

How Oakland Turns Its Back on Teens: A Youth Perspective

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***I**N THE COURSE OF THEIR SUMMER WORK AS ONE OF THE CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENT pilot projects, Youth of Oakland United surveyed 200 youth in Oakland about their concerns and used the results to draft proposals to improve their environment. Their primary proposal was for more teen centers, which they regard as a preventive measure against crime and a positive alternative to incarceration. This article was written by three teenagers at the end of the summer. They then presented it to the Oakland City Council and to high school groups in Oakland. Thus began their organizing within the Oakland youth community for policy changes within the city. With help from local organizers and lawyers, they drafted a ballot initiative known as “Kids First,” or Measure K, calling for 2.5% of the city budget, or \$6 million over the next 12 years, to be directed toward after-school programs, music, art, tutoring and other services for Oakland youth. They then collected the requisite 50,000 signatures to put the measure on the ballot. The electorate approved Measure K in the November 1996 elections.*

Seein’ It Through My Eyes (by Jermaine Ashley, Age 16)

Here’s a place where right is wrong and wrong is right. Dope runs the streets and those who are supposed to serve and protect are common enemies. Every thing is backwards; then they wonder why there’s a loss of respect because it was never given. You have to grow up fast just to keep up with our peers. Stepping out of your house is like stepping into another world. No love, not knowing who you can trust, and at any point in time anything can happen and will happen. But you can’t be scared to walk out of your house, can you? *No!* Why? Because I’m a hard young *man*. Why? Because I have to be. It’s either be the beast or be eaten by the beast. Elders look at me and think I’m a menace to society, but they do not know I’m doing the best I know how. I tried to get a job. I put in an application. I even got an interview, but no one taught me how to present myself, so that job is down the drain.

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A teenager is really new to this world and not prepared for the challenges life will offer, like HIV, herpes, teen pregnancy, peer pressure such as fighting, drugs, sex, and many, many more. Life is not quite real to a youngster yet. I feel a person is as good as his or her company in some ways. If a boy is growing up without a positive influence, he will be negative, not by choice but by nature. In other ways, the environment shapes the young man. Statistics show that the average life expectancy of a young man growing up in Oakland is shorter than the life expectancy of a young man in Piedmont. Some say that Oakland is just full of dumb, crazy people and others say that there's more than meets the eye.

We, in Youth of Oakland United (YOU), have seen a big difference among the schools, neighborhoods, and recreation centers within Oakland. A city that has all nice neighborhoods and other public facilities helps its residents have a better life, while in a city where schools, neighborhoods, and public facilities are bad, residents have more problems. If you take away a person's learning and cage him in neighborhoods with a lack of positive influence, his chance of making it in the real world will be reduced.

We feel that that's where teen centers come in as a start. A lot of our elders like to point fingers and talk down to us as young people today. Now, if that point of a finger were a helping hand and kind words, the situation we have could be better. Not that we're claiming to solve every problem, but we feel if the city helps one, he'll help another, and she'll help another, and *that* will make a difference. Do you understand that kids of today are the rulers of tomorrow? Only investing in us today will make sure tomorrow is a better day.

Introduction

The boy that was raised by wolves was told he was a wolf
and he thought he was a wolf.

The boy that was raised in the city was told he was a loser
and he thought he was a loser....

Ignoring the Youth of Today

The City of Oakland has ignored the cries of the youth for a very long time. This is shown through the attempt to implement a curfew that would legally criminalize the youth. The meetings we held with city residents indicated that there were more recreational activities in the 1970s. With the cutbacks on recreational activities sponsored by the city, many of the young turned to activities that are deemed inappropriate or even illegal.

Youth of Oakland (YOU) is a multiracial youth organization that is helping Oakland youth voice their concerns on issues that directly affect them. YOU members between the ages of 14 to 19 have organized around issues like the

nutrition programs in schools and, more recently, the proposed Oakland teen curfew. This summer we have come together to demand the improvement of recreation centers and programs for teens.

Preventive measures such as recreational programs that accommodate the needs of youth have proved successful in cities such as Phoenix, Arizona, Fort Myers, Florida, and Newark, New Jersey. The Trust for Public Land reported that in Phoenix juvenile crime decreased by 55% when recreational facilities stayed open until 2:00 A.M. in the summer. In St. Petersburg, Florida, juvenile arrests declined by almost one-third after the city began a youth academics and recreational program. In Newark, a once abandoned recreation center is now being used by 5,000 youth a month; crime has decreased since the city renovated it. These programs benefit the youth by offering positive role models, raising self-esteem, decreasing crime in an uplifting way, and providing alternatives to incarceration. *Allocating money for positive alternatives to incarceration must be a top priority of the City of Oakland.*

Our Research

Crisis in Teen Programs

Oakland may seem like a place with different sights and activities for everyone. However, when it comes to youth programs, the city seems to hide the fact that youth are ignored. This summer, YOU surveyed almost 300 youth between the ages of 14 and 19 at summer schools, on the streets, in parks, and at recreational centers. We found that the majority of youth feel that there are too few activities for them, especially for teenagers. Because of age restrictions, youth are not allowed to do many things, such as go to clubs, dances, and other evening events, and are limited to only a few kinds of activities.

In fact, most of the youth interviewed expressed feelings like, “Whenever I go somewhere, it is always in another city because the stuff in Oakland is always hecka messed up.” They feel that they have to go outside Oakland to have real fun, because there’s nothing to do here. For example, they go to Berkeley, Richmond, or San Francisco to hang out with friends at arcades, shopping malls, or public places where adults hang out, too. The shopping malls in Oakland are run-down and most of the stores are closed, or there is nothing to buy. Many who like movies said that there were not enough movie theaters in Oakland, especially after the theater at Eastmont Mall closed down. There is no place in Oakland that stays open late enough for teens to hang out together. There are not enough fairs and festivals to keep young people busy. As a result of all these things, we’ve seen many of our friends always doing something bad instead of positive things. The results of the surveys overwhelmingly showed that there’s a great need for organized youth programs in Oakland.

Problems with Existing Centers

Oakland does have several teen centers, but they serve less than 200 teens each day, less than one percent of the city's 36,000 teenagers. According to the youth, there are many good reasons that they do not attend these centers. First, many feel that the centers are no longer safe for them to attend. Many centers do not have a safe, well-maintained, well-lit environment, and an inviting ambiance. Safety and the maintenance of the facilities are reasons why youth do not attend these centers. For example, some recreational centers are always so dark and scary looking that the youth don't want to attend. At some centers there are people hanging around that young people are afraid of.

Second, youth said that the "good" recreation centers, like Brookfield and Arroyo Viejo, are too far away from their homes. Likewise, teen centers are not always located where teens are. They are spread out and young people don't want to take public transportation. They feel that taking the bus takes too much time and costs too much money. For example, we visited Acorn recreational center and the youth there said that they don't want to go to the teen center at deFermery. They feel that they should not have to travel the distance when they have a center that could be improved nearby. If the center is not near my house, why should I bother going through all of that way to get there?

Third, many teens feel the programs the centers currently offer do not interest or excite: they do not meet their needs. Most of the programs are for children under the age of 12. When the recreation centers do have trips, the youth have to pay and many people don't have money.

Fourth, some centers are in such bad condition that they remain empty. For example, Mosswood does not have the right equipment to attract more youth and the equipment they do have is of poor quality. Sanborn recreation center does not even have a basketball court, so those interested in playing basketball must make their own out of a pole and use a round piece of steel for a hoop. This is kept up in a garbage can.

Fifth, publicity about existing programs does not bring in that many youth. Many of the youth said that they don't even know what the teen centers are about or what programs they offer. Youth never hear about the few good programs that do exist at the teen centers.

Lots of Talk, But No Money

Many of these problems stem from the lack of money. Our research showed that when the City Council told Parks and Recreation to open teen centers, they didn't give them adequate funds to run the centers. The Council told them to make the centers out of what they already had.

The city doesn't give successful centers, like East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) and Centro del Juventud, any money. In fact, the City of Berkeley gives

EBAYC \$500,000 to run their program in that city, while Oakland gives them nothing to operate the same program here. Oakland gives no money to youth organizations.

When we interviewed center directors, they said money is needed for staffing in order to provide a safer environment with more programs for youth. Many teen centers are understaffed, as they have only a few full-time staff members. If they want to have any programs, they need to raise their own money. It's very difficult to attract teens to a program if that program doesn't have a budget or adequate facilities.

Teens Lack Real Power

In addition, though the teen programs do have an advisory council, the teens don't have direct voice in the major decisions affecting the center. They don't control any of the budget, the staffing, the hours of operation, or anything like that. As a result, all of the decision-making for the recreation centers is done by adults. Why should adults be telling recreational centers what the youth want? Youth should be able to take part in the decision-making process so we can have the programs we want.

Recommendations

Vision for Teen Centers

Teens want flexible, not rigidly structured, programs, plus activities that meet their needs and with which they are comfortable. Because teens usually will not engage in new activities that make them look foolish, they need programs that they can, at their discretion, slowly engage in. YOU conducted several focus groups — in-depth discussions with small groups of youth on what programs would attract them to a teen center. The following is a description of the programs suggested by the focus groups.

Youth want organized tournament leagues with prizes to attract teens to the centers. Centers should have adequate staffing and equipment to provide midnight intramural sports games. Youth want quality equipment and facilities that include good courts, posters, paint, and a lounge area for inside.

Recreational centers should provide alternative activity trips to amusement parks, excursions, and camping programs that let youth explore nature and get out of the city. Pool tables, dominoes, cards, arcade games, board games, books, and magazine subscriptions are necessary to attract youth and give them fun activities to do. So, too, are dance parties with DJs, with food and drink funded through the admission price. Recreation centers can rent out gyms to provide shows, parties, and performances. The performances can include plays, singing, dancing, etc. The availability of a VCR and a television can provide entertainment and education.

Youth need college and GED preparation programs and tutoring to supplement school programs that are insufficient. Offering classes on how to receive grants,

scholarships, and financial aid for college will give youth more opportunities. Also helpful would be job training classes that include job interview preparation, vocational training, and paid internships. Providing culturally appropriate programs such as political science and history will create political and cultural awareness in youth. Centers could also have music classes that include playing instruments and singing, allowing youth to explore the arts, which is not possible in public schools.

Counseling and Mentoring

Community-based peer counseling and conflict resolution are needed to provide both alternatives to violence and comfortable relations between youth. Confidential counseling on health issues like teen pregnancy, sex, STDs, AIDS, drugs, and gang prevention should be provided by our peers, from our perspective. All of these are rare and not geared toward teens.

A Role in Decision-Making

The major citywide problem is that youth lack an active role in the decision-making process in programs that affect them. In particular, we recommend the following:

Citywide, we advocate the creation of a Youth Development Department that will work with other city and county agencies and community organizations to meet the needs of youth, especially housing, drug rehabilitation, job training, teen centers, etc. An “open house” fair or festival should be held at each center on the same day to attract youth so that publicizing the available programs and activities at the centers is made easier and less expensive.

At individual teen centers, we believe that all policies directed toward teens must incorporate the concerns and solutions of youth. Teens should be hired from the community to work on staff and coordinate teen events to create more job opportunities for the youth. Center staff should be enthusiastic about working with and relating to youth. Centers should be open late. Recruitment, outreach, and publicity should be aggressive and youth-designed; it should be broadcast over television and radio, and flyers should be posted. The facilities should have peer conflict mediators to maintain a safe environment by resolving conflicts without violence.

Conclusions

Youth raised in the inner city are constantly bombarded with negative images, from the liquor stores on every block, to tobacco advertisements and “Just Say

No!” signs. All of these show us that society has no hope for us. The majority of the youth interviewed say that there are not enough activities in Oakland. The lack of funding for teen programs perpetuates the low self-esteem of youth, who then turn to activities that are illegal or seen as unsuitable. The programs mentioned in this proposal can potentially boost youth moral by redirecting their energy into creative and constructive avenues, rather than destructive ones. Centers, in general, should provide safe havens for youth.

The recreation centers in Oakland look bad by comparison with those in other cities like Piedmont or Berkeley. With so many teens, there are not enough activities to accommodate the youth. There are more than 36,000 teens in Oakland and there are not enough places for youth to go.

The City Council of Oakland simply is not in touch with youth ideas and needs for recreation, or their presence in general (except when it comes to crime and the police). If they were, they would fund more programs for teens. That is something we aim to change.