

Carrying Community through COVID FY21 CYD Report

"Art has the potential to change the world. Art has the power to transform, to illuminate, to educate, to inspire, and that is what AFH allowed me to do." – AFH teen

This report describes the intense challenges that Creative Youth Development organizations faced between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021. In addition to reflecting on the changes the COVID-19 pandemic brought to CYD organizations, it also details how these organizations expanded their missions with creativity, resourcefulness, and flexibility at the center of their work. The data contained herein comes from 72 Creative Youth Development programs across Massachusetts that represent a range of disciplines, rural and urban environments, and various ages of young people.

YouthReach is the longest continually running support program for Creative Youth Development work in the United States. Started in 1994, this Mass Cultural Council program has invested more than \$15 million in more than 100 organizations in its 27-year history. The program currently funds 72 Creative Youth Development programs that focus on infusing youth development with creative experiences in the arts, humanities, and interpretive sciences.

The 2020-2021 year offered challenges and stress for all Creative Youth Development organizations as they worked to revise, create, and morph programming to address safety needs brought about by COVID-19 while still maintaining strong support for the young people, families, and communities with whom they worked. When the pandemic world pushed for isolation, they created transformative spaces and practices for staff and young people that encouraged creativity, motivation, and connection for young people to be able to process the multiple pandemics and continue to build identities, skills, and visions for a better world.

YouthReach Participant Demographic Information

An overview of the youth involved with Creative Youth Development programs in Massachusetts include:

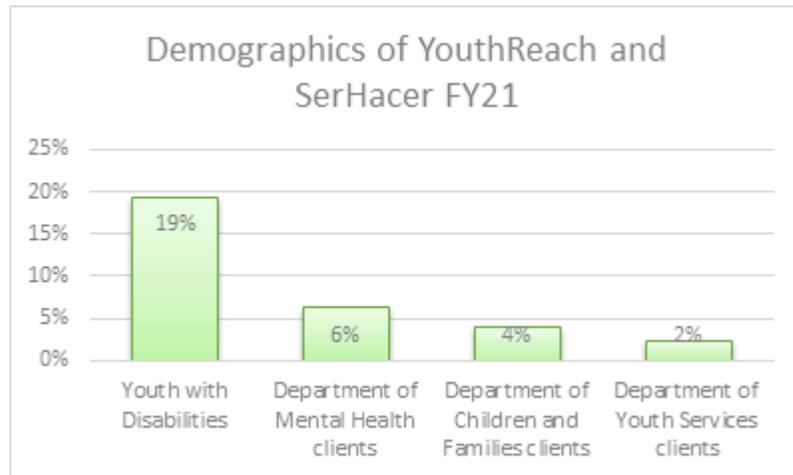
of youth served in FY21: **8072**

of youth served in FY20: 9818

Demographics

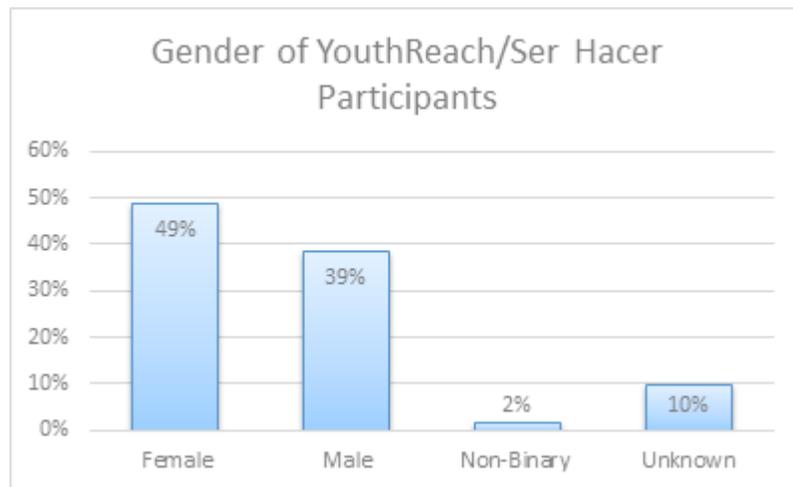
Prepared on 11/3/21

- 52% - Youth living in economically depressed urban environments
- 28% - Youth who live in homes where English is not spoken
- 21% - Youth living in public housing
- 19% - Youth with Disabilities
- 11% - Foreign-born Youth



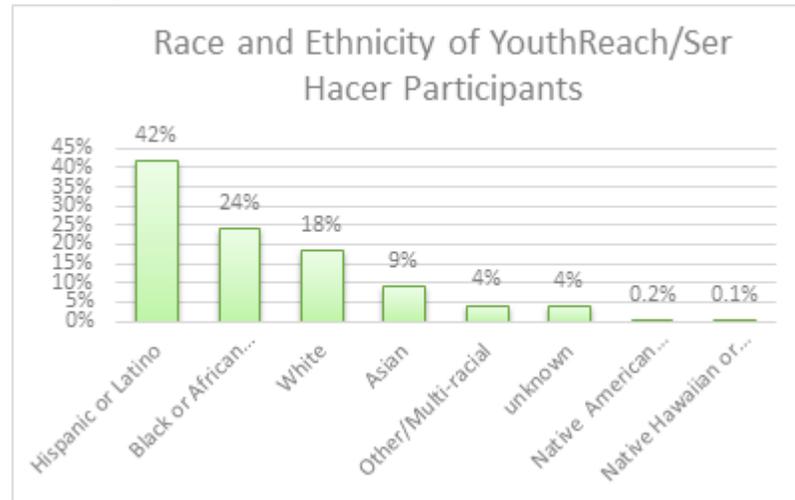
- 6% - Department of Mental Health clients
- 4% - Youth living in economically depressed rural environment
- 4% - Department of Children and Families clients
- 2% - Department of Youth Services clients

Gender



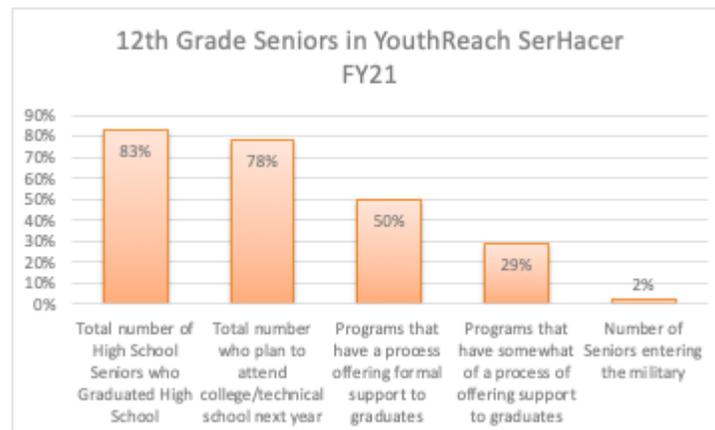
- 49% Female 39% Male
- 2% Non-Binary 10% Unknown

Race and Ethnicity



- 42% Hispanic or Latino
- 24% Black or African American
- 18% White
- 9% Asian
- 4% Other/Multi-racial
- 4% unknown
- .2% Native American Indian or Alaska Native
- .1%, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Graduates



- 83% of high school seniors graduated high school
- 78% plan to attend college/technical school next year
- 50% of programs have a process offering formal support to graduates
- 29% of programs have "somewhat" of a process of offering support to graduates
- 2% of seniors plan to enter the military

Overview of FY21 Findings

FY20 Findings *(based 74 reports)*

As part of the Final Reporting for FY20 (inclusive of the first three and half months of the COVID-19 pandemic) 74 Creative Youth Development organizations were asked to describe how their organization pivoted to address the needs of young people. Their responses illustrated the complexity of CYD work in providing high quality experiences in the arts, sciences, and humanities while simultaneously meeting the basic needs of working with youth, families, and communities who are systemically disadvantaged.

Among the responses, three areas of programming changes emerged from the responses:

- **A focus on connection** – Over and over in final reports the word ‘connection’ came up as a first response to the pandemic, reinforcing the value of positive relationships, mentoring and community support inherent in CYD programs.
- **Pivot to online learning** – Like most industries, nonprofit out-of-school programs pivoted almost immediately to establishing connection and opportunity online. Nearly all programs responding to the survey cited an immediate shift to online programming during the month of March. There was tension between continuing with existing programming and/or developing new resources for work that shared the same values.
- **Focusing on basic needs** – Many CYD programs serve as holistic supports for young people and community, focusing on issues going far beyond that of an art program. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the true breadth of the role these programs play in their communities.

FY21 Findings *(based 72 reports)*

In FY21, CYD organizations attempted to fill systemic gaps in responding to needs of their young people, families, and community. Organizations expanded their reach of services to include issues of food/housing insecurity, technology, racial injustice, and mental health while prioritizing relationships and the deepening of partnerships to be able to address these needs. Teaching artists focused on utilizing the arts, even the pivoted-to virtual world, to support young people in both processing the effects of multiple pandemics, and bravely continuing to build connections while advocating for a transformed, more just future as change-makers.

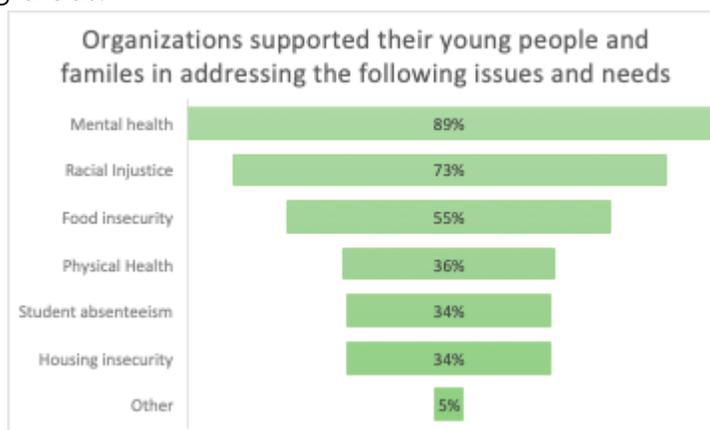
As COVID endured into the 2020-21 school year, most organizations continued to offer private lessons and group classes online, adapted studios for safe in-person instruction, redesigned concert seasons, and created new programming. Many provided both synchronous and asynchronous instruction

to offer flexibility to students and to help navigate absenteeism. They rearranged schedules, offered support hours, and many also delivered care packages, and art kits to respond to students' stress levels and needs.

More than anything, they were a trusted partner with strong existing relationships in the community and became resources to families about local, state, and federal assistance, including information about food pantries, vaccination clinics, and mental health clinics. The four areas of growth for Creative Youth Development during FY21 centered around a programmatic and structural deepening of the experiences of FY20, including:

Leaning into the Human Service work of CYD: Conscious efforts were made to provide families with resources. New staff positions were created for food delivery programs, mortgage/rent relief, filing unemployment, and mental health/counseling services, and legal and financial help for families facing evictions. Of 72 reporting organizations, 89%, felt they needed to expand their mission to attend more directly to the pressing needs of young people and communities. For example, one organization encapsulated the prevailing thinking of the cohort saying, "This year we saw a steep rise in depression, and insecurities in multiple areas. We could not address musical learning until students felt secure in their basic needs, so we dedicated ourselves to building relationships with students and families."

Collectively out of the 72 organizations that expanded their mission, they did so in the following areas:



When asked to identify areas that CYD programs pivoted to address, respondents also spoke in other very specific ways in which they helped their communities, such as: "We were able to leverage a total of \$105,950 to support families in paying back rent and help 55 families receive a \$500 direct payment from our partnership with the Family Independence Initiative among other support."

1.) A Focus on Mental Health: The pandemic brought many mental health effects to the young people of CYD programs. Anxiety, isolation, loss

of creative confidence, difficulty with retaining information and focus, and depression loomed large. Organizations responded by organizing, addressing mental health needs, increasing resources, and providing individual support with connections to social workers. 89% pivoted to address needs more fully in mental health. They offered comments, including:

- *The feeling of isolation, helplessness, anger, and the effect on the mental health of our students once we pivoted to virtual programming created so many emotional problems. We had to focus on working on more creative engagement.*
- *We witnessed mental health challenges such as depression. Whether triggered by family job loss, social isolation, food insecurity, fear of illness, or all of the above, depression seemed to hit many of our participants hard.*
- *Many youth participants experienced depression, and some suicidal ideation, and we made referrals to crisis services and therapy. Multiple youth stopped attending classes. We focused on homework support and following up in these situations.*
- *LGBTQ youth often faced unsupportive/unsafe housing situations, and sometimes faced physical and emotional abuse, lost income, and food insecurity. Meeting youth's basic physical and mental health needs had to accompany and/or precede art-making.*
- *Teens lost connections to the wider community: jobs, routines, social connections, and a sense of control and autonomy were lost. Staying home cut rural teens off from their most meaningful and stabilizing relationships and left them feeling helpless.*

2.) A Focus on Racial Justice: 73% of responding programs reported that they pivoted to address needs for racial and systemic justice, saying:

- *Publicized crimes against our community brought the need to emphasize our commitment to and solidarity with our students.*
- *There was a heightened anxiety about racial injustice due to the Black Lives Matters movement and the rise in anti-Asian violence. We decided to address these things by taking up #MakingJoy, #MakingLiberation & #MakingArt+Technology as our themes and to adopt an attitude of "We Make the Road by Walking" from Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Antonio Machado.*
- *In response to systemic racism, AFH teens made it clear that they wanted to lead the way to a more just society through their art. AFH launched Voices of the Future for our teens to use paid studio time to respond creatively to unfolding events.*

COVID Changes That Will Endure

Many Creative Youth Development organizations dug deep into their creative spirit and honed their ability to adapt in order to create programming that was accessible and relevant. Virtual instruction with individuals, groups, and performances, while not ideal, opened opportunities for more young people to participate and for an expanded

reach to a wider diversity of youth. For many youth who already had active digital lives, the shift to digital saw an increase in participation in some organizations and, for those who worked with teens, many found benefits with the greater flexibility and ease of scheduling without transportation issues. Teachers also reported greater student engagement with the greater range of teaching tools.

The majority of respondents indicated that they would continue some form of hybrid programming in a post-COVID environment, primarily focusing on:

- Inclusion of hybrid virtual programming and access to technology
- Diversifying curriculum - amplifying youth and BIPOC narratives
- Providing increased support for individuals and families
- Engaging new artists

Looking Ahead

In FY21, Creative Youth Development programs increased their structural and programmatic capacity to provide needed human services to youth and families in their communities. In planning for the 2021-2022 school year, organizations are prioritizing being a trusted, flexible partner with young people while emphasizing:

- **Listening to youth voice** - With a focus on connection, mental, and physical health
- **Increasing staff care and capacity** – Providing support mechanisms for existing and new staffing to accommodate the changing environment
- **Enhancing safety protocols** – Balancing the needs of boards, youth, and families, organizations are continuing to update and refine guidelines
- **Focusing on new recruitment strategies** - Participation in CYD programs was down almost 20% in FY21 and without schools and in-person recruitment opportunities those numbers may continue to dwindle.
- **Engaging in networking and trainings** – To develop dynamic capacity to meet changing needs
- **Finding flexibility of funding** – Individuals and government support increased significantly during the pandemic and organizations are looking at how to secure funding from human service sectors, where much of their work now exists.