Thesis Title: Positive Youth and Community Development in Brownsville, Brooklyn

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Abstract: Community development programs and practices have been led by a variety of programs and organizations including government agencies, community development corporations (CDCs), other nonprofit organizations and community leaders. However, the most important stakeholder, the community, was not involved in the decision making or implementation of many of these initiatives.

This has had significant consequences to low-income families and communities as some of these initiatives have perpetuated negative health, educational and economic conditions and disparities for people of color and poor neighborhoods across the nation. To address the power imbalance in the planning of poor neighborhoods, the fields of city planning and community development have started to incorporate participatory practices. However, rarely do participatory practices give power to residents by allowing them to be decision makers in the planning of community development strategies. How can planning become transformative and consider capacity building, community empowerment and a true redistribution of power from professionals to community members?

This thesis considers how community-based organizations (CBOs) have acted as transformative planners by creating spaces for residents to participate in the decision-making and implementation of community improvement projects. It considers the work of the Brownsville Community Justice Center and its partners in facilitating resident involvement, specifically for youth of color engaged in the juvenile or criminal justice system, in the improvement of a disenfranchised community. This thesis seeks to understand the value of involving youth, who are at a critical stage in their development, in community improvement efforts.

While community development has been moving toward more inclusive strategies by government and planning professionals, this research will bring attention to the role of community-based organizations and neighborhood youth in improving their local community. Furthermore, this research speaks to the need for planners to create processes that introduce, engage, and incorporate residents in community development approaches so that they can be in positions to make informed decisions for their community.