

Lesson 7: Power

Goals/Purpose

Through this lesson, the group will explore issues of power and how power structures impact their lives. It also allows the group to begin to discuss systems of power and to build a set of shared experiences. Finally, real youth victories are illustrated so that youth start to recognize their own capacity to make change.

Objectives

- Define 'power' and identify three things it takes to have power from a community-organizing model
- Describe how our identity shapes our experiences
- Examine which groups have power over others and how power is systematically maintained
- Identify projects where youth used people power to build their power and make successful changes in their community

Total Time 90 minutes

Agenda/Activities

- Introductions/Icebreaker
- What Is Power?
- Our Experiences with Power
- Power Chart
- Pyramid of Power
- The Power of Youth Organizing
- Closing

Facilitator Preparation

- Write Up Agenda
- Separate marbles into small bags for each participant
- Create outline of power chart
- Make poster of the 'Pyramid of Power'
- Make large posters of youth organizing victories

Materials Needed

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Bag of 10 marbles for each participant
- Bucket or box
- Pyramid of Power handout (1 per person)

Tools

- Pyramid of Power

The Basics

Power is **the ability to control circumstances or to make things happen**. Power is especially important to youth because, developmentally, they are learning what is involved in having more control of their own lives, decisions and activities.

The concept of power and being able to recognize where power lies in a given situation are essential to understanding direct action community organizing. Community organizing is about people coming together and building power to get what they want.

In this lesson youth learn about different types of power and what is needed to have power. Youth are also guided to discuss who has power, who doesn't and the reasons behind why power is often not shared equally. Through this discussion youth can learn about power that is used for social justice and power that is used to oppress others.

Discussions about power can evoke deep and sometimes painful feelings because often, in our society, power is not shared equally. Many young people have already had experiences that have left them feeling powerless and oppressed. This is especially true for young people of color, disabled youth, young people who do not have a lot of money and those that are gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual.

Before facilitating this lesson, it is important for the adult facilitator to take some time to think about his or her own feelings about power and oppression. It is important for the facilitator of this lesson to be aware of power differences between himself or herself and the youth that will be taking part in the lesson. For instance a white adult facilitator is likely to have had different experiences with power than a group of youth of color (i.e. The white adult may not be watched suspiciously by store owners the same way a young person of color may be). The adult facilitator needs to be sensitive to participants' differing experiences and feelings about power. If the adult facilitator would like help with this lesson, there are many outside experts who could be approached to co-facilitate the lesson, or facilitate it him/herself. Some potential community resources include: Youth Together, Youth Media Council, Diversity Works, SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation), Movement Strategy Center, California Fund for Youth Organization, Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing and Youth Action. (Please also see the Community Resources section for additional suggestions and contact information.)

1. What is Power?

30 minutes

Materials: newsprint, markers/pens

a. Group Brainstorm. Ask: **What is power? What words or images do you think of when you hear the word power?** (Solicit responses and record on newsprint.)

Use the brainstorm to explain the definition of power: Power is the ability to control circumstances or to make things happen.

b. Review two different kinds of power: **People Power** and **Institutional Power**.

People Power

The power that all of us have to collectively make change in the world.

Institutional Power

The power of government, churches, organizations, and corporations. It is the authority that institutions have to influence society. Institutional power is in the hands of the few but affects many.

c. Ask: **What do you think people need to have in order to have power in the world?**

Record the answers on newsprint. Usually youth will name a number of things needed to have power including money, people, respect, teamwork, know a lot of people, etc. (Make sure to add teamwork if it is not mentioned.)

Use the brainstorm to explain that in direct action community organizing people usually need one or more of the following things to have power (and make things happen):

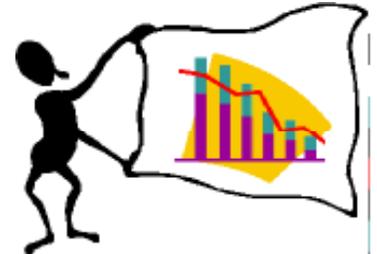
◆Organized money



◆Organized people



◆Organized information



Explain that while all of the things they named are important to have power, in community organizing there are three key elements to building power and that's what we're going to talk about for a few minutes. Circle any of the words or ideas listed above that were named in the brainstorm.

Emphasize that money, people or information alone is not enough to really have power. What also needs to be added to each of those is being organized; that is the strategy part that helps people make the changes they want. Institutions and corporations may have a lot of money, but we can come together to organize ourselves and others to build our people power. Coming together is related to teamwork that was listed in the brainstorm. Finally, as organizers another important part of our role is to tell our story so that people will listen – in other words, know what we're talking about and put the information together so people will understand how the problem affects them. Reinforce that the youth are experts about their own community, and you, the adult, also know resources in the community. Together the group already has most of the basic elements needed to have power, and once you put them together (organize them) your group will be even stronger.



d. Youth Power

Take a moment to ask the youth the following questions. Put their responses on newsprint. The paragraph below each question is a sample response.

1. How do you youth have power?

Youth have energy, especially when they come together, that astounds many adults. Many people do not expect youth to speak out intelligently about a concern. When youth speak in a determined, respectful, and knowledgeable way about an issue, they have incredible moral authority. Their power comes from their ability to surprise adults and their willingness to say what many adults are not comfortable saying.

2. How are youth less powerful than others?

People below the age of eighteen do not have the right to vote. Voting is an important tool for impacting policy. In addition, some adults believe that teenagers are irresponsible, lazy, or dangerous. These misconceptions lead some adults to not take youth seriously.

Use the following as a guide to debrief this exercise with the group:

- Do you think of power differently now based on our discussion? How?
- How can groups of people build their power? What weakens the power of a group?
- What power do you have to make change in your community? How do you want to use that power?
- What do you think is the most important thing you want to remember from this discussion?

Conclusion: Let the youth know that this exercise focused on a shared characteristic of group members - - they are all youth. The following exercises will explore how participants are different from one another and how they may have diverse experiences with power because of those differences. As you facilitate the rest of the exercises in this lesson come back to the shared experience of youth power as a way to bring the group together.

2. How Identity Shapes Our Experiences¹

15 minutes

Materials: bag of 10 marbles for each participant, bucket or box

This activity may bring up strong feelings for participants. Because this exercise asks personal questions it is best used with a group of youth who have already established trust with each other. The facilitator needs to be prepared to help participants understand how identity can shape a person's experiences and how history influences which groups have power.

- a. Have the group gather in a circle. Hand out a bag of marbles to each person.
- b. Let the youth know that you will read out a series of statements. If the statement is true for you, throw a marble in the box/bucket. If it is not true for you, do not throw a marble from your bag. Explain that the exercise is done in silence so people can think and notice how they feel; there will be time to talk afterward.

Statements:

- Throw a marble in the middle if you speak a language other than English.
- Throw a marble in the middle if you or somebody in your family immigrated here from another country.
- Throw a marble in the middle if your parents did not go to college.
- Throw a marble in the middle if your family has struggled with money.
- Throw a marble in the middle if somebody has stereotyped you because of what you look like.
- Throw a marble in the middle if someone has ever underestimated you because of your race/ethnicity, gender, age or sexual identity.
- Throw a marble in the middle if you are a young woman.
- Throw a marble in the middle if you know somebody who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.
- Throw a marble in the middle if you or somebody you know has a disability.
- Throw a marble in the middle if you are under 18.

- a. Use the following as a guide to debrief:
 - ***Have each person turn to someone next to them and share their thoughts on the exercise.***
 - ***How did this exercise make you feel?***
 - ***Was this a hard or easy exercise to do? Why?***
 - ***Were there any statements that stuck out?***

¹ Adapted from *Political Education Workshop Manual*, SOUL: A School to Build a Movement

Debrief continued...

- ***What are some of the strengths about being a member of one (or several) of the groups in the exercise?***
- ***What does this show about our group? About youth in your community?***
- ***Ask if anyone wants to share out loud.***

Close by talking with the youth about how identity shapes our experiences in the world. Identity is our age, race/ethnicity, gender, community, family, and language -- all of the things that make us who we are. We are going to spend the rest of today exploring how identity and power are connected.



Youth from the Middle College Empowerment Through Action (ETA) group present their concerns about youth access to tobacco and alcohol to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors. The group was successful in influencing the Board to adopt a new tobacco retailer licensing policy.

3. Power Chart²

25 minutes

Materials: blank Power Chart on newsprint with categories listed at top, markers

The sensitive material in this activity may challenge the group's communication skills. Because this exercise asks personal questions it is best used with a group of youth who have already established trust with each other. It is important for the facilitator to be prepared to handle strong feelings that may come up and to help participants understand the problem of **systems** of oppression rather than blame individuals.

a. The Power Chart is filled out in three steps. **Step 1** is the "Power Group" and the "Less Powerful Group."

b. Introduce the Power Chart as an activity that looks at which **groups** have institutional power and which **groups** have less power in society. Explain that we are going to do this by filling out what we call the 'power chart.'

Let students know that the information you are presenting is a theory (or an explanation) that describes how power is structured in society and how power can be misused. Let students know that they do not have to agree with it, but ask them to 'try it on.'

Explain that we all have power in society, but some groups have more than others do. As a result, some groups have more privileges than others. For example adults are given the right to vote while people under the age of eighteen are not. If certain groups have more power then they can control circumstances. When one group tries to control another it is called oppression. This is a problem because the systems of oppression make sure that not all groups' needs are met.

Now we are going to try and think of as many **groups** as possible that have power in society and what groups they have power over (less powerful groups). Discuss with youth that this exercise is based on generalizations and that many of us live on different sides of the power chart. (Encourage youth to use their own experiences. Remind youth that the previous exercise included a lot of groups they might belong to. Make sure the groups in the sample chart below are represented on your blank chart.)

c. Emphasize that the reason for doing this exercise is to understand how power is structured in society so we can figure out how to work to build our power and make our lives and communities better. It's not about blame or guilt, it's about working together to build a just society. We need everyone to do that!

² Adapted from *Political Education Workshop Manual*, SOUL: A School to Build a Movement

d. Sometimes this exercise causes a group to become polarized with individuals who identify with the “Power Group” becoming defensive because they feel that they are being blamed for mistreating people who are in the “Less Powerful Group.” Talk with the youth about how feelings like guilt and anger sometimes come up during the exercise and remind them that no one chose to be born into one group or another. Review group agreements and come up with a plan on how to cope with negative feelings that come up. Having a plan can help people use their feelings in a constructive way. One plan may be giving each participant a note card and a marker so that they can write down any feelings they have during the exercise that they do not feel comfortable sharing. The adult facilitator can then take the cards and write up people’s comments on newsprint. The facilitator can then lead a discussion about any thoughts or themes that emerged.

Use these questions as needed:

- Who do you usually see in positions of power?
- Who has more money in society, (insert name of power group) or (insert name of less powerful group)? How do you know?
- Who gets to make more decisions, (insert name of power group) or (insert name of less powerful group)? What groups face discrimination?



STEP 1		STEP 2	STEP 3
Power Group	Less Powerful Group	Examples	System of Oppression
White people	People of color	White people are usually more able to go out into the world without being stopped by the police.	Racism
Men	Women	Women on average get paid less than men for the same work.	Sexism
Rich people	Working class, low-income and poor people	Rich people can often afford better healthcare for their families.	Classism
Heterosexuals	LGBTQQ people	Heterosexuals can kiss their partner in public without fear of being hurt by others.	Heterosexism
Able-bodied	People w/disabilities	Able-bodied people do not have to worry about going up and down stairs the way someone who needs a wheelchair does.	Ableism
Adults	Youth	Adults can walk into a department store and usually get a salesperson to help them.	Ageism

e. **Step 2** of the chart is asking the group to come up with examples of what the oppression of the less powerful group looks like. (e.g., if a person says they are married, others always thinking their partner is the opposite sex; being followed or watched in a store because you are a youth of color; underestimating young women.) Write these under the examples in column three.

f. The last step, **Step 3**, is labeling the kind of power described (the system of oppression column). Use the definitions to explain the following:

Racism	The system that gives white people power and privilege at the expense of people of color. ³
Sexism	The system that gives men/boys power and privilege at the expense of women/girls.
Classism	The system in which wealthy people have privilege and maintain wealth at the expense of working class, low-income and poor people.
Heterosexism	The system that gives heterosexuals power and privilege at the expense of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people.
Ableism	The system that gives power and privilege to able-bodied people at the expense of people with disabilities.
Ageism	The system that gives adults power and privilege at the expense of children and youth, and also younger adults power and privilege at the expense of the elderly.

g. Ask, “What do you think the purpose of this activity is?” Ask, “What different parts of your identity have influenced your experiences with power?” Reinforce that differences in identity – race, religion, sexual orientation, gender – separate us into groups. Some groups have power over others, but this doesn’t mean that all people in that group are bad. In fact many of us live on different sides of the power chart (e.g. we are able-bodied people of color, queer men, etc.). And many of us have used our power to change the system because we want justice for everyone.

You can use this opportunity to show how systems of power intersect and emphasize how eliminating just one of the systems doesn’t make everyone free.

³ The authors distinguish between racism and race prejudice. Race prejudice is stereotypes and assumptions associated with skin color, language, country of origin. All of us – white people and people of color - have been socialized to have race prejudice. Racism is a system in which race prejudice is coupled with power to build institutions that value white people of European descent more than people of color, and gives white people more opportunities to pursue educational and economic advancement.

This exercise shows how power is structured in society, which is important to understand because we are all affected by the power structure. Furthermore, not only is this the power structure we face today, but it has also been the way power has been set up historically. The vast majority of the institutions in society keep the power structure going. It's really important to understand the power structure if we want to make change.

h. Ask for any questions/clarifications before moving forward.

i. Next, make sure to point out that what often happens in struggling communities is that different groups blame each other for the problems, and so the problems keep us divided from each other. For example, when unemployment in the United States rises, some American citizens accuse immigrants of "taking jobs." Ask for other examples of a problem that pits two or more communities against each other. Reinforce that blaming each other and harmful misconceptions keep communities fighting against each other rather than working together to fight for justice in all of our communities.

j. Conclusion: Recognizing and understanding both our power and oppression, and the fact that they can co-exist, is an important step. Another step is to see that some groups have privilege at the expense of other groups because of the systems we live under, not because they are guilty or wrong. Organizing is a tool to fight the systems of injustice. It offers opportunities for those of us who have some of the privileges, and those who do not, to successfully work for justice.



Pyramid of Power⁴

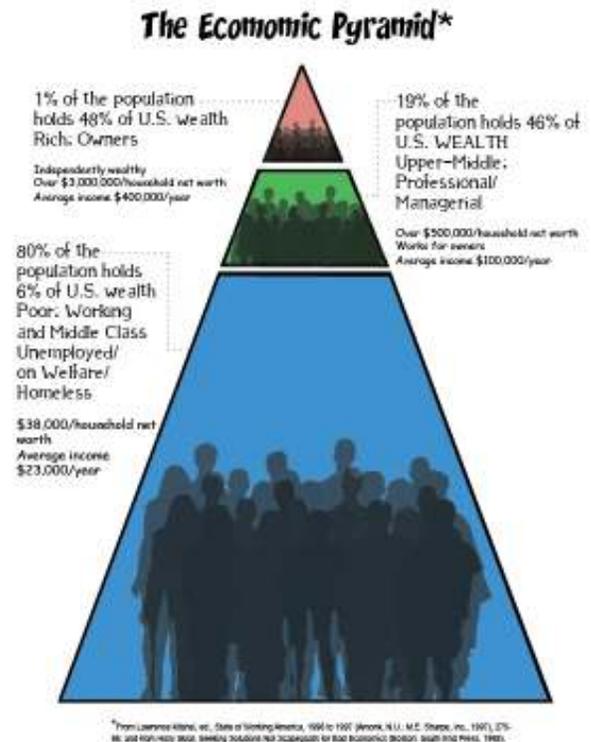
10 minutes

Materials: Pyramid of Pyramid poster

Show the group the Pyramid of Power poster (see *Tools* at the end of this section). Ask participants to explain what they see in the picture.

Ask the following questions to help guide the discussion:

- **How many people are on top?**
- **How many are on the bottom?**
- **How are they connected?**



Process Discussion: Point out the large number of people on the bottom, the smaller number on top and the people at bottom are holding up the people at the top. The people on the bottom are building the pyramid higher for the people at the top.

Ask: **How do you think this relates to our society and what we talked about earlier?**

Ask: **In this society who's mostly on top and who's mostly on bottom?**

Conclusion: The power of the people at the top rests on our shoulders. If we step back and let the bricks fall, those in power fall also. So, even if we're at the bottom, we still have a lot of power.

Explain that next we're going to hear some stories of youth who built their power and used it to make changes for themselves and the people at the top.

⁴ Adapted from *Political Education Workshop Manual*, SOUL: A School to Build a Movement

The Power of Youth Organizing

10 minutes

Materials: stories illustrating victories have achieved in their communities through organizing

Conduct a group brainstorm of victories that youth have had organizing for something good in their communities.

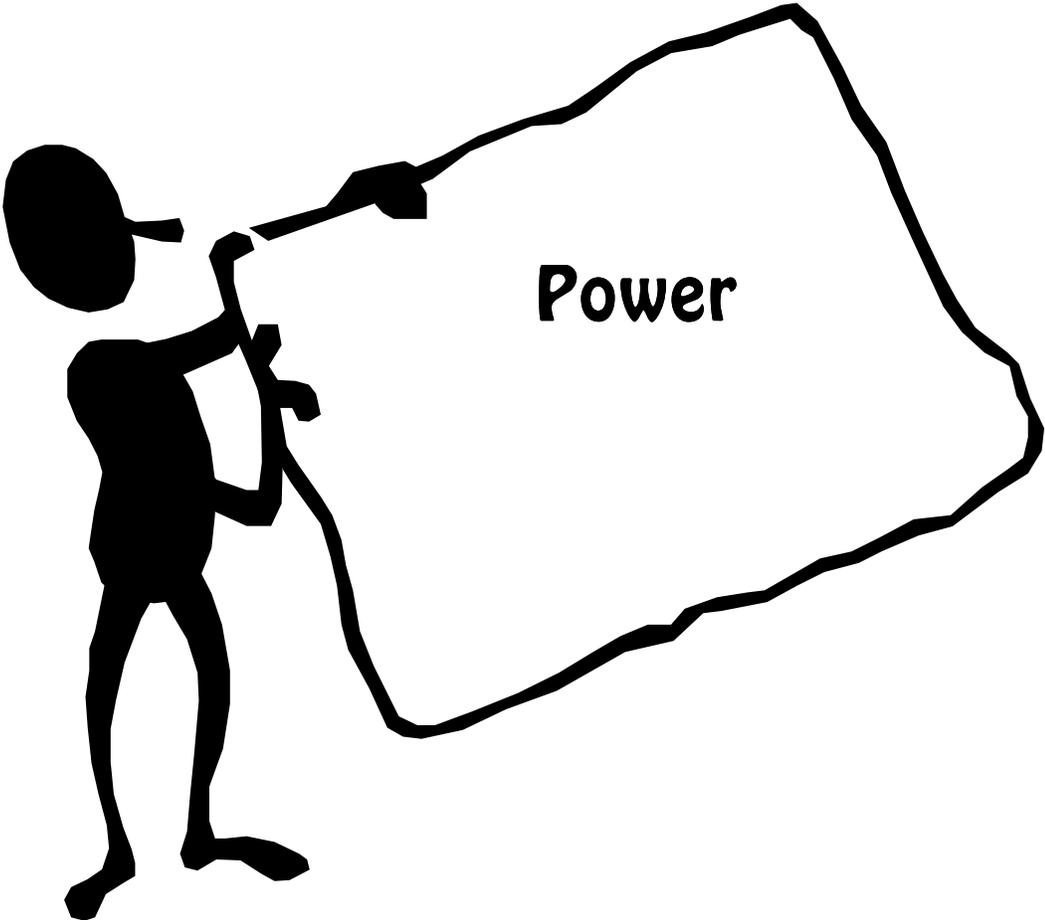
Ask: ***Has anyone heard of any local youth groups that have organized to make positive changes in their communities?***

If no one has heard of any, share a few of the following local (Contra Costa County) victories:

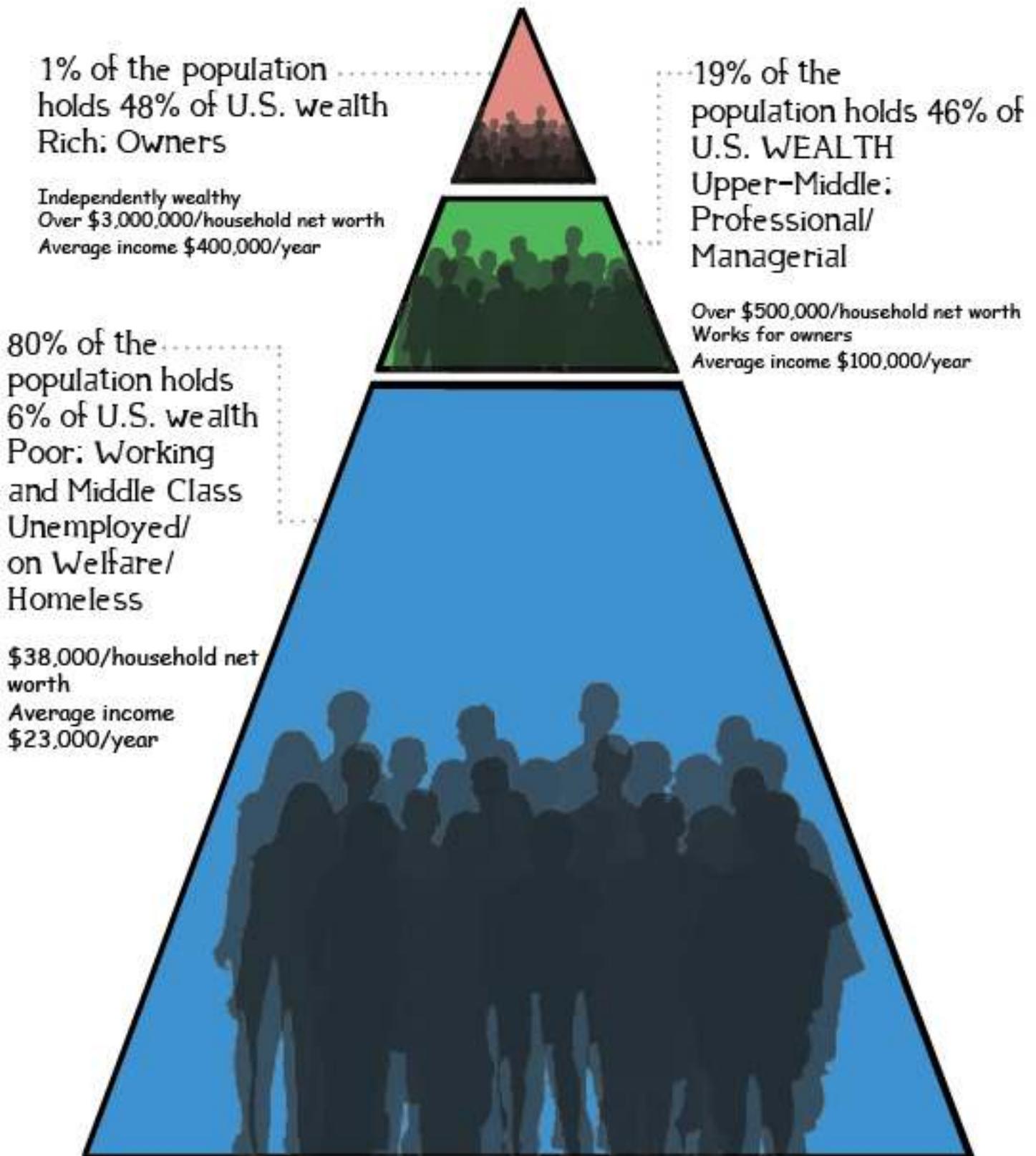
- **TIGHT (Tobacco Industry Gets Hammered by Teens):** The first County youth organizing and youth development initiative, TIGHT succeeded in getting a tobacco free youth ordinance passed in the County and 17 cities. This restricted tobacco advertising and promotions, banned self-service displays of tobacco products and instituted tobacco retailer licensing programs. (Check out ordering information in the Resources Section to get a copy of the TIGHT video “Hear their Voices” illustrating the group’s strategies for success.)
- **East County Youth Connection (ECYC):** ECYC got the Mt. Diablo School District to add an activity bus so youth who live in Bay Point can participate in after-school activities at the high school they attend since there is no high school in their own community.
- **Empowerment Through Action (ETA):** ETA members established a collaboration with the Richmond Police Department that began with an agreement from RPD to enforce local and state tobacco sales laws.
- **Queer Youth Action Team (QYAT):** QYAT mobilized to get the legislature to adopt AB537, a law that ensures safety for students who are, or who are perceived to be Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual or Transgender. QYAT also worked with school districts to implement the law.

You can also ask for volunteers to look into other youth organizing victories and report back at the next meeting.

Tools – Lesson 7



The Economic Pyramid*



*From Lawrence Mishel, ed., *State of Working America, 1996 to 1997* (Amonk, N.U.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997), 275-86; and from Holly Sklar, *Seeking Solutions Not Scapegoats for Bad Economics* (Boston: South End Press, 1995).