




# Transformative impacts of a civic leadership program created by and for refugees and immigrants

Christine Shi<sup>1</sup>  | Anjali Dutt<sup>1,2</sup>  | Farrah Jacquez<sup>1,2</sup>  |  
Bryan Wright<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

<sup>2</sup>CARE: Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

<sup>3</sup>Cincinnati Compass, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

## Correspondence

Christine Shi, University of Cincinnati, 2600 Clifton Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA.  
Email: [shicl@mail.uc.edu](mailto:shicl@mail.uc.edu)

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## Abstract

Immigrants and refugees are severely underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making in the United States. These groups face significant barriers to civic and political participation and leadership, despite a frequent commitment to community care and engagement. There is an urgent need to address immigrant integration and underrepresentation through transformative means that go beyond voting to create a more inclusive and socially just society. We investigated outcomes associated with participation in an immigrant integration program designed to increase immigrants' access to civic engagement through a community-based participatory research and action process that centered the voices, experiences, and wisdom of refugees and immigrants. Thirty immigrants and refugees representing at least eight different communities participated in semi-structured interviews. Results illustrate how the program assisted in transforming participants' consciousness, skills, and relationships related to meaningful civic engagement and realizing their voice, power, and rights. These results emphasize the impact and potential of community based participatory research to transform

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individual and collective efficacy, consciousness, and capabilities—a vital first step in transformative justice.

#### KEYWORDS

civic engagement, community based participatory action research, immigrant integration, immigration, refugees

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With more than 40 million foreign-born people residing in the country, the United States has the largest immigrant population in the world. However, despite almost 14% of the United States population being foreign-born, immigrants and refugees are severely underrepresented in civic decision-making bodies with only 3% of all voting members in the 117th congress being immigrants themselves. Moreover, Immigrant's List, a proimmigrant political action committee, endorses only 18 congresspeople (not all of whom are immigrants) whom they deem as proimmigrant. This includes those who seek to keep families and communities together, bring otherwise law-abiding residents out of the shadows, and end all policies that have created a culture of fear in immigrant communities (Immigrants List, 2021). While the US Census Bureau foresees a lower number of future immigrants, projections still show net immigration both adding 75 million to the US population by 2060 and representing 95% of the general population increase by 2060 (Center for Immigration Studies, 2019).

In addition to being severely underrepresented in decision-making bodies in the United States and in most immigrant-receiving nations, immigrants and refugees also face substantial barriers to gaining political voice and power (Bäck & Soininen, 1998; Bloemraad, 2013; Dancygier et al., 2015; Dixon et al., 2018; Martin & Blinder, 2020). The effects of underrepresentation on marginalized people have long been established as detrimental to psychological health, predictive of experiencing strong, negative stereotypes and prejudice, increased political alienation, decreased responsiveness to candidates, and signaling of identity-based exclusion which undermines political efficacy (Costa, 2017; Martin & Blinder, 2020). Interventions aiming to address underrepresentation in decision-making bodies must be considered carefully, in collaboration with these communities, to avoid further exacerbating social and political marginalization.

Previous research and existing theory posit that the identities and backgrounds of elected officials are pivotal to decision-making and culture-shaping and that descriptive representation in partnership with substantive representation is necessary for an active, just, and free political environment (Evans et al., 2017; Hayes & Hibbing, 2017; Pitkin, 1967). Decades of political science research have shown that women, Latinxs, and African Americans in public office have brought progressive change to the lives of women and communities of Color in the United States, although more work is needed both in research and practice (Reingold et al., 2021). For example, after the election of Barack Obama, political efficacy among Black constituents dramatically increased (Merolla et al., 2013). In 2006, the Latinx community saw a similar increase in political engagement after the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme court (Evans et al., 2017). Nonetheless, when immigrants, particularly immigrants of Color, are elected to decision making bodies, they continue to face xenophobic attitudes in the U.S. such as anti-immigrant action, speech, and discrimination at national to local levels (Dittmar, 2014; The Aspen Institute, 2016; Ura et al., 2015). Overall, our social institutions and immigration policies so severely discriminate against immigrants that immigration can be considered a social determinant of health which increases stress, decreases access to health care, and restricts choice (Castañeda et al., 2015).

There is urgent need to transform current avenues of immigrant and refugee integration to increase representation in decision making bodies and access to civic engagement and advocacy. We examined how a program designed by and for refugees and immigrants in partnership with a local government representative and

academic researchers, through a community based participatory research (CBPR) process, was experienced among the immigrants and refugees who participated. The program sought to equip immigrant and refugee community leaders with language to explore sociopolitical systems and identity, tools and knowledge for civic engagement, and connections to power-holding decision makers. The overarching goal is to support immigrant and refugee participants' capacity to enact their agenda for empowered civic engagement.

## 1.1 | Civic engagement

Existing processes geared toward immigrant and refugee integration are often insufficient at supporting civic engagement (Dixon et al., 2018). While civic engagement is often traditionally recognized as processes such as naturalization, voting, and campaigning, this narrow definition already excludes the many immigrants who are not citizens (and thus cannot vote), and those who do not wish to naturalize. Other forms of civic engagement which do not require citizenship include: participation in workshops or educational events related to health care, skills training, advocacy, or other civic priorities; fundraising; participating in ethnic-based organizations, neighborhood or local associations, non-profit organizations, community and volunteer groups, and coalitions (Bloemraad, 2006; Dixon et al., 2018; Ebert & Okamoto, 2013; Sandoval & Jennings, 2012). Civic engagement in these forms is vital to immigrants' acquisition of social capital, empowerment, and integration into their host society (Li, 2020).

The National Partnership for New Americans defines immigrant integration as “a dynamic, two-way process in which immigrants and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities, with several components that focus on including immigrants' access to mainstream institutions.” A goal of immigrant integration is to strengthen the “systems and tools that allow immigrants and refugees to participate [and civically engage] in their communities, support their families, and live with dignity” (National Partnership for New Americans, 2022). However, this ideal stands in sharp contrast to how immigrants are welcomed. Most immigrant integration funding in the United States solely focuses on encouraging immigrants and their children to naturalize and vote while leaving out other forms of civic engagement such as community organizing and advocacy (Dixon et al., 2018; Fussell, 2014). This limited, prescriptive aid fails to incorporate immigrant perspectives and strengths into the civic engagement process and does not treat immigrants as equal partners. Additionally, though citizenship, naturalization, and voting are important parts of immigrant integration and do address barriers such as providing legal support and understanding the complex processes, this narrow focus neglects many additional ways people contribute, participate in a liberal democracy, advocate for their needs, and live with dignity in their civic landscape. These issues surrounding the lack of support for immigrants' civic engagement call for community-based, participatory action to substantively transform immigrant integration.

The positive effects of civic engagement on the wellbeing of the individual, community, and broader society are well demonstrated in research. For example, civic engagement among youth has been found to promote health and successful development (Balsano, 2005; Hart & Kirshner, 2009), the wellbeing of institutions and communities in which the youth live (Putnam, 1993), and political equality (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). In a 2014 case study, engaging in social movements was shown to help Latinx immigrant students counteract hostile school climates, reconstruct adverse schooling experiences into positive contributions to their success, and better understand their identities as racialized civic participants (Gutiérrez, 2014). Furthermore, a longitudinal study with racial minority youth in Chicago demonstrated that civic engagement in adolescence was related to higher life satisfaction, regular civic participation, educational attainment, and lower rates of arrest in emerging adulthood (Chan et al., 2014). Additional research has shown that community organizing may lead to avenues to help build social and political capital within immigrant communities. For example, working and advocating with local neighbors on issues such as improving public transportation and public parks has shown to be avenues for building friendship and commonality through shared purpose (Pastor, 2016). The existing research powerfully demonstrates that civic engagement is vital to individual and communal health, development, and justice.

Although there is abundant evidence for the benefits of civic engagement (McGarvey, 2005; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Weng & Lee, 2016), outcomes with actual gains in political power and representation by immigrants

and refugees are few and far between, as evidenced by the proportion of representation immigrants and refugees have today in U.S. societies. In addition, certain forms of civic engagement have even proven to harm immigrant communities. For example, selective community policing, police partnership, and certain bureaucratic efforts which label certain immigrants as “good” and others as “bad” have been shown to fracture immigrant communities. At their most extreme, these efforts have led to immigrants perceiving their fellow immigrants as the cause of state mistreatment (Andrews, 2017). This labeling of certain immigrants as “good” and others as “bad” reinforces white supremacy and weaponizes more assimilated or “white adjacent” immigrants against those labeled “bad” immigrants, further legitimizing the abuse of those who are labeled “bad” immigrants (Chavez, 2013; Yukich, 2013).

However, often when guided by immigrants themselves, civic action proves to be powerful. Surges in immigrant rights activism in 2006, grassroots responses to anti-immigrant legislation, and advocacy for the Federal Dream Act have enacted change in immigrant integration policies, illustrating the importance of immigrant integration beyond naturalization and voting. Civic engagement through community organizing, advocacy, and other nonvoting means has been vital to the progression of immigrants' rights, building individual and community identity and empowerment, and mitigating stressors related to immigrant feelings of social isolation (Dixon et al., 2018). Teamwork focused on civic care, a concept set apart from civic engagement because it centers a deliberate attitude of providing care for one another via civic processes, has been shown to build collective trust and solidarity among community members (Pastor, 2016). Thus, when working toward immigrant integration, it is important to think past naturalization and voting while also seeking to transform our sociopolitical landscape. To work toward better immigrant integration, we must go beyond ameliorative means that seek only to fit immigrants into a system which erases their identities but to transform the systems which marginalize and extort them in the first place (Dixon et al., 2018; Marquez, 2000).

## 1.2 | Transformative verses ameliorative interventions

Immigrant integration in which immigrants have dignified access to mainstream institutions cannot exist without changes to systemic issues such as widespread nativism, nationalism, and inequity. Addressing systemic issues of contemporary contexts requires transformative interventions, orientations, and attitudes, such as CBPR, rather than merely ameliorative efforts. Ameliorative efforts seek to create change within a system, without altering the system's values, assumptions, structures, and power dynamics (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2009). Ameliorative interventions ignore power dynamics, deprioritize values, and individualize structural problems while placing the responsibility for marginalization on the individual.

In contrast, interventions described as transformative, or second-order change, frame issues in terms of power dynamics such as oppression and inequities in power that require liberation. In transformative interventions, values such as self-determination, participation, social justice, power-sharing, equity, diversity, and accountability to oppressed groups and people play a central role. The desired transformative outcome of enhanced well-being is conceptualized in terms of power, specifically related to increased control, choice, competence, and awareness, and is manifested in enhanced socially supportive relationships, participation in social and political spheres, and acquisition of valued resources (employment, income, education, housing; Riemer et al., 2020). Current forces that prevent immigrant integration are a result of oppressive powers, systems, and norms. Thus, work toward immigrant integration must be rooted in transformative rather than ameliorative attitudes to bring about liberation and equitable immigrant integration.

Efforts to support immigrants and refugees created without the equal influence of these communities often unintentionally miss the mark in sustainably addressing issues immigrants and refugees face. This is in part because they lack meaningful insight from the very communities they wish to serve and disregard the often paternalistic, imbalanced power dynamics between immigrants and nonimmigrants at play. Relatedly, efforts to research minoritized peoples' pain to leverage aid for those communities should heed Eve Tuck's (2009) call to be critical of how we contribute to narratives of minoritized communities as damaged, helpless, and hopeless. Tuck (2009) calls for researchers to apply a desire-based framework which does not deny harm done yet it centers the rich desires,

complexities, humanity, and wholeness of communities to our research, rather than a damage-centered one which only frames entire communities as one-dimensional sufferers without agency who only exist to receive harm from their oppressors. Thus, to contribute to transformative change to immigrant integration, efforts should be grounded in liberatory, participatory, and transformative processes that are critical of power and equity, and center the experiences, wisdom, complexities, and desires of immigrants.

### 1.3 | Community based participatory action research

The current study has a CBPR orientation, a collaborative approach to research that “equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings.” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). CBPR inherently leans toward transformational work rather than ameliorative, for the benefit of the community and the elimination of disparities. Different from community outreach, CBPR represents a “systemic effort to incorporate community participation and decision making, local theories of etiology and change, and community practices into the research effort” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). CBPR's essential principles include equitably involving the community in all phases so that the work, aiming to build capacity within the community and researchers, conducting research which directly aids community well-being, and having a trusting relationship between the researchers and target community (Israel et al., 2005; Vaughn et al., 2017).

CBPR is based on two primary assumptions for improving outcomes and reducing disparities in communities. First, interventions are strengthened by the addition of community insight and theories of etiology and change. Second, participation itself can enhance community wellbeing and intervention efficacy in several ways (Buchanan et al., 2021), including cultural and local sensitivity and sustainability and productivity of the intervention (Jewkes & Murcott, 1998). Community-based, participatory organizing grounded in transformative values and led by the very group impacted by an issue is positively related to greater agency, efficacy, and civic and political engagement (Dutt, 2018; Grabe & Dutt, 2020). By collaborating with immigrants from the start, CBPR has the potential to improve rigor and relevancy of health research with immigrant communities (Vaughn et al., 2017).

## 2 | THE CURRENT STUDY

In the current study we examine one CBPR effort with the goal to contribute to transformative immigrant integration: the CARE Cincinnati's Refugee and Immigrant Civic Leadership Program. Specifically, we analyzed 30 qualitative interviews conducted with program participants about their experiences and perspective on the program. Conducting qualitative interviews allowed for a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of the collective group, as well as each individual. Qualitative methods are also ideal for conversation and clarifying meaning during data collection which can be vital to truly understanding participants who hold multicultural, multilingual, and socially nuanced experiences. We aimed to analyze how the intervention impacted participants with special attention given to how it may have affected the self and collective efficacy of participants. Specific research questions included: (1) how did participants experience the Civic Leadership Program? (2) How did participation in the Civic Leadership Program relate to actualizing transformative outcomes?

### 2.1 | Cincinnati, Ohio

Our study takes place in Cincinnati, Ohio, a major city in the United States. that sits on the border of Ohio and Kentucky with a population of about 300,000 and a metropolitan area just over 2.2 million people as of 2020. Both Cincinnati and Ohio have long histories of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, including German, Irish, Jewish,

Polish, Asian, and Eastern European refugees, for over a century. Cincinnati also has dealt with strained race relations and disparities among its residents, that impacts the experiences of refugee and immigrants (Dutt et al., 2021). Today, Cincinnati is one of the lowest ranked metropolitan areas for Black-White unemployment equality, income equality, and education equality (National Urban League, 2017).

In 2018, Ohio welcomed the third greatest number of newly resettled refugees in the United States, after Texas and Washington. Currently, records from local organizations serving refugee populations estimate that there are more than 25,000 refugees residing in the greater Cincinnati region. Consistent with national standards, refugees in Cincinnati are supported for an average of 90 days through an official resettlement organization, however, this support may vary from state to state. The three months of support consist of aid relating to housing, employment, schooling, and public transit. Although early support in these areas is essential, the prescribed nature of this support does little to acknowledge refugees' own agency by only recognizing one dimension of their basic needs (and even still, typically falling short of meeting those needs [Darawsheh et al., 2022]). This limited, paternalistic support disregards the far more complex reality, needs, and desires of refugees. Furthermore, like current pitfalls in federal-level immigrant integration efforts, this short-term support ignores the systemic barriers to civic engagement and thus, does little to promote sustainable, dignified integration of refugees into their new communities.

### 3 | METHOD

#### 3.1 | CARE Cincinnati

This study examines an effort rooted in transformative values to address immigrant and refugee integration, underrepresentation, and civic engagement. Civic Action for Refugee Empowerment (CARE) Cincinnati was a CBPR project lead by a team of 12 members of the refugee community in Cincinnati, the director of Cincinnati Compass (Cincinnati's immigrant and refugee welcoming initiative), and researchers from the University of Cincinnati. The CARE Cincinnati team worked to collaboratively develop research tools and administer them in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to identify areas of focus and strength in the community. Rooted in an assets-based community development model, the goal of CARE Cincinnati was to identify community strengths to be harnessed in actualizing community identified goals and empowering changes to promote inclusive civic engagement that ultimately serves the entire Cincinnati community (Dutt et al., 2022a; Jacquez et al., 2021).

After an investigation into the social, environmental, and civic experiences of diverse refugee communities in the Cincinnati area through surveys and focus groups conducted in seven languages, the CARE team synthesized the community feedback into three action plans in response to community needs and the high potential for impact. This study focuses on one of the action plans, a leadership program where refugees and immigrants could learn about civic engagement in Cincinnati and build a community network with representatives and decision-makers. The Civic Leadership Program was also explicitly a pipeline for refugees and immigrants to engage in civic leadership such as running for office or joining community action networks.

#### 3.2 | CARE Cincinnati's refugee and immigrant civic leadership program

The goal of CARE Cincinnati's Refugee and Immigrant Civic Leadership Program was to facilitate a CBPR process where the CARE team would develop and enact their agenda for empowered civic engagement in Cincinnati (Dutt et al., 2022a; Jacquez et al., 2021). The CARE team developed the program which consisted of five workshops: (a) an introduction to Cincinnati government, (b) community organizing (how to work with others in your community to work for change), (c) narrative advocacy and public speaking (how to tell your story to policy makers and stakeholders), (d) equity and inclusion in civic work (how to be an advocate for justice for everyone), and (e) group

reflection and strategizing. Workshops were held every other Friday evening via the video calling software Zoom (due to COVID-19 pandemic precautions needed in 2021) and generally included a guest speaker and discussion.

Workshops were conducted largely in English with live interpretation provided for all participant language needs. Each participant was provided with a welcome package of fact sheets about Cincinnati, the aggregated data collected from previous CARE team surveys, and a small gift bag of CARE memorabilia. Compensation for participating in the program was a \$250 gift card.

### 3.3 | Participants

The CARE team organized two rounds of the Refugee and Immigrant Civic Leadership Program with two different cohorts recruited from in and around Cincinnati. Participants were recruited through word of mouth and fliers in several languages hung in various immigrant and refugee centered organizations in the greater Cincinnati community. All 30 participants of the program were interviewed for this study. Participants were from a diverse array of ethnic and national backgrounds including, but not limited to, Hispanic, Latinx, and Arab as well as Cameroonian, Ethiopian, and Chinese communities. The number of years participants have lived in Cincinnati ranged from 2 to 30 years but most commonly, participants had lived in Cincinnati for less than 10 years. Eligibility requirements included being over the age of 18 and a member of an immigrant and/or refugee community in or around Cincinnati and having availability during the workshops and access to a computer or phone with audio. For all participants, participation was voluntary, and all sessions and interviews were recorded, data deidentified, and participant names changed to pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. For more information on participants' demographics, see Table 1.

### 3.4 | Measures and procedure

Participants of the CARE Cincinnati Civic Leadership Program each completed a postprogram interview to gather insight into their experiences of the program. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) focused on participants' sense of connectedness and political influence, and efficacy related to civic engagement. The protocol development was guided by the aforementioned desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) and thus centered the complex personhood of interviewees and what they want to see in their communities. Interviews, each lasting between 10 and 30 min, were conducted over the phone in the language participants requested. Each interview was conducted by one of four undergraduate or graduate students fluent in either Spanish, English and/or Chinese. All language requests were accommodated by these four interviewers. Spanish interviews were by student volunteers fluent in the language and Chinese interviews were translated by CS who is fluent in Chinese. Back-translations were noted within transcripts as memos wherever translators deemed clarity was necessary (e.g., instances of slang, idioms, or culturally situated metaphors).

### 3.5 | Data analysis

Interview transcriptions were thematically analyzed through an inductive approach, a common method of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus of our analysis was identifying what participants described as being main outcomes associated with civic engagement and the Civic Leadership Program. To begin the analysis, translated and transcribed interviews were read thoroughly and annotated by this paper's first two authors (C. S. and A. D.) to better understand the data's content and patterns. Next, C. S. and A. D. generated an initial codebook

**TABLE 1** Participant demographics.

Participant number	Cohort	Pseudonym	Self-reported immigrant community <sup>a</sup>	Migrant generation	Interview language
1	First	Ahmad	African	Foreign-born	English
2	First	Amir	African	Foreign-born	English
3	First	Ana	Hispanic	Foreign-born	Spanish
4	First	Dolores	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
5	First	Emilia	Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
6	First	Fatima	African	Foreign-born	English
7	First	Hewan	Ethiopian	Foreign-born	English
8	First	Hugo	Hispanic	Foreign-born	Spanish
9	First	Isabel	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
10	First	Katalia	Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
11	First	Lucia	Latinx	Foreign-born	English
12	First	Mariana	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
13	First	Masika	Egyptian-Arab	Foreign-born	English
14	First	Maya	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
15	First	Omari	Congolese	Foreign-born	English
16	First	Paloma	Hispanic	Foreign-born	Spanish
17	First	Tej	Nepalese	Foreign-born	English
18	First	Xiomara	Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
19	Second	Adeline	Cameroonian	Foreign-born	English
20	Second	Adilah	Moroccan	First	English
21	Second	Agnes	Hispanic	Foreign-born	English
22	Second	Aharon	Egyptian-Arab	First	English
23	Second	Aida	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	Spanish
24	Second	Guo	Chinese	Foreign-born	Chinese
25	Second	Jenny	Hispanic/Latinx	Foreign-born	English
26	Second	Jia	Chinese	Foreign-born	English
27	Second	Min	Chinese	Foreign-born	Chinese
28	Second	Rafael	Mexican	Foreign-born	English
29	Second	Rosa	Hispanic	Foreign-born	Spanish
30	Second	Zhaohui	Chinese	Foreign-born	Chinese

<sup>a</sup>Self-reported immigrant communities are listed as reported by participants in their interviews and thus vary by preferred demonym.



through an iterative process of line-by-line coding using 10 randomly selected interviews. This process entailed reading each line of dialog and noting potential codes.

After the preliminary codebook was created, two additional coders thoroughly familiarized themselves with the codebook and all interview transcripts. The team used the initial codebook to code all interviews while generating new codes and revising existing ones to accurately reflect the data's contents. Coders were reminded to be attentive to other aspects of the data which may not fit into previously established codes and themes. All interviews were analyzed by two or more coders. Through the process of consensus coding, disagreements in the coding were discussed until consensus was reached on the code and its definition. Codes, frequencies of codes, and other patterns informed the conceptualization of themes.

## 4 | RESULTS

Our analysis revealed two major themes related to ways in which the Civic Leadership Program bolstered existing strengths in its participants: (a) developing consciousness and (b) building skills and relationships (see Table 2).

### 4.1 | Developing consciousness: "I feel different because I feel like I have a voice. And it's not just for me, it's for the community."

The most salient change participants reported in connection to their involvement in the program were changes in consciousness related to power, rights, and opportunities which immigrants and refugees are entitled to, and how these factors interact to impact participants' lives. Nearly all participants described positive changes to their attitudes toward civic care and engagement after completing the Civic Leadership Program including a positive change in their senses of efficacy and agency regarding civic engagement. Min, who had felt insignificant to broader society because of her immigrant status said, "now, with my capabilities, I feel like I have some ability to take action, like I can do something." Maya also reflected on her attitudes toward civic engagement opportunities and how it was impacted by a lack of knowledge about civic rights: "I didn't know that you could speak up and ask for things like street signs and things like that, and now, I know these are things you can do. We were just lacking the information itself." Rafael also reported a similar change in himself, "I think I feel more confident... I learned a lot of stuff that I didn't even know that I had the right to do... for the immigrants staying in Cincinnati... I [now know] I have more rights."

Nearly all participants reported learning about rights they previously did not know they had. After gaining knowledge about civic engagement, their rights, and opportunities they are entitled to, participants reported realizing the power they are entitled to. These narratives illustrate ways in which the Civic Leadership Program facilitated transformative outcomes for participants, specifically through the increased awareness of rights and opportunities and thus, the choices and freedoms available to participants.

After attending the Civic Leadership Program, many participants also expressed a new-found value in understanding the power of their own voice. Rafael said, about himself and other people in his Latinx community, "I learned that we can make our voice heard." Similarly, Isabel narrated, "I feel different because I feel like I have a voice. And it's not just for me, it's for the community. Maybe I don't need it, but somebody else might." Isabel's new sense of both individual and collective empowerment and voice was a common sentiment among participants when reflecting on the impact the program had on them.

Although most participants reported increased efficacy, it should be noted that a few participants did not report changes in their consciousness or were left with unanswered questions from the workshops. Dolores, for example, spoke about the Civic Leadership Program's storytelling workshop where participants learned to tell their stories and said:

**TABLE 2** Theme definitions and examples.

Theme and Definition	Examples	Quotation Exemplars
<p>Developing Consciousness</p> <p>Changes in consciousness, awareness, and attitudes related to the individual and collective efficacy, power, rights, opportunities which immigrants and refugees are entitled to, and sociopolitical systems</p>	<p>Participant expresses a new desire to work with local government or be involved in formal civic engagement when previously hesitant</p> <p>Participant reports increased self-efficacy related to working with local representatives and/or bring about change in their community</p> <p>Participant's perceived value of their voice increases</p> <p>Participant expresses a new understanding of systemic justice and factors which inhibit their ability to live with dignity</p> <p>Participant realizes they are entitled to far more rights and opportunities than they previously thought and/or lack access to power and are systemically impeded</p> <p>Participants realize that some "normal" experiences to them are unjust</p>	<p>"I think the desire [to work with local representatives] was always there, and now, it's even more present because we know.... with all the different people that we had in the [program], each could express what's happening in their community."—Mariana</p> <p>"I think this program was very helpful for me because I know that I can do more things and I have more rights from before."—Rafael</p> <p>"Before, it was like, I don't want to be involved with politics but now, I know my voice counts. I was doing it by voting, I will never miss a voting time, but now I know I can do more than just voting and help the community in other ways."—Fatima</p> <p>"[This program] has changed my attitude. Before, it felt like I was a small, poor, lowly immigrant who just should live their life and day-to-day and whose experience had little to do with the broader society and there wasn't anything I could really change or impact the broader society or have relations. But this class taught us that there is a relationship between the government and your own life experience and that they are here to serve you and impact your life here. And that relationship is important."—Min</p> <p>"We have rights, so if we want to express or share our culture, we can do so. Just because we're from other cultures doesn't mean we need to hide; we're free to express ourselves too."—Maya</p> <p>"I feel more like confident... I learned a lot of stuff that I didn't even know that I had the right to... for the immigrants staying in Cincinnati."—Rafael</p>
<p>Building Skills and Relationships</p> <p>Increases in skills related to civic care and engagement which support existing and new relationships and participants' individual and</p>	<p>Participant gains new language for something they already do in the community</p>	<p>"I didn't know but I was already doing [civic engagement work]. I really was! I was doing a lot, I just didn't know it. But when she explained what [civic engagement] was, like</p>

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Theme and Definition	Examples	Quotation Exemplars
collective pursuit of dignified living	<p>Participants gain new knowledge or skills related to navigating life in the U.S. and Cincinnati</p> <p>Participants report having built connections across groups they otherwise wouldn't interact with or learning about similarities/connections between groups and feeling more united across groups</p>	<p>you're helping your neighbors, doing stuff, volunteering, stuff like that, is part of the [civic engagement], I was like, man, I am already doing this! I am part of this, my voice counts in this community."—Fatima</p> <p>"I've always been really involved with [the community], but definitely after [the program, I feel] more powerful now, I think I have better tools to engage with [local government] and to ask for some changes, you know, I have a better understanding of what things we can really ask for and be very realistic about it..."—Lucia</p> <p>"I used to live with Nepali speaking community, I was known with the Bhutanese community only, but with this program I could get connection with different, other people, with other cultural background, historical background, countries background, so I could connection with the other communities as well."—Tej</p>

At the end [of the storytelling workshop], I just said, "what for?" I don't know who I'm going to tell my story to... At least for me, I'm not a leader of anything, so why would I tell my... story to anybody? I don't know why I would share that.

Dolores reported confusion about the workshop and alludes to her belief that her story is unimportant because she isn't a "leader of anything." This suggests that some participants in the program, who are not already involved in leadership activities, may not view sharing their personal story as a valuable contribution.

However, many participants shared how gaining new language for what they already do positively impacted their self-perception and consciousness related to civic care. Isabel said, "[After the Civic Leadership Program] more than anything, I feel more sure of what I am doing because in reality, before, I was always leading in groups. I was always very involved in the community." Although nearly all participants shared many examples of how they each civically engaged and cared for their communities in traditional and nontraditional ways, many were not able to recognize the value and power of their work and potential until attending the Civic Leadership Program. This was captured by Fatima:

I think the most important part of the program was when they talked about the civic care. Like how, not just telling you "If you are in the house of representatives, you are helping your community," you know, the little things and the big things all together is what all civic care is... I think it encourages people when they talk about stuff like that, [it helps them to realize.] "oh, what I am doing isn't little and I have to keep doing that." You know, because I was surprised, I thought, man, I do all those

things, but I didn't know I was helping all those people. You know, telling my story, telling them how I help people, [the workshop speaker] was like, "wow, you are definitely one of those [helping people]"

Fatima illustrates how the Civic Leadership Program gave her the language to realize her voice, power, and value. Through the Civic Leadership Program, Fatima, like many other participants, reported being able to realize that her assets and actions related to civic engagement and care were important and valuable.

Reported changes in consciousness extended outside of participants' consciousness about themselves and civic engagement. Emilia shared:

I [used to] feel less than for being an immigrant, like nobody will take me into consideration. But now, I feel like people are taking in mind immigrants. The thing that is still missing is more support for immigrants that actually allows them to participate and be able to work with the city or community engagement in the city.

Emilia narrates a change in her consciousnesses related to her place in the broader sociopolitical context which surrounds her. Emilia, like many other participants, initially reported feelings of powerless, undeservingness, and personal responsibility for their lack of social mobility as immigrants. Before the Civic Leadership Program, she felt less than and unconsidered by others because of her immigrant status. But now, she not only believes that her immigrant status shouldn't mean she is inferior but rather that she deserves support in gaining power and voice. After the program, Emilia emphasized that there are many barriers that don't allow immigrants to be heard in local government and in the city. Emilia stressed the need to address these barriers and that systems must shift to support immigrants more equitably.

#### **4.2 | Building skills and relationships: "I have more tools, more information that are very essential for everything I do for my community... CARE is helping us to have that connection"**

Participation in the Civic Leadership Program was reported to have bolstered the skills and knowledge of resources and tools among participants that enable them to civically engage and care for themselves, their relationships, and their communities in meaningful ways. For example, Omari reported, "By being a member of CARE... I have more tools, more information that are very essential for everything I do for my community... CARE is helping us to have that connection." Fatima also shared about the skills she gained:

I never know how to start or where to go but having [the class], I was able to know who to write or who to go see if a problem in my neighborhood or in the city that I live. So, it was very helpful for me to get that information done. And usually, I get people coming to me, asking questions, and some of the questions people are asking, now I know the answer just because of the training... I am more confident that I will give the right answer to those people about their city or if they want to reach out to their representatives so it may, so it, the training helped me to help those people to move on in their community

Here, Fatima described gaining skills related to working with local representatives and advocacy which she now feels confident in sharing with others in her community. Other participants such as Lucia reported feeling empowered from the skills she's gained after completing the Civic Leadership Program: "After [the program, I feel] more powerful now, I think I have better tools to engage with [representatives] and to ask for some changes, you know, I have a better understanding of what things we can really ask for and be very realistic about it."

Participants also expressed learning much about different groups of people and making meaningful connections across and within groups. Ahmad reported, "I spoke with people from different communities, different languages, and from the experience I have now, I have a bigger view of what the community needs are." New connections, Ahmad reported, have helped him to broaden his understanding and connection to the diverse community around him. Hugo also mentioned being able to build meaningful relationships across different groups as a result of the program:

Being in this program has allowed me to get to know a lot of other Hispanic people interested in the same thing. We just chatted about this program and about other programs that can help, not just Hispanic people, but all kinds of immigrants. Lots of people don't have this kind of information, so they can't get involved in anything, and they don't even know how much help is out there for them

Hugo echoes a common sentiment among participants—that the relationships formed as a result of the Civic Leadership program built up their social networks and provided important information which increases their access to opportunities and support they may not have otherwise known.

After the Civic Leadership Program, participants who requested it were all added to a WhatsApp group text to stay in contact with one another and share resources, opportunities, and questions. Elena referenced this group and reported, "we've continued talking in our WhatsApp group to talk about how we're going to organize... [This is] something for the benefit of everyone." Mariana also shared about the WhatsApp group and the value of connecting across different groups and forming new relationships to facilitate meaningful community care:

I have met people that are leaders in lots of other communities, and having all of them in the same place... I think it was so much better to be able to share ideas of how to help people this way, as immigrants. Having everyone from different places and different organizations in the same meeting gave us so many more tools and so much information about the help that's available, and now after we can communicate amongst ourselves to talk about the program. And I think this could help us a lot, having places where we can find out about things we don't know about, like resources in our community that could really help us out.

Here, Mariana explains the value of the relationships and connections made during the Civic Leadership Program, crediting the format of the program in which refugee and immigrant leaders from diverse neighborhoods in Cincinnati and personal backgrounds were all brought together to share their ideas for how to care for their communities. This centering of their voices, experiences, and expertise coupled with support from nonimmigrant or refugee participants who helped logistically with tasks such as creating the WhatsApp group, passing along information to local decision makers, or answering questions, allowed for increased access to helpful aid, ideas, resources, opportunities, and friendships. Because of the continued communication from the WhatsApp group, participants have been able to continue to communicate about ideas, questions, and opportunities that provide further support and connection.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study analyzed how a CBPR project, which centered the voices, experiences, and expertise of refugees and immigrants, and prioritized transformative aims, was experienced as an empowering program. Immigrant and refugee experiences of civic engagement cannot be boiled down to simply voting and naturalization, despite current federal funding practices and values (Dixon et al., 2018). Immigrants' and refugees' nuanced experiences of civic care and leadership in their communities and simultaneous marginalization affirm a need for transformation in our

civic landscapes. Our results illustrated how the Civic Leadership program assisted in transforming participants' consciousness related to realizing their voice, power, and rights, and the systems and forces which shape their lives, and bolstered necessary skills and new relationships integral to accessing meaningful civic engagement opportunities beyond voting and naturalization. Specifically, this process involved supporting immigrants with their reported needs and desires, connecting them to power-holding decision makers in productive meetings, and facilitating discussion about both the bureaucratic processes and systemic forces which shape civic engagement processes. These results corroborate previous research in liberation and community psychology which emphasize the value of education in empowerment and transformative action, particularly through the merit of learning skills and making small accomplishments to building a sense of efficacy (Moane & Quilty, 2012; Moane, 2008). While the Civic Leadership Program is limited in its reach and systemic impact, these results emphasize the potential of CBPR which centers refugees and immigrants to contribute to meaningful, transformative outcomes related to immigrants' access to the skills, knowledge, and relationships integral to obtaining power.

While refugees and immigrants continue to be severely underrepresented and face substantial barriers to gaining power, activists have called for those working with refugees and immigrants to move beyond boosting empowerment by lay terms. The concept of empowerment has been co-opted by mainstream institutions, robbed of its original meaning, and individualized to remove systemic critiques (Batiwala, 2007; Cattaneo et al., 2014). However, when firmly grounded in its origins, positioned between individual and social power, and anchored in the priorities of marginalized communities, empowerment's transformational aim is clear and potent (Cattaneo et al., 2014). Our results corroborate previous research in community psychology which shows that involvement in empowering settings, spaces designed with the intention of supporting marginalized people to gain control over their lives and environment, can facilitate positive outcomes for participants (Dutt & Grabe, 2019; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Dutt et al., 2022b; Maton & Salem, 1995; Maton, 2008).

This study intentionally aimed to utilize the concepts of empowerment and self-efficacy in a critical and participatory manner, grounded in transformational values. First, participants played a central role in our program's design, and empowerment within the Cincinnati community was identified as a need by community members during the CBPR process. Interviews also explicitly detailed participants' lack of knowledge about their rights before involvement in the program. In response, careful action was taken during the CBPR process and during the workshops to discuss how participants understood their rights, while not dismissing existing power dynamics, barriers to power, and inequities which they face. This process was alluded to in participant interviews as they described realizing they were entitled to far more rights than previously understood meanwhile also noting the structural barriers they face to gaining power. Intentional and careful action was taken to continue this collective effort to increase participants' access to power through creating a WhatsApp group which continues to be highly active today. Although a group message does not address systemic inequities, the connections and network facilitated contribute to addressing barriers and access to opportunities. Nevertheless, limitations to our study design impacted the Civic Leadership Program and our results. Most significantly, the Civic Leadership Program was shortened and held online via Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic precautions. If precautions were unnecessary, the program was intended to be held in-person along with other in-person events such as parties and workshops. Ideally informal gatherings would have extended from the program, with opportunities to chat with individual participants afterwards. Many also described having difficulty understanding presenters and other participants because of the combination of poor audio quality and language unfamiliarity despite live interpretation being provided for all language needs. During our interviews, a few participants shared unanswered questions or confusion from some workshops. Social desirability may have encouraged participants to describe their experiences in a more positive light. However, during interviews, negative experiences with the program, such as hesitancy toward civic engagement and politics, as well as frustrations with the CARE team related to communication were shared. Thus, we believe that the interviews reflected authentic experiences. It is also important to note the near impossibility for a five-session program to bring about the desired transformative changes which CARE team members and participants shared. However, values and concepts related to transformative change, such as power

dynamics, rights, and inequities, were discussed consistently and immediate needs of knowledge, skills, and connections, were prioritized and met whenever possible. We believe this orientation in both design and action toward transformational change has contributed to transformation in ways yet unseen. Finally, due to logistical issues such as the timing of data collection and implementation of the program and COVID-19 pandemic precautions, pre-tests were unable to be collected. In future research, we recommend a pre and post, mixed method study design to gather more in-depth and nuanced data. Previous research conducted with CARE Cincinnati can also lend additional insight (Dutt et al., 2022a; Jacques et al., 2021).

The CARE Cincinnati Civic Leadership Program aimed to contribute to transformational change in Cincinnati's civic landscape by enacting the CARE team's agenda for empowered civic engagement in Cincinnati through the centering of refugee and immigrant voices, wisdom, and experiences. While we have yet to see systemic shift in Cincinnati since our program, by prioritizing transformational aims and a desire-based framework among other liberatory values, participants reconceptualizing their own power, competencies, and awareness, enhanced socially supportive relationships, and gained important resources, all of which are transformational outcomes (Riemer et al., 2020). Nevertheless, more continued and sustained community, state, and national level work is necessary for just, dignified immigrant integration. Finally, although interviews with participants revealed the results of the Civic Leadership Program to be largely successful by standards of increasing self and collective efficacy and positively bolstering assets in the community, it's important to note that the Civic Leadership Program itself should not act as a blueprint for empowered civic engagement. Rather, the voices of the marginalized and values, practices, and processes of liberatory and transformative efforts and CBPR should be critically carried on as they aimed to be in this study. Questions related to these concepts to ask during a CBPR process may include: Who is this for? Thus, who is helping design this? Whose experiences and expertise are being centered in this work? How are we fairly compensating and supporting them while we do this work? What are we each bringing into the process and how is it impacting the process? How is power being distributed, shared, and transferred during this process? Although prioritizing values of liberatory and transformative efforts in CBPR may lead to similar program designs as the Civic Leadership Program, the value of this study is also in the lessons learned by community members and activists throughout the process of creating, facilitating, and sustaining the program and its impact.

Asking critical questions such as these is necessary to advance immigrants and refugee civic engagement beyond voting. Results from this study illustrate the potential of CBPR and other organized efforts to contribute to necessary transformative change in our civic landscape. This study exists as one way in which the voices of incoming immigrants were prioritized when designing and implementing an immigrant integration intervention. Future CBPR should also continue to advance and apply these transformative, liberatory values to promote the equity and access to dignified livelihoods of refugees and immigrants.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research described in this manuscript received an exemption from ethical approval from the University of Cincinnati institutional review board.

## ORCID

Christine Shi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3807-2838>

Anjali Dutt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8151-8474>

Farrah Jacquez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8558-1526>

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

1. After completing the Civic Leadership Program, how capable do you feel about working with local representatives to address issues in your communities?
2. Has your desire to engage with local government and representatives changed? If so, how?
3. Has your understanding about the influence you have on the Cincinnati community changed? If so, how?

4. Has this program influenced your capability and desire to express your cultural background in Cincinnati? If so, how?
5. How has this program influenced your vision for your future in Cincinnati?
6. In what ways did this program meet your expectations and what you hoped to gain?
7. What have been your favorite and least favorite parts of the program?
8. What was the most important part of the program for you? Why?
9. If you could change something about the program to make it better, what would it be?