any one day, the department supervises close to 700 youth who are held in locked facilities.³³ Experts consider probation camps to be a

²⁹ Jacob, 2007.

³⁰ Gregor & Hewitt, 2011.

³¹ Krisberg et al., 2010.

³² The Los Angeles County Probation Department oversees both adult and juvenile probation, tracking approximately 43,000 adult offenders and is responsible for 9,000 juveniles, both in and out of custody.

³³ Newell & Leap, 2013.

more moderate alternative to the adult criminal justice system and the state-run Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Each probation camp in LA County is a fully enclosed facility, with a capacity to hold up to 120 youth. While the LA County Probation Department runs these facilities, other county departments provide education (300 minutes of daily instruction in classes with a maximum 17-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio), health, and mental health services.³⁴

Youth are sent to these facilities after a court hearing for three-, six- or nine-month sentences, with an average camp stay of 4.7 months.³⁵ The average *daily* cost to house a youth in a probation camp is \$329.61; for a *six-month* sentence, this equates to more than \$60,000 per youth.³⁶ Of the approximately 900 young people detained in the probation camps, 89% are male and more than 95% are youth of color. African American youth are particularly over-represented in LA County's probation camps, with an incarceration rate three times that of their prevalence in the general population. Youth in the camps come largely from the First and Second supervisorial districts, encompassing South Los Angeles, East Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley.³⁷ Los Angeles County juvenile probation camps are located in sparsely populated, geographically isolated areas of the county and remain largely correctional in design.³⁸

Youth live together in dorms with little privacy and high risk. As noted by former LA County Assistant Chief Probation Officer (and current and former Interim Chief Probation Officer) Calvin Remington, this design, which places many youth in one large room together, can foster competition, deepen factions, and further gang problems.³⁹ Reports found a high incidence of youth-on-youth assaults, particularly when large numbers of youth were together in the dorms.

African American youth are particularly over-represented in LA County's probation camps, with an incarceration rate three times that of their prevalence in the general population.

³⁴ <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/41381.pdf>

³⁵ This average length of stay of 4.7 months is inconsistent with the three-, six-, and nine-month sentences youth are given because early release from the camps is a common practice. Abrams, Daugherty and Freisthler, 2010.

³⁶ Wion, 2012.

³⁷ Newell & Leap, 2013.

³⁸ Macallair, et al., 2011.

³⁹ Remington, 2012.

There are many problems that youth – primarily young men of color – experience within probation camps. Investigative and research reports repeatedly found that staff employed excessive use of force, inappropriate physical restraints, blatant mistreatment and assault, overuse of pepper spray and verbal abuse. To address violations and abuses, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), and Department of Mental Health, have undertaken considerable policy, program, and staffing changes. Nevertheless, considerable work remains to make this system rehabilitative and to respond to the pre-existing emotional, psychological, and physical harm exacted as a result of punitive treatment and isolating experiences in camp.⁴⁰ Most significantly, community-based support for youth reentry and to prevent youth from further probation system involvement has been sadly lacking. This is another area the Probation Department has begun to address. However, considerable questions have been raised regarding the disposition of the state-based Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) funding which is specifically designated for use to fund community-based services. All of these developments have considerable implications for the BLOOM Initiative.

Most significantly, however, the Los Angeles County Probation Department has begun to recognize that there is a strong differentiation between the services and supervision required for juvenile and adult populations. With this in mind, the department has embarked upon a \$1 million year-long study focused on the feasibility of dividing the department into two separate departments, one for juveniles and one for adults. This possible change would have strong implications for the BLOOM Initiative, which could serve as a model program in future planning.

⁴⁰ Newell & Leap. 2013. Remington, 2012.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The primary focus of the quantitative data is on educational outcomes, both short and longer term. All of this information was provided by the 2015-2016 BLOOM grantee partners based on the data collected as part of the BLOOM Initiative. This section of the report begins with some basic information concerning the overall Initiative, the grantee partners, and the youth participating in the Initiative. Throughout this section of the report, references will be made to the qualitative findings that are described in further detail in the Key Qualitative Themes section (Page 39). While the qualitative report provides a tremendous amount of useful information, of particular relevance to the focus on education and schools presented in this section are the following themes:

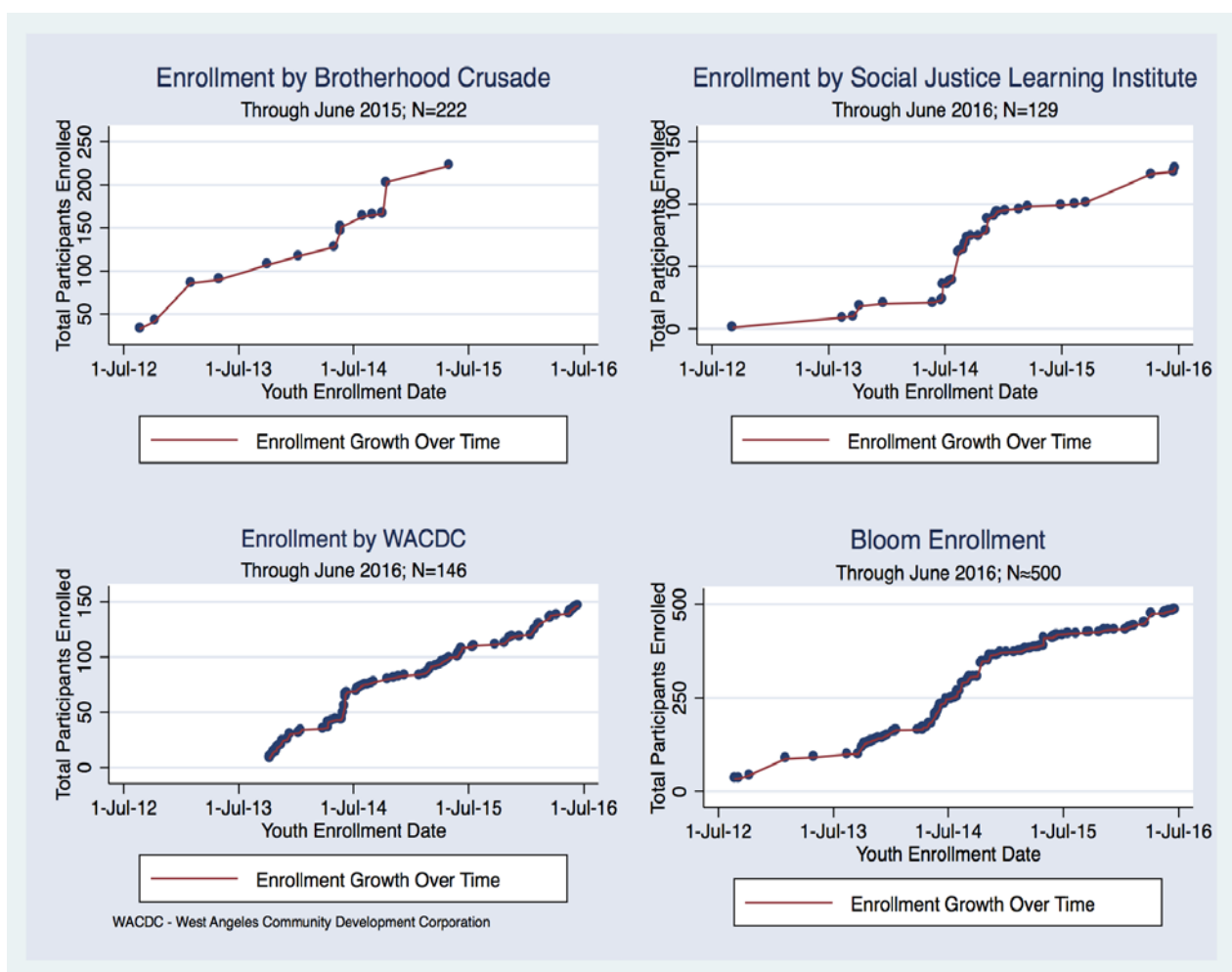
- **Theme 1:** Life Before BLOOM – Before engaging with BLOOM, participants' lives were characterized by a number of challenges and obstacles to success.
 - o Subtheme 1(c): Academic and Behavioral Issues. Familial instability, insufficient encouragement, and a peer culture of devaluing education often translated to low academic motivation, truancy, and other delinquent behaviors.
- **Theme 2:** New BLOOMers – BLOOM effectively gained and retained new participants.
- **Theme 3:** Skill-Building Activities – BLOOM programming and services developed participants' academic, interpersonal, and life skills.
 - o Subtheme 3(d): Academic Support and Tutoring. The academic support services provided by BLOOM's partner agencies improved youths' academic experiences and students cited increased motivation.

Readers are encouraged to take a close look at all the themes that come through from focus groups and interviews, which are available in the Key Qualitative Themes section (Page 39).

ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION

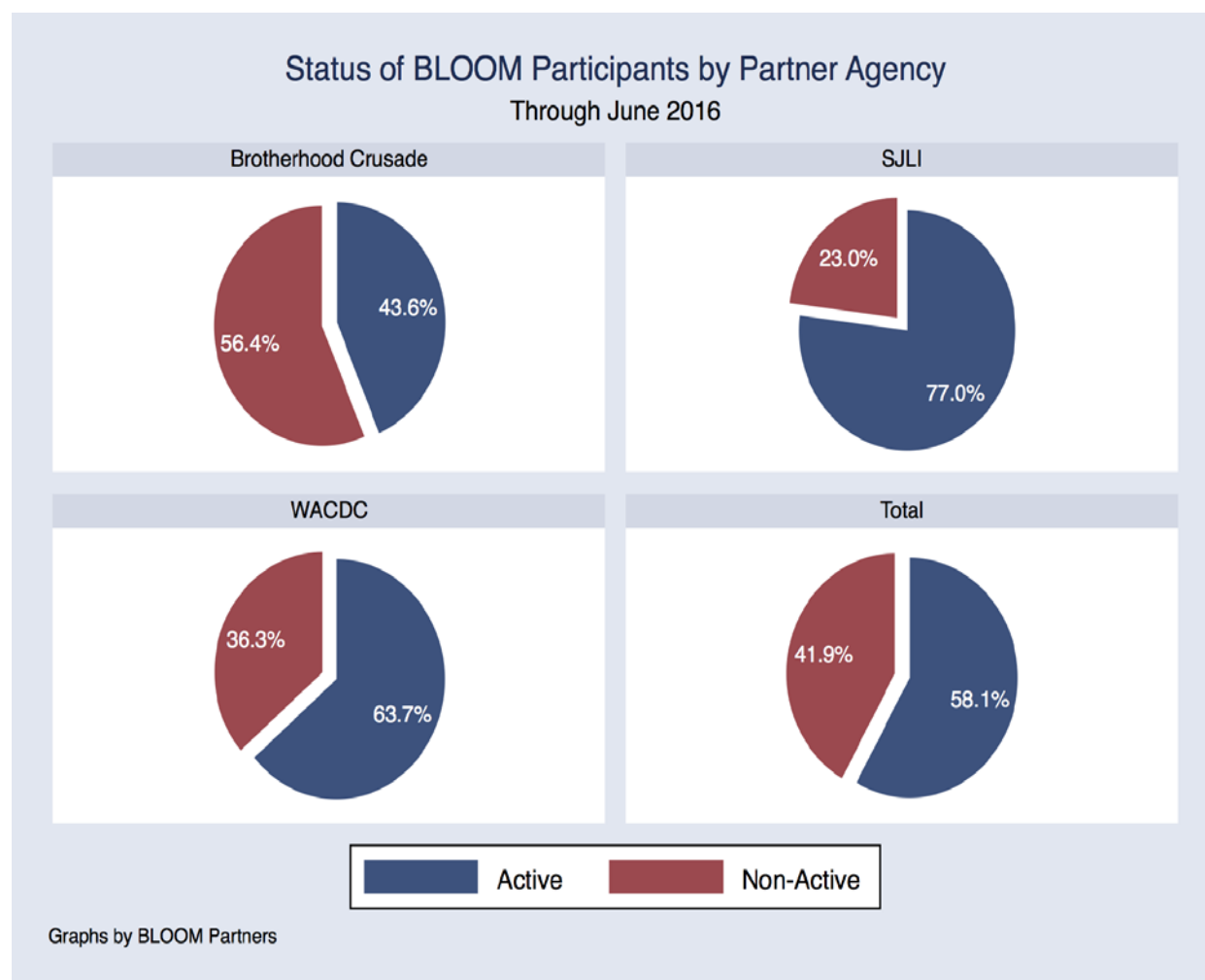
To date, approximately 500 youth have been enrolled in BLOOM. Figure 1 (below) shows the enrollment growth for each partner and overall. It is important to note that the scales on all the graphs in Figure 1 are scaled slightly differently. West Angeles Community Development Corporation/Goodwill Industries of Southern California (WACDC/Goodwill) began later than the other two partners and Brotherhood Crusade (BHC) has not enrolled a new youth since June of 2015.

Figure 1. Enrollment by Partner in BLOOM Initiative



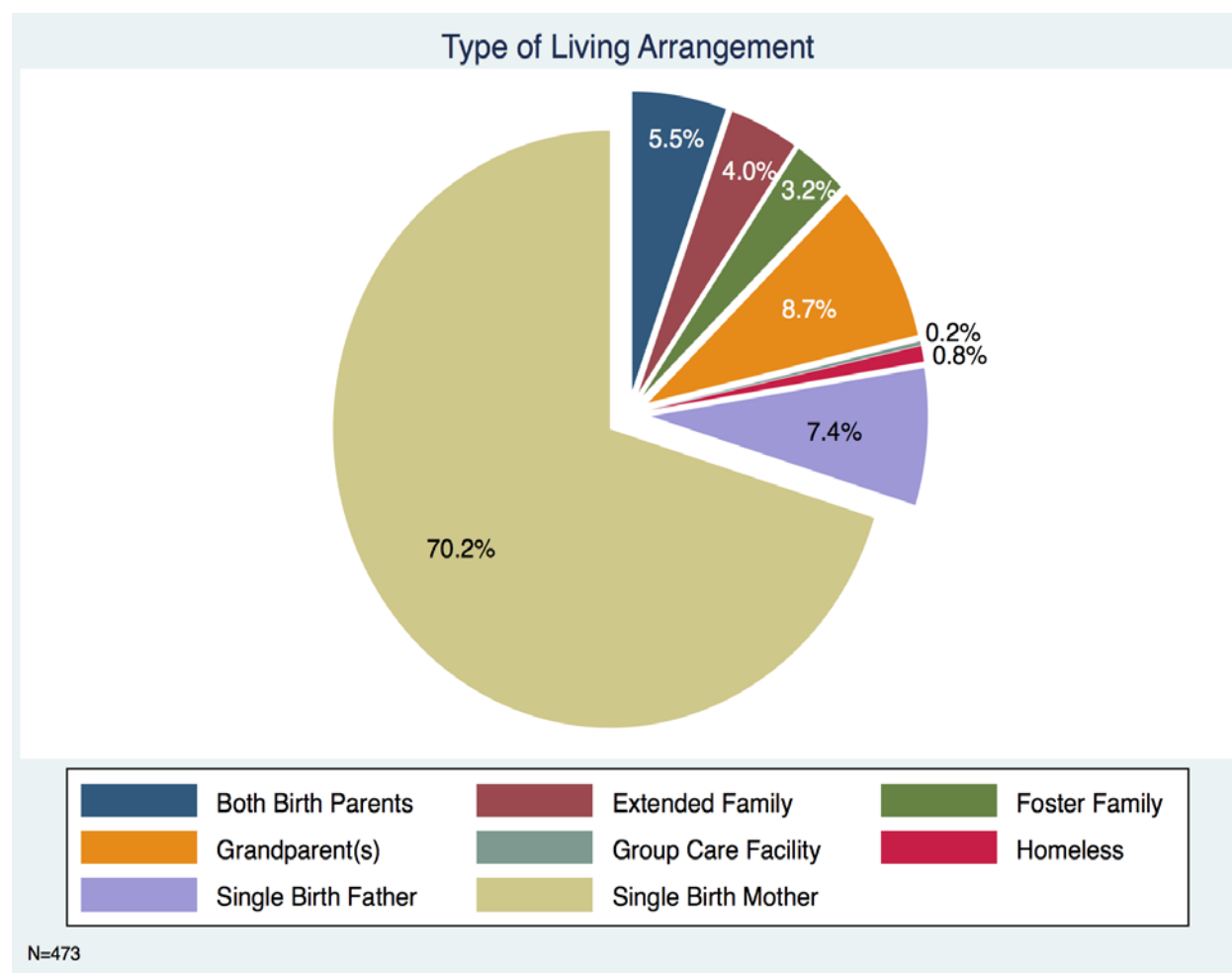
Currently 58% (286/492) are actively participating in BLOOM. The partners self-define which youth are 'active' compared to 'non-active'. Essentially the BLOOM youth identified as 'active' continue to be engaged in the opportunities provided by the partner and are available so updated information can be collected on a quarterly basis. As can be seen in Figure 2 (below), Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) has the highest percent (77%) of active BLOOM youth, followed by WACDC/Goodwill with 64%.

Figure 2. Status of Youth in BLOOM Partners



In Figure 3 (below), the majority of the BLOOM youth report coming from single parent, female-headed households (70%). This is followed by grandparents (8.7%) and then single parent, male-headed households (7.4%). Only 5.5% of the youth reported living with both parents.

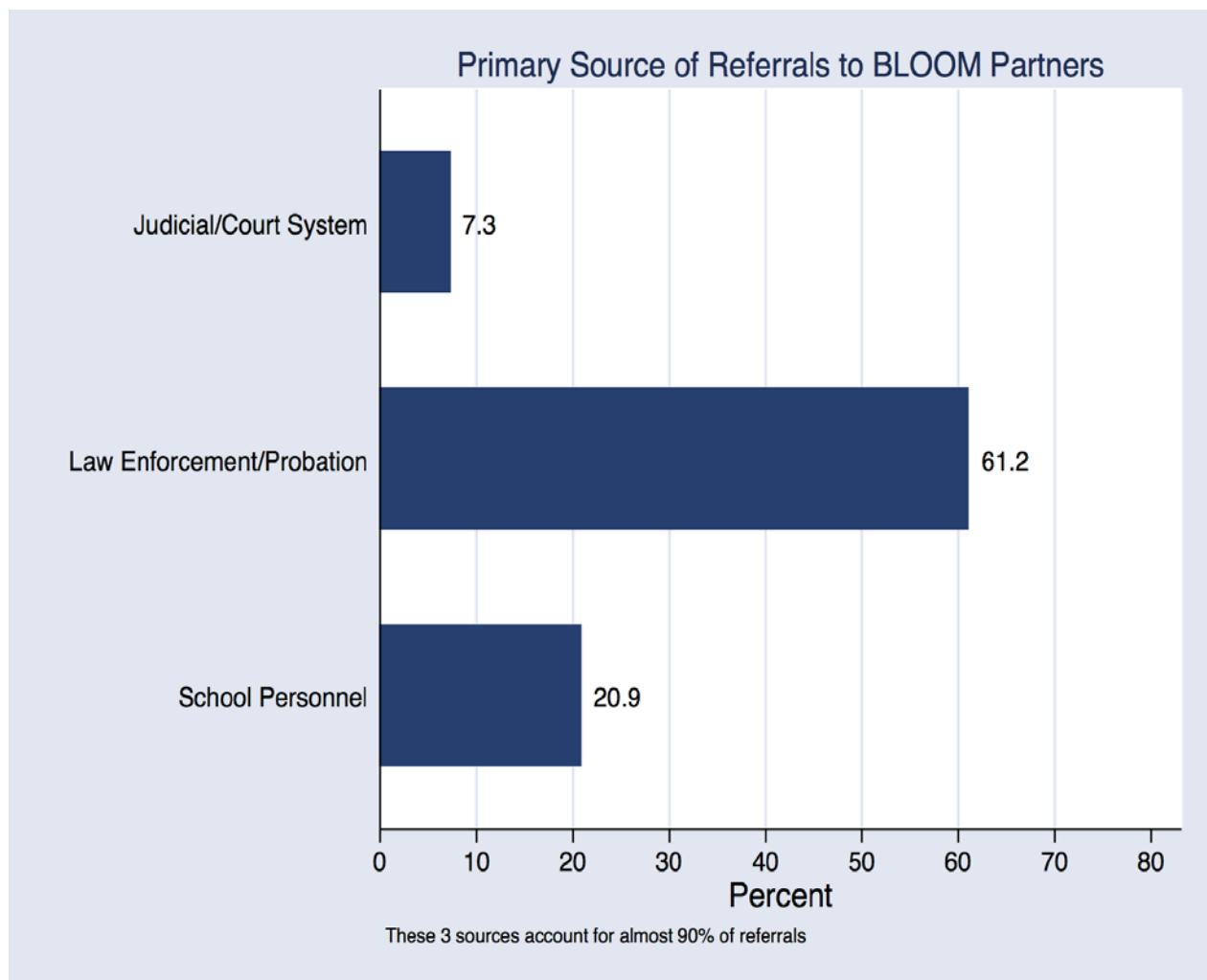
Figure 3. Living Arrangements



REFERRAL SOURCE

In Figure 4 (below), the majority of referrals come to the partners through law enforcement (61%), followed by school personnel (20%). These three referral sources (Law Enforcement/Probation, School Personnel, Judicial/Court System) account for almost 90% of the referrals received by the partners. There is a difference (not shown) in primary referral source between partners, with Brotherhood Crusade and WACDC/Goodwill getting 90% and 64% respectively from law enforcement, and SJLI getting 54% from school personnel and only 7% from law enforcement.

Figure 4. Primary Referral Sources to BLOOM



EDUCATION MEASURES

A quick examination of grade level (Figure 5, below) when youth enter BLOOM indicates that the majority of youth enter enrolled in grades 10-12. Regardless of current level of involvement (Active vs. Non-Active), the youth who enter are primarily from grades 10th through 12th. In addition, almost 30% of the youth actively involved with one of the partners attend school every day (Figure 6, Page 27). An additional 20% attend two to three days a week leading to almost 50% of these youth attending school more often than not. Attendance weekly or sporadically is substantially less in those youth who are no longer actively engaged with the Initiative. For additional detail please refer to the Key Qualitative Themes section (Page 39), in particular Subtheme 1(c): Academic and Behavioral Issues (Page 43).

Figure 5. Grade at Which Youth Entered BLOOM

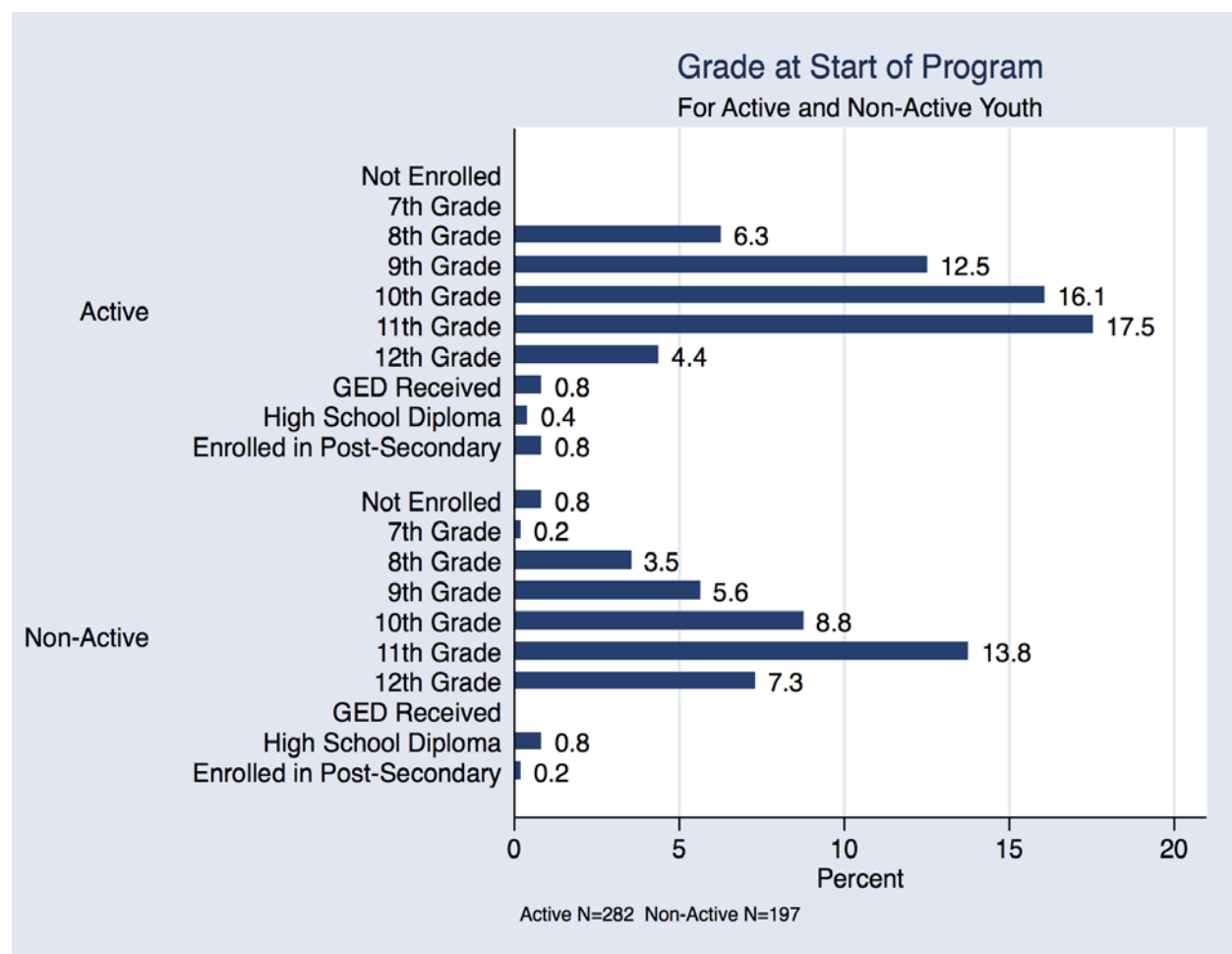
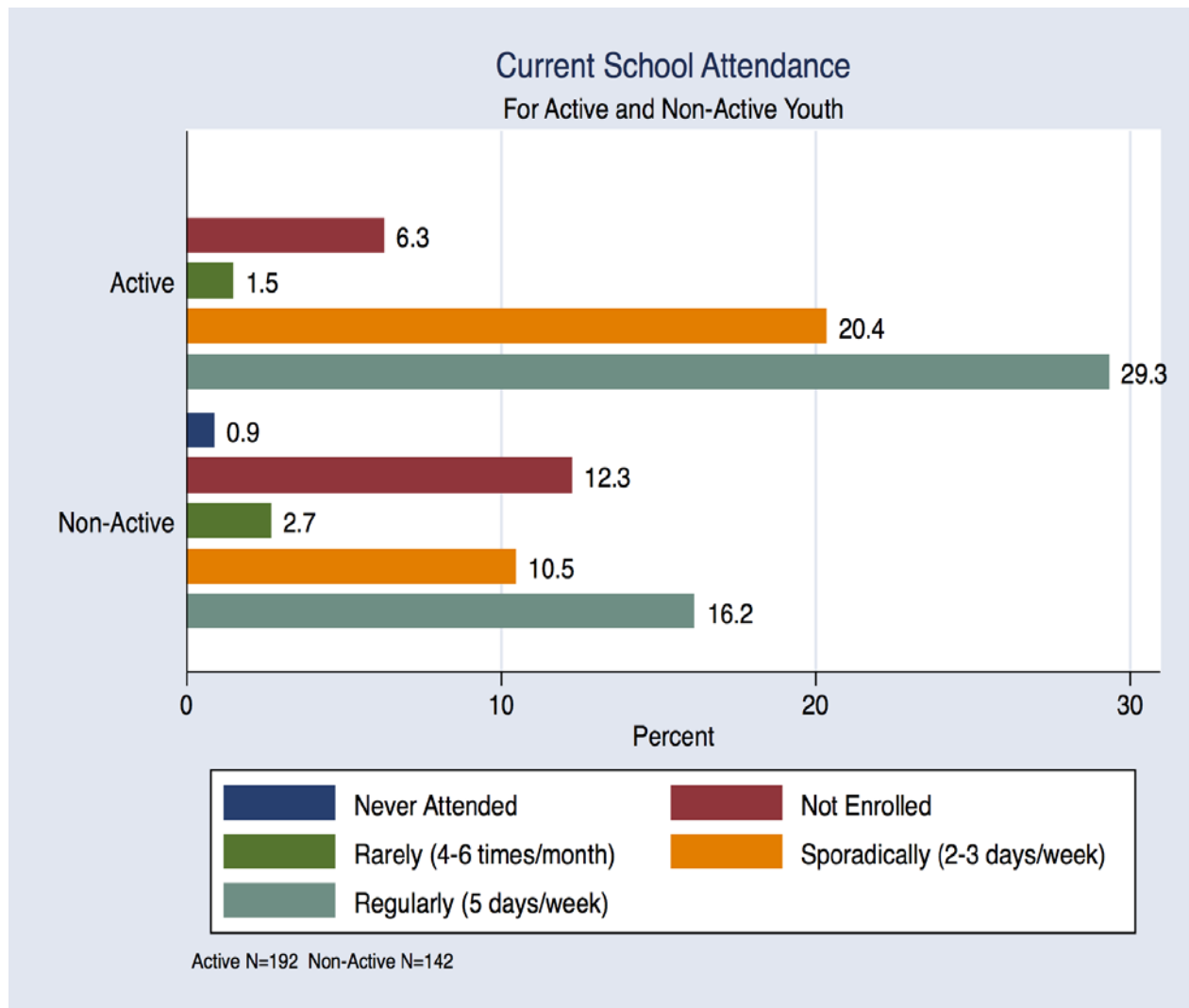
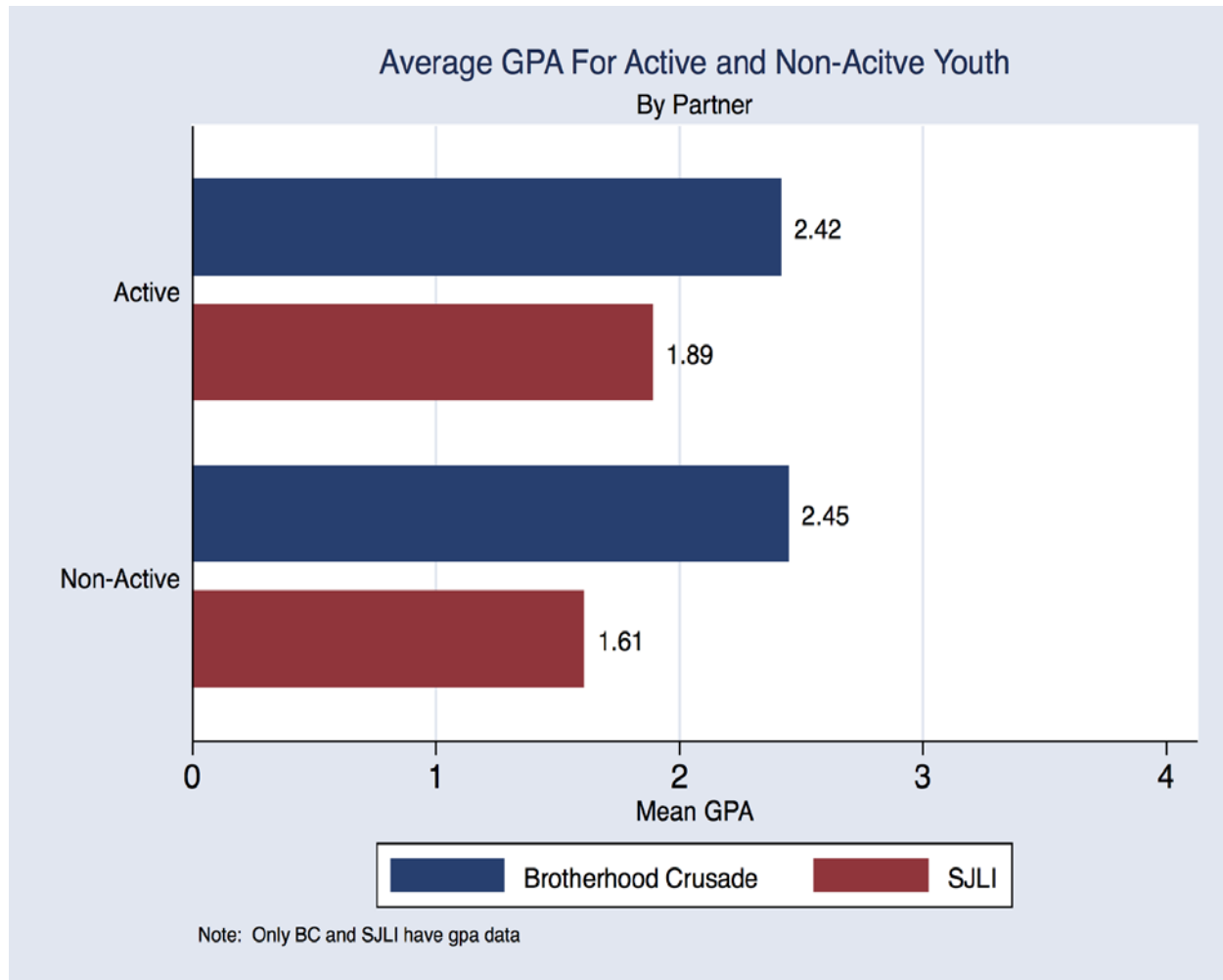


Figure 6. School Attendance



The analysis of the GPA data (Figure 7, below) demonstrates that those who are currently active as well as those who are no longer active participants have a passing GPA. However, GPA data are not available on the majority of the youth participating (205 out of 492). Only Brotherhood Crusade and Social Justice Learning Institute collected GPA data. Part of the challenge is the relationship the partner has (or does not) with the educational agencies (schools) associated with the BLOOM youth. The overall GPA for youth with 'Active' status was 2.22, the combination of BCH and SJLI (*not shown*). Another positive to note is that the GPA for the 'Non-Active' is also good at almost 2.5.

Figure 7. Grade Point Average (GPA)



Both partners, Brotherhood Crusade (BHC) and Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) are engaged in credit recovery efforts with the BLOOM youth. Credit recovery allows students enrolled in accredited middle/high schools to take the credits they require to meet their school's graduation requirements. Figures 8 and 9 (below), show the average number of credits recovered by both partners and for those youth who are currently actively involved and those who are no longer actively involved. In order to assist youth in working toward a high school diploma this is a necessary step toward that goal.

Figure 8. Credit Recovery Support

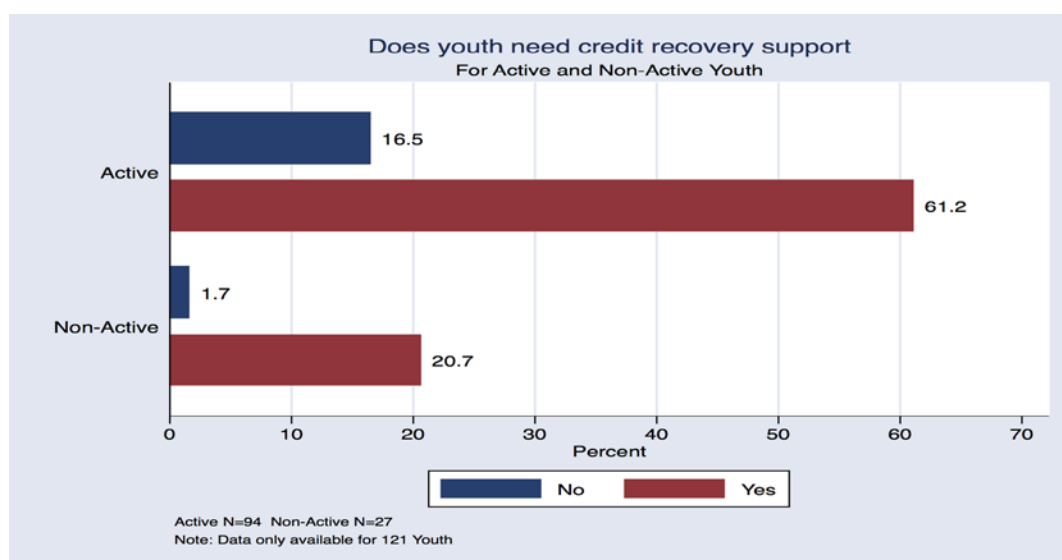


Figure 9. Average Credit Increases

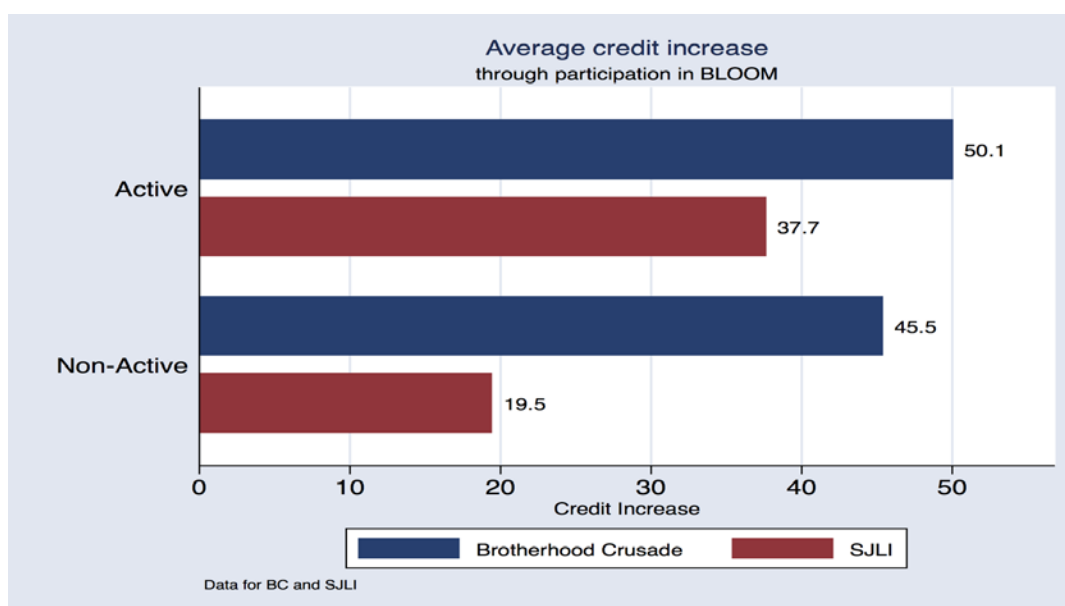
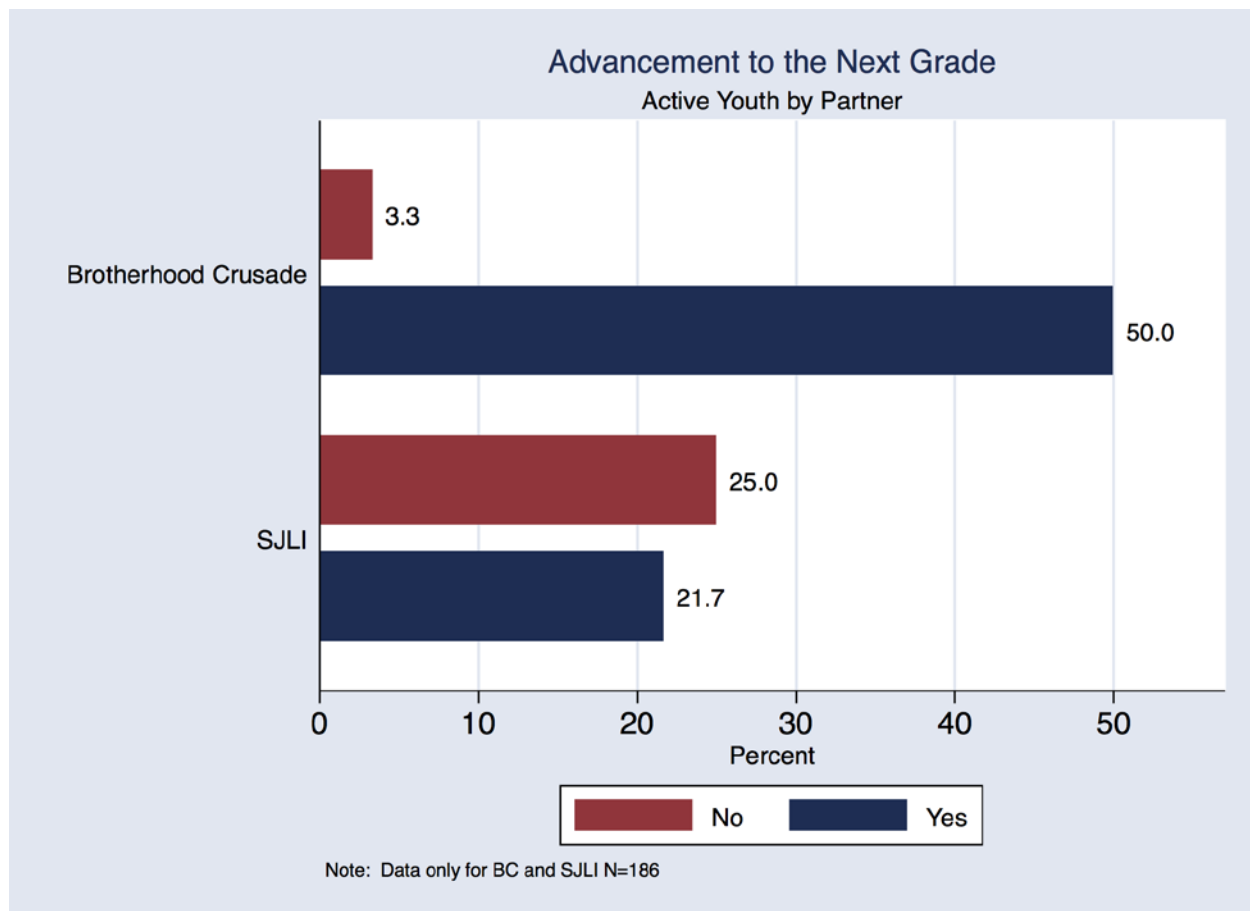


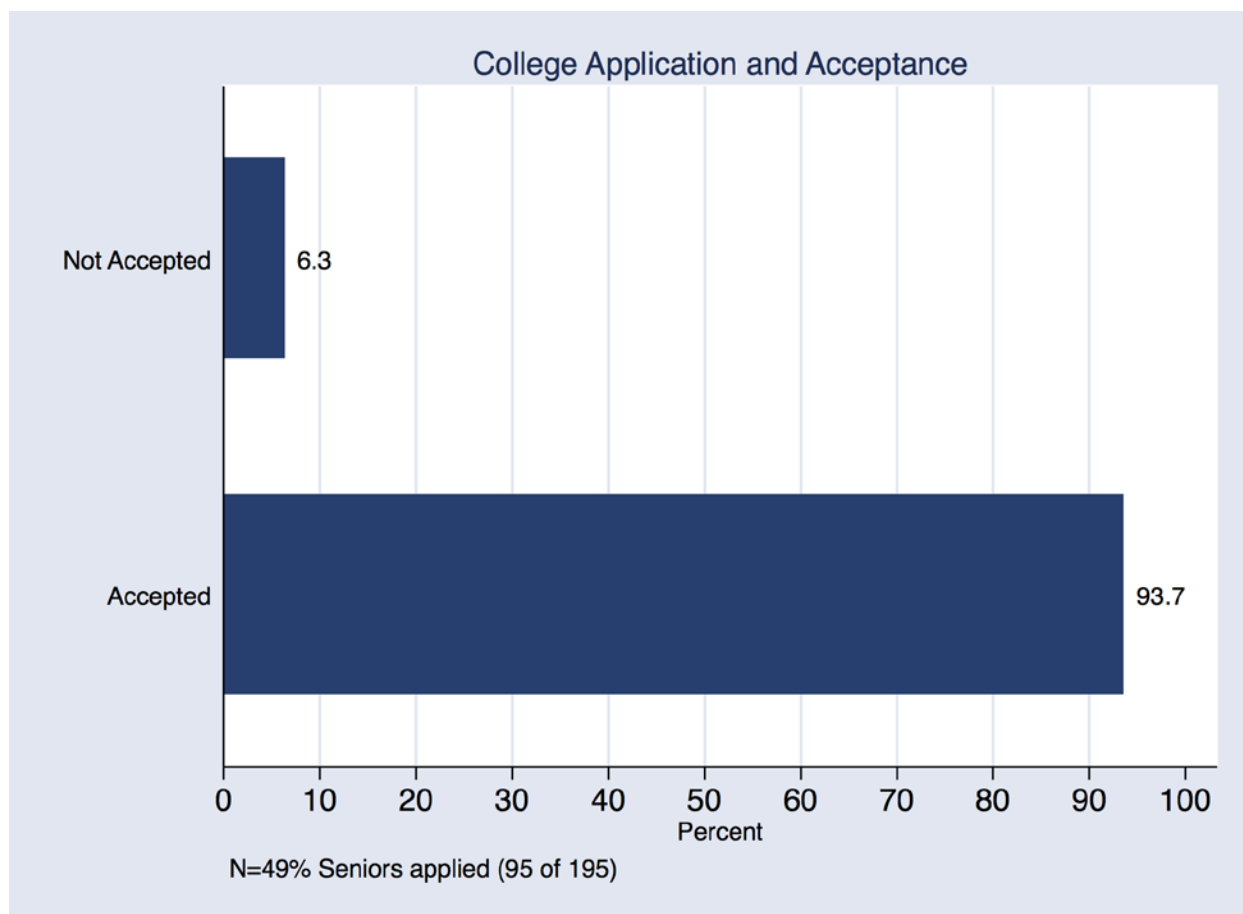
Figure 10 (below), provides information on the percentage of actively involved youth who have moved on to the next grade (“Yes”). Across both partners, almost 50% (49.4%) have successfully advanced. Slightly more than 27% of the youth have not successfully transitioned. For more in-depth information, please refer to Subtheme 3(d) – Academic Support and Tutoring in the Key Qualitative Themes section (Page 39) for explanations from the youth themselves.

Figure 10. Advancement to Next Grade



As noted previously, a majority of youth begin participating in BLOOM during their sophomore through senior year in high school – so, every year a number of youth may have the opportunity to graduate and move on to higher education. Of those seniors who successfully completed, almost 94% are subsequently accepted to college (Figure 11, below). At this time, college persistence for BLOOM youth has not been tracked; however, this is a good indication that BLOOM is helping to prepare participants for post-secondary opportunities.

Figure 11. Seniors Applying To and Accepted in Higher Education



It is difficult to progress in school if you are unable (or unwilling) to attend. Figure 12 (below) presents information on Expulsion/Suspension prior to involvement with BLOOM and while participating in BLOOM. Eighty-nine percent of BLOOM youth report *not* being suspended or expelled in the previous reporting period. Just over 11 percent of active BLOOM participants reported being suspended or expelled. This is a good thing since one of the primary goals of the Initiative is to help support youth to stay engaged in education. Additional information can be found in the qualitative data, Subtheme 1(c) - Academic and Behavioral Issues, and Subtheme 3(d) – Academic Support and Tutoring (Pages 43 and 53).

Figure 12. Suspension/Expulsion of Active BLOOM Participants

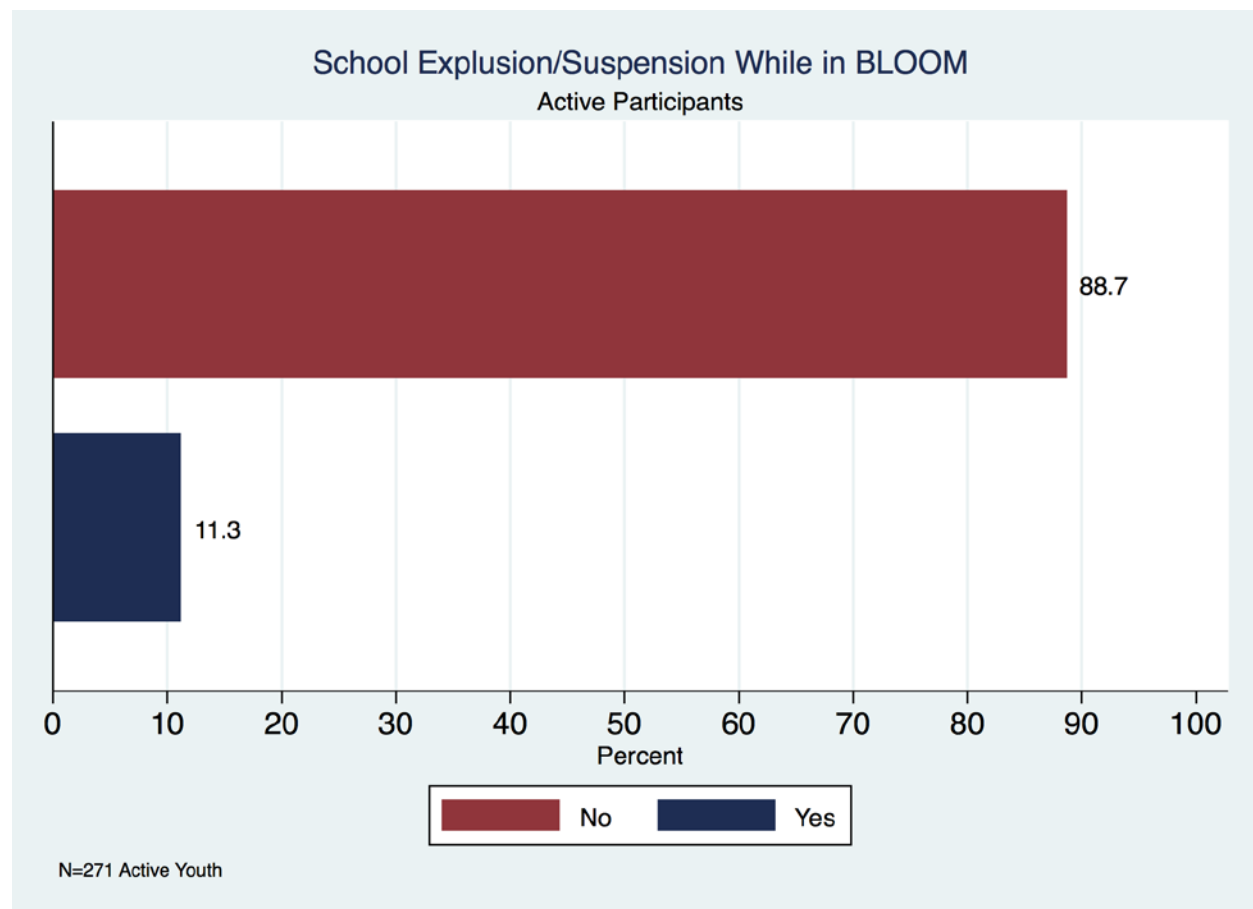
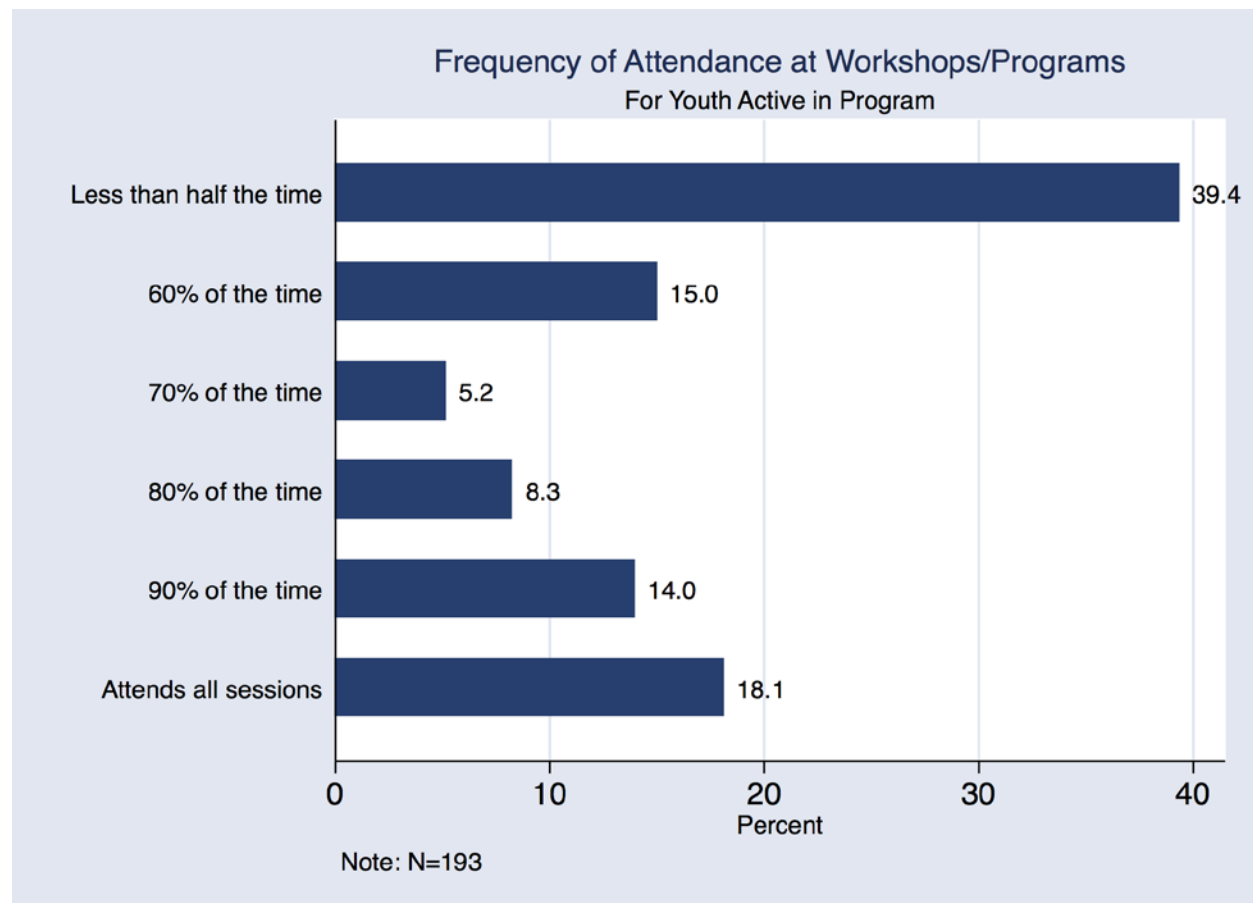


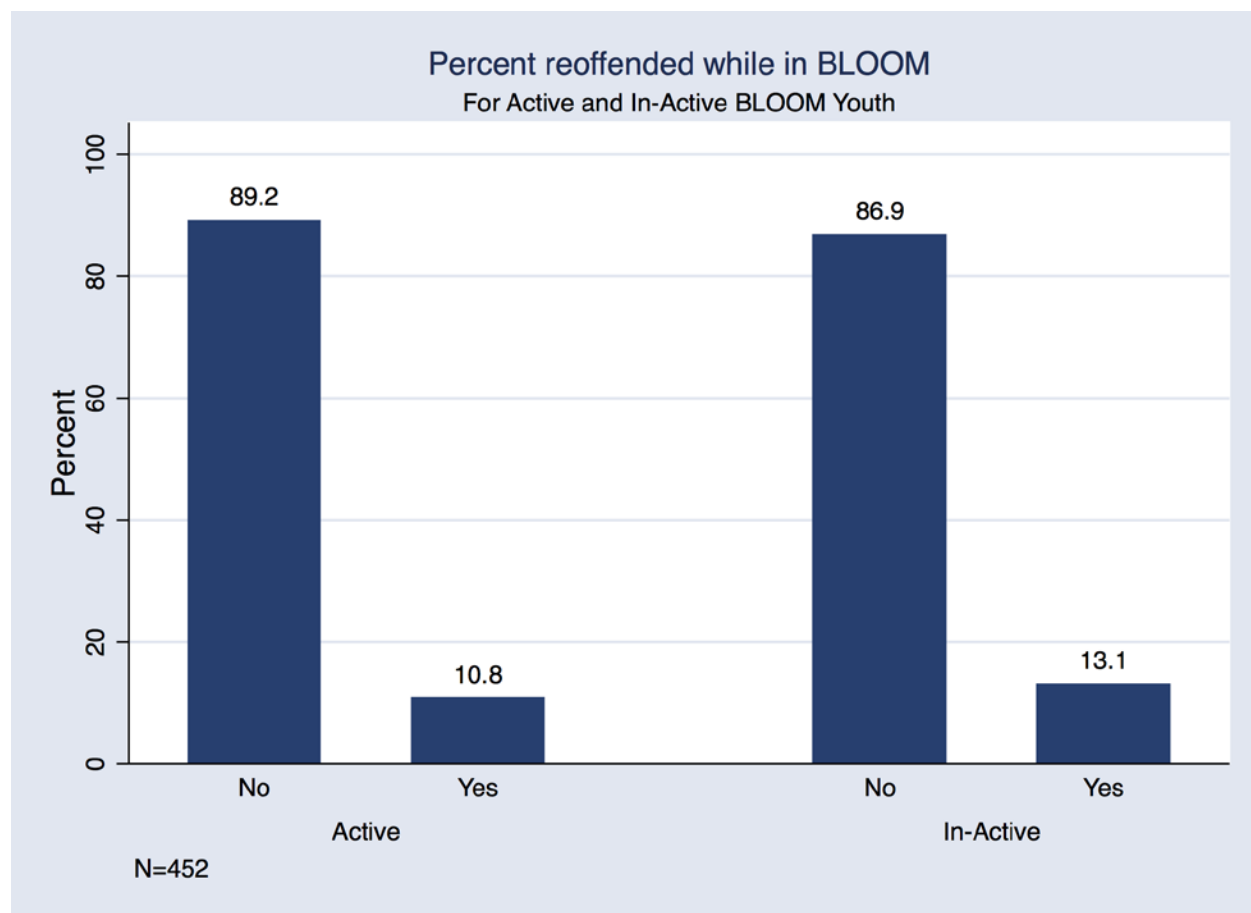
Figure 13 (below) examines the level of participation in BLOOM programs, workshops, and activities made available to the currently active BLOOM youth through the three partners. What is somewhat striking is the fact that over 60% participate more than half of the time. This is a good sign for the types of programs and workshops made available to the youth. This level of participation certainly has an impact on the data presented in Figure 13. The overarching goal of the BLOOM Initiative is to help the youth change the trajectory of their lives. This has been primarily accomplished by a clear focus on education, whether that is supporting their ongoing education through academic supports or helping them reintegrate into school and make up credits lost through school absence.

Figure 13. BLOOM Participation



Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of youth who have participated in BLOOM have upheld the terms of their probation by not-re-offending (Figure 14, below). This is equally true of those who are still active (89%) and those who are currently non-active (87%). The continued emphasis on the educational component of BLOOM is essential. This provides some evidence that even after participation in BLOOM, the program may continue to impact the lives of youth who are no longer active.

Figure 14. Percent of BLOOM Youth Upholding Terms of Probation



As the BLOOM Initiative continues, it will be important to attempt to determine if greater levels of participation lead to increased academic success. In order to do this, it will be necessary to not only determine what activities the youth participate in but what those activities are and if they are related to educational outcomes. This relates directly to some of the qualitative information presented in the Key Qualitative Themes, specifically Themes 2 and 3 (Pages 46 and 49), which focus on engaging and retaining BLOOMers and skill building activities.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

OVERVIEW

In early 2016, the UCLA evaluation team collected in-depth data from BLOOM participants drawing upon two tested and rigorous qualitative methods: (1) individual depth interviews and (2) focus groups.⁴¹ Utilizing *both* one-on-one ethnographically guided conversation through the interview process *and* group discussions among peers provided increased anonymity and privacy in the former approach and enhanced collaboration and sharing in the latter. Together these data collection methods produced a depth, diversity, and abundance of data for qualitative analysis in line with accepted qualitative data collection practices.⁴²

DEPTH INTERVIEWS

A representative sample was constructed and a total of 18 depth interviews were conducted with youth who have been receiving BLOOM services. Of these, half (9) of the interviewed youth participated in Brotherhood Crusade and the other half (9) in Social Justice Learning Institute's Black Male Youth Academy. A member of the research team conducted interviews in spaces familiar to the youth to ensure that individuals felt comfortable and safe in a location that was convenient for them to meet. With the consent of each youth, the interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

Five (5) youth were BLOOM alumni who had moved on to outside opportunities and were no longer participating in the Initiative. Two youth were "newcomers" with less than four months in BLOOM; the remaining youth who were interviewed had been participating in BLOOM for one to three (1-3) years. Youth were between the ages of 16 and 19 and all had been raised in or spent significant amounts of time in South Los Angeles. Although all of the youth who were interviewed had justice system and/or Probation Department contact at some point, only six (6) of the participants were on

⁴¹ Depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation.

⁴² Patton, 1990. Strauss & Corbin, 1998.

probation at the time of their interview. One young man had fathered a son who was an infant at the time of the interview while another reported that he had a child on the way. The diverse composition of the interviewee sample provided a breadth of information regarding the BLOOM Initiative. Equally significant, interviews offered meaningful information about the needs of the Initiative's target population of young Black men.

FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to the depth interviews, the UCLA research team conducted two (2) separate focus groups in the spring of 2016. One (1) group consisted of six (6) participants from Brotherhood Crusade, while the other included 16 SJLI students; between the two (2) groups, there were 22 total participants. With all the participating youths' consent, the focus groups were audio recorded.

Focus group participants ranged from 14 to 20 years old. Similar to the depth interviews, both focus groups included established BLOOMers, newly enrolled youth, and BLOOM alumni. The composition of both focus groups afforded the evaluation team an appropriate range of backgrounds and needs, helping to paint a portrait of BLOOM's target population of probation-involved Black male youth. In addition to BLOOM's criteria, many participants reported either past or ongoing involvement with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS); gang membership or affiliation; and struggles with homelessness. BLOOM participants also included fathers. Overall, the diverse backgrounds of focus group participants allowed the research team to collect ample and vivid qualitative data.

All focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded. These recordings were then transcribed and analyzed using an open coding process. To develop preliminary themes, members of the evaluation team reviewed focus group contents and a random sample of interviews. From this review, the team created a comprehensive list of more than 30 line items. To ensure that the list of themes was comprehensive, all transcribed materials were reviewed twice and coded based on this complete list. Using codes developed from the open coding process, the second coding process created more

highly refined key themes. The most prominent themes are discussed throughout this report; these were themes present in at least 40% of focus groups and interviews, with some mentioned in as much as 75% of the focus groups and interviews.

Coding revealed consistent and reliable overlap in data collected through the interviews and focus groups. Data analysis indicated that there were substantial programmatic similarities between Brotherhood Crusade (BHC) and Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), although programming was implemented differently at each agency. However, as youth described programming at each site, many parallels emerged and it was apparent that programming at both BHC and SJLI actively aligns with BLOOM's mission and the specific needs of BLOOMers. Qualitative data coding analysis also revealed extensive and meaningful themes surrounding BLOOM programming, offering an important portrait of the youths' perspectives. These themes form the bulk of the evaluation's qualitative findings and fall into several categories:

- (1) Youths' lives before BLOOM involvement;
- (2) Their initial experiences with the Initiative;
- (3) Skill-building in BLOOM;
- (4) Supportive relationships with BLOOM staff/peers; and
- (5) Youth development.

Given the information provided by youth, recommendations for program improvement are also offered by the evaluation team. For ease of understanding BLOOM specifically, qualitative findings and recommendations presented in this report are overarching and represent a synthesis of data collected, coded, and analyzed from both BLOOM partner agencies.

KEY QUALITATIVE THEMES

THEME 1: Life Before BLOOM – Before BLOOM, participants' lives were characterized by a number of challenges and obstacles to success.

Subtheme 1(a): Instability of Family Life. *Many participants grew up in single parent households or were raised by extended family or siblings; though some participants described a stable upbringing, most had experienced some form of familial instability consisting of separation, parental absence, or a lack of support/supervision growing up.*

Nearly all the youth, even those who said their financial needs had been met, described caregivers who were unable to provide consistent supervision and the necessary emotional support. One young man explained,

Even though I had everything at home, me and my dad didn't talk that much. [...] ⁴³ when I was over there, he's the man of the house so whatever he says goes, so if I got attitude or whatever, he likes to fight. And if you know my dad... he's big. Like big. So it wasn't the funnest of times trying to fight him – ever.

Another young man recalled,

I grew up with both my parents - they were both drug addicts. Ex drug addicts. They separated when I was around the age of 7 to 8.

Youth attributed lack of attention and support from family to a variety of factors. Several youth explained that their parent(s) had to work long hours to support multiple children. One BLOOMer elaborated, “*My dad was never there. My mom raised me by herself. My mom has eight kids.*” Another youth, who was raised by both parents, described the impact his parents' work schedule had on him,

Growing up, my mom and dad would always work a lot, so I used to have to like figure out what I would do. [...] So I started going on the streets and stuff – and like trying to do what a boy do, so hanging around with the wrong crowds.

⁴³ Throughout this report, “[...]” is used to denote spoken word left out of a transcribed quote, i.e. interviewer questions and unrelated comments. An effort has been made to preserve the meaning and integrity of all participants' quotes.

Other youth had caregivers that would unpredictably disappear and reappear in their lives due to repeated incarceration or bouts of substance abuse, crime, and gang involvement. One youth described how these circumstances affected him:

I really had to take care of myself growing up... after my mother and father divorced, my mom would leave the house – I would say for a month – and my older brother would take care of me. I really had to take care of myself, feed myself, get myself ready for school.

Instability in the lives of caregivers translated directly to instability in the lives of youth, particularly at a young age; youth discussed having to move homes or change caregivers repeatedly. Many youth experienced ongoing contact with DCFS. One young man remembered being uprooted from his primary caregiver:

I was born and raised in Downey, California – with my grandmother. She was raising me. And then my mom basically, like, told me I couldn't stay with my grandma no more, so I moved to the inner city, which is South Central, Los Angeles. From there I lived with my mom and that's when things got difficult. [...] [When I moved to South Central] basically it was... it was around 3rd grade. [Age] nine or ten.

Homelessness was a distinct possibility for some and an acute reality for others. Another youth eloquently offered his account of the turbulence caused by multiple foster home placements:

Growing up, I didn't have much of a little kid life 'cause I was going from foster home to foster home, out of state – I've been to Colorado, Nevada, Mississippi, Kentucky – there's foster homes out there. I've been to 23 different foster homes out here, I've been sent to Command Post – Well, not for nothing bad, just 'cause they didn't want me and my sister. [...] This is the longest foster home I've been in – like, 9 months, this the longest one. My shortest one was four days.

During the interview, this young man proceeded to explain the devastation that shaped his personal development during his formative years as he missed childhood experiences most people take for granted such as holiday and birthday celebrations. To cope with these struggles early on, the young man remembered leaning upon two siblings and a cousin who entered the child welfare system with him. However, the inability of DCFS to find suitable placements in foster care eventually separated him

from his cousin and brother, and even more recently from his sister. His account of repeated loss and separation was poignant and filled with sorrow.

Subtheme 1(b): Lack of Protective Factors and Emerging Negative Influences.

Youth were exposed to a variety of negative influences from family members, role models, and friends.

Though, many had caring parents, relatives, and peers supporting them through struggles early on, often times these individuals' involvement with crime, drug use, or gang membership impressed itself upon the youth.

Many of the young men interviewed described ongoing contact with negative influences, especially male family members such as older siblings, cousins, or uncles who served as temporary role models but did not offer the best examples. As one young man noted: *"It was kinda hard growing up without a father, 'cause I only had my brothers to kind of learn off them, which they wasn't – they like, wasn't kind of setting a good example for me."* Notably, in line with research on the relative prevalence of mixed-age socialization in impoverished areas, youth described having deep social involvements with older individuals who exerted tremendous influence on them and their behaviors.⁴⁴ One of the BLOOM youth recalled:

Me and my brother used to fight a lot and I think that's what made me who I am today, why I'm so big - I try to be. 'Cause he's ten years older than me and I grew up fighting with him. I was hanging with him too for a minute.⁴⁵

In addition to the negative influence of some of their older peers, many youth described being exposed to substance use and abuse at a young age. One interviewee explained, *"Around the age of 13 I saw the drug use in the house from my mother and brother."*

However, older "role models" were not described as the only negative influence. Same age peers were another significant source of negative influences. When asked what

⁴⁴ Harding, 2005.

⁴⁵ Many South Los Angeles residents use "minute" ironically to refer to a long period of time.

obstacles he faced, he replied, “*Challenges? Knowing how to socialize with the right crowd, the right people, the right friends.*” The impact of these various “risk factors” and negative influences became particularly relevant to youth as they moved through adolescence and into young adulthood: “*As soon as I hit high school my life just...*”⁴⁶ *that’s the challenge. Teenage life is the challenge.*” Peer pressure, social norms and beliefs among peers often facilitated individual youth’s delinquent and criminal activity, gang membership, and drug use. One young man describes how the perceived benefit he gained from stealing dovetailed with social norms that predominated in his peer group:

[I committed crimes because I was] with the wrong crowd. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to commit crimes but I was the person to do whatever it was for money, so then, when someone showed me how to do it without getting caught, I was just like... that’s all I want to do. It’s not like I have fun going out there socking people, you know? That’s not fun, but ... I didn’t want to do that, but... the way people made it sound so cool, ‘Oh, like they probably stole from you. They probably... That’s probably karma that’s happening to people.’ So people just influence me to – to think that robbing and committing crimes is cool. Yeah, so that’s pretty much... being a follower is also another challenge, not being my own person.

Youth explained that their environment fueled these types of negative social norms among peers. The majority of BLOOMers believed that exposure to poverty, violence, and crime in their communities created substantial obstacles to thriving in life thus influencing a survival mindset. One young man responded to a question about the challenges he faced growing up:

Just the gang violence, the shootings, the prostitution. [...] I saw it on the streets. I went to [] Elementary School, so... every time I came out of elementary school, [prostitution] was, like, right there. [...] Yeah, I saw it at a very young age. [...] I just tried to ignore it. I try to ignore it as much as I can, like... that’s why I think I am the person I am today, ‘cause... I ignored a lot of stuff, you feel me? When I see prostitution... I use that as positive energy not to let my sisters, or anybody else that I know, or anyone else I’m related to or girls I know to not walk down that path.

When asked about the attractions of gang life, many youth went to great effort to explain that gang life “in the neighborhood” offered access to support, resources, and status –

⁴⁶ Here, the youth became very somber and his voice trailed off sadly.

these all served as incentives for ongoing involvement with gang lifestyle. For some youth, these pressures were further exacerbated by familial gang ties as well as their residence in areas with prevalent gang activity. As one young man explained, *“Most of my family were gang members. I grew up in a gang-infested area in South Central LA. [...] I actually joined a gang at age 13.”* However, gang involvement was not uniform and there were youth who resisted gang activity. For several of the young men interviewed, fear of violence prevented deeper involvement with street gangs. One youth recalled, *“I almost gang banged until an incident happened in the alley with a shooting, so that changed my whole picturing of gang banging.”* However, several youth expressed their feelings that the instability of their life circumstances necessitated their involvement with gangs for protection and resources. These experiences and affiliations produced lingering feelings of loyalty, endearment, and gratitude toward one young man’s “people” as he affectionately explained:

Me like... labeling it as a gang... I don't label it – 'cause that's my people, that's my family. Them is the people that was there for me when nobody else wasn't, so if it's labeled a gang, then yes I'm from that gang 'cause I'm from my people.

Despite the positive components and benefits youth attributed to gang membership, the majority of the young men interviewed ultimately underscored the danger associated with gang involvement. One youth described numerous life threatening incidents linked to gang violence, the last of which nearly caused a fatal injury, explaining, *“My first time I got shot at age 14 and I got shot at the age of 16 by two different people shooting at me at the same time.”*

Subtheme 1(c): Academic and Behavioral Issues. *Familial instability, insufficient encouragement, and a peer culture of devaluing education often translated to low academic motivation, truancy, and other delinquent behaviors.*

The qualitative data offered evidence that the young men in the sample faced many obstacles to high academic achievement prior to their involvement in the BLOOM Initiative. There were constant struggles with school attendance and performance.

Several youth detailed the ways in which they acted out against the school environment, one as early as elementary school:

When I got to high school, before I came to SJLI, I was ditching every day. I just thought – I didn't think, I just did what I wanted to. Didn't go to school, went when I wanted to, left when I wanted to... so I had challenges staying consistent and going to school.

When I started school I didn't do anything. I barely went to school, I was just talking, fighting, messing with people for no reason, just... out of control.

When I went to school, I would just be bad. I wanted attention. I was the baddest kid in elementary because I was the main one cussing out my teachers.

These challenges were often exacerbated by a lack of support from school staff. Some youth admitted that they never considered themselves “academically inclined” – even while acknowledging other personal strengths. However, when asked about their specific strengths, the majority of youth considered themselves smart, capable, and full of “unrecognized” and “overlooked potential” that could have been nurtured by supportive teachers. Several youth also explained that issues such as low academic confidence were exacerbated by negative experiences with teachers who would discourage, embarrass, or ignore them. One young man recalled:

They have those teachers that be like ‘Well, I still get paid anyway, I can care less what you do. I still get a paycheck at the end of the day.’ You got those type of teachers, and then you got the one that just really don't even bother to say anything to you.

Academic and behavioral issues caused several youth to transfer schools or be put on probation; one described being kicked out of school before 6th grade. Still others pursued alternatives to the traditional education system by attending continuation school or attempting to earn a GED. Several youth described how they had given up on completing any level of education prior to BLOOM. There were definite consequences for this educational “surrender.” The majority of youth who did not attend school then became gang involved and engaged in criminal activity. In turn, their criminal

involvement and delinquency translated into extensive contact with the justice system.

One youth explained:

[I would] commit crimes. Robberies and burglaries and do all type of stuff – smoking, selling weed, stealing cars. Everything! Everything you can name. [...] First I got probation. So during the ages of like 13 through 16, it was just probation, house arrests – back and forth – probation, house arrest – back and forth, going to jail for a couple of weeks. And then finally I committed a robbery last year and they sent me to camp for 5 to 7 months.

Subtheme 1(d): Mental and Emotional State. Qualitative analysis revealed that youths' family life and upbringing often provoked negative emotions and self-perceptions.

Youth described how they were “struggling” and that it was “difficult” just trying to survive, while others felt “lost” trying to navigate through adolescence with limited support. One young man lamented, *“I didn’t really have nobody I could talk to before I came in this program... So before this program, I was just struggling.”* Several participants’ experiences of violence, neglect, and instability left them with deep emotional wounds and psychological trauma. One young man poignantly discussed dealing with personal trauma that was quite clearly linked to violence, as he offered, *“I’ve seen a lot of trouble. I got my own trouble from when I got shot, to this day I got post-traumatic stress. I hear a gunshot and catch myself in the zone.”*

When students spoke about the challenges and the “trouble” they faced, they often took personal responsibility for their mistakes. Nevertheless, repeated failed attempts at improving their lives and a perceived lack of control over their life circumstances left many participants feeling hopeless and emotionally drained. As one young man remembered, *“Even though I still tried to keep myself out of trouble at some times, but it was like trouble always kept finding me.”* Another youth stated that even after making positive changes for himself, there was a constant struggle *“keeping things I used to do away from the things I am doing.”* Some youth linked the scarcity of opportunities

available to them to feelings of anger and frustration, which exacerbated delinquency or prompted them to act out impulsively.

THEME TWO: New BLOOMers – BLOOM effectively gained and retained new participants.

Subtheme 2(a): Finding BLOOM. *Almost all of the participants took one of three paths into BLOOM: they were either formally mandated, semi-formally referred, or were brought by a friend. Very few youth found BLOOM independently or through a parent.*

There were different levels of institutional involvement in youth arriving at a BLOOM event or activity. First, there was a small group of individuals whose participation was sparked by a formal recommendation by the court or was a mandatory term of probation. One young man flatly admitted, “SJLI... *it was assigned to me.*” This was more prevalent in the SJLI focus group where several participants in this group described receiving mandatory court orders to engage in BLOOM. Second, another group of youth were those referred to BLOOM by school staff such as teachers or principals as a response to ongoing behavioral and academic problems. Still others reported that counselors or probation officers referred them to the program, thinking that participation in the BLOOM Initiative might be a “good idea.” The third entry point, where individuals found their way to BLOOM was through a friend or mentor who introduced them. One young man recalled:

Some of the people that was already in there was like, ‘Aw, brother you should come.’ I went to one of the circles, and I heard [a BLOOM mentor] talk and I was like – ah, I like this. It was interesting, so I kept going more and more and it kept giving me opportunities so I just stayed in.

Youth explained that current participants often encourage – or even pressure – their uninvolved friends to join BLOOM by explaining that it provides social activities, support, and other resources, including clothing, food, tutoring, and additional activities and materials.

Subtheme 2(b): First Impressions. *BLOOM staff and participants fostered an atmosphere that enabled all newcomers to feel welcome.*

Any individual may feel awkward or unsure in a new situation, particularly youth who have been marginalized or simply caught up in the difficulties of adolescence. Many youth entered the BLOOM setting with hesitation or uncertainty, as embodied in the account of one young man who described his feelings of trepidation early in his BLOOM participation,

At first I wasn't practicing being comfortable while being uncomfortable, back then, so it wasn't my kind of environment so I was like, 'Nah this isn't for me.' 'Cause I'm only used to what I know so it takes a while to get used to and adapt, but ... it works.

Another youth recalled, *"They talked me into going and then when I went, it was great. I loved everybody. The atmosphere was great. It felt like they were actually there to help."*

Both BLOOM agencies made concerted efforts to provide a welcoming, positive atmosphere, and to ease youth entry in every possible way. This welcoming environment supported youths' transition into the Initiative in cases where an individual's attendance was mandatory.

Agency success in doing this was demonstrated by the many youth who discussed how BLOOM's uniquely welcoming atmosphere drew them in and facilitated their engagement with programming. One youth who admits to *"making fun of [BLOOM] at first"* explains how the program kept him coming back:

Everybody there felt like brothers. Everybody. Nobody had an attitude, people walk in there – you see how they're kind of irritated when they walk in, but when they get in there, their whole aura changed.

During the qualitative evaluation process, it was important to explore how BLOOM programming succeeded at establishing this safe space. One young man observed that program staff fostered BLOOM's open environment by *"[taking] the initiative to make [me] feel comfortable."* Staff would reach out to specific individuals to encourage them

to come to the program. Their approaches were perceived by youth as hands on rather than intrusive, and clearly effective:

And even before when I wasn't so with the program, they would call me, 'what are you doing? Where are you at? I got this event. You're coming, I don't care what you're doing, cancel your plans, you have to.' And they made me feel like people cared. Growing up, even though I had both parents... it was like, do what you do.

Some of the youth had experiences with other programs that enabled them to effectively evaluate the positive aspects of BLOOM. One young man expressed frustration with typical approaches to service provision in which lessons, counseling, or advice are given to youth before the individual's learning style or life circumstances are explored and understood by the teacher, therapist, or counselor. This model creates informational disconnects between adult service providers and the youth, it reduces the efficacy of services due to miscommunication, misunderstanding, or a lack of respect and willingness from one or both parties. This “disconnect” along with a lack of cultural sensitivity have long plagued service delivery. However, qualitative findings offered a strong picture of BLOOM innovation. One young man described how BLOOM turned this model on its head:

What they did was find a relationship with me and then start. They wanted me to be cool and then knowing I'm going to listen to what they got to say and then they start talking, so it wouldn't be like wasting their time.

Staff is not the only part of this initial engagement. Participants themselves also play a part in creating a welcome space for new members. When asked how BLOOMers respond to new people or individuals first entering the program, one youth said “We treat newcomers the same way. We welcome them in.” Another youth offered a similar opinion, remarking: “We treat them the exact same.” He went on to explain how seasoned BLOOM participants and team members will encourage newcomers’ active participation by involving them in classroom discussion:

We address them, we put them more involved with the learning atmosphere. So basically we help them out. And basically, when Mr. Doherty asks us a question, we turn straight to the person. We don't direct them, but we also help them out, like if they get stuck or something, we elaborate what they say.

THEME 3: Skill-Building Activities – BLOOM programming and services developed participants' academic, interpersonal, and life skills.

Subtheme 3(a): Soft and Interpersonal Skill Development. *BLOOM staff identified youths' individual challenges, weaknesses, and areas of vulnerability and addressed them through processes of both personal, professional, and life skill development. Most significantly, qualitative research revealed that BLOOM mentors sought to provide youth with tools to lead fulfilling and productive lives.*

Many youth lacked the coping skills, emotional maturity, and self-awareness to address their mental, emotional, and/or behavioral issues alone. This is a hallmark of adolescence but is further complicated by the life experiences and trauma of these youth. BLOOM staff attempted to fill gaps in personal development wherever possible. For example, both programming and staff-youth interactions focused on helping BLOOMers to hone a variety of soft skills including anger management, self-discipline, conflict resolution, teamwork, and techniques for dealing with stress. During interviews, a youth recalled,

The easiest thing for me to do was...was to listen. Listen and observe and [...] take things that they're saying and put it into my daily life, like... And those are some of the things that made me open up. 'Cause I listened, and I listened before I talked – because usually I would speak before I listen.

The program addressed youth's motivation and emphasized the value of responsibility and accountability. One young man explained that BLOOM, “got [him to be] more responsible with getting up in the morning and going to work and school.” Another youth appreciated that the Initiative, “brought [him] out of [his] comfort zone” and “taught him to be comfortable while being uncomfortable.”

Rather than confining themselves to a set curriculum, BLOOM grantee staff took a holistic approach to mentorship and youth development. They were flexible and open to

innovation and transformation at even the most basic level. No lesson was too trivial as these youth observations demonstrate:

They showed me a whole new way of life, how to live. From the smallest to the biggest, how to dress, how to interview, how to eat at the table, how to – if you see trash on the floor, pick it up and throw it in the trash. A lot. A lot of life skills they helped us with.

They would see how I dress – I was sagging my pants, you know? Got my shirt all untucked, you know? Just – you know, walking around with my shoes unlaced up. They told me, ‘Man, that’s the image you wanna set?’ Then they told me ‘saggin’ is ‘niggas’ backwards. And I was like, ‘Man! Dang, that’s deep too.’

We go out to places in public – we are well groomed, dressed up. ‘Cause you never know who’s going to walk in the door, so that’s what I like – they didn’t teach me how to dress ‘cause I always had the style of dressing up and stuff, but they brought it out of me more, like made me want to do it more. You know, I wouldn’t mind wearing a suit or something on a hot day, you know? You look good still!

One of the youth cited specific improvements he experienced in both his vocabulary and speaking ability. He explained,

My vocabulary was all bad before I came into SJLI. My vocabulary was bad, I didn’t know how to talk, my fluency was bad, I stuttered, I had to stop and hesitate after every sentence. I could not talk.

Another young man offered that BLOOM “helped me switch my lingo so I got better academic language ‘cause I would be cussing [...] like street slang.”

During focus groups, multiple youth recounted developing interpersonal and communication skills through BLOOM programming. Their experiences were very similar. Several youth reported that they had been shy, quiet, or had difficulty speaking before BLOOM; many found their voice and “opened up” after being involved in the Initiative. Both of the BLOOM agencies had considerable personal impact. For example, when asked what involvement with BLOOM changed about him, one young man responded:

My attitude, the way I approach people, the way I talk to people. I'm nice. Or even, they teach you how to, like, be serious and give people attention when you want to talk to them, like, always stare at someone in their eye. They taught me just little things.

Subtheme 3(b): Professional Development and Financial Literacy. BLOOM programming utilized a personal capacity-building approach to youth development by providing tools and knowledge that would grant immediate benefits to youth both personally and professionally.

There were many skills taught by the two BLOOM agencies in both spheres. Professional skill development addressed resume-building and how to find a job, along with helping youth learn how to set up and perform effectively during a job interview. As one youth stated BLOOM,

...gets you ready for after high school. So it's not like you don't know what to do, how to go to school, how to get here, how to get a job. They teach you everything. They teach you how to make resumes for yourself.

Participants enjoyed opportunities for networking with young people who represented a new peer group. One youth recalled, *"I met other people that wanted to be lawyers, you know? Kids that wanted to be doctors, mechanical engineering, like you said everybody have they own life story."* Another participant explained,

[BLOOM] gave me more hope and effort, 'cause they ended up introducing me to more people. Learning more about myself and what I actually was capable of in doing was really communicating and mutualism with other people so I learned a lot about that.

During a depth interview, one youth described meeting the California Attorney General along with attending events, which included business owners, nonprofit organization leaders, policy makers, law enforcement, and advocates.

Several youth found the program's financial literacy curriculum especially useful. Youth recalled learning about economic disparities and engaging in ongoing lessons on personal finance, which covered responsible budgeting and credit cards. A young man testified, *"I learned about credit cards and payday loans, how to spend our money*

wisely. How not to go pull our money out from the bank.” Youth also appreciated how staff strived to be relevant in their teaching, making an effort to link lessons to their personal lives and community. For instance, several youth discussed how the program taught them about the disproportionate impact of predatory loans on African American communities.

Subtheme 3(c): Lessons in Cultural and Historical Awareness. *Programming also made itself more relevant to youth by focusing on African American history, cultural awareness, and issues that directly affect BLOOMers’ communities.*

At both agencies, programming taught youth about the systemized oppression of minorities in order to demonstrate how youth fit into the financial and political system. This emerged in many youth comments, typified by one young man who stated, *“When I first came, we was just learning about what goes on in our city, what type of stuff make us wanna go out and commit crimes.”*

This approach increased youth interest, motivation, and participation, as shown by the following young man’s account:

I was never involved until literally like, the middle of my twelfth grade year [...] it was a bunch of Black kids in a room, just having fun, you feel me? And they was just teaching them about Black history. And I was like... ‘cause I love history... so, I just went up in there, and that’s when I met Daniel.

Programming content also included materials and teaching that encouraged participants to explore their identities as African American men. Several focus group participants contrasted the way in which Black history topics were covered in their regular academic classes, which emphasized the White perspective, victimizing Africans and African Americans, with the more nuanced lessons taught through SJLI’s Black Male Youth Academy. Many youth expressed appreciation for the decidedly empowering methodology used within these history lessons, which covered topics like racism, slavery, and police brutality. As one young man explained, BLOOM encourages youth to think beyond their immediate surroundings. *“We learn a lot of things in here. We learn*

about this school, and a lot of things about our culture and about everything that's outside of this school."

Despite the gravity of topics addressed and the profundity of participants' identity transformation, youth often described educational and development opportunities as enjoyable and engaging. One young man's words eloquently reveal how BLOOM strikes this balance, as he stated, *"When I come we have fun. We work and have fun, and the work that we do is fun."* Participants enjoyed research and political advocacy projects that allowed them to delve deeper into issues affecting their community. Projects included trips outside of Los Angeles where youth met politicians, advocates, community stakeholders, and potential funders, allowing them the opportunity to present and discuss their ideas. In one engaging project, BLOOMers created a mobile phone application designed to address instances of police brutality by educating people about their community's police activity. These projects created a unique opportunity for BLOOM youth by interweaving research-based education, community engagement, public speaking, and networking opportunities.

Subtheme 3(d): Academic Support and Tutoring. *The academic support services provided by BLOOM's partner agencies improved youths' academic experiences and students cited increased motivation.*

Funds were used to provide monetary incentives for academic achievement. One student explained a system in which students would be awarded with \$5, \$15, or \$25 if they were able to keep their GPA above certain levels: *"They rewarded us last time for our GPA. [...] Basically, [a BLOOM staff member] brought \$500 and our goal was to make him broke."*

One young man remarked that BLOOM would *"be that helping hand."* In fact, there were several accounts during the focus groups of how BLOOM mentors provided tutoring and lessons to youth to help them improve academically in school. To adapt to individuals'

learning styles, staff spent extra time explaining concepts while using hands-on methods and demonstrations. One young man recalled:

He'll talk to me about two or three hours and it will all make sense, you know? [...] Like, how he explain. He'll bring out cups and stuff and quarters and how he explain it to us, it makes more sense. Instead of just trying to lecture us, he like, gives us examples.

The hard work of mentors was extremely meaningful to youth. These extra efforts paid off for many individuals who cited academic improvements:

This class actually helped my GPA, 'cause I wasn't really doing that good mid-way through the year. But I started picking my grades up in this class. It's work I actually enjoy so I actually do my work in this class, which has gotten me an A.

Ever since I been here, my grades started getting better and better. It's like A's and B's and less C's. I've never had a D or F here because of that.

According to the quantitative analysis, BLOOM's academic support services generally produced measurable improvements in participants' grades, but qualitative analysis illuminates the less easily quantifiable academic benefit youth garnered. What was significant for the majority of students was how their attitudes toward their education shifted. This transformation was embodied in the words of one BLOOMer who exclaimed, *"I'm off the streets, I'm focused on school. I want to go to college. I never ever wanted to go to college, I didn't want to go to high school."* BLOOM's programming helped many youth see the value in investing in their education and further motivated them. *"I feel like I have more work ethic, like I can go to college now,"* one young man explained. Another described how the Initiative *"helped [him] realize how key education was to [him]."*

BLOOM nurtures the educational aspirations that youth possess. *"We went to CSUN, we went to Northridge, we went to a UCLA [football] game,"* one young man recalled enthusiastically, as he explained how that helped to see what college campuses really looked like. BLOOM facilitated trips to college campuses to nourish youths' dreams

about attending college. One youth vividly remembered a trip taken through BLOOM's Reintegration Academy:

We went to Cal Poly for a whole week and we got to smell the trees, breathe the air, and walk around with college students and everything, So, it was like... really eye opening. That's when I met [...] a lot of good people.

Past trips to Cal Poly through the Reintegration Academy have also included conversations with college students who shared backgrounds similar or even identical to those of BLOOMers. This element exerted a profound impact on one interviewee who described his experience:

The thing that I liked most about [the conversation with college students during the Reintegration Academy] was it was people that's been in my shoes that made it, you feel me? Like when I was talking to some of the college students, they was like, 'Oh, I sat in the chair that you're sat in', you feel me? 'I stepped where you stepped at'.

These encounters afforded youth both the inspiration and confidence to pursue higher education if they so choose. Additionally, BLOOM provides support and resources to youth transitioning into higher education. Youth discussed how BLOOM mentors helped them with the logistics of college (applications and classes) and served as counselors, helping with their planning processes. One interviewee recounted times when BLOOM brought in outside agencies to help youth organize the needed documents for college applications such as transcripts and letters of recommendation.

Subtheme 3(e): Material Resources. *BLOOM assisted youth by providing material resources.*

BLOOM agencies helped participants in concrete, tangible ways by providing personal and material resources otherwise inaccessible to them. “[BLOOM] helped me with resources and what I needed,” one youth recalled gratefully. Another participant explained how his involvement with the foster care system left him with limited financial resources that made it difficult to even buy basic necessities such as clothes and shoes. He went on to contrast the deprivation he experienced in foster care with BLOOM,

which helped him buy professional attire. As he remembered, *“All I had was really just the [foster care] system and they wasn’t really helping me financially, they didn’t help me with getting suits and stuff like that.”* Funding that is allocated and spent on material resources for participants fills these gaps. In another instance, youth cited the hygiene and personal care necessities kept on hand as important and helpful.

Throughout focus groups, the young men were grateful for all aspects of the agency programming. Participants greatly appreciated the high quality food provided at BLOOM meetings and events. *“People were funny, and then they fed me too, so it was pretty okay. That was a plus,”* one youth recalled. To those who have never lived in poverty, the abundance of free food comments in the qualitative data is startling. This finding should not trivialize the value of a nutritious meal for participants burdened by poverty and even homelessness.

It was clear that mentors attempted to aid BLOOMers in every way possible, as exemplified by one youth’s remark that, *“When I didn’t have a suit they helped me get some better clothes, some dress up attire.”* Another young man described how BLOOM staff helped him get a car and a driver’s permit; during his interview, he was happy to report that he also expects to get his driver’s license soon.

THEME FOUR: Pro-Social Relationships and Support Networks – BLOOM programming benefitted participants’ by encouraging positive relationships and linking youth with positive support networks.

Subtheme 4(a): Creating Safe Spaces. *The BLOOM Initiative at both agencies creates safe spaces that facilitate relationships between youth and staff; these relationships become the primary mechanism by which youth development occurs.*

While analysis of qualitative data revealed the significant themes surrounding welcoming newcomers and creating supportive academic environments, it is important to note that BLOOM also offers pro-social group activities outside of class, which allow participants to hang out, relax, and get to know one another. When asked what his

favorite part of the program was, one young man replied that *“the best part is [...] when we play sports together – like, basketball [and] football.”*

Youth responses made it clear that trips, events, and retreats represented a special and meaningful source of relationship building in the program. Many youth enthusiastically described group attendance at events and trips, while others discussed weekend long retreats which included participants from schools other than those they attended. These retreats created opportunities for bonding with staff, peers, and BLOOM alumni; these experiences reinforced the BLOOM culture that emphasized attachment and brotherhood through activities such as making campfires and sharing personal experiences. One youth detailed what he experienced at his first retreat,

They took us on a trip to Yucaipa, on a camping trip – a men’s retreat. [...] We went out there and we had a – we did a campfire, and I would say it was about 15 young men in our circle. The fire was supposed to represent whatever is bothering you – your burdens, your problems, anything negative – that fire burned it all up. That fire deleted that. That’s where you release everything in this circle. You uplift the next person, you show them they are somebody, you love them, you care for them. You want them to know that you’re in their corner. So really, that fire is uplifting, it is encouraging, and it’s your safe zone. Where you can be yourself.

The transformative impact these retreats had on youth was echoed in the words of several other youth in both the interviews and the focus groups – exemplified by the words of one youth who talked about the attachment that was shared as he recalled,

Another favorite memory is when we all came together as a family at the end. Like, at the end of the retreat... at BLOOM... at Cal Poly, we all came in as separate groups, but we all left as family.

Subtheme 4(b): Supportive Staff Relationships. Youth received guidance from caring and consistent adult mentors.

Based on their own reports, it was not always easy for BLOOM staff to develop a bond with BLOOM youth. This was not the responsibility of the staff members but was instead due to what many youth admitted was their initial inclination to be suspicious or distrustful of staff members. What became a crucial point for focus group discussion

was what actions changed the dynamic – what made the difference for BLOOM youth? Several of the young men explained that they needed mentors to open up first in order to gain their respect and trust. One young man offered his account that,

It was difficult for me to cope with [Staff member, Molly] at the beginning, because it was like, dang, this White girl coming up in here and she thinks she knows us and everything... then she like actually started opening up to us.

In many cases, it was the staff member's relentless dedication that served as the groundwork necessary for a mentoring relationship to blossom. In the words of several youth, *"They won't give up – they won't," "They keep on pushing" and "They never left."* Other participants' responses also revealed that persistence and consistency made a meaningful difference in changing youth's minds about the intentions of the service providers:

They've been actually there and, you feel me? I've been on Molly for a cool minute... And for her to do just... do what she do for the SJLI is really eye opening to me, so... Yeah, she really breaks her neck, you feel me? Tryna make sure that we good.

Another youth enthused, *"Molly, she does everything for us. She thinks about us, she gives us food, so that's why I love her too."* While a different young man specified, *"we're their first priority beside anything else that they need to take care of which shows me that they actually care."*

Subtheme 4(c): Mentorship from Male Role Models. *Many youth cited relationships with an adult male mentor in BLOOM as serving as a father figure with whom they could form attachment.*

Many youth described biological fathers who were absent or unavailable. Research shows that father absence, conceptualized in the research as the "father wound," has developmental consequences for young men; these effects are psychological, economic, emotional, cognitive, and physical, and are particularly prominent in

externalizing, projective behavior and a recurring and ongoing sense of loss.⁴⁷ BLOOM programming addressed youth parental loss, absence, and neglect by fostering supportive, caring, attentive relationships between male mentors and youth, a particularly prominent theme in the qualitative data. One youth described his relationship to an agency staff member as a *“very strong connection, like a second father”* and went on to say he anticipates the relationship will be *“life-long.”* Another BLOOMer explained, *“Mr. Doherty really is like a role model, and so is Justin.”* In line with previous research, youth described these healthy relationships fostering positive personal development and inspiring them to achieve more.⁴⁸

Participants described being able to connect with their mentors through common interests such as sports. To facilitate this bonding process, mentors personally modeled open communication by sharing details of their own lives, including their hardships. As one youth participant remembered:

They shared about their life, so it was just an open thing. Everybody talked about they life. It wasn't just us talking about our lives, they talked about their lives to connect with our lives, so [...] it wasn't nothing I felt embarrassed about or should've felt embarrassed about 'cause everybody went through the struggles.”

One young man commended BLOOM mentors for *“lead[ing] by example.”*

Youth noticed when BLOOM mentors took the initiative to help program participants feel comfortable, spending time with them one-on-one in non-academic contexts. During focus groups as well as interviews, youth characterized mentor relationships as involving sustained contact and nonjudgmental support on the part of each individual mentor. *“They never really like judged me for nothing. I feel like I could tell them everything,”* one youth offered, while another explained that they *“always have your back – it don't matter what it is.”* A student described the approach of his BLOOM mentors: *“They don't come at you with stuff, like trying to be all into your business.”*

⁴⁷ Miller, 2013. Eric D. McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013. East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006.

⁴⁸ Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003. Fisher & Griggs, 1995).

'Cause they're not really here to tell you what to do. They're just here to show you what's in life.'

Youth used adjectives such as “caring” and “loving” to describe close relationships with their mentors; many emphasized the significance of mutual respect in their interactions. Additionally, there was no shortage of gratitude expressed toward mentors in the qualitative data. Sustained contact on the mentor’s part involved one-on-one communication with youth outside the confines of dedicated class time and program events, typically via phone or in person. One young man even recalled receiving wake up calls from BLOOM mentors:

I be asleep and they call me in the morning, '[Nickname], wake up! We're about to go here and do this. You gotta look nice – put on something, put them shoes on.'

Several even described the ongoing communication between themselves and their mentors as frequent and unprompted. That way, mentors could intermittently check in on youth, offering them a feeling that there was someone “out there in the world” caring for them:

They also help us out individually... one of the nights they'll call us like, 'Are you okay? Do you need anything?' Just on the random they would call me, like, 'Do you need anything? How's work going?' They'll ask me how I've been.

Another youth offered an illustrative anecdote about his relationship with his Brotherhood Crusade BLOOM mentor:

They called me or I called them - in the middle of the night. Like, I called when I got my new phone. I called Mykol Lewis at like 10 o'clock at night – he answered the phone. And I haven't talked to him in like two weeks, but he was like, 'Is this [nickname]!? Yo, what's up man, we gotta -' I didn't even say my name and he knew exactly who I was... and that made me feel like I was wanted.

One young man explained that, in his experience, conflicts between youth and BLOOM staff had been settled with discussion and some level of mutual agreement, much like conflicts with “*parents looking out for you for your best interests.*” By fostering an

organizational culture of support rather than judgment, BLOOM staff makes space for youth to share openly and become completely comfortable. Happiness, laughter, and enjoyment were integral to many participants' relationships with their mentors. One participant shared,

Javan and Mykol Lewis... I clicked with them like I couldn't click with anybody ever. There's been times when we've been in the car together and said something and just laughed the whole way there.

Subtheme 4(d): Peer Support and Friendship. *Youth outcomes improved through involvement with development-oriented, pro-social peer groups consisting of fellow BLOOMers.*

Coding and analysis of qualitative data revealed that the strength of peer bonds is facilitated by participants' shared characteristics (such as race, age, probation involvement). One young man pointed out that BLOOM creates and builds a unique community, observing, *"There is no other class where there's a full Black male class."* Another said, *"We like a family. It's all Black males in there."* Programming allowed youth to develop close friendships and even pseudo-familial bonds with fellow BLOOMers. Youth repeatedly described the feeling of brotherhood that thrives among BLOOM participants as one participant's remarks eloquently explain:

You have someone to talk to. And even if you don't want to talk to, like, the teachers at BMYA, you have your brothers to talk to, you know? So, you could go to one of them. Even the seniors and stuff, you can go to them, talk to them. [...] Like I can talk to him and say stuff that I can't say to certain teachers and counselors because I feel like, that's like another brother, you know, from another mother.

In fact, numerous young men likened the people they met through BLOOM to a "second family." The majority of focus group participants agreed that after getting to know each other in BLOOM, many youth stay in contact outside of class. Several describe long-term and life-changing friendships that began in BLOOM. In turn, during interviews, several young men explained that friends from BLOOM serve as positive influences that "keep them out of trouble." Another participant stated that peers in BLOOM have helped him with anger issues, continuing:

This class pretty much helps me meet people [...] that keep me in check in situations [that cause anger]. 'Cause, I know in the past I did have a pretty bad anger problem where if you said anything wrong to me, I would just fly off the handle quick.

When asked what the best part of the program was, one youth replied,

Being unified. Like, because outside this class there isn't too much unity – in the communities especially, like, they – like I said, the gangbang, you know? The colors, the blocks. You get unity up in here.

Another explained why brotherhood is central to his BLOOM experience, saying,

My favorite memory is just when all the BLOOM guys get together, all the young people get together and we just, like, interact with each other. To me that's the best part, 'cause it's not about the adults – it's about the youth. And it's about us interacting with each other because we're gonna be the ones growing up in this world, the same age, having to be helping each other, depending on each other, hiring each other, firing each other.

BLOOM's culture of brotherhood creates clear benefits for the youth involved as far as pro-social interaction and emotional support, creating protective factors to shield youth from violence and future risk. However, another more nuanced benefit to this network arose from analysis of the qualitative data, as one BLOOMer poignantly expressed:

So with us having unity in here and being, you know, having each other's back through thick and thin, even through our ups and downs... It also helps us in other classes, like, I have [a fellow BLOOM participant] in a few of my classes and if I was slipping and not doing work, I know he's going to, like, get me back on track. Or if he's not going to class, I know I could just go check up on him and, like, talk to him, and get him to come back to class. Together we can get all this done and help each other through education, through high school.

Interestingly, the heavy emphasis placed on education by BLOOM staff translated to the strengthening of peer networks by creating a norm of accountability among BLOOM youth. Participants' willingness to hold each other accountable provides a reservoir of motivation and support for continuing education and personal development.

Subtheme 4(e): BLOOM Culture. *At the crux of these two social networks (staff and peer) are “circles” in which youth and mentors come together for open communication, learning, and mutual support.*

One BLOOMer explained: *“We would circle up. It represents that this is a chain. This is our safe space. We’re here to uplift each other.”* The program teaches BLOOMers that the use of the group circle has symbolic meaning rooted in African culture. The circle’s meaning is personally transformative – emphasizing inclusion: it is meant to be “uplifting” and “empowering” offering the message that, according to the tradition, *“everybody in the circle [has] their own individual talents”* that contribute to the group and make it better as a whole. Youth found circles as “helpful” times to find support in their peers and mentors. *“These circles are powerful,”* one youth emphatically stated.

Two youth explained a mantra the program uses in connection to the circle, while a third described how it feels to be with fellow BLOOMers:

The word we use is ‘ashe.’ It is a term of endearment. Saying I love you, I care about you, I uplift you.

I liked the circle and how we grouped and afterward how we said ‘ashe.’ And ‘ashe’ means we respect each other. I liked that. ‘Ashe’ is ... I support you, I’m there for you, I love you, I’m there if you need somebody to talk to, I’m here for you. Basically ‘ashe’ is a family without a family.

For me it’s like a family. Nobody argues, we don’t butt heads. It’s like a straight family. I can talk to them about anything, I can come for them with anything, and you don’t feel like you have to be judged. When we in our circles, we feel like we’re at the dinner table, like, with your family, talking about your day, how everything is going, or how’s school. They ask questions nobody ever asks – like, ever. [...] And it made me feel like home.

THEME FIVE: Youth Development – The positive experiences and development described by participants demonstrate the efficacy of BLOOM programming.

Subtheme 5(a): Perspective Shifting and Life Outlooks. *Mentors encouraged youth to form a positive individual identity emphasizing self-worth and self-development.*

Many BLOOMers described being asked questions about their future by mentors, which held the implicit message that they each had a promising future. Repeatedly, youth claimed that BLOOM opened them up to opportunities they were previously unaware of or considered unattainable. During interviews, youth consistently referred to the dramatic shifts in life outlooks and mental attitudes experienced as a result of participation in BLOOM. One youth evoked the feelings of many, stating, “[BLOOM] just changed my whole mindset and keeps me from a whole lot of trouble.”

From the majority of interview responses, it was apparent that feelings of hopelessness and futility characterized many youths’ lives prior to becoming involved with one of the two BLOOM agencies. “Before this program I was kind of lost, you know. Yeah, without this program I probably still be lost and don’t know where I want to go,” one young man explained. Participants recognized the value of new opportunities offered by the Initiative and wanted to take advantage. In the words of an enthusiastic BLOOMer:

I know they’re helping me get there. All the opportunities they’re helping me out with? They weren’t there two, three years ago. Two years ago there were people who I knew, family members, who told me I was gonna end up dead or in jail.”

Another expressed gratitude for development opportunities; “they’ve given us jobs to do.”

New experiences and relationships stemming from BLOOM involvement reinforced both the trust and the optimism of youth participants. One young man expressed his relief that, “I feel [...] like I’m gonna be somebody. I’m gonna be able to take care of myself.” Youth described improvements in self-esteem and increases in self-confidence as a result of their participation. “[BLOOM] made me feel like I was somebody, like I still had

a chance," one young man insisted. Others described opening up for the first time, becoming more talkative, and coming out of their shell. In the words of a participant, BLOOM *"helps young Black men wake up and realize their full potential when they can't see it themselves."* Another added, *"[BLOOM staff] really just mentored us. Shaping us to expand our mind – to get out of our 2.5 and really – really just expand in life."* The idea of youth expanding themselves beyond their "2.5" was a phrase that recurred in coding of the qualitative data. One young man explained that the "2.5" referred to the 2.5 mile radius that most youth were used to staying within:

They [Brotherhood Crusade] kind of helped guide us and like oh – here are some things we can do to help you get on a better track. You know, they took us out of the 2.5. I'm saying the 2.5 is the 2.5-mile radius around us. Everything most people do is 2.5 miles around them, where you eat, your friends, you sleep. Everything. So what they do is take us outside of the box to show us things. To get our minds to explore out there than what we see every day. You feel me? So they took us to clubs, get togethers, and celebrations.

Participants described the life philosophy conveyed by BLOOM programming and staff as *"deeper than a specific position - they want you to understand meaning in life."* Another focus group participant added, *"They bring me to another level mentally, like I said, they make me feel like I have a purpose."*

Subtheme 5(b): Anger Management and Coping Skills. Youth cited that BLOOM participation helped them reduce maladaptive behaviors and promoted healthy conflict resolution and problem solving.

Many identified their anger – or what was referred to as being "short tempered" – as a hindrance to their success at some point, with several individuals explaining that this was what caused them to fight or act impulsively. Several youth explained that BLOOM helped them work through their anger, giving them tools and strategies to deal with their rage. Or, as one young man explained, *"They teach me to forgive. Now that I'm running across situations, it's easier for me to forgive and more hard to [hold a] grudge like I used to."* Another BLOOMer explained how having a support group to discuss his feelings alleviates his desire to act out,

When I went to BLOOM every Tuesday and Thursday I have that support. I go every time, you know, If I only get this two times a week I'm gonna go every time, you feel me? Even if I'm having a bad day, I'll think about Thursday coming up. Alright, I can express myself [then]. I don't gotta go off on somebody. I look forward to Tuesday and Thursday.

Several participants drew upon the support network developed in BLOOM to help them understand, articulate, and cope with struggles in their lives. Several youth described BLOOM mentors and peers helping them process the death of friends or brothers or to work through depression, grief, and trauma. A participant discussed how *"I can't express myself to people [...] I would go and express my problems to them and I was feeling better."* BLOOM youth also mentioned instances in which mentors helped them strengthen relationships with friends and family. One youth explained, *"It's like a.... therapy. You can go and explain anything you want to and they gonna tell you the path to go to be correct."*

Subtheme 5(c): Future Plans. *Youth planned to continue to improve themselves personally, academically, and professionally.*

The majority of BLOOM participants enthusiastically claimed they wanted to remain involved with BLOOM in the future. It was also apparent that BLOOM alumni had set an example for this practice by staying connected to the program: serving as mentors and attending yearly retreats.

Unsurprisingly, each and every BLOOM youth interviewed or involved in the focus groups was committed to earning his high school diploma or GED. In line with BLOOM's goal to promote youths' pursuit of post-secondary education, most youth had plans for some type of continuing education after high school. Several participants were enrolled in or planning to attend community college; the majority of BLOOMers believed these plans were feasible on-ramps to four-year colleges and universities. In the words of one:

I wanna be the first one in my family to say I've actually graduated high school and go to a four-year university... and got my PhD? That's awesome. Nobody else in my family ever do that.

Despite valuing education and being interested in college attendance, not all youth were committed to the idea of pursuing higher educational degrees. Some considered the immediate financial stability a job could provide to be best suited to their current situation, for instance, in the case of supporting a child. Other individuals described plans to attend trade or vocational schools, Los Angeles Trade Tech for example, to learn practical skills such as welding or electric.

Regardless of plans for continuing education, all youth held stable employment as a high priority for their future. Several BLOOM participants who were not sure of their plans to continue with higher education cited “*a stable career*” and “*a job 9 to 5*” as goals they hoped to attain within five years. Youth wanted to be able to support themselves and their families financially without relying upon food stamps, welfare, or government housing. In turn, all of these young men dreamt of having their own homes and many wanted to move themselves and their families away from dangerous areas or out of Los Angeles. Their feelings were typified by the remarks of one BLOOMer who emphasized, “[*I want to*] *experience more. There’s more than L.A.*”

When asked what careers youth would like to have in the future, interviewers were showered with colorful descriptions of youths’ dream jobs. Some wanted to utilize their love of sports as a professional athlete, while one enterprising young man was interested in sports media and production. Many BLOOMers wanted to work in creative fields including art, acting, photography, architecture, clothing design, and music. One young man explained that a dedicated music studio at a BLOOM partner agency has allowed him to pursue his dream of producing and recording his own music. Several youth noted they wanted to pursue careers that would enable them to give back – nursing, law enforcement, and social work were specific professions mentioned. Particularly poignant motivations were expressed by one BLOOM youth who explained, “*I love helping people. [...] wanna be like a probation officer though, so I can help little kids. So I can show kids, ‘Man, I’ve been in your shoes before.’*” Another described his dream of starting his own nonprofit organization to help youth, saying, “*I wanna be able to have the power to help other people.*”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further Opportunities for Evidence-Based Practices

The BLOOM Initiative should continue to draw upon the success of evidence-based intervention programs. The extant research on high-risk youth offenders evidences the utility of intensive, long-term case management as well as other hands-on, individualized intervention strategies. These strategies include family-based therapies (Functional Family Therapy, Multidimensional Family Therapy, or Brief Strategic Family Therapy) that involve a youth's family in the intervention process as well as Multi-Systemic Therapy, which provides each youth participant with a team of service providers, advocates, and mental health professionals to guide a youth's development in the face of complex needs. Though resource intensive to implement, these strategies have been recognized as models of evidence-based practice for juvenile justice intervention, especially among high-risk youth. It is also critical to underline the importance of the implementation of Trauma-Informed strategies because they draw attention to the ways in which familial and community factors (such as incarceration or gang affiliation), mental health issues, and substance abuse affect each youth. Given the prevalence of trauma among BLOOM's target population, this report recommends that the BLOOM Initiative explore ways in which these more intensive mental health or therapeutic services could be further incorporated into programming. This could be achieved by seeking a partner agency to provide additional services and resources to youth identified as high risk by BLOOM mentors or service providers.

2. Improving Data Collection Methods

Consistent with the recommendations from last year's report, the BLOOM Initiative has continued to develop a "data discourse" and a "culture of evidence" by gathering individual- and agency-level data. However, a number of improvements could be made on this front. An analysis of the quantitative data collection process revealed discrepancies in data collection between agencies, missing data on certain measures, and general data entry errors. To increase the rigor and usefulness of quantitative

analysis, the BLOOM Initiative must work to ensure the completeness and consistency of data.

Attention to data is a critical process. Completeness of data in the BLOOM Initiative's case requires accurate information on each measure or outcome for each individual participant or agency; if an indicator tracks change over time, for instance, completeness would require data at certain intervals of time. Data completeness in BLOOM can be fostered several ways:

- At the general level, an organizational culture of data collection and an emphasis on tracking should be emphasized to grantee partners to motivate service providers to collect data reliably and, importantly, convey that information to BLOOM once it has been collected.
- To facilitate data sharing practices, the BLOOM Initiative should continue to encourage interagency cooperation and seek collaborative partnerships with law enforcement, the Probation Department, and schools.
- Allocation of funds or technical assistance to grantee partners and community-based organizations could alleviate discrepancies among partners' technical capacities for data collection.

Data completeness and consistency are important because they allow for comparisons over time, among agencies, and between types of participants (for instance, effectiveness with gang-affiliated youth versus non gang-affiliated youth). As the Initiative expands and grows, BLOOM should also consider ways of making the data collected clearer or “finer grained.” This involves increasing the specificity of measurement – for example, by capturing more information about family life, including more/certain details about youth participation, or creating more categories to distinguish between youth risk or need levels. Clearer data might also require the number of indicators being measured to increase. It is important to note that changes to data collection must balance concerns over data usefulness and accuracy with concerns of feasibility; larger quantities and higher specificity of data will capture more information but there may be an upper limit to the usefulness of said data given collection and

analysis constraints. With four years of the Initiative completed, it may be useful to “pause” evaluation for one year while refining the data collection process.

3. Document Specific Academic and Educational Supports

One of the primary goals of the BLOOM Initiative is to change the trajectory of the lives of youth. The primary challenge that often interferes with this progress is re-offense, recidivism or re-incarceration. What appears to mitigate the likelihood of re-offense is the youth’s participation in the variety of services and supports provided by the BLOOM partners. The primary focus of this report is centered on the educational supports and services provided by the partners. In order to be able to make a stronger statement moving forward, we would recommend that, should quantitative data collection continue, the exact type of academic and educational supports the youth participate in should be documented by each partner, in addition, the amount of time (dose) the youth participates in these services/supports should be recorded on the individual youth level.

4. Youth Assessment and Tracking

Even within the specific target population of Black male youth 14 to 18 years old, BLOOM participants come into the program with a wide range of life circumstances, family environments, and individual needs. The fact that BLOOM has tailored its approach to this population from the outset aids in the alignment of service provision to clients; however, expansion of youth assessment and tracking would allow BLOOM service providers to better address the unique needs of each individual and to aid in data collection. Monitoring youth risk, need, and progress in the program should be expanded by utilization of assessment tools across BLOOM grantee partners.

There are a variety of standardized assessment tools used by human service and social welfare practitioners depending upon the aim of assessment. For instance, field practitioners use risk assessment instruments on incoming participants to determine which youth are most and least likely to re-offend and direct services accordingly. Other assessment tools have more descriptive goals; for instance, the Global Appraisal of Individual Needs (GAIN) family of assessment instruments covers topics from physical

and mental health, risk-taking behaviors to living situation and family background. Needs assessments and family background analysis is important because it helps identify what specifically motivates an individual's behaviors. Programming should be responsive to the drivers and nature of an individual's "at risk" behavior if it is to maximize efficacy.

5. Address Potential Sources of Miscommunication

Youth identified a handful of potential sources of misunderstanding and disconnect within the program including perceived favoritism and sharing of information or expectations. When asked how BLOOM could change and better serve young men, several youth brought up situations where the amount of attention or resources individuals received from certain staff proved to be unequal. One young man explained that at certain points he felt like staff was *"favoring some kids [...] because they stand out the most."* Sentiments such as these could be addressed by reinforcing equal treatment of youth wherever possible and by having an open discussion about how BLOOM is proceeding to allow youth to communicate feelings to staff if they so choose.

Not getting the information out ahead of time and general programmatic organization were other potential challenges identified in the qualitative data analysis. For example, two youth felt there was a *"disconnect"* in a situation in which the contract terms of a stipend were miscommunicated; this resulted in at least one youth having unfulfilled expectations that work on an advocacy project would result in money in hand. The youth thought *"better communication"* could prevent a similar situation from recurring.

Several youth described feeling a disconnect between expectations and reality during a few policy program sponsored trips which brought youth in contact with members outside the immediate BLOOM community. These interactions were not always as fulfilling as youth were expecting. Another participant felt frustrated and *"disrespected"* when audience members tuned out during youths' presentations. He explained, *"We've been taught to look people 'n the eyes when we're talking to them because that's how they know you're serious and [certain BLOOM outsiders] didn't do none of that."* These

encounters were remembered with great emotion by a small group of BLOOM youth who described them as “*disappointing experiences*” that occurred during BLOOM. However, it is critical to note that youth did not blame BLOOM for negative experiences with outsiders. Though the discouraging responses and less than positive behavior of BLOOM-outsiders falls beyond the Initiative’s control, in the future, it might prove helpful for BLOOM staff to proactively address these sources of frustration given their potential to deepen youths’ feelings of marginalization. Such situations can also be openly discussed, used as teachable moments to develop coping and interpersonal skills, and to allow chances for youth to process negative emotions.

6. Expansion of BLOOM Activities

Many participants agreed that the BLOOM Initiative could help a greater number young people in the area with additional funding. They thought BLOOM activities would be suited to locations outside of Los Angeles and one specifically suggested Long Beach. “*I would give BLOOM its own building,*” one youth said. During focus groups, one youth wished that BLOOM was open to his Latino friends, while another offered the opinion that there should be a parallel program to address the needs of other minorities. Youth also wanted BLOOM to expand by providing more career and college readiness services; they were also interested in being able to continue to receive BLOOM services during the transition into higher education. One young man suggested the program incorporate opportunities that would offer BLOOMers insight into specific careers like nursing or engineering.

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