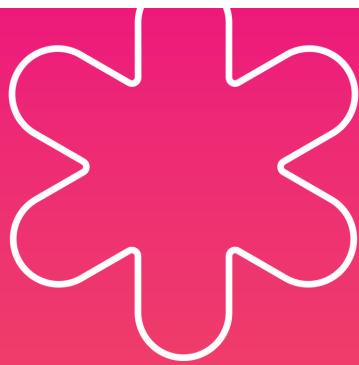




**PUBLIC HEALTH
INSTITUTE
AT DENVER HEALTH™**



Overcoming the Struggle with Our Strength

PHOTOVOICE QUALITATIVE DATA REPORT

→ 2022



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PURPOSE OF REPORT

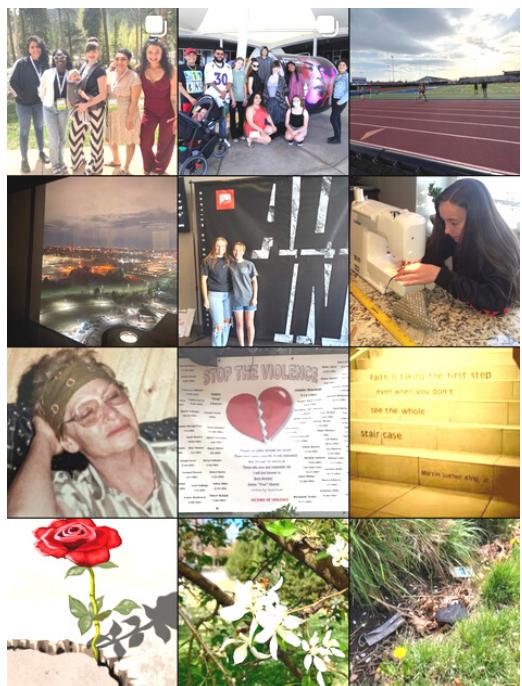


The purpose of this report is to document our collective qualitative data analysis findings from our #EYESurvive PhotoVoice Project.

ABOUT US

EYE For Prevention is a coalition of 14 paid young leaders from across the Denver-Metro area, who have lived experience in substance misuse and/or mental health struggles. We come together to create healing spaces for young people to identify their passions and strengths and grow together as a community. We collect and analyze data to better understand the issues that young people are facing and the root causes of those issues. We then mobilize to come up with creative and powerful projects and prevention strategies to make a positive impact. Authentically engaging young people with diverse lived experience is vital to our process. We train and educate adults who work with youth and decision makers who impact youth so we can collectively create environments where our current and future generations can thrive.

WHAT IS PHOTVOICE?



PhotoVoice is a process in which people use photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences and share them with others. The pictures can be paired with captions created by the photographers, to bring the realities of the people's lives to light to inspire change. PhotoVoice can be used to encourage critical consciousness. Through choosing, discussing, and reflecting on the submitted photos, people can come to a clearer understanding of the economic, social, psychological, and political forces that impact themselves and their communities. It is often used to uplift the voices of individuals and communities that are often not given a voice to bring about change, improve conditions, and enhance lives by reaching and influencing decision makers.

OVERVIEW OF THE #EYESURVIVE PHOTOVOICE PROJECT



The EYE For Prevention Youth Coalition invited young people (under the age of 26) to participate in the #EYESurvive PhotoVoice Project. This project specifically looked at substance misuse and mental health by highlighting that the struggle is real but so is our STRENGTH! Youth were asked to participate in this project to bring awareness to their lived experience, use storytelling as a form of social change and healing, and connect with other young people who are also overcoming the struggle with their strength.

This was a two-part PhotoVoice project. Youth were asked to upload and describe two photos to represent the struggle and strength. The struggle was defined as things that cause or contribute to substance misuse (injustices, barriers, social determinants of health, obstacles, and risk factors). Strength was defined as things that help prevent youth substance misuse(resiliency, inspiration, things that support good mental health & wellbeing, things that help overcome challenges, and overall protective factors). As a guiding prompt, we asked youth to describe the pictures they uploaded using these questions:

Describe your picture:

- **What is happening in your picture?**
- **Why did you take this picture?**
- **What does this picture tell us about life in your community?**
- **How does this picture provide opportunities to improve life in your community?**
- **Where did you take this picture? How are you impacted by place/where you live?**

Following the completion of the submission process youth were asked to evaluate their experience participating in the PhotoVoice. In addition, each young person who submitted photos was given the opportunity to receive a visa card. These were sent out to the youth in the mail. Demographic information of participants can be found on *page 7*.

COMMITMENT TO EQUITY IN DATA



The Public Health Institute at Denver Health aspires to present data humbly, recognizing numbers never tell the whole story. We strive to work with individuals and communities to learn and share their stories to improve collective understanding. Knowing that people across life circumstances have inequitable opportunities to achieve optimal health, we commit to pair numbers and stories to inform policy and systems change to improve health for all.



BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT



EYE For Prevention first explored PhotoVoice by learning about it as a prevention strategy and tool to collect meaningful qualitative data by having the youth leaders participate in the PhotoVoice process. EYE For Prevention youth leaders each created six PhotoVoices, three representing the struggle, and three representing strength. The youth leaders held a sharing circle to present their PhotoVoices. Through this process, the youth leaders got to know each other on a deeper level, hearing about each other's lived experiences, backgrounds, stories, trauma, and resiliency.

After doing the project as a small group, the youth leaders were inspired to launch it on a larger scale within the broader Denver-Metro youth community. The youth leaders assisted in developing the entire process from start to finish. *A goal of getting 50 PhotoVoice submissions was determined by the youth leaders.* Following setting a submissions goal, developing an outline of the process, and creating a timeline, a submission tool was created in Qualtrics to collect submissions from youth and evaluate their experience participating. The form then sent them to a separate survey within Qualtrics to collect the information needed in order to receive a gift card for participating. The project was shared through social media, flyers, and word of mouth. It was also shared by EYE for Prevention partners to encourage youth to participate in the project. *A total of 32 unique PhotoVoice submissions from youth were received.* Once the submissions were received, EYE for Prevention youth leaders organized and conducted focus groups to discuss the PhotoVoices submitted, and gain a deeper understanding of the struggle and strength. *Nearly 100 young people participated in the focus groups.*

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Following the collection of the PhotoVoice submissions, the EYE For Prevention Youth Leaders began analyzing the photos by first compiling and categorizing them in Google Jam Boards, one for struggles and one for strengths. The photos were categorized into overarching themes in the Jam Boards by the youth leaders through many in depth discussions. It was often found that many of the photos could fit into multiple categories. Continued discussions of the photos allowed for the proper categorization into the most relevant category. This was our first understanding of what contributes to youth substance misuse and poor mental health, and what helps young people not use substances. The number of photos under each category demonstrated their importance.

Once the photos were categorized the captions were organized in a document by the overarching theme with which the photo was categorized. The youth leaders then went through a thematic coding process to identify common themes mentioned in the captions. Once completed the themes were compiled into a spreadsheet and defined. The themes were counted and recorded in the spreadsheet to determine which were the most mentioned by youth in their photovoice submissions. A similar thematic coding process was followed for analyzing the focus group discussions. We hope this report can help to share this information, as well as inspire and educate others on youth mental health and substance misuse prevention efforts through an authentic youth engagement and equity lens.

KEY TIP:

**NEVER DO THEMATIC CODING ALONE—
CONSENSUS IS KEY!**



UNDERSTANDING THE STRUGGLE



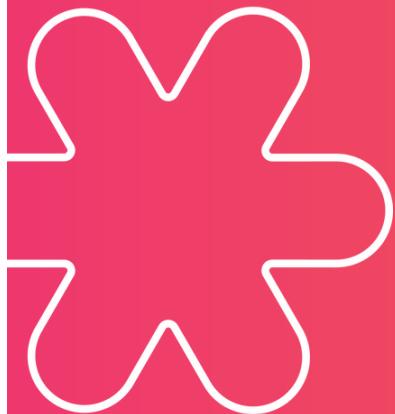
Understanding the struggles young people face in today's society is essential to creating relevant and effective substance misuse prevention efforts. Most of the photos submitted representing the struggles that young people face fell into six overarching categories. These categories are *Environmental Injustice*, *Violence/Safety Issues (10 photos)*, *Health Struggles (Mental, Physical, Emotional) (4 photos)*, *Racial Injustice (3 photos)*, *Generational Trauma (3 photos)*, *Loss (3 photos)*, and *Self-Image/Insecurities (3 photos)*. Environmental Injustice had the most photos with a total of 10 photos, highlighting the large impact it has on substance misuse among young people in the Denver-Metro area. The state of youth's physical, mental, and external environments have a profound impact on their mental state and well-being. Pollution, littering, and damage to property can negatively impact mental health by creating an unwelcoming or hostile environment. A few quotes that highlight the impact of the environment on young people are below:

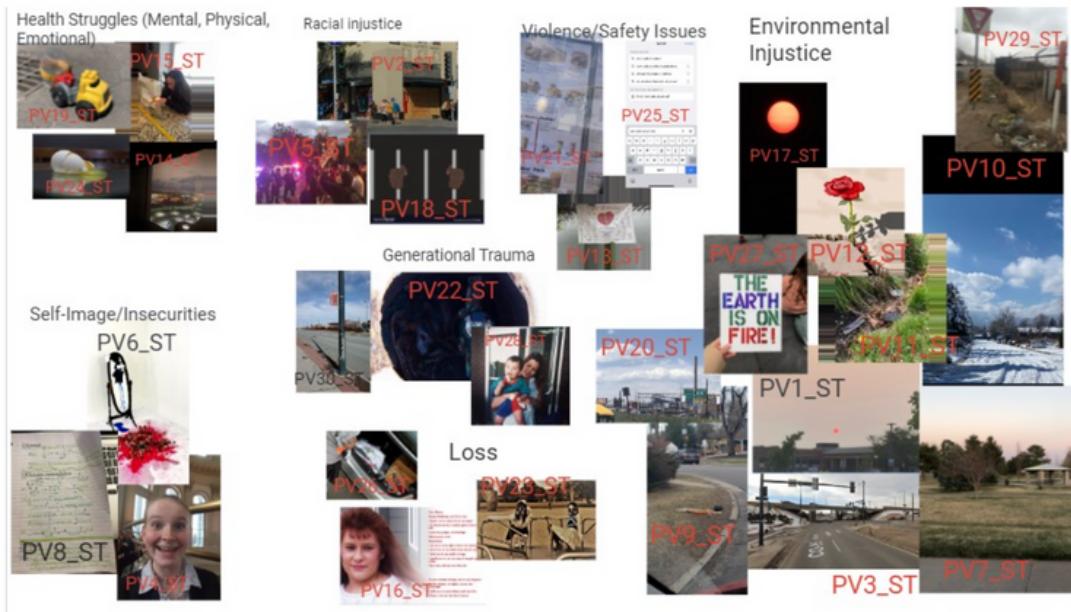
“When we feel like our communities and environments are being degraded and ignored, we tend to internalize those same feelings.”



“Seeing our normally beautiful skies full of smoke not only discouraged outdoor activities and negatively affected physical health, but also spread fear and gloom.”

“This image is of what I imagined was rot in some kind of sewer or water cavity taken in Five Points. This was taken well into our most recent epidemic of colonization in the area, and it was a reminder of how our culture, our history & even our bodies are merely food for white populations to dine on at their leisure- even in a place once called the ‘Harlem of the West.’”





The other overarching themes of health struggles, racial injustice, generational trauma, loss, and self-image/insecurities all are important to consider in planning substance misuse prevention efforts, however they had far less photos categorized under each of them. These themes can also contribute to the state of youth's mental state and well-being in their own ways, and they may compound the impact that environmental injustice has on the mental health and well-being of the youth in our communities. Overall, these themes give way to a sense of hopelessness, lack of control, and dissatisfaction in regard to larger societal problems, which highlights the need for and importance of youth engagement as well as the importance of creating enriching and beneficial opportunities to meet the needs of all young people in the Denver-Metro Area.

Following the categorization of the PhotoVoice submissions, it was important to determine the driving force behind the overarching struggles that young people face. *The word cloud represents the common themes found during the process of coding the captions for the photos.* The bigger the word or phrases are, the more often they came up in focus group discussions and PhotoVoice submissions. The most common themes by overarching category are highlighted in *Table 1* on the following page.

OUR STRUGGLE



TABLE 1.**The most commonly mentioned themes by overarching category:**

OVERARCHING CATEGORY	MOST COMMON THEMES
Self-Image/Insecurities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of inadequacy • Societal expectations
Racial Injustice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact on Mental Health and Substance Use
Environmental Injustice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of community pride and connections • Impacts mental health
Health Struggles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID Isolation • Mental Health
Violence/Safety Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Fear • Leads to substance use
Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Addiction • Lack of safe space
Generational Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health struggles • Lack of belonging • Internalization of injustices

Mental Health was the most commonly identified struggle that youth face in their everyday lives across each overarching category. The mental health of young people is compounded by racial injustice, environmental injustice, and lack of belonging demonstrating the pervasiveness of mental health and the need to address the factors that contribute to poor mental health. Another recurring theme was continual and generational injustices that generate hopelessness through their cyclical nature. This lack of change and growth created feelings of isolation and loneliness. COVID and decreased community engagement added to feelings of isolation, lack of connection, and lack of belonging furthering the impact of mental health.

UPLIFTING YOUTH STRENGTH

Understanding the strengths or items that prevent substance misuse among young people is equally as important as understanding the struggles or contributors to substance misuse in order to create strengths-based prevention programming.

Examining the photos submitted under the strengths category brings a sense of hope, inspiration, and empowerment which is a key approach within the Positive Youth Development Framework and Social Justice Youth Development Framework. Most of the strength photos fell into five overarching categories: *Empowerment (10 photos)*, *Connecting to nature/Earth (6 photos)*, *Identity (6 photos)*, *Community (5 photos)*, *Creativity (3 photos)*, and *Animals (2 photos)*. Empowerment had the most photos with a total of 10 photos, highlighting how youth feeling empowered in their lives through education, safe spaces, belonging, being involved, and feeling heard can profoundly assist young people in not misusing substances.



Other protective factors identified were community and connecting to nature. Encouraging young people to develop stable connections with people and resources can act as a valuable factor to foster belonging and collective action among youth. When young people find connection and purpose from the world around them, they tend to feel a deeper connection and understanding of their communities and the world, and their place in it. This again highlights the need for authentic youth engagement opportunities. A few captions that highlight this are below:

“This photo is of me practicing acro yoga at a music festival I was vending my handmade jewelry/massage therapy at and attending sober. When I took this photo I felt very strong, healthy, happy, and empowered.”



“With this newfound knowledge, I found my passion in social & environmental justice. I used reading, writing, and creativity as therapeutic tools to help me become sober and get on the right path.”

“Art became an outlet for me to safely express how I felt free of judgment and expectations.”



“This is a picture of my school garden. This represents strength because of the community it takes to make one. I remember seeing people in the field, working collaboratively to make something beautiful. This reflects the strong community of my school.”

OUR STRENGTH



Following the categorization of the PhotoVoice submissions, it was important to determine the driving force behind the overarching strengths that help young people with sobriety and making healthy choices. The word cloud represents the common themes found during the process of coding the captions for the photos. The bigger the word or phrases are the more often they were mentioned in focus group discussions and photovoice submissions. Overall, community, perseverance, strength, nature, growth, and trusted adults were the most frequently mentioned throughout the photovoice submissions. Taking action was also vital to youth growth and positive mental health, as connections to advocacy, community, and change inspires a positive outlook and helps young people trust that they are more than their challenges and struggles. The most common themes by overarching category are in *Table 2* on the following page.

TABLE 2.
The most commonly mentioned themes by overarching category:

OVERARCHING CATEGORY	MOST COMMON THEMES
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of inadequacy • Societal expectations
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact on Mental Health and Substance Use
Animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of community pride and connections • Impacts mental health
Connection to Nature/Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID Isolation • Mental Health
Empowerment/Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Fear • Leads to substance use
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Addiction • Lack of safe space

The photovoice project looked at both the positive and the negative in young people's lives. By uplifting the struggles that youth face, it helped create community and feelings of togetherness when youth realized that they are not going through these struggles alone. It allowed them to feel heard with the different challenges, injustices, or barriers they have experienced. Uplifting youth strength cultivated inspiration and solidarity in wanting to create a better world for all youth to stand in their strength and resilience. The data gathered through this process will be utilized to inform the work of the EYE for Prevention youth leaders moving forward and the development of training for adults that interact with young people.

PHOTOVOICE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA



Demographic information was optional for participants to provide. *Out of the 32 individuals that participated, a total of 31 individuals completed the demographic information section.* To understand who we were reaching we asked all participants if they had prior experience with substance use. About 50% said they had no prior experience while 39% reported having prior experience. The majority of the participants were 16-18 years old (55%) (*Table 3*). Slightly more than two thirds of participants reported that their current level of education was high school (68%).

TABLE 3.
Age of Participants (N=31)

AGE (YEARS) PERCENT (%)

13-15	9%
16-18	55%
19-21	15%
22-24	13%
25-26	6%

When asked what racial or ethnic identity that participants identified with, slightly less than half identified as White (42%), slightly less than a quarter identified as Hispanic or Latinx (21%) and 18% identified as Black or African American. The remainder of the racial or ethnic identities can be found in *Table 4*.

TABLE 4.
Racial or Ethnic Identity of Photovoice Participants (N=31)

RACE/ETHNICITY	PERCENT (%)
White	42%
Hispanic or Latino	21%
Black or African American	18%

South Asian	5%
East or Southeast Asian	3%
Middle Easterners, North African, or Arab	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Racial or Ethnic Identity Not Listed	3%
Prefer Not to Answer	3%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%

Participants were also asked to provide their sexual orientation. This was a select all that apply question. Slightly more than half identified as Heterosexual/Straight (54%) and about a third identified as Bisexual (30%). The remainder can be found in *Table 5*. Participants were then asked to share their gender identity. Participants predominantly identified as female (81%), with 16% identifying as male and 3% preferring not to answer.

TABLE 5.
Sexual Orientation of Participants (N=31)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	PERCENT (%)
Heterosexual/Straight	54%
Bisexual	30%
Gay	3%
Lesbian	3%
Questioning	3%
Pansexual	3%
Asexual	3%
Sexual Orientation Not Listed	0%

TABLE 6.
City Where Participants Live (N=31)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	PERCENT (%)
Westminster	54%
Littleton	30%
Greeley	6%
Denver	3%
Aurora	3%
Boulder	3%
Broomfield	3%
Arvada	3%
Centennial	3%
Colorado Springs	3%
Englewood	3%
Fort Collins	0%

We were also interested in understanding where youth live that participated as it was open to any youth but primarily those in the Denver-Metro Area. Slightly less than half of those that participated live in Denver (42%). The remainder of the cities that participants live in can be found in *Table 6*.



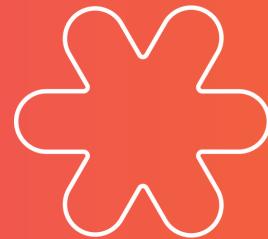
To see all of the PhotoVoices, visit our Instagram page [@eyeforprevention](https://www.instagram.com/eyeforprevention) and see all posts with hashtag #EYESurvive.

QUOTES FROM YOUTH ABOUT THE PHOTOVOICE PROJECT



After gathering reflections from the EYE For Prevention Youth Leaders we asked youth about their experience participating in this project. Those that chose to share feedback really enjoyed the opportunity and were thankful to be able to participate. It helped many young people feel less alone and understood. Here are a few things they had to say below:

“I loved participating in this project and sharing my experience and voice with others, as well as reading/hearing about theirs. It made me feel less alone and more understood and supported!”



“This was an amazing opportunity to reflect on my mental health and really check in with myself and see how I am doing.”



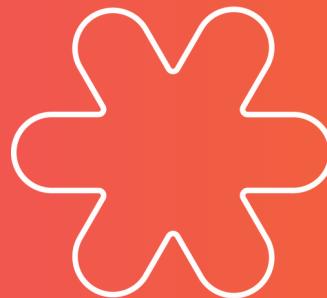
“I love that youth are able to express their experiences without backlash or judgment.”

FOCUS GROUP

To deepen our understanding of youth mental health and substance misuse, we held focus groups about photos submitted during the PhotoVoice. Some of the focus groups facilitated were strategically aligned with another group or event, such as the *Youth Partnership For Health meeting*, the *Collaborative Youth Summit*, *Rise Above Denver Teen Action Council meeting*, and others. We were intentional about spreading the word to young people with lived experience to engage in meaningful conversations about the PhotoVoice Project. During these focus groups, an overview, the purpose, and examples of PhotoVoice were shared. We then asked participants various questions as well as engaged the youth participants in creative methods such as Jamboard to get their feedback, thoughts, and ideas:

"When we are with youth, it is easier to see eye to eye, but with adults it can be hard because of adultism..."

Doing the PhotoVoice "[m]ade me feel less alone, knowing other youth also struggle with this."



During our focus group discussions, we discussed and reflected on the PhotoVoice submissions and overall project, gaining a deeper understanding of young people's struggles and strengths. The common themes we found amongst our discussion include:

- **Division and the Power of Togetherness**
- **Social Inequities**
- **Mental Health Struggles and Awareness**
- **Lack of Safety Amidst Brutality**
- **Intersectionality of Strengths and Struggles**

Many of these themes were similar to the themes found in analyzing the photovoice submissions further demonstrating their importance in addressing youth substance misuse and mental health.

A post-discussion survey was conducted for three of the focus groups. The following is a summary. A total of three focus group discussions were completed with a total of 51 young people. A total of 19 individuals completed the post discussion surveys providing a 37% response rate. Information on the post discussion survey is summarized in depth at this link. Unfortunately, demographic information on focus group participants was not collected.

Following the focus group discussions around PhotoVoice submissions, participants were asked to provide some additional information around their experience participating in the focus group and PhotoVoice project. The majority of young people who participated (84%) indicated that participating in the project helped them understand what causes or contributes to substance use and/or poor mental health among young people in their community (*Table 7*). The majority (63%) also indicated that participating in the project helped them understand what prevents substance use and/or poor mental health. It appears that participation helped with participants understanding what causes or contributes to substance use and poor mental health more than understanding what prevents substance use and/or mental health.

TABLE 7.
Improved understanding of what contributes to/prevents substance use and/or poor mental health among young people (N=19)

Did participating in this project help you understand what causes or contributes to substance use and/or poor mental health among young people in your community?

RESPONSE	PERCENT (%)
Yes	84%
No	5%
Unsure	11%

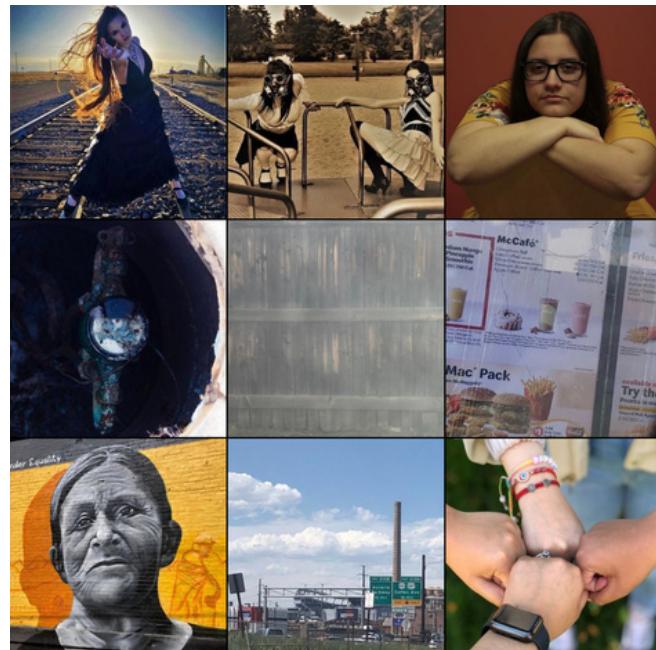
Did participating in this project help you understand what prevents substance use and/or poor mental health?

RESPONSE	PERCENT (%)
Yes	63%
No	11%
Unsure	26%

Participants were then asked to rate how much participating in this project impacted their view of substance use, mental health, their community, social/environmental justice, and themselves. Participating in the project seemed to have the greatest impact on the participants' view of their community and social/environmental justice. 68% of participants indicated that it impacted their view of their community a lot or a great deal and 85% indicated that it impacted their view of social/environmental justice a lot or a great deal. A limitation of this data is that we do not know if the impact on their view of each item was positive or negative, this is something that we should consider asking and keeping in mind for future projects.

Participants overwhelmingly feel that the photos submitted could be used to train adults to better support youth at risk of substance misuse (63%). This is great feedback from young people as the hope is to use photos and other data collected from this project to design training for adults that work with youth at risk of substance use.

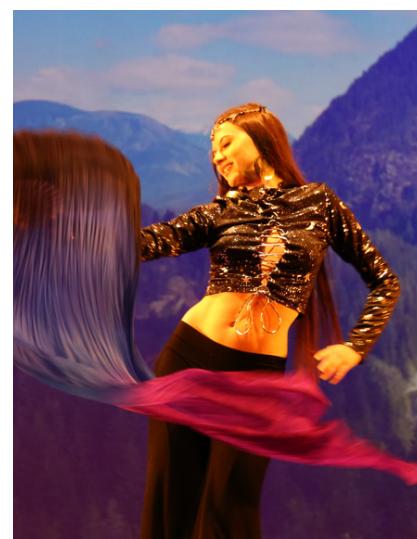
Participants were finally given an opportunity to share what participating in this experience was like for them. Many enjoyed the experience and felt that it helped them feel more connected to others. Some described the experience as eye opening to the issues that young people are facing. All responses can be found in *Table 3* linked [here](#).



PHOTOVOICE EXPO

To amplify our implementation efforts, we held an #EYEsurvive PhotoVoice Expo on Friday, July 22nd at the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Theatre in Denver. This event was truly moving, empowering, and healing. Youth resilience was highlighted by providing a professional stage for young people to powerfully share their voice and their talents through speeches and performances. We cultivated a PhotoVoice expo where we displayed the PhotoVoices submitted by young people. Participants were able to interact with the PhotoVoice Submissions and leave their own thoughts, feedback, and stories as well. We partnered with multiple organizations such as Womxn From The Mountain, Confluence Media, Uprise Youth Movement, and more.

The youth leaders designed the expo to hold space for themselves and their peers to share their truth with others. Topics shared centered around setting free the demons and battles that we all hold inside, and perhaps don't discuss; allowing us a space to be vulnerable and move towards collective healing; and finding a way to understand and be here for one another in ways previous generations couldn't. A brave space for youth to feel valuable, seen, and heard was created. Youth were able to display their strongest talents and passions while exercising new skills in a safe space. Youth were able to engage in sacred traditional ceremony in ways that honored cultures that are commonly silenced and erased, building a sense of unity with other individuals including EYE leaders, other performers and audience members as well. With such high pressure that is put on youth, it is vital to create these spaces that engage youth in different forms of self care, exploring culture, identity, and various forms of culturally-informed healing. It is also important to ensure that they have a say in creating these spaces as the youth leaders did with this event.



Participants were empowered and mobilized on a collective call to action that aligned with what we heard from our PhotoVoice project, which is to become engaged in environmental justice issues impacting our community. We highlighted fellow community partners, connecting youth with valuable resources in their own community that are based on beneficial and humanitarian causes. Through this, we exposed youth to community members that look like them that have overcome trauma in various constructive ways, inspiring youth to rethink how they explore art or other coping skills. Participants were asked to complete an evaluation to understand their experience and the impact of the expo. You can view the full evaluation here. Here is some of the feedback we received in the evaluation:



“Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it. I can’t thank the organizers enough for this and would love to see more spaces like it moving forward.”

“This was one of the most empowering and deep events I’ve ever participated in/attended in my life and I am so very grateful for the experience and opportunity!”



View the photos from the PhotoVoice Expo linked [here](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Do the inner work to heal. None of us can heal our planet or our communities if we are not simultaneously working on our own healing.**
- **Commit to being anti-racist and work to learn your own implicit biases. Truly understanding and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion is vital when it comes to youth and community engagement, and ensuring to uplift authentic engagement and avoid any type of tokenization.**
- **Support environmental justice initiatives. We are encouraging people to discover their own connection to the earth, and understand that the environment has a large impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. Take action around environmental justice initiatives, and start to lessen your own impact.**
- **Create safe spaces for young people to be themselves, to connect with other youth, and to have real opportunities to learn, grow, and make a difference.**

Authentic youth engagement can help youth be their best selves, and prevent substance misuse. In order for our youth to heal our planet, we need to equip them with the tools and allow them the space to learn to do so. In order for youth to be engaged, they need to feel valuable, and that includes providing opportunities to highlight and encourage the individuality of each student. It is creating spaces for each young person to thrive in spite of the various conditions, experiences, and adversities they may face.

EYE For Prevention believes these recommendations will have an impact and provide protective factors for young people and be powerful substance misuse prevention methods. The youth who are engaged in EYE For Prevention have lived experience with substance misuse and/or mental health struggles, and want to provide support, resources, tools, and inspiration for other young people, as well as adults who work with young people.

ACTIONS AND NEXT STEPS



EYE For Prevention will continue qualitative data efforts in partnership with Youth Roots, conducting a Youth Scan Project. We will continue utilizing creating methods to uplift youth voices and tell our stories! In the next year we will conduct another healing event to come together and showcase our efforts and projects. We hope to also expand upon the PhotoVoice Project. We want young people to know they are not alone in their struggles, and they have so much inner strength! Alone we are strong, and together we are really powerful. We also will continue utilizing this data to train and educate adults who interact with young people on what young people need to prevent substance misuse and improve mental health.

“A tremendous strength of our community is our passion for making change. We took this picture as a group after we learned about the PhotoVoice project, with the goal of showcasing that youth come together for a common cause and work together to address concerns in our communities.”



You can view all of the PhotoVoice submissions on our Instagram @EYEforprevention with the hashtag at the beginning of the post #EYESurvive. Follow us to stay updated about upcoming opportunities and events.