Lesson 10: Choosing a Problem

Goals/Purpose
This lesson will help youth to list all the problems and assets that they have observed in their community and choose one problem to focus on.

Objectives:
- Youth will be able to list the problems and assets that they have seen in the community
- Youth will be able to explain that some of the problems will be easier to make a difference on than others
- Youth will choose a problem to work on

Total Time: 2 – 6 hours (several meetings/weekend retreat) depending on what is happening in the community, whether there is informal consensus about a problem, and the level of group experience with group decision making.

Agenda/Activities
- Introductions/Icebreaker
- Creating a community mural
- Brainstorming problem and asset lists
- Selecting a problem to work on
- Closing

Facilitator Preparation
- Choose a space to do this lesson that has enough space to hang large sheets of paper on the walls
- Remember which youth and adults conducted the community <u>assessment</u> together. Be prepared to divide your large group back into the <u>assessment</u> groups for the small group portion of this lesson
- Remember to be creative and have fun

Materials Needed
- 1 sheet of newsprint at least 4 feet by 3 feet for each small group.
- 3 sheets of easel size paper for each small group
- Plenty of markers
- Masking tape
- Sticker dots

Tools
- Scorecard

The Basics

After youth have done a community assessment it is likely that they will have identified many problems or things that they want to change in their community. They may also have noticed many assets or strengths of the community. This lesson guides youth to list all the problems and assets in their community and pick one or two problems that 1.) they feel strongly about and 2.) they think they can make a difference on in a year. The timeframe of one year is suggested because the lives of youth may change very rapidly, and for many teenagers planning beyond one school year isn't manageable.

In direct action community organizing, problems and issues are different. A problem is a broad area of concern (e.g. pollution). Issues are specific pieces of the problem that have a specific solution (building more windmills on public land).

In your work, the problem may have already been decided, for example teen pregnancy or youth tobacco use. If the problem has already been decided, you can go right to involving youth in picking an issue (see the lesson plan "Picking the Issue"). There are advantages to having a problem area already defined. We have found that groups with a defined problem can move more quickly into action.

If you do not have a problem that you must work on then you need to work with the youth to select a problem that they care about and that impacts the community.

In direct action community organizing, groups usually go right to picking an issue rather than first picking a problem area to focus on. However, we have found that when working with youth it is helpful to create more steps in the process before picking an issue. Picking a problem is one step that has been added. Picking a problem helps youth narrow down the choices and apply criteria that they will use again when they are working on picking an issue.

It is unlikely that everyone in the group will immediately agree on which problem to focus on. As a result, picking a problem can be a difficult group decision. There is a risk that group members may become divided between several compelling community problems. Using a consensus approach will increase communication and help you make a choice that everyone feels good about, because maintaining group cohesion is so important to success of the group. This is discussed here and in the lesson plan "Picking an Issue."

Picking a problem requires youth to talk with adult facilitators as well as their peers. The process of picking a problem should be given plenty of time. We have spent up to 6 hours on this process at both retreats and in meetings. The length of time it takes depends upon what is happening in the community, the

level of group cohesion, experience with group decision making and other factors.

In this lesson, choosing a problem is done in three steps. First, murals and lists are used to discuss the different problems raised in the community assessment. If one problem does not consistently emerge as a priority through discussion, repetition, a sense of group urgency, then the group votes to narrow the focus to the top two problems. Finally, one problem is selected through a consensus or voting process.

Important questions to keep in mind when choosing a problem:
- Does the problem significantly impact the community?
- Do the youth in the group care about the problem?
- Is it likely that other youth in the community will help with the problem?
- Is it likely that adults in the community will help with the problem?
- Can young people make a positive difference on this problem within one year?

1. Create a Group Mural and Brainstorm Lists   60 minutes

Materials: One large piece of newsprint paper for mural, 3 sheets of easel size paper, markers, and stickers

Overview
Describe to the group that they are going to separate into smaller groups (5-10 participants) based on the groups we used for community mapping and create a mural of their community. The mural should represent the way the youth see their community and should include assets and problems that they observed during their community assessment. The mural does not need to be a work of art - content is more important than style. Let youth know that they should feel free to include their individual experiences as well as the experiences they had as a group during the community assessment.

a. Step 1: Ground rules
Guide the full group in coming up with some ground rules that they will use during the mural making and discussion process. You may want to include the following ground rules:

- Respect other group members, their ideas, and their work
- Agree to disagree about how people see the community
- Have fun!

b. Step 2: Mural
Divide the group into the groups that they were in when they did their community assessment. Each group should be with at least one adult facilitator (ideally the adult who was with them when they did the assessment).

DRAW!!

Try the following techniques to help them get started:
1. Remind everyone that stick figures are ok.
2. Remind the youth that they are the experts
3. Ask the youth what they remember from the community assessment- ask them to draw it.
4. Ask the youth to brainstorm a list of things that they want to include in their mural
5. Start drawing something basic like a house you remember from the community assessment
6. Ask youth what they saw when they walked out of their house today.

c. Step 3: Brainstorm Lists of Assets and Problems
When each small group seems about done with their drawing move to the 3 sheets of easel paper. Ask for a volunteer to be the scribe. Then, brainstorm all of the community's assets and problems. The scribe should write assets on one sheet of paper and problems on another. The 3rd piece of paper can be used to list things that the group is uncertain if it is an asset or a problem. More drawings can be added to the mural if there are things in the list that are not included in the mural. Some groups may be more comfortable with the list or with the mural - using both techniques provides youth with two methods for synthesizing information from their lives and the community assessment.

d. Step 4: Report out
Have each small group present their mural and lists to the full group. Make note of similarities and differences between the groups' murals by underlining or circling them. Allow the youth to respond to the work of other groups, being mindful of the ground rules you have established. If you have several small groups, keep the report backs short so as to maintain the young peoples' attention.

2. Break!   30 minutes

Choose a structured or unstructured activity to give young peoples' minds and bodies a break. There are icebreakers and team building exercises listed in this curriculum.

3. Choose a Problem to work on   At least 30 minutes

a. Step 1: Pros/Cons of Problems
Take some time to focus on the problems. Ask the youth to talk about the problems they feel most strongly about. Use the following questions as discussion points.

- What would the group get out of working on this problem?
- Do you think other youth would work on this problem if you asked them to?
- Do you think adults would work on this problem if you asked them to?

After discussing these questions, see if a priority becomes apparent. If a priority emerges and you have a strong sense that it is what the group wants to work on, then make sure the group formally approves it through its agreed upon decision making process.

If there is no clear problem that emerges as a priority, then you and the group will have to take extra steps to select a problem area to work on.

b. Step 2: Make a Decision
Here are two processes your group can use to pick a problem.

Consensus
It is best if the group can select the problem you will work on using a consensus process. That way the group has an opportunity to consider each other's ideas, work through their disagreements and come to a solution that everyone can live with. It may take a few meetings to reach consensus, but it's worth it. (See page 5-8 for consensus model.)

If the group is unable to come to consensus, as one of ours was unable to, then you can try different methods like selecting and rating criteria or voting (although voting is likely to result either in one group feeling defeated or in both feeling frustrated). If your group has successfully made group decisions in the past, then use whatever process works for your group.

Scorecard (optional: If group can't reach consensus.)

Explain that since the group can't come to consensus, there is another way to pick a problem – it is using criteria. We all make decisions using criteria (whether it's if we think something will be fun, or if we have money, or a way to get there). There are criteria that will help us to pick a problem. We're going to review the criteria and if folks agree, we'll use this method to pick the problem to work on.

Distribute the scorecards and review criteria. Advise youth to use the questions under the criteria to help them come up with a score for each criterion.

Explain the point system: 1 is low, 10 is high. Try to avoid 5's.

If the group agrees, complete the scorecards and tally the points. The problem that received the most points is the problem you will focus on.
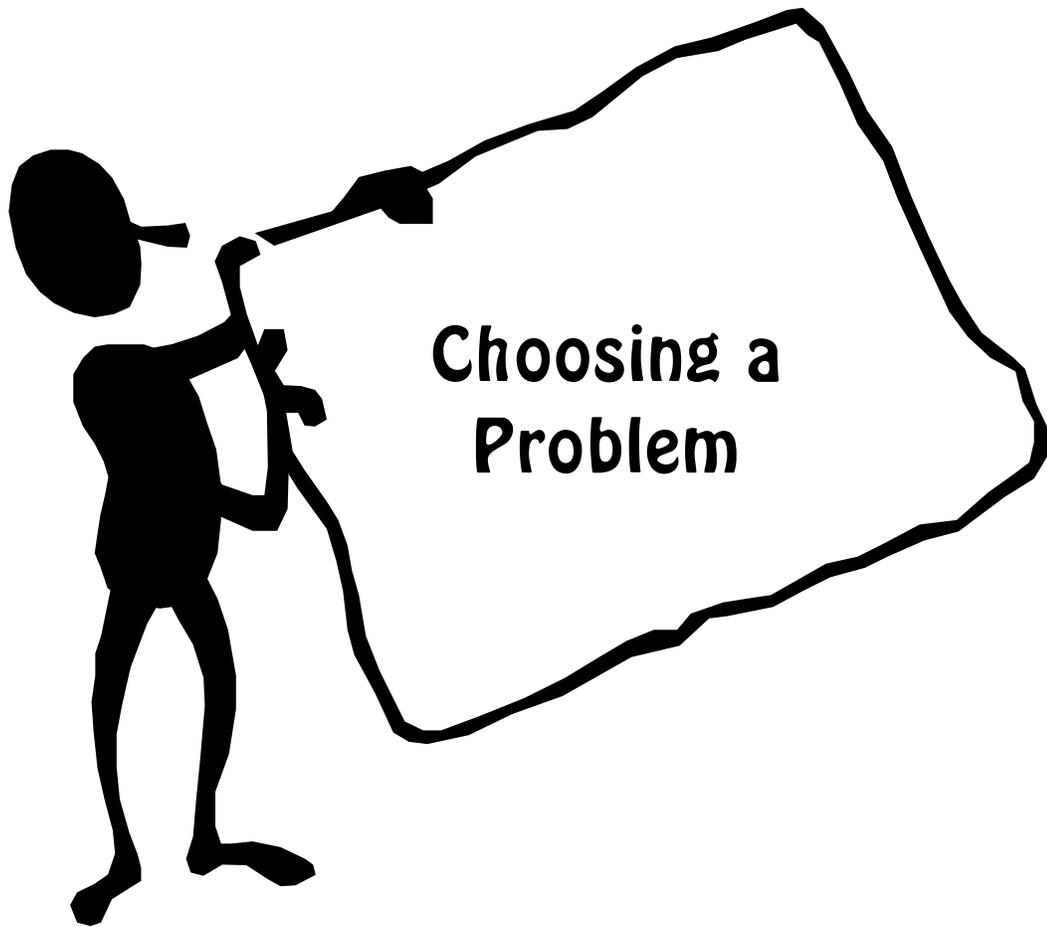
Here's a sample:

Problem Scorecard			
Rank the following problems from 1-10 using the criteria listed below. 1 is low, 10 is high.			
Criteria	Violence	School Improve-ments	Combining Violence related to school
Other people are interested. ❖ Do other people agree it's a problem? ❖ Are others willing to work with us on it?			
Brings our group together. ❖ Does it help us to work with each other? ❖ Will everyone be able to find something they can do to participate?			
Has an impact in a short amount of time. ❖ Can we accomplish something in 3-6 months?			
Total Points **(Total should be between 0 –30)**			

Tips for Successfully Choosing a Problem:

1. Rushing the process can lead to group members feeling alienated and may lead to deep divisions in the group. The times given are suggestions and should be adjusted to fit the needs of your group.

2. The closer the group can come to consensus before the vote is taken the better. If your group is not very cohesive or does not seem to agree on the major problems in the community conduct your vote on a different day. List all the problems on one sheet of paper and reintroduce them on a later date.

3. This process can be intellectually draining for both youth and adults. Take plenty of fun breaks (see icebreakers and team building activities).

4. The murals that the group creates are effective visual aides for future presentations the group may do on their issue. Keep them for future use.

Tools — Lesson 10

Choosing a
Problem

Sample
Problem Scorecard

Rank the following problems from 1-10 using the criteria listed below.
1= low, 10 is high. Try to avoid 5's

Criteria	Addressing Violence in the Community	Improving Mt. Diablo High School
Other people are interested. ▽ Do other people agree it's a problem? ▽ Are others willing to work with us on it?		
Brings our group together. ▽ Does is help us to work with each other? ▽ Will everyone be able to find something they can do to participate?		
Has an impact in a short amount of time. ▽ Can we accomplish something in the next 3-6 months?		
Total Points **(Total should be between 0 –30)**		