

# **Building Social Cohesion Among Diverse Youth During COVID-19**

Insights from the Pilot Phase  
of the Youth Unity Project



# Acknowledgments

While it is impossible to list all the local staff and volunteers who brought the Youth Unity Project to life at a national scale, this report is a result of their dedication to building a more equitable future through an unwavering commitment to supporting immigrants and building bridges between immigrants and receiving communities.

We would like to thank the participating YMCAs and their leaders who contributed their time, experience, ideas, and enthusiasm to piloting the Youth Unity Project.

**YMCA of Metro Atlanta**  
**YMCA of Boise (Treasure Valley Family YMCA)**  
**YMCA of Greater Boston**  
**YMCA of Columbia Willamette**  
**YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit**  
**YMCA of El Paso**  
**YMCA of Central Florida**  
**YMCA of Greenville**  
**Heart of the Valley YMCA**  
**YMCA of Greater Houston**  
**YMCA of Greater Kansas City**  
**Kentucky YMCA Youth Association**  
**YMCA of Greater Long Beach**  
**YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles**  
**YMCA of Greater Louisville**  
**YMCA of Marshalltown**  
**YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee**  
**YMCA of Missoula**  
**YMCA of Central New Mexico**  
**YMCA of Central Ohio**  
**YMCA of Greater Omaha**  
**YMCA of Greater Philadelphia**  
**YMCA of Greater Richmond**  
**YMCA of Greater Triangle**  
**Two Rivers YMCA**  
**Virginia YMCA**



## YMCA of the USA

Since its founding, the YMCA has been reaching out to underserved communities. The YMCA began in London in 1844 as a response to new migrants from rural England entering the city. Providing support to assist newcomers and marginalized youth has been a thread throughout the history of the YMCA—from launching the first English as a Second Language (ESL) class in the United States in 1856 to providing aid to thousands of new arrivals at Ellis and Angel Islands in the early 1900s—and it is an important demonstration of how the organization extends its mission "...for all."

In the United States, the YMCA is comprised of YMCA of the USA (Y-USA)—a resource office for the national YMCA network—and nearly 800 independent YMCA associations in a federated network structure. With a presence in more than 10,000 communities in the United States, the YMCA is a national leader in youth and community development.

Today, local YMCAs throughout the nation are working to strengthen and expand services focused on immigrant youth. YMCA immigrant-integration programs and services vary from one association to another based on community needs, but they generally focus on these key areas: language and education, economic integration and employment, health and well-being, citizenship and civic engagement, and community development. In practice, YMCA immigrant and newcomer services include volunteer programs, services focused on education (ESL, after-school programs, adult basic education, truancy intervention, college access, and civic education), and economic-opportunity programming (job training and placement).

## American Immigration Council

The American Immigration Council works to strengthen America by shaping how America thinks about and acts towards immigrants and immigration and by working toward a more fair and just immigration system that opens its doors to those in need of protection and unleashes the energy and skills that immigrants bring. Following a merger earlier this year with New American Economy, the American Immigration Council seeks to empower and help newcomers at every step in their journey from arrival to full belonging in American communities. It focuses on cultivating inclusive communities where everyone who calls America home can thrive and strives to reform an immigration system that works for all Americans, one that understands immigration to be America's greatest competitive advantage.

A significant piece of the Council's work is in educating Americans of all stripes about the benefits of immigration and facilitating cross-cultural dialogue about how communities can succeed by being more welcoming. The results indicate real and positive impacts from this work, but the Council believes that changing the conversation around immigration in the long term requires a large-scale youth engagement and education program like the Youth Unity Project. The Council brings significant subject-matter expertise to this project, as well as experience in immigration education, advocacy, research, policy, and storytelling.

# Executive Summary

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The United States has a long, complex history of immigration that has shaped how we view the country—its strengths, its shortcomings, as well as its promise to be a sum greater than its parts. For us to reach our fullest potential as individuals and as a nation, it is incumbent on us to understand and explore our many immigration journeys.

However, public debate around immigration is more divisive now than it has been in generations. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, this widening divide has quickly created an environment in which youth, both new immigrants and those within the receiving community, feel less connected, engaged, and empowered to create their own, bold vision for a cohesive nation.

What began before the global pandemic as a kernel of an idea between YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) and New American Economy (now the American Immigration Council) suddenly gained new urgency and meaning. Both organizations, committed to equity, inclusion, and the celebration of diversity, recognized that the potential to attain these values begins with young people. It was with this vision that the Youth Unity Project began to take shape.

The Youth Unity Project, a joint effort created by Y-USA and the Council, connects young, new immigrants with young people in their respective receiving communities and teaches them about immigration in the United States. Throughout the process, the young people engage on issues related to social justice, belonging, and social cohesion.

1. Educate participants on the basics of the U.S. immigration system;
2. Foster meaningful cross-cultural engagement and cooperation between immigrant youth and receiving-community youth;
3. Increase the likelihood that participants pursue civic engagement and community involvement beyond the program; and,
4. Train a cohort of young leaders to educate and facilitate productive dialogue around the immigration issue among diverse youth.

The key to meeting these goals starts with youth empowerment and education in spaces—both virtual and physical—that bring immigrant youth and receiving-community youth together. In 2021, the pilot phase of the Youth Unity Project took place in 10 YMCA locations across the country. Conducted over 9 and 12 weeks with one to two sessions per week, the pilot project recruited 207 youth participants; 15 percent of the participants were immigrants and 68 percent were the children of immigrants.

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To track participants' progress and measure the impact of the project during the pilot year, Y-USA and the Council co-developed pre- and post-program surveys for the participants, as well as a post-program survey specifically for the program's educators. The results from the surveys show the pilot program was highly effective in achieving its major goals:

- **Increasing understanding of the U.S. immigration system:** In the pre-program survey, 34 percent of the participants reported they had learned nothing in school about the U.S. immigration system and 62 percent said they had learned only a little. After completing the program, the share of the participants who said they knew some or a lot about the U.S. immigration system increased from 46 percent in the pre-program survey to 80 percent in the post-program survey.
- **Encouraging critical thinking:** About 53 percent of participants said the program made them think differently about how they read the news. The share of participants who believed that immigration is good for America also increased from 74 percent to 84 percent.
- **Promoting cross-cultural dialogue and understanding:** After going through the program, higher shares of participants reported they talked with other young people from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds (from 78 percent in the pre-program survey to 90 percent in the post-program survey), while being able to find more similarities among them (from 78 percent to 86 percent).
- **Developing appreciation of differences and awareness of bias:** The program helped more participants develop a strong connection to their own family's immigration history and cultural background (from 66 percent to 83 percent). A higher share of participants also reported being aware of their own biases around skin color, language, appearance, age, or religion (from 80 percent to 88 percent). Additionally, when communicating with people from different backgrounds, many participants found it most difficult to overcome language barriers and handle issues related to biases, racism, and privileges. About 43 percent of participants reported this program made them feel more comfortable communicating with a diverse group of people.
- **Fostering social cohesion and civic engagement:** Nearly 62 percent of the participants felt division in the country, their community, or their home. Many think we can become less divided through education, communication and connection, and advocacy. After finishing the program, participants were more likely to feel a strong connection to their communities (from 64 percent to 72 percent) and volunteer or help others (from 53 percent to 69 percent).

By engaging peers of different backgrounds in this experience, the participants bridged social divides, fostered greater social cohesion, cultivated skills around empathy and communication, and ultimately influenced systems change through modeling collaborative engagement and elevating their voices as change-makers. These were demonstrated by the community projects developed by participants of the Youth Unity Project, such as the DACA fundraising and awareness event in Long Beach, California, and the street vendor vaccination project in Los Angeles.

Building on best practices and lessons learned from the pilot phase, the Youth Unity Project will more than double its reach to local Ys in Year 2, positioning the project for further scaling across the national YMCA network and beyond. This project will be a model in which youth—both immigrants and those in receiving communities—will be positioned as change-makers, positioning them to effectively contribute to the recovery and revitalization of our country and work with each other to build a more compassionate and cohesive nation.

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# Introduction

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**T**he public debate in the United States around immigration is more divisive than at any time in recent history and has been further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While anti-immigrant sentiment has existed in the United States throughout its history, such sentiment has increasingly been given a place in mainstream conversations not seen since the early 20th century. This dramatic increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric is fueled by shifting public dialogue that is more anti-immigrant, disruptive technologies that allow audiences to bypass traditional media, and the resurgent practice of weaponizing misinformation. As such, the ubiquity of anti-immigrant sentiment in both traditional and new forms of media has impacted Americans of all ages.

This has created an environment in which youth, both new immigrants and U.S.-born alike, feel less connected, less engaged, and less empowered to articulate and foster their own vision for an inclusive society.

Furthermore, the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis have shone a light on widening health, education, and employment gaps among young people of color — including newly arrived young immigrants. These gaps risk deepening social isolation in immigrant communities, in turn jeopardizing immigrant youths' sense of belonging and preventing them from participating in civic life, social integration, better employment opportunities, and eventually a stable economic future.

While the immigrant rights movement continues to fight inequitable policies, provide necessary services, and battle strident anti-immigrant voices, there is also a critical need to invest financial and strategic resources in encouraging communities, particularly among the youth, to build empathy and counter divisive rhetoric at all levels of society. As the United States rebuilds from the COVID-19 pandemic, this need to do so is even more urgent. To ensure an equitable recovery from COVID-19 for all, America needs clear voices, strong advocates, and role models for compassion and inclusion.

The first step to achieving this starts with youth empowerment and education in spaces — both virtual and physical — where immigrant and U.S.-born youth can come together. With the right support, young people can cultivate skills around empathy and communication, bridge social divides, and foster greater social cohesion. Ultimately, through modeling collaborative engagement, they may be able to elevate themselves as voices and advocates for change.

PART I

# Contributing to a Changing Narrative

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Immigration has become a wedge issue across the country, often leading to polarizing rhetoric that feeds into a negative narrative on immigration and reinforces deeply entrenched community divisions. This can undermine the ability of newcomers to the United States and the receiving community to build meaningful, positive relationships. As the divisive rhetoric roils, the potential for anti-immigrant hate speech and violence grows, putting communities on edge and in danger of hardening us vs. them frames of understanding. With that being said, community members, regardless of their background, must ultimately live amongst each other.

Through the leadership of organizations like the American Immigration Council and Welcoming America, the Ad Council launched the “Belonging Begins With Us,” a national communications campaign with accompanying ground game in communities across America that is dedicated to fostering a more welcoming nation where everyone — regardless of their background — can feel like they belong.

Using the concept of belonging as a catalyst to illustrate community connectedness, the campaign amplifies narratives that speak to the work being done across the United States to build bridges across lines of difference, while also underscoring the critical importance of efforts that address diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging across institutional and community-based contexts. The campaign continues to amplify stories of community connectedness.

While the media campaign has become an important tool to help reshape the national narrative, it is programs, activities, and experiences such as the Youth Unity Project that help model, innovate, and implement genuine community-building. It was with this intent in mind that the YMCA joined the American Immigrant Council’s coalition to launch “Belonging Begins With Us”, and subsequently partnered to activate the Youth Unity Project in a way that brings the Ad Council campaign to life in communities across the United States.

## PART 2

# Program Overview

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The Youth Unity Project is a capsule methodology and experience collaboratively developed by YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) and the American Immigration Council (the Council) in partnership with local YMCA leadership and youth. It was designed to be adopted and implemented in local YMCAs across the United States.

Within this innovative experience, new immigrant youth connect with young people in their respective receiving communities and engage with them on issues related to social justice, belonging, and social cohesion by learning about immigration in the United States.

## KEY GOALS

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Undertaken during the difficult backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, this project sets out to support young people in reaching their full potential and enhancing their self-confidence, awareness, and cultural competencies. By guiding participants to explore concepts of historical contexts and questions about identity, equity, and social cohesion, the project hopes to inspire transformation within each community through fostering social connections, spurring civic action, and enhancing participants' knowledge base. The project also aims to develop innovative digital strategies and solutions to enable immigrant and U.S.-born youth to engage with each other and create solutions for a better future, both during and well beyond the COVID-19 era.



## KEY GOALS

Over the duration of this project, it focuses on achieving these four primary goals:

### **Educate participants on the basics of the U.S. immigration system.**

At the end of the program, each student should have a good understanding of how the U.S. immigration system works and its history. They should be able to use this base understanding to think critically about immigration today and assess what they are hearing from news outlets, social media, or other platforms, and form their own articulate, informed opinions.

### **Foster meaningful cross-cultural engagement and cooperation between immigrant youth and receiving-community youth.**

After the program, students should feel better able to connect with people of different backgrounds. They should have increased their capacity to work well across differences of perspective and opinion; gained skills in listening well, speaking confidently, and showing empathy; and gained experience in community-building. As young people work together, they forge a greater sense of community cohesion.

### **Increase the likelihood that participants pursue civic engagement and community involvement beyond the program.**

The project aims to spark and cultivate an interest in civic and community engagement and provide opportunities for that beyond the 9-to-12-week program dosage, allowing young people to engage in the process of building a world in which they wish to live and ensuring a vibrant democracy.

### **Train a cohort of young leaders to educate and facilitate productive dialogue around the immigration issue among diverse youth.**

The project provides YMCA staffers who serve as instructors with tools and training to execute the program successfully, achieve the curriculum objectives, engage youth across diverse backgrounds, and nurture an environment in which youth can more deeply engage in civil society.

The experience of this pilot program will add to the larger movement around building social cohesion in all types of communities and promoting values of inclusion, belonging, diversity, and acceptance.

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## CURRICULUM

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To achieve these program goals, the curriculum of the Youth Unity Project includes four major sections:

### 1

#### **Relationship Building**

The first section of the program focus on helping the students build positive relationships through shared experiences and collaboration, thus establishing a foundation for a cohesive and trusting group dynamic. Students share their family stories and backgrounds and explore commonalities in their life experiences.

### 2

#### **Immigration Knowledge**

This section provides the youth with a base knowledge of the U.S. immigration system — how it works, its history, and the politics surrounding it; breaks down stereotypes and fosters positive perceptions of immigrants through sharing immigrant facts and personal stories; creates empathy, caring, and compassion amongst youth through the realization of their human similarities through story sharing; creates discussion, discourse, and dialogue about immigration issues and policies; and helps youth learn and be proud of the immigration experience within their own family and in their community — locally, nationally, and globally.

### 3

#### **Community Project**

Students work as a team to brainstorm, select, plan, and deliver a civic engagement project that addresses an unmet need of local immigrant residents and builds a bridge within the community.

### 4

#### **Celebration**

During the last session of the program, students reflect on their experiences working on community service projects and come together to celebrate their hard work and accomplishments. This celebration allows them the opportunity to connect the dots between immigration, youth leadership, and the community.

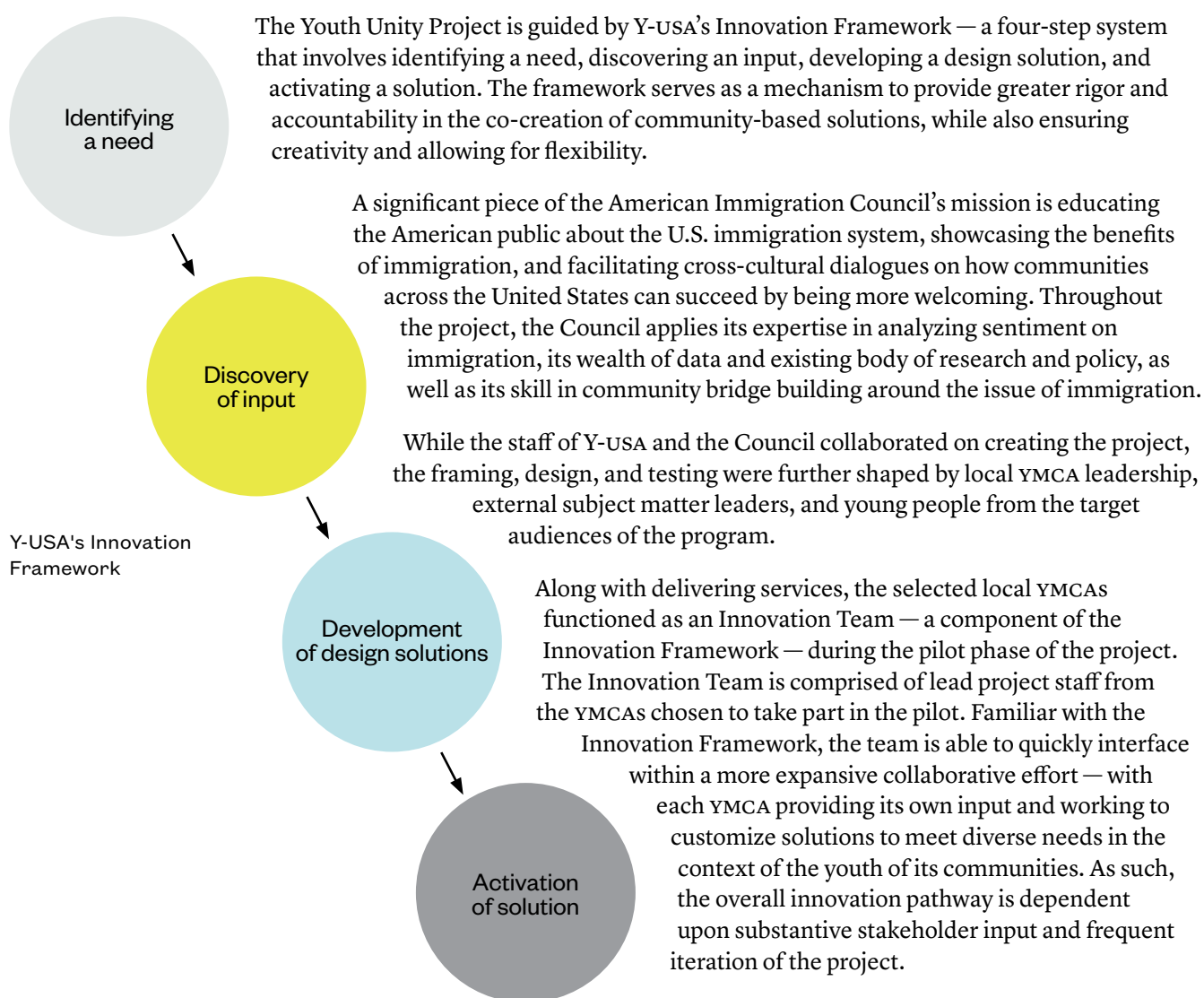
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By engaging youth of different backgrounds in this experience, the project is designed to equip them with essential leadership skills, cross-cultural competencies, and an appreciation of diversity, equity, and inclusion with a global mindset.

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## INNOVATION TEAM

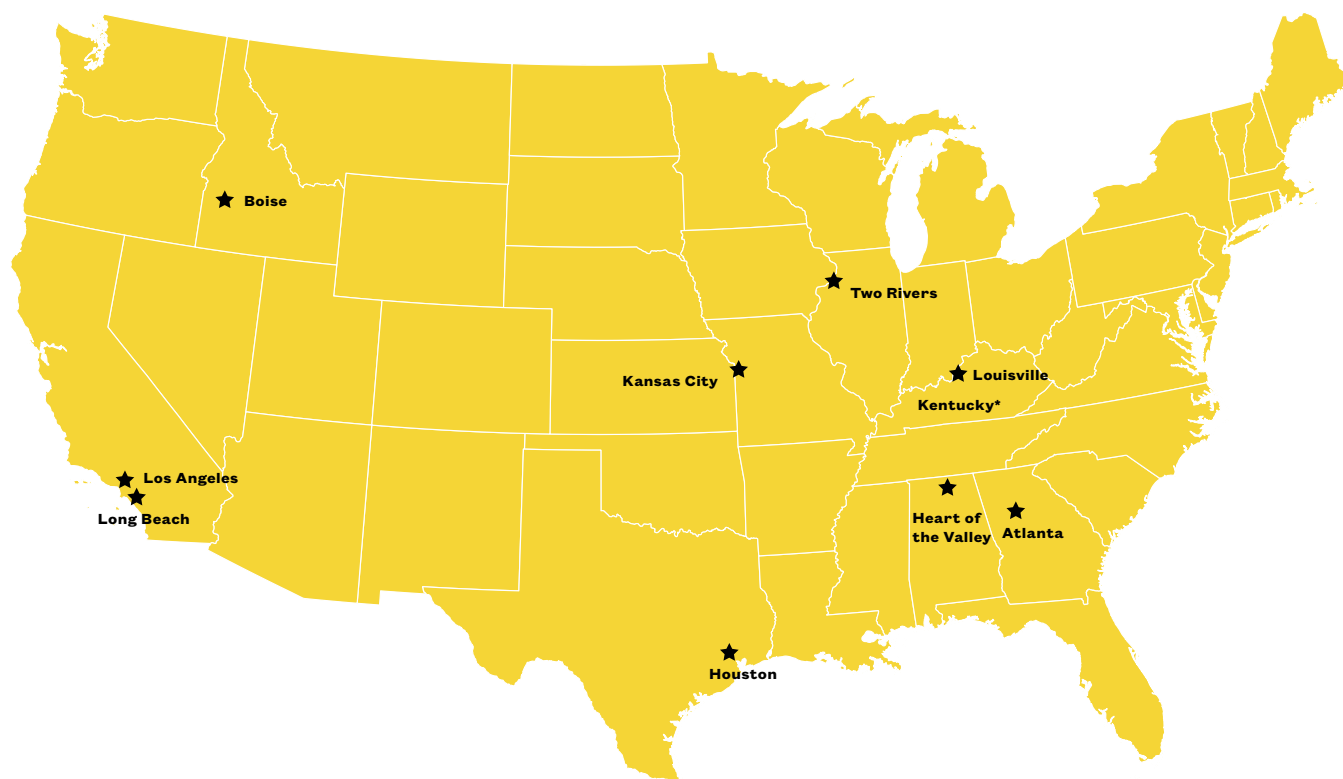
In alignment with its 10-year strategic plan, Y-USA has transitioned from a hub-and-spoke model to a networked organizational model, supporting efforts across the YMCA's nationwide network of nearly 800 independent YMCA associations and creating new approaches for addressing pressing community needs — such as emerging issues around immigration and community cohesion — with diversity and inclusion further embedded as its organizational imperative.



## EXECUTION OF THE PILOT PROJECT

The pilot year plan included executing the program across 10 YMCA locations in 2021. The selection criteria for pilot locations included, but were not limited to: geographic representation; a large immigrant population; a mix of rural and urban youth audiences; and alignment with existing efforts, such as those YMCAs involved in Welcoming America National Inclusion Cohorts or YMCA New American Welcome Center work, or communities engaged with the American Immigration Council through the Gateways for Growth Initiative, the Global Talent Chamber Network, or other similar activities.

### LOCATIONS OF PILOT PROGRAM



\*State-wide virtual program

The pilot program spanned between 9 and 12 weeks with one to two sessions held per week, depending on the site and the complementary ‘host’ program to which it was connected (e.g. Y Achievers). It was designed to be flexible so that local YMCAs could adapt the experience to be as specific to their students and communities as possible.

Because of the pandemic, the early sessions for the program depended heavily on digital, online platforms to convene and engage youth participants. Fortunately, many Y-run youth programs had already adjusted to organizing, facilitating, and delivering youth programs in digital spaces. Young people had transitioned to the video conference format with minimal difficulty, and the YMCA had become increasingly adept at creating youth-friendly, inclusive, and equitable spaces online.

As the restrictions on physical distancing eased, some YMCAs started to introduce in-person options to supplement and complement the virtual elements. In this way, the project allowed for more intimate social proximity as it was deemed safe, without stalling the pilot. It also made it possible to keep forming virtual cohorts of young people from multiple locations.

During the pilot phase, five YMCAs conducted all their programs virtually, four YMCAs applied a hybrid model (virtual for Cohort 1 and in-person for Cohort 2), and one YMCA carried out the program all in-person.

To make the virtual facilitation more intimate, manageable, and pragmatic in the early pilot stage, each site did not exceed 20 participants for programs offered virtually or hybrid.

Overall, the pilot project recruited 207 students to engage with 10 YMCAs across the country, including 102 students in the first cohort and 105 in the second cohort. On average, 12 students participated in each program.

The local YMCAs also built partnerships with a wide range of community stakeholders to recruit participants, provide transportation, cover participant fees, act as guest speakers, or help with community service projects. These partners included city governments (four out of the ten YMCAs), local schools (four YMCAs), other NGOs (three YMCAs), and corporations (one YMCA).



**NUMBER OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS IN PILOT YEAR**

YMCA Branch	State	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total
Atlanta	GA	10	8	18
Boise	ID	8	-	8
Kansas City	KS	10	6	16
Kentucky	KY	7	21	28
Heart of the Valley	AL	14	14	28
Houston	TX	-	21	21
Long Beach	CA	20	13	33
Los Angeles	CA	12	-	12
Louisville	KY	8	7	15
Two Rivers	IL	13	15	28
Total		102	105	207

## PART 3

# Measuring Impact

**T**o adapt and iterate the program effectively, Y-USA and the Council co-developed an evaluation tool to use throughout the pilot year. The tool included a pre-program survey and a post-program survey for the participants, as well as a post-program survey for the educators, to help track participants' progress, evaluate how effective the project is, and plan for Year 2.

The Council and Y-USA research teams developed the evaluation tool using the Civic Learning Spiral — a survey used by the Association of American Colleges

and Universities to measure civic learning in college students — as a model.<sup>1</sup> The tool captured a range of measures – from knowledge acquisition to leadership skills development, from changes in attitude to an increased sense of belonging.

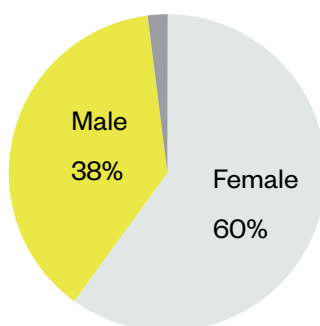
Overall, the pilot program received from the participants 140 pre-program responses and 88 post-program responses, as well as 10 responses from the educators.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

Nearly  
**85%**

of participants were between 13 and 19 years old. Of those participants, **half** were between 13 and 15 years old, and the other half were between 16 and 19 years old.

Nonbinary or Not Sure - 2%



About 60 percent of the participants were female, 38 percent were male, and 2 percent were nonbinary or reported being not sure about their gender identities.

LGBTQ

19%

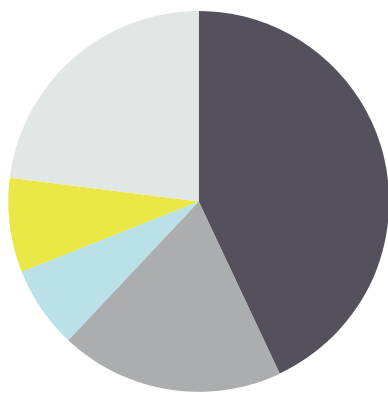
Heterosexual  
81%

More than 81 percent of the participants said they were heterosexual, and 19 percent reported being members of the LGBTQ community.

1. "Civic Engagement Value Rubric". Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2017.

The program targeted young people in their teenage years. They came from diverse racial and ethnic groups. At least 77 percent of the students were members of BIPOC communities, including 43 percent who were Hispanics, 19 percent who were Black or African Americans, and 7 percent who were Asians and Pacific Islanders. At least 58 percent spoke more than one language. About 97 percent of the youth primarily spoke English and 45 percent spoke Spanish at home.

#### RACE AND ETHNICITY OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS



<span style="display:inline-block; width:10px; height:10px; background-color:darkgrey;"></span>	HISPANIC .....	43%
<span style="display:inline-block; width:10px; height:10px; background-color:grey;"></span>	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN.....	19%
<span style="display:inline-block; width:10px; height:10px; background-color:lightblue;"></span>	ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER.....	7%
<span style="display:inline-block; width:10px; height:10px; background-color:yellow;"></span>	OTHER BIPOC .....	8%
<span style="display:inline-block; width:10px; height:10px; background-color:lightgrey;"></span>	NON-BIPOC .....	23%

About 85 percent of participants were born in the United States, with the remaining participants reporting being born abroad. Represented among

these foreign-born students were 12 countries of birth including Mexico, Guatemala, Afghanistan, China, India, and Tanzania. About 68 percent of participants reported having at least one immigrant parent. These

About

68%

of participants reported having at least one immigrant parent.

immigrant parents hailed from 26 countries, with Mexico as the most common country of origin for immigrant parents with 23 percent reporting at least one parent being born there.

At the 10 pilot sites, participants were guided by a diverse group of primary instructors in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity, aged between 23 and 55.

Half of the educators were from BIPOC communities, including Asians and Pacific Islanders, Black or African Americans, and Hispanics. Three educators themselves were immigrants, coming from Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Netherlands. Four U.S.-born educators reported being the children of immigrants.

## KNOWLEDGE, ENGAGEMENT, AND SENTIMENTS ON IMMIGRATION

**Nearly 91%**  
of participants felt this  
program gave them a  
**better understanding** of  
immigration in America.

After completing the program, almost 91 percent of the participants felt this program gave them a better understanding of immigration in America. As a result, the shares of the participants who said they knew *some* or *a lot* about the U.S. immigration system both increased.

### KNOWLEDGE OF THE U.S. IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

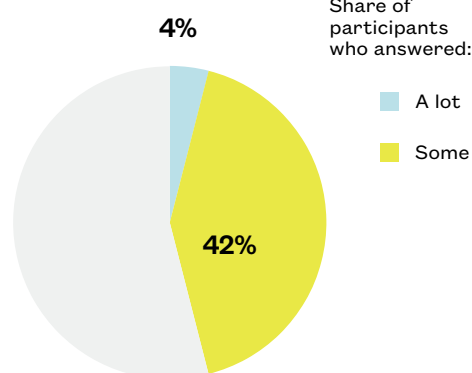
Despite its significance to America's history, the U.S. immigration system — how it works, how it came to be this way, and what impact it has had on the country — is not a common topic of discussion in U.S. schools.

Given this, it may not be surprising that message testing has shown that the argument “we are a nation of immigrants” in favor of immigration does not resonate among most Americans.<sup>2</sup> Without a foundational knowledge of immigration in the United States, it appears difficult for Americans to think critically about the issue, especially given the rhetoric and misinformation that surrounds it.

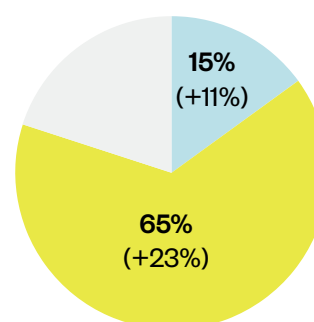
The program aims to teach young people — foreign-born and U.S.-born — the basics of the U.S. immigration system and the benefits of diversity and inclusion, so that they have the tools to develop informed opinions and accurately assess what they hear in the media, and from others, every day.

In the pre-program survey, nearly 34 percent of the participants reported that in school they had learned *nothing* about the immigration system in the United States and 62 percent said they had learned only *a little*.

#### PRE-PROGRAM SURVEY



#### POST-PROGRAM SURVEY



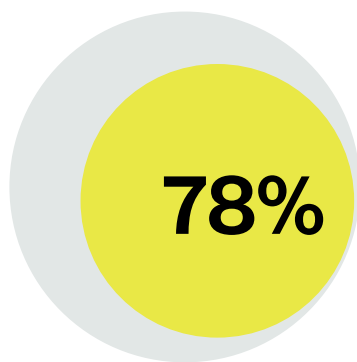
2. "A Core Narrative for Immigration Messaging." The Opportunity Agenda. 2009.



“I think that the media portrays immigration as a bad thing, but the program has shown me different perspectives of our immigration system in America.”

### — Program Participant

After the program, participants also reported that they talked about immigration issues with their family and friends more frequently and felt more confident about contributing to those discussions.

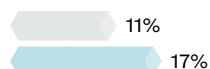


Share of students who said they would pay more attention to the news after having finished the program.

An overwhelming majority — 78 percent of the participants — said they would pay more attention to immigration in the news after having finished the program. At least 53 percent said this program made them think differently about how they read news, including participants who said they will “pay closer attention to the news sources I follow,” “fact check using credible sources when seeing something provocative or dramatic,” and “understand that using social media as my only form of news information isn’t enough.”

### DISCUSSING IMMIGRATION ISSUES

Share of participants who say they **often** discuss immigration issues in their homes or with their friends



Share of participants who say they **sometimes** discuss immigration issues in their homes or with their friends



Share of participants who say they **always** feel confident about contributing to that discussion about immigration



Share of participants who say they **sometimes** feel confident about contributing to that discussion about



■ Pre-Program Survey ■ Post-Program Survey

About 62 percent of the participants felt immigrants were welcomed in their city and 8 percent felt immigrants were not welcomed in their city. To tackle the anti-immigration sentiment in some cities, the program aims to reframe the immigrant experience as a distinctly American experience, and a shared one, whether a person’s family has just arrived or came to the United States hundreds of years ago.

In the pre-program survey, when being asked what they thought about when they heard the word “immigration” or “immigrant,” many participants thought about the migration process, why immigrants came to the United States, or foreigners. After completing the program, more participants thought about immigrants’ struggles, their strengths (e.g. hardworking, persevering, brave), and their families.

The share of participants who believed that immigration is good for America increased from 74 percent in the pre-program survey to 84 percent in the post-program survey.

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The program puts a strong emphasis on giving participants the skills to communicate with people from different backgrounds and the ability to participate in productive dialogue around tough issues like immigration.

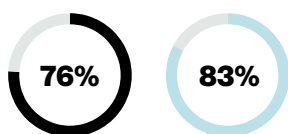
After completing the program, higher shares of participants reported they talked with other young people from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds, and were able to find more similarities between them. The share of participants who reported getting along with their peers

and having respect for peers of other cultures or ethnic groups stayed at relatively high levels in the pre- and post-program surveys.

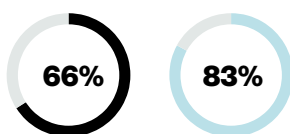
Program participants developed a stronger connection to their own family's immigration history and cultural background after going through the program. A higher share of participants also reported being aware of their own biases around skin color, language, appearance, age, or religion.

### SHARE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE THAT...

... they feel connected to and am proud of their own cultural background



... they know and feel connected to their own family's history, including their family's history with immigration



... they talk with peers from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds other than their own

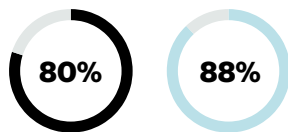


... they believe that someone from a different culture or ethnic background may not really be that different from them



■ Pre-Program Survey  
■ Post-Program Survey

... they try to be aware of their own biases around skin color, language, appearance, age, or religion



... they get along with other peers



... they have respect for peers of other cultures or ethnic groups



When communicating with people from different backgrounds, many participants found the easy parts to be listening to people's stories, *discussing cultural differences*, or *being open-minded*. The hard parts for them included overcoming language barriers, *not offending people*, or *handling issues related to biases, racism, and privileges*.

# About 43%

of participants reported this program made them more comfortable communicating with a diverse group of people because they:

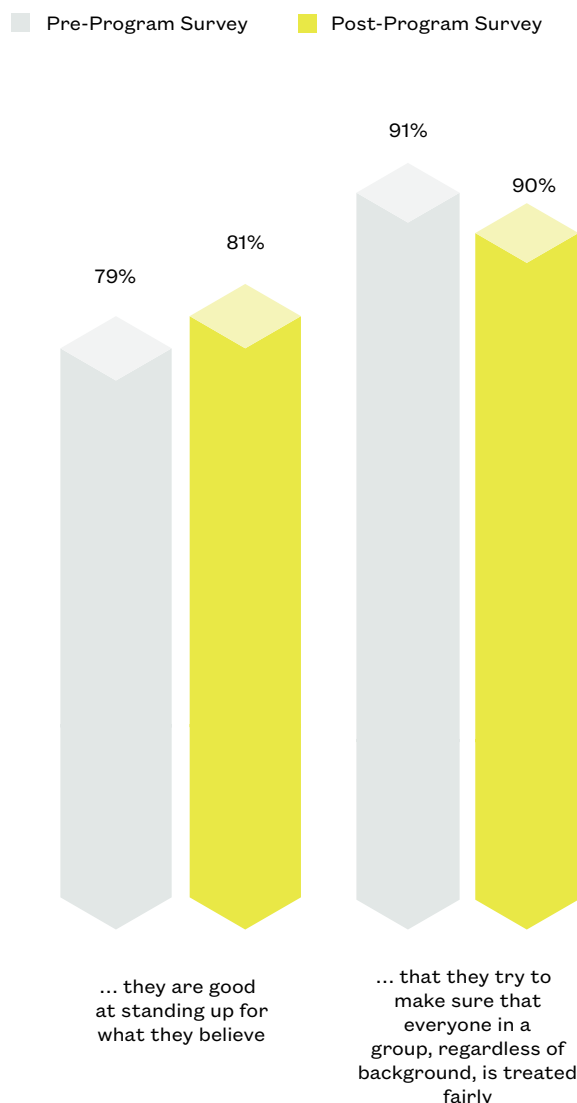
**Have more knowledge of different backgrounds**

**Are able to see their similarities**

**Are about to relate or empathize more**

The shares of participants who said they were good at standing up for their beliefs or tried to make sure that everyone in a group was treated fairly stayed at relatively high levels in the pre- and post-program surveys.

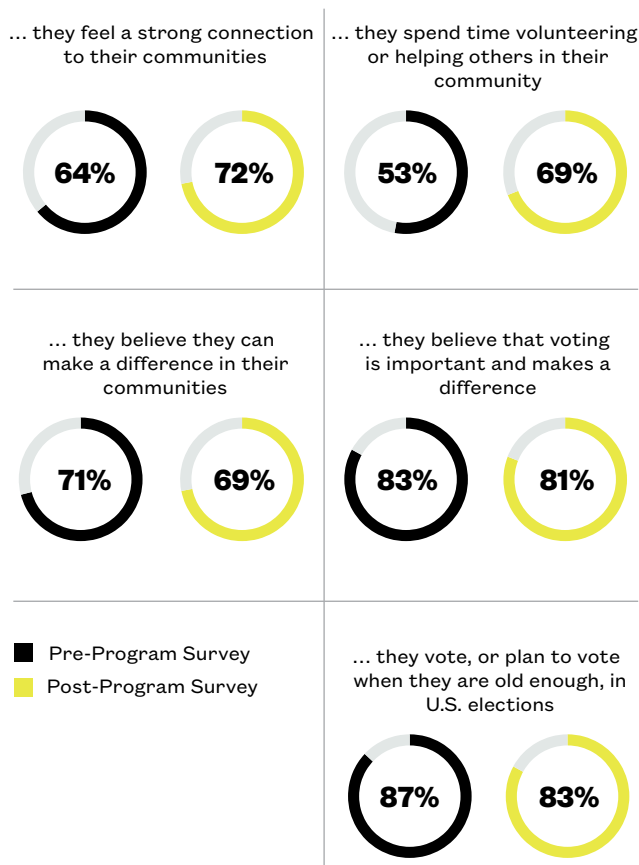
## SHARE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE THAT...



## CIVIC PARTICIPATION

After finishing the program, participants were more likely to feel a strong connection to their communities and volunteer or help others. The shares of participants who believed that they could make a difference in their communities or that voting was an important way to make a difference stayed roughly the same, while the shares of participants who said they voted or planned to vote in U.S. elections saw a small decrease.

SHARE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE THAT...



Nearly 62 percent of the participants felt division in the country, their community, or their home. Many think we can become less divided through:

### EDUCATION

"I believe we can become less divided by understanding the roots causes for immigration and realize that a lot of these people actually help our economy."

— Program Participant

### COMMUNICATION AND CONNECTION

"I think we can become less divided by simply hearing each other out. I feel that communicating and connecting is what overall allowed our program to be so intertwined and successful. I feel that the world can learn by this and come to understand each other, thus building unity."

— Program Participant

### ADVOCACY

"Advocating for your communities at a young age really helps get a clear point across to many other community leaders and can help other youth see eye to eye on certain situations and actually take action on any problems going on right now."

— Program Participant

## SPOTLIGHT ON

# Youth-Led Community Service Projects

**A**s program participants go through the program, they begin to work together to co-create and design a project that helps support local immigrant communities, furthering the larger discussion on concepts of social cohesion. Each of the projects aims to engage the broader community and raise awareness, understanding, and action that strengthens a community's sense of belonging, inclusion, and cohesion.

As a youth-led and designed solution, these projects take many forms, ranging from creating a community event to developing a social media campaign and holding a series of education sessions. As examples of these youth-led community initiatives, two projects from Long Beach and Los Angeles showcased how youth-led initiatives could have a real impact on mobilizing local communities to work together to support their vulnerable members.

## DACA AWARENESS AND FUNDRAISER EVENT

One issue that repeatedly arose in the youth-led discussions during the Youth Unity Project in Long Beach: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. The policy implemented by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants law-abiding undocumented youth a renewable two-year reprieve from deportation and the ability to legally work in the United States if they are in, or have graduated from, high school. During the pandemic, some undocumented youth participants who were eligible to apply for DACA could not afford the DACA application fee. They did not have access to stimulus checks and public assistance.

Program participants felt increasingly frustrated about these issues and decided to run a local fundraising event to educate the local community about the challenges faced by DACA-eligible individuals and raise funds for their DACA application fees.

To prepare for this event, program participants did an initial round of fundraising among their family and friends to make 60 T-shirts (as seen in the picture), after discussing with them the issues for DACA-eligible youth. They then set up a booth at a local YMCA resource fair to educate more community members about these issues.

The participants managed to sell 57 T-shirts for \$20 each. They gave the money raised to the two DACA-eligible youth in their cohort, who had successfully submitted their applications before a federal judge in Texas ruled to block new DACA applicants.<sup>3</sup>



PHOTO CREDIT: YMCA OF GREATER LONG BEACH

3. "Federal Judge Finds DACA Unlawful, Blocks New Applicants." Politico. July 16, 2021.



## VACCINATION CAMPAIGN FOR STREET VENDORS

Youth participants in the Youth Unity Project in Los Angeles wanted to help one of the most vulnerable groups in their local community – the street vendors. Their work put them at increased risk of COVID-19 infections because they came into frequent contact with their customers. But since many of the street vendors were undocumented immigrants, they were unsure whether they should receive the COVID-19 vaccines because they did not want their undocumented status exposed.

To help protect the street vendors during the pandemic, the participants set off to assure them that they did not need to provide proof of citizenship to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. They hoped to encourage as many street vendors to get vaccinated as possible and to establish a line of trust in their local immigrant community.

The participants prepared information flyers highlighting translation services available at vaccination appointments, used social media to share information, and found people in their community who would be able to support their efforts. Congressman Jimmy Gomez and State Assemblymember Miguel Santiago joined the youth in outreach campaigns carried out over two weekends. The participants targeted areas where street vendors gathered, including Boyle Heights, downtown Los Angeles, and East Los Angeles.

They ended up registering more than 150 people on their vaccination sheet and passed on the information to the local health department to follow up on getting those street vendors the COVID-19 vaccine they needed.



PHOTO CREDIT: YMCA LOS ANGELES

## PART 4

# Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Overall, the educators of all 10 YMCAs said this program was effective at helping youth participants learn about the immigration system and the immigrant experience in America and better communicate with peers from different backgrounds.

“The cohort spoke a lot about how they felt they learned things they do not get in school and definitely debunked things that they hear on the media. They mentioned out loud multiple times that they have a better appreciation for the immigration experience and will be more mindful of how they speak about people who have immigrated.”

— Program Instructor

“I believe that this program was effective in having youth engage with their cultural history in a way that was positive and affirming. By allowing our youth to share and express parts of their identity that they often try to erase or hide for fear of 'not being American' and rather leaning into that immigrant side and owning that as part of what it means to be American was great.”

— Program Instructor

Nearly 78 percent of the youth participants said this program had met or exceeded their expectations. The rest of the participants were expecting more immigrant students in their cohorts, more guest speakers from different backgrounds, more discussion about racism in the country, and more knowledge about immigration history or processes.



## Nearly 78%

of youth participants said this program had met or exceeded their expectations.

## MOST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

In the pre-program survey, a majority of the participants said learning more about U.S. immigration was their major goal for this program. In the post-program survey, many mentioned they had enjoyed the program far better because of the community projects they were able to work on.

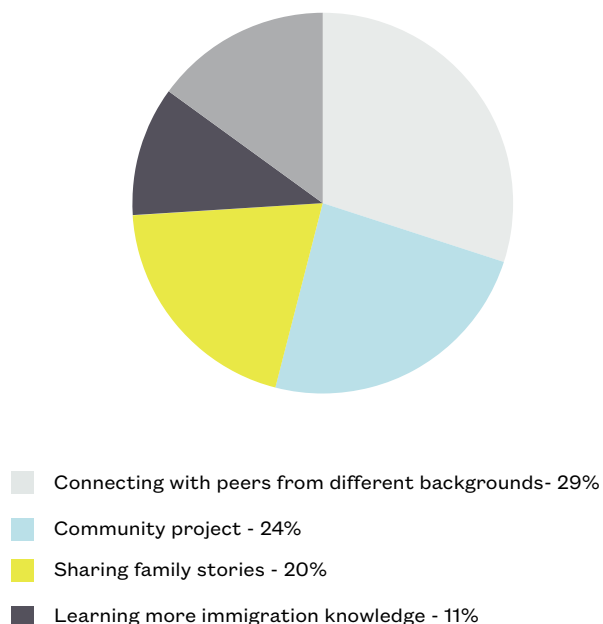
“I did not realize how much outreach and how impactful our project would be within our community. I didn't think it would be as hands-on and have such an impact on the community. It surpassed my expectations and I feel very proud to be a part of this program”

— Program Participant

The community project was one of the participants' favorite parts of the program (24 percent of the participants mentioned it in their post-program responses). The other parts that ranked among their favorites included connecting with peers from different backgrounds (29 percent), sharing family stories (20 percent), and gaining immigration knowledge (11 percent).

For the educators, the most successful activities included sharing family stories (mentioned by instructors from three YMCAs), community projects (two YMCAs), team-building activities (two YMCAs), video-based learning (two YMCAs), and youth-led dialogues (one YMCA).

FAVORITE PROGRAM COMPONENTS, REPORTED BY STUDENTS



MOST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM ACTIVITIES, REPORTED BY EDUCATORS

1. Sharing family stories
2. Community projects
3. Team-building activities
4. Video-based learning
5. Youth-led dialogues



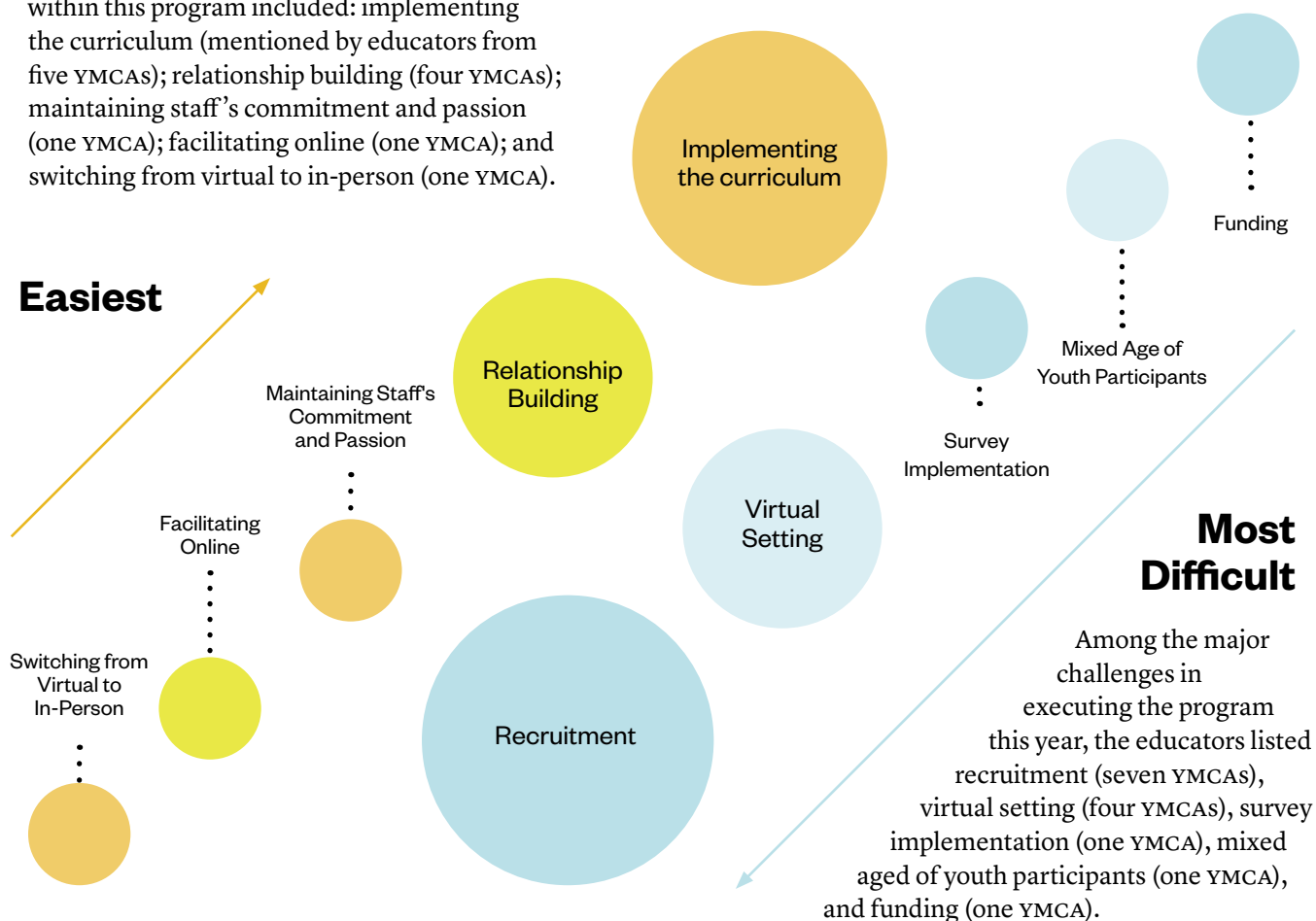
## PROGRAM EXECUTION

**T**he pilot phase of the program coincided with an extremely difficult moment in U.S. history, presenting many unanticipated challenges that forced the programs to address several difficult issues. About 88 percent of participants felt the program created a safe space to talk about tough things. And educators from six of the ten Ys felt that they were given the tools to be able to meet the moment and conduct this program as successfully as possible.

For the educators, the easiest things to execute within this program included: implementing the curriculum (mentioned by educators from five YMCAs); relationship building (four YMCAs); maintaining staff's commitment and passion (one YMCA); facilitating online (one YMCA); and switching from virtual to in-person (one YMCA).

# About 88%

of participants felt the program created a **safe space** to talk about tough things.



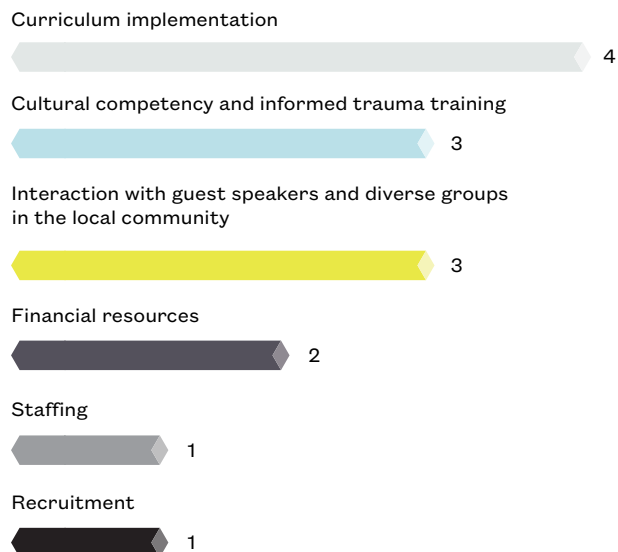
## TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS

**M**ost of the educators (from eight YMCAs) had a positive experience with the pre-program training they received. One had mixed views, and one reported limited training for staff who joined halfway through the program.

The educators from eight YMCAs were satisfied with the support they received from Y-USA, the Council, and their cohort peers, but two had mixed views.

When asked about the additional resources or training that they thought would be helpful, some educators mentioned more support in these areas: curriculum implementation (four YMCAs); cultural competency training and informed trauma training (three YMCAs); interaction with guest speakers and diverse groups in the local community (three YMCAs); financial resources (two YMCAs); staffing (one YMCA); and recruitment (one YMCA).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES OR TRAINING THAT EDUCATORS THOUGHT WOULD BE HELPFUL



## MOVING FORWARD

**W**hen asked about things the program could do differently in the future, some participants mentioned it should do more outreach during recruitment, especially in school, to further increase the number of participants. Some asked for a longer program, especially to finish the youth-led community projects. Others wanted to ensure consistent attendance and active participation by their peers in the program, see more diverse topics and guest speakers, hold more in-person meetings, and have more structure and focus for the materials.

Among the educators, they thought about better ways to recruit participants, ensure representation and diversity of youth participants in the program, tackle intersectionality issues between immigration and race and ethnicity, and encourage continued youth engagement after the completion of the program.

Educators from eight of the ten YMCA locations said they would be willing to help train future educators for this program.

# Next Phase of the Project

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In Year 2, the Youth Unity Project will more than double its reach to local Ys and continue to scale up each year from that point forward, funding permitting. After the pilot phase of the project, the second year focuses on refinement, enhancement, re-testing across a wider cohort, and finally, positioning the project for further scaling across the national YMCA network and beyond.

The project is also expecting the number of participants for each cohort to grow as the project becomes more established in local communities and the educators become more comfortable with program implementation, especially regarding recruitment and student retention throughout the program.

Based on feedback from participants and educators during the pilot phase, the innovation team will work with subject matter experts to further refine the curriculum and develop it into a capsule curriculum that can be easily passed on to local YMCAs to implement in their programs.

Throughout the project, the team will ensure continuous assessment of where and how the project can align with and link to existing organizational and community efforts to engage and bridge immigrant and receiving-community youth.

To make sure that the positive impacts of the program sustain beyond the program, the team will also think about how to incorporate future opportunities for student engagement into the project. Some local YMCAs, such as Long Beach, have already folded the Youth Unity Project into existing programs and are preparing to continue after funding ends, demonstrating a strong indicator for the sustainability of the overall project.

