Many low-income youth of colour in the US do not have access to training or opportunities for highly skilled careers in tech – a fact reflected by the dismal lack of diversity in most big tech companies. Hack the Hood is one ambitious and award-winning non-profit that is striving to change the face of tech by helping young people to develop their digital, entrepreneurial and life skills.

Empowering the next generation of innovators
Located in California’s Bay Area, Silicon Valley is synonymous with the rise of the computer and electronics industry, as well as the emergence of the internet and innovative start-ups rooted in the digital economy. As much a state of mind as it is a geographical location, it conjures images of gleaming skyscrapers, corporate offices with sea views and thriving co-working spaces crammed with MacBook-using, skinny-latte-drinking geek entrepreneurs.

Yet despite its glossy veneer, there is another side to this highly populated region that surrounds the San Francisco and San Pablo estuaries. The Bay Area may be one of the world’s wealthiest regions, but there were 829,547 people living in poverty there in 2013 – just over 11.3 per cent of the region’s total population. Moreover, the unemployment rate in Oakland – the city connected to San Francisco by the 4.5 mile Bay Bridge – is more than double that of San Francisco’s, while its median household income is more than US $20,000 less than that of its neighbour.

There is a racial dimension to this inequality that cannot be ignored. For instance, Bay Area residents who are black or African-American are more likely to be living in poverty than other racial or ethnic groups, while white, non-Hispanic residents are the least likely to be living in poverty. Indeed, in August 2015 Silicon Valley giants were lambasted by senior US politicians, including Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus GK Butterfield, for their “appalling” track records on diversity. Official figures have revealed that a large proportion of workforces in the world’s leading tech companies are just 2 per cent black.

PROMOTING DIGITAL INCLUSION

One organisation on a mission to change the makeup of the tech workforce is Hack the Hood, an Oakland-based non-profit that hires and trains youths from low-income families to build websites for small businesses in their local communities. Conducted via six-week immersive boot camps, and ongoing workshops throughout the year, this two-pronged approach benefits both youths and small businesses alike, consequently effecting positive change in the wider community.

Since its launch in 2012 by co-founders Susan Mernit, Zakiya Harris and Mary Fuller, Hack the Hood has gone from strength to strength. “In the past year, our budget has grown from $75,000 to $1.2 million,” CEO Mernit says.

JOSE’S STORY

Jose, age 17, enrolled on Hack the Hood’s 2014 summer programme, prior to beginning his junior high school year. Although he wanted to be a programmer and work in tech, he was extremely shy and when he spoke it was barely above a whisper. He had been to hackathons before – but he struggled at these events because he was such a quiet person.

However, he flourished at Hack the Hood. He was assigned a mentor from a local start-up who taught him coding, and even after the programme and stipends ended, he kept coming to Hack the Hood with his friend. When he heard about a game design competition from the Hack the Hood team, he decided to enter it with his friend – and they won it. As a result, he received a cheque for US $1,000, and he was selected to fly to Washington DC and tour the White House. He even presented his game at the White House because he was one of the first to put his hand up and volunteer to do so.

Since then, Jose has pitched at the Latino Start-up Alliance and has joined an innovation entrepreneur programme for youth where he won another $1,000. “It has been the most wonderful transformation to see his dream keep evolving,” Mernit says.
enthusises in an interview with *International Innovation*. “This means that we have the capacity to work year round and with far more young people that when we started in 2013. We now have six full-time staff members, we have health insurance and we have worked with over 300 young people through our programme.”

One of the reasons that Hack the Hood’s work is so exciting is that it actively changes the trajectory of young people’s lives by opening up new career opportunities. “It’s clear to me that there is a giant community of young people who are going to get thrown away and end up in low-skilled, menial work when actually they are capable of so much more,” Mernit emphasises. “At Hack the Hood, we are aiming to change this by exposing young people to careers in tech and helping them navigate this complex world so that they can go ahead and work in the industry.”

**REVOLUTIONARY ENGAGEMENT**

It is widely acknowledged that there are discrepancies between schools in rich and poor neighbourhoods in the US. While richer families are able to fund educational programmes that provide extra training in core subjects, students from low-income backgrounds often lose out; with little or no access to the training or support they need, they are more likely to be tracked into remedial classes. “There is also a social block, which is the fact that our country has a lot of racism – and it can come out in the assumptions that people make about what others are capable of,” Mernit adds.

It is a frustrating situation: there are many smart people in low-income neighbourhoods, who are highly resilient, resourceful and energetic – and yet because they do not know anyone working in tech or what tech jobs are out there, they are effectively shut out of these networks. As Mernit points out, tech companies often hire workers via referrals from existing staff members. “In a company like Facebook, where you might have a million people applying in a year, the 24 per cent who come via referral have a much higher chance of being hired,” she explains.

Hack the Hood addresses these issues by engaging with students in a way that capitalises on the strengths they already have. This can be revolutionary because many of the youth on the programme perceive themselves as being too ‘urban’ or too ‘other’ to fit into the tech industry.

Through the guidance of staff members and volunteer mentors – who are professionals working in the tech field – the students are taught to navigate knowledge-based work and are given the opportunity to discuss the challenges they face. “The tech world can be a very unwelcoming place,” Mernit admits. “For instance, you may have all the right technology skills – but you might be just one of two or three people of colour or one of very few women in a technical role in a company, and this can cause you to feel very ‘other’. Learning how to cope with code-switching in these environments is important, but can be challenging for someone who doesn’t have any mentors or relationships. You may think: ‘It’s my problem’. But it’s not you – it’s the system.”

**VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

There is a huge amount of raw talent and creativity in the youth at Hack the Hood – already, three groups of young people who have completed the programme, all under the age of 25, have started their own companies. “Our plan is to continue to use Oakland as a direct service model where we develop programmes,” Mernit discloses. “At the same time, we are bringing the Hack the Hood framework to communities across the state and eventually throughout the country, enabling them to use the tools we have developed to transform the aspirations and lives of young people.”

Providing youth with skills that lead to better opportunities and options for more highly paid jobs will transform entire communities at a grassroots level. It will increase the spending power of the residents, causing more money to be invested back into traditionally poor neighbourhoods. Moreover, facilitating greater digital literacy will reshape the internet in the future, laying the groundwork for a more diverse and innovative tech ecosystem.