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The Role of Women and Youth in Policy-Focused Community-Based Participatory Research: A Multi-Case Study Analysis

By

Analilia Patino Garcia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Public Health in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Meredith Minkler, Chair
Professor Jason Corburn
Professor Emily Ozer

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The Role of Women and Youth in Policy-Focused Community-Based Participatory Research: A Multi-Case Study Analysis

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By Analilia Patino Garcia
ABSTRACT
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By
Analilia Patino Garcia
Doctor of Public Health
University of California, Berkeley
Professor Meredith Minkler, Chair

Communities that are marginalized by unequal distribution of resources and power are at an increased risk of suffering an undue burden of illness and premature death. Staggering health disparities persist throughout the United States, a collective result of a lack of affordable, accessible and culturally relevant health care services, missed opportunities for preventive services, and public health interventions grounded in approaches that focus too narrowly on individual behavior change. Such approaches cease to capture the complexities of local social, economic and political environments, which contribute to the myriad of inequalities that unjustly perpetuate disenfranchised communities. The active engagement of low-income individuals and communities of color who are disproportionately affected by health inequities can serve as a powerful tool to advocate for policies that can contribute to reversing health disparities. Increasingly, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), as an orientation to research, has garnered attention and respect from academics and community-based organizations alike, as an approach that equitably engages community residents as part of the research process—making it accessible and relevant—with a focus on action-oriented solutions to community identified problems of greatest importance.

This dissertation aims to illustrate the role of promotoras (lay health workers) and youth involvement in research and their subsequent contributions to policy change outcomes. Through a retrospective case study analysis of three CBPR partnerships in California, I describe their individual and collective contributions to the research process, and in leveraging research results to advocate for and bring about policy change. The first case is a partnership in Los Angeles’ Skid Row with youth living in Single Occupancy Rooms (SROs), who were galvanized to action by violence in their community, discrimination they face at school, and their lack of access to the only park in their neighborhood. Their actions led to national media attention, which resulted in school district policy changes, and increased, albeit still limited, access to their local park. The second case involved youth in a Bakersfield community that worked collaboratively with adults from various city agencies and community organizations to achieve environmental changes that led to the creation of safe open...
spaces for families. The final case focused on a partnership in Old Town National City involving a group of women who were transformed into powerful advocates in the pursuit of environmental justice. Through culturally and linguistically appropriate trainings, the promotoras (lay health workers) who were also residents of National City, made significant contribution to the research process, that in turn contributed to subsequent policy wins.

The various participatory methods employed by each of the three partnerships explored facilitated participation and empowered participants to have an active voice through numerous community engagement activities. CBPR is well positioned to effectively mobilize residents, including, in the case for this dissertation, women and youth, and to build capacity within communities that will outlast any funded intervention.

Collectively, the three CBPR case studies offer exciting, innovative possibilities in the engagement of promotoras and youth as equitable partners in the research process. At the same time, the cases offer lessons learned and important implications for research, practice and policy. The voices of the women and youth involved in the partnerships are captured throughout the dissertation, a unique gift to this dissertation, on the insider perspectives they bring as they share their experiences, leadership development, and individual level outcomes as a result of their participation.
DEDICATION

To my parents, Javier and Carolina Garcia, who left their families and country with the hope and dream of a better life for themselves and their seven children. Through your sacrifice, you instilled in me the importance of hard work, honesty, humility, integrity and commitment to our family, language, and culture, and to stand up against injustice.
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Lastly, big thanks to the three communities- Greenfield, Los Angeles, & National City- who opened their homes to me and shared their experiences. I thank you for entrusting in me to honor you by telling your story.

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Introduction

The context of place in relation to health matters. This includes the political and social structures that shape and influence where we live, work and play (WHO, 2009; Bell & Rubin, 2007; Unnatural Causes, 2010). This dissertation contextualizes three places in California: Skid Row Los Angeles, Bakersfield, and Old Town National City, with three distinct CBPR partnerships that have demonstrated evidence of contributing to policy change and/or influence the political environment. Never have these stories been so urgent and timely as they are today, with the growing evidence pointing to the relationship between geography and health outcomes throughout the lifespan (Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Bell & Rubin, 2007; Unnatural Causes, 2010). Policies that promote equity, through justice and fair inclusion (Bell & Rubin, 2007), and that promote upstream solutions sustainable over the long haul are better positioned to positively influence environments in which we can build healthier communities for families. Changing our environments requires a paradigm shift from a Market Justice approach, that is embedded in individualism, to a Social Justice approach, grounded in collective responsibility and the common good (Beauchamp, 1976). Briefly, as Beauchamp (1976) argued, a market justice approach to public health views health as a commodity, the individual the appropriate target for change efforts, with minimal collective actions and freedom from government obligations to protect the common good. In contrast, a social justice approach focuses on collective strategies to protect the public, control hazards and share the burden of protecting fellow citizens from death and disability (Beauchamp, 1976).

With the national public health epidemics of childhood obesity and chronic illnesses (CDC, 2011), attention to multi level interventions, e.g., creating healthy environments, promoting physical activity, and encouraging and enabling healthy choices on the individual and family levels, are required. In 2008, the World Health Organization’s Commission on Health Disparities published a report addressing the gap in health, infusing urgency for an international health equity agenda focused on action to “Improve the Conditions of Daily life.” According to the WHO (2008), policies to positively influence the social determinants of health can positively impact the development of young children, improving health outcomes throughout the lifespan.

The active engagement of low-income individuals and communities of color who are disproportionately affected by health inequities can serve as a powerful tool in advocating for policies that can contribute to reducing health disparities. A community organizing strategy has the potential for generating a grassroots movement that can bring public attention to a specific issue or problem, in the process garnering the attention of those in positions of power (Milio, 1981). Information pertaining to human and financial costs of the public health problem, while also including potential alternatives to the problem in question, can generate widespread attention and public discourse (Milio, 1981). Increased public awareness of and concern about an issue can translate into community mobilization, a call for hearings or meetings with government officials, media advocacy, and other strategies that can in turn help lead to policy action. The problem can be contested from a broader framework that extends beyond public demonstrations, and includes testimonials and scientific evidence of the problem (Milio, 1981; Corburn, 2005). Milio and others argue that strategic and consistent organized efforts “are the tools for sustained strengthening of public opinion and for resolving the policy-making issue in the public interest” (Milio, 1981, p. 296).
Research suggests that “communities and government work better” and thrive when there are opportunities for civic engagement and collective decision-making (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 213). Through participation in the civic action process there are public opportunities for community members to share their stories and take ownership of their lived experience. Community resident leadership development is an empowering process that has the potential to mobilize residents to seek social and political change. In his writing on deliberative democracy, for example, Fung (2005) points out that as a political ideal, deliberative democracy engages citizens to be part of the decision making process by suggesting solutions that are based on reasons founded on egalitarian principles of fairness, equality, and the common good (Cohen & Fung, 2003). Fung (2005) contests that deliberative democracy is hindered by the “background inequality” that persists due to the inequities across social, political and economic conditions. In a case study from which I’ll be drawing in this dissertation, for example, the youth in Los Angeles’ Skid Row were galvanized to action as a result of the lack of safe, open recreational spaces and the discrimination they faced from a unsupportive school district, criminal justice system and community.

As suggested above, Community- Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an approach to studying and developing strategies to link research to policy action that together are necessary for eliminating health disparities (Israel, et al.1998, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Minkler, 2010; Morello-Frosh et al. 2005; O’Fallon & Dearry, 2002; Wallerstein & Cacari-Stone, 2007). As such, it extends beyond the individual “high risk” strategies, such as a traditional medical model for prevention (Rose 1985). By challenging public health practitioners to address the fundamental social, economic and political determinants of health and engaging communities as part of the solution not the problem, CBPR offers a refreshing new approach.

As a non-traditional scientific approach, CBPR bridges the gap between academia and communities by building and strengthening collaborative partnerships and bringing to the forefront unsung community voices that are often marginalized in the research process, due to unequal distribution of resources and power (Fawcett et al, 1995; Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). By fostering community participation and giving voice to the lived experience of residents, CBPR relinquishes an “expert based” approach, resulting in a research process that is accessible and relevant for all communities involved. CBPR establishes trust, builds on existing strengths and resources, fosters co-learning, and critically examines community identified health problems (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). Through an iterative process and reciprocity of ideas, the CBPR process engages and empowers individuals most affected by the issues public health practitioners and academics seek to solve. Ultimately, this leads to action-oriented solutions that can lead to innovative intervention strategies, policy change at multiple levels- local, city and state- or enforcement of existing laws and codes, potentially improving health outcomes and eliminating health disparities (O’Fallon, I. & Dearry, A. 2002;Wallerstein & Cacari Stone, 2007; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

As illustrated in the three case studies explored in this dissertation, Community-based participatory research is an orientation to research that involves many diverse methods but emphasizes equitable participation of partners and includes action as part of the research process itself (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008; Israel et al. 1998, 2005). A commitment to action distinguishes CBPR from other research approaches and in recent years has gained momentum in identifying, studying and finding placed-based solutions to a wide range of health and social problems (Minkler et. 2008; Israel et al. 2005; Fawcett et al. 1995).
The intersection of CBPR, civic engagement, leadership development, and their links to community and policy change form the basis of this dissertation. Across all three cases, a description of each CBPR partnership is offered, along with a description of the place to contextualize the “backstory.” This is followed by a description of the participatory research methods employed, the partners’ roles and the subsequent findings. Each partnership is shown to have taken unique steps to action that resulted in different outcomes on three levels: individual, community and policy. Each is described, as applicable, and bring to the forefront the voices of the women and youth partners. Finally, each case offers important lessons, and challenges, when working in partnership that include the importance of honoring and valuing the process as much as the outcomes; attending to policy enforcement; building capacity within communities to in turn, improve sustainability, and using creative means to foster the potentiality of youth, who even under the most adverse circumstances, have the ability to mobilize and take action against injustice.
References


Engaging homeless youth in policy-focused CBPR; A case study from Skid Row, Los Angeles

While Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has gained momentum and respect from academics, community-based organizations, and funding institutions alike as an approach to studying and addressing health disparities, the advantages of more active engagement of youth as genuine partners in this process is more recently receiving attention. CBPR has been defined as:

> "a \textit{collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings.} CBPR begins with a topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities."

(Kellogg Health Scholars Program, 2001; Israel et al. 1998)

By accenting community participation and the lived experience of residents, CBPR relinquishes an “expert-based” approach, resulting in a research process that is accessible and relevant for all communities involved. CBPR further puts a heavy emphasis on action, and increasingly policy level action, as part of the research process to help address social and health inequities (O’Fallon & Deary, 2002; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Morello-Frosch, Pastor, Sadd, Porras, & Prichard, 2005).

Traditional CBPR approaches engage all partners (e.g., academic, community residents, and organizations) in the identification of the problem, strategies to address it, possible solutions, and action steps. But in recent years, the engagement of a fourth partner—youth of the respective communities—has helped bring to the forefront in CBPR the voices of young people who can play a key role in identifying and studying the problem, identifying potential solutions, and acting to help bring about change. Growing evidence highlights the benefits to both young people themselves and their communities with the engagement of youth in CBPR projects (Hennessey-Lavery, 2005; London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; Mitra 2004; Holden 2004; Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger, Kandawalla, & Kurlaender, 2008; Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007, Bozlak & Kelly, 2010). For example, youth who participate in civic engagement are less likely to engage in risk-taking behavior, and more likely to engage in civic activities in adulthood (Soleimanpour et al. 2008; Ribisl et al. 2004; Mitra 2004). When youth are invited to engage in participatory evaluation of programs that are designed to serve them, there is a greater sense of ownership because they have an opportunity to play a role in the decision-making process (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Soleimanpour et al. 2008; Springett and Wallerstein, 2008). Investing in youth leadership development further provides opportunities to inform the development of effective health promotion strategies from a diverse youth lens (Soleimanpour et al., 2008). Similarly, as school-based research by Ozer et al. (2010) demonstrates, youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects is also a promising vehicle for promoting meaningful engagement, building self-efficacy, and positively influencing youth development.

Building on this groundwork, the present article examines a youth-focused CBPR project in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles, where a small group of young people worked, with their adult mentors at the University Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), and an academic partner at Loyola Marymount University to study the concerns of youth in their neighborhood. Their findings were used to help bring about changes in several key policy and system domains, including juvenile justice, education, and recreation. I also describe the challenges faced, and the
difficulty of sustaining and enforcing changes in this environment, as seen through the eyes of the youth, their adult partners, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

To better understand and contextualize the events that surrounded this partnership, a brief overview of the geographic and social context of “Skid Row” is offered, followed by presentation of the conceptual framework and methods used in this case study. I then present a description of the partnership, its key players and their roles in the research and action phases of the work. Both research and policy advocacy processes and outcomes will be discussed, as will more individual outcomes for youth participants. I also explore, however, the continuing frustrations and challenges encountered by the community partners, including the difficulty of achieving policy enforcement, particularly where marginalized youth, and other less powerful segments of society are concerned. In particular, I discuss the real world consequences of the challenges identified by youth and families in Skid Row once policies were changed, and then not enforced, or only partially enforced, in their neighborhood environment. I conclude with an analysis of opportunities, challenges and lessons learned and implications for the field.

**Skid Row, Los Angeles and its “forgotten” youth population**

Typically bringing to mind images of homeless single men, often with substance abuse issues, the 55 square block “Skid Row” area in Central City East, Los Angeles also includes a less visible population of families with children (Dyrness, Spoto, & Thompson, 2003). From 1990-2000, the number of children under the age of 18 living in Skid Row grew from 1% to 15% of the area’s population, while the number of women grew from 168 to 1,251 (Dyrness et al. 2003). In 2009, the American Community Survey five-year population estimates (2005-2009) reported a decline in the number of children under the age of 18 living in Skid Row to approximately 3%, while also reporting an estimated increase in the number of women living in Skid Row from 1,251 to 4,029 with a significant number of women over the age of 65 (n= 811) serving as caregivers to children (American Community Survey, 2011). Although the estimated percentage of children has declined substantially over the last decade, many children remain in the neighborhood. Researchers at the University of Southern California (USC) have identified “factors such as rising poverty, lack of affordable housing, increased health care costs, and welfare benefit time limits” as contributors to the changing face of Skid Row (Dyrness et al. 2003).

Despite a dense network of social services, the Skid Row neighborhood is not designed or equipped to meet the needs of families and youth. Much of the housing stock in the neighborhood consists of single room occupancy (SRO) residential hotels, which are designed for single adults (Dyrness et al. 2003). SRO’s are typically overcrowded and in poor condition, posing threats to the health and wellbeing of children and adults alike (Dyrness et al. 2003). For example, a study focused on women and children living on Skid Row documented the adverse health outcomes affecting children, who as a result of being exposed to violence, coupled with the emotional distress of living under extreme conditions, are at a higher risk for a host of health and mental health problems, in addition to learning disabilities and developmental delays (Dyrness et al. 2003)

In addition to poor living conditions, youth have been adversely impacted by the myriad of social services centralized on Skid Row as a form of “containment policy.” Skid Rows have been a unique part of US history dating back to the post civil war era when the economic downfall that followed the civil war left many people poor and homeless, resulting in their displacement and “relocation” to Skid Rows throughout the country (Garnett, 2005). Although many Skid Row neighborhoods have disappeared, they continue to exist in cities like Los Angeles, and struggle with the challenge of reconciling land-use issues with equitable homeless policies (Garnett, 2005). For
example, the commercial and industrial growth of the 1950’s and 60’s in east of downtown Los Angeles pressured public officials to closely examine the future of Skid Row (Garnett, 2005; Wolch, et al. 2007). Particularly, its availability of affordable housing stock for homeless adults, which had been dramatically reduced due to poor, non-compliant, dilapidated buildings (Garnett, 2005; Wolch et al. 2007). Instead of demolishing the buildings, city officials and advocates opted to invest money and resources into Skid Row by renovating and bringing existing housing units up to code, and centralizing social services, placing them in close proximity to the poor (Garnett, 2005; Wolch et al. 2007). The “containment policy” was presented as a “rehabilitation” strategy by the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency in 1975 to address the housing stock shortage, but many contest that the “containment policy” sought to prevent the spillover of the blight on Skid Row into the downtown area (Wolch et al. 2007; Jackson & Malped, 2009; Garnett, 2005; Connell, 1985). The inequalities perpetuated by unjust urban land-use policies, such as the policy of containment, further segregate and marginalize urban residents. Placing homeless adults and youth, an already vulnerable population at a greater disadvantage and risk for “double jeopardy,” with mounting institutional and societal barriers precluding their advancement in society. Although the containment policy of 1975 “preserved” the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing stock for adults (Cardenas et al. 2008), it discouraged youth and families from making their homes in the neighborhood subsequently. As UCEPP director Zelenne Cardenas notes, living in these conditions have taken these youth from being “at risk” to being “in risk” (Cardenas et al. 2008).

Conceptual framework

The intersecting areas of youth civic engagement and positive youth development, together with a model of the policy making process, form the conceptual framework basis of this article.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a burgeoning theoretical field that challenges the discourse from developmental psychology that has traditionally overlooked the positive characteristics of youth, focusing instead on the psychological dysfunction that promotes problem behaviors among youth (Larson, 2000, p. 170). Researchers have demonstrated that youth involvement in social or community change efforts can contribute to PYD (Tienda & Wilson 2002; Earls & Carlson 2002; Ozer et al. 2010). In the context of PYD, empowerment efforts and outcomes are developed and explored on multiple levels: identifying and building on youths’ individual assets, creating or strengthening organizational environments in which adolescents can be helped to engage in pro-social and other positive behaviors, and building communities that foster future orientation and in other ways contribute to positive youth development (Zimmerman, 1995; 2000).

Closely related to PYD, Earls and Carlson (2002) suggest that civic education is an important ingredient in the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Through participation in the civic action process, youth have public opportunities to share their stories and take ownership of their lived experience. Such engagement allows them to collect and share evidence of the ways in which a variety of socio-structural and other factors may be negatively affecting their health. Involvement in processes like CBPR can provide opportunities to work as “lay experts” in tandem with adult mentors and scientific experts, further enhancing youth’s capacity to have an impact on public discussion and public policy.

As noted above, public participation in the policy making process is central to CBPR efforts that have as their goal research-informed action on the policy level, and increasingly, youth are playing key roles in such efforts (Breckwich-Vasquez, 2007; Springett and Wallerstein, 2008; Wright, 2007). Multiple models of the policy-making process exist with relevance for those engaged in CBPR
Most such models highlight a series of steps that are not meant to be used in a linear manner, but rather as an iterative process, with a continuous examination and revisiting of the steps (Bardach, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, I will be describing the following steps: problem definition; creating awareness and getting on the policy agenda; constructing policy alternatives and deciding on a policy to pursue; advocacy strategies; and policy implementation and enforcement, as well as additional outcomes and setbacks. Following a look at the methods of the broader research of which this case study analysis was a part, I apply this conceptual framework in exploring youth involvement in the CBPR partnership in Skid Row and its processes and outcomes.

METHODS

The UCEPP partnership examined here was one of six policy-focused CBPR partnerships in California included in a broader study, funded by The California Endowment, to explore the role of CBPR as a strategy for linking place-based work and policy to promote healthier communities. Following Yin’s (2003) case study protocol, two members of the research team visited LA’s Skid Row in 2009, conducting key source interviews with the lead community and academic partners and a focus group with four youth, each of whom signed a consent form approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board. In 2010, follow up phone and in-person interviews were conducted with two youth and the community partner. Additionally, phone interviews with a local policy maker and a school district representative were undertaken, along with a guided tour of the neighborhood, and archival review of relevant internal documents and media coverage.

Data analysis followed a procedure developed and successfully used in an earlier cross-site case study analysis of 10 CBPR partnerships undertaking policy-focused work across the U.S. (Minkler et al., 2008 a and b). A coding template developed for the national study included key domains that were also of interest in the present study (e.g., partnership genesis, research methods, policy goals, activities and outcomes, contextual factors, capacity building, and sustainability). In addition, and based on subsequent literature and discussions with experts in the field, new coding categories were added, including changes in the policy environment, and what needs to be in place for successful work to occur on the policy level. For the purposes of this case study, additional codes pertaining to the uniqueness of this project were developed, for example, youth involvement in the research and policy process (see table). Audiottapes of the interviews and focus group were professionally transcribed and an initial round of coding independently conducted by two of the authors, who identified key themes and codes, compared their findings and returned to the data to reconcile any discrepancies. The qualitative software package, ATLAS.ii ™ (version 5.5) then was used to group all key domains by site and generate reports. A second round of coding was conducted using the reports, and a similar reconciliation process undertaken. Consistent with CBPR principles, a preliminary case study report based on the findings was shared with community partners for member checking to help ensure the accuracy of data interpretation.

The UCEPP Partnership

The United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP) is a non-profit organization founded in 1996 to address alcohol and drug related problems in the downtown “Skid Row” area of Los Angeles. UCEPP’s mission was to engage residents in combating “the systematic conditions and social disparities that threatened a healthy environment” (http://www.socialmodelrecovery.org/united-coalition-east-prevention-project-ucepp). Working from a social justice framework, the organization mobilizes the most vulnerable populations by actively
engaging in grassroots community organizing, assessment, research, and innovative action-oriented approaches. The latter include civic engagement in local government, with the aim of achieving positive community change that promotes neighborhood wellness, cohesiveness, and safety (http://www.socialmodelrecovery.org/united-coalition-east-prevention-project-ucepp).

In 2003, UCEPP began informally connecting with local youth who had begun dropping by on a regular basis. Seeing the need for a more strategic engagement, UCEPP began working with the youth on their concerns including, “lack of recreational activities,” and unsupportive school and community environments. At the request of one youth, for example, who had just witnessed the stabbing death of a friend’s mother, UCEPP lent the youth a video camera which they used to document the raw reality of life in Skid Row, as well as the strength and resilience of its youth, by interviewing people in their neighborhood context. UCEPP then helped link the youth with interested students at USC’s film school, who edited the raw footage to help the youth produce a documentary which they titled “We’re not bad kids” (KCET Films, 2006). The film achieved local and national attention, with the youth project leader invited to appear on several national television programs in New York City. But the process of collecting the stories of fellow youth in Skid Row also got several of these young people interested in more formally uncovering the realities of life in this neighborhood as it was being experienced by their peers.

UCEPP PARTNERSHIP RESEARCH METHODS, ROLES AND FINDINGS

With the assistance of UCEPP staff, and a psychology professor at Loyola Marymount University, several of the youth – who called themselves “Coalition X” in reference to all the unknowns in their lives and futures – helped design a survey for administration to local youth. The collaboratively developed questionnaire included 10 questions about Skid Row youth’s attitudes and experiences in their neighborhood and at school. Consistent with CBPR principles, and to insure a higher response rate given the nature and sensitivity of the questions being asked, administration of the survey was undertaken by the youth partners rather than adult partners. Using convenience sampling, the survey was successfully administered to 96 youth living in Skid Row, with a very low refusal rate. Survey responses captured family and living conditions, neighborhood level problems, (e.g., drugs, violence and treatment by police), as well as health and education-related issues.

The data was analyzed by the academic partner who presented the results back to the staff and youth, and began a collaborative process of interpreting the findings. As part of this iterative process, the partners also discussed issues such as who was responsible for the problems and conditions uncovered, and what needed to be done by whom to make sustainable changes.

The survey findings were compelling: fully half of the youth had been “in trouble at school” for not having proper or clean uniforms, while 43% had been ticketed for minor offenses, most often jaywalking (66%). The results further indicated that 50% of the Skid Row youth interviewed had witnessed a death. Contrary to popular assumption about people living in Skid Row, however, the study also showed that 76% of youth reported not having tried drugs (Cardenas, et al. 2005; see Table 1). Finally, and far from the image of Skid Row youth as homeless transients, the great majority of study participants reported that they lived with a parent or family member. Over 70% had lived in the neighborhood for at least a year, and 30% stated that they had lived in Skid Row for four or more years (Cardenas, et al. 2005).
Table 1. Key findings from UCEPP youth partnership survey

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Survey results from Toxic Playgroup Report, November 2005</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Over 70% of children have lived in Skid Row for more than 1 year</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ Almost 50% of children have witnessed a death living on Skid Row</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ 76% of the youth surveyed lived with at least one parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ 66% of youth have been ticketed for “jay walking”, while 43% have been cited by Los Angeles police department.</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ 33% reported limited access to health care services</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ 50% reported being punished at school for not wearing the proper uniform</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ 80% attend school regularly</td>
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<td>➢ 71% of youth have never tried drugs</td>
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Source: Cardenas et al. Toxic Playground: Growing up in Skid Row, UCEPP, November 2005

To further increase the relevance and importance of these findings, the partnership supplemented and “humanized” them through narratives that would give meaning to the stories behind the numbers. The stories of these and other youth study participants, some of whom had participated in the earlier documentary, gave additional nuance and context to the survey findings. Ultimately these collective processes and data “validated [the youths’] lived experience,” revealing both the strengths of these youth, and the often painful reality of their lives on Skid Row, infusing urgency and an immediate call for action. The partnership’s survey findings, along with quotes from the youth and their adult mentors and 23 recommendations for action were published by UCEPP in a widely publicized report, Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row, in 2005 (Cardenas et al. 2005).

The striking parallels between what was captured in video and what was identified in the surveys, together with the media attention (Los Angeles Times, 2008) which the former had garnered, provided strong ammunition for the UCEPP partnership’s subsequent policy-focused efforts. It became increasingly difficult for those in positions of power to ignore the inequalities that had been perpetuated by institutions and systems that had failed the youth of Skid Row. And current programs, practices and policies were unequipped and ill prepared to provide the neighborhood’s youth with a safe place to live, play and learn.
MOVING FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

The UCEPP partnership followed a series of non-linear steps, a common process among CBPR partnerships working to address health problems and inequities in their communities through policy and systems level change. As illustrated below, by integrating the knowledge gained in the research process and leveraging its findings through policy advocacy involving many of these steps and related activities, the UCEPP partnership was in a good position to help impact public policy and systems change in several areas of particular interest to youth members: education, juvenile justice, and parks and recreation.

POLICY STEPS

Problem definition

Through their survey, Coalition X members had identified several interrelated problems: Harassment and unequal treatment by the juvenile justice and school systems, as well as lack of access to parks and other resources available to youth in more affluent neighborhoods. Further, and similar to the earlier USC study (Dyrness et al. 2003), the UCEPP survey helped shed light not only on the problems identified by the survey and the youths’ personal stories, (e.g., being unfairly targeted at school for lacking the proper uniform, or ticketed for minor offenses), but also on the families living in Skid Row. This was critical for framing the problem contextually, and providing key evidence needed in the problem definition and refining stage of the policy process.

Creating Awareness and getting on the policy agenda

Release of the report, *Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row*, which highlighted findings of the partnership’s survey and recommendations for action, was the impetus for a multi-strategy awareness campaign, which included innovative and effective use of media advocacy that created a platform for youth to share their perspectives. One of the youth interviewed, for example, wrote a compelling article, published in the *Los Angeles Times* about her experience living in Skid Row (Los Angeles Times, 2008). Additional media advocacy, as well as press conferences, and the earlier national media appearances by a youth leader of the documentary project on such mainstream television shows as *The Montel Williams* and *Tyra Banks* talk shows, together with the documentary itself, further helped get the youth’s concerns on the policy agenda. A well-timed invitation to the youth researchers by UCEPP’s academic partner to speak at Loyola Marymount University’s annual “Government Forum” also proved an important opportunity for creating increased awareness. The Coalition X youth spoke as part of panel to a standing room only audience, showcasing their documentary, and, in the words of the academic partner, giving “a whole new light to understanding children and homelessness…the character…nature and issues in Skid Row, Los Angeles.”

Coalition X members also attended numerous public hearings at the LA Unified School District (LAUPD), advocating for services for homeless youth during the public comment segment. One of the Coalition X members candidly recalls standing up with his friends, and speaking up at a school council meeting, “I told them about the lunch ticket, and talked about the clothing, when we got kicked out of school for coming in with the dirty clothing.” The partnership’s success in creating awareness, in retrospect, appeared to lie in part in their strategic investment in building and establishing relationships with elected officials from both the LAUSD school board, and the Los Angeles City Council, which in turn contributed to setting and advancing the agenda for the UCEPP partnership.
Constructing policy alternatives and deciding on a policy to pursue

Consistent with their youth-centered philosophy, UCEPP staff arranged several daylong strategic planning process sessions, in which Coalition X members actively participated, and included conducting a power analysis of the variety of issues that had been identified in the survey. Through such a process, participants identify, for a policy change they wish to see, targets (with the ability to help bring about change), likely allies and opposition, and strategies for helping increase support and weaken resistance (Ritas et al. 2008). By engaging in a respectful dialogue and discussion of the partnership’s priorities, recommendations and strategies were narrowed down. UCEPP adult mentors helped the youth think through potential policy targets, identifying the pros and cons of their policy alternatives. The process began with adult mentors posing to the youth the questions, “What did we find out?”; “What is the data actually saying?”; and “Do the numbers match what we experienced collecting the data, and the stories we heard?” The validation of their own lived experience revealed by the survey helped the youth contextualize and address what “the data brought to the surface,” and the associated policy implications, moving from a comprehensive list of 23 recommendations to three priority areas and corresponding city departments and targets: The Los Angeles Police department (LAPD), Los Angeles Parks and Recreation department and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Although a wider range of proposed recommendations and policy targets were published in the report, “Toxic Playground, two major policy needs and respective targets “jumped up,” regarding the school district and recreation, prompting the partnership to take action to pursue these.

Policy Goal #1:

Equitable treatment of homeless youth throughout the Los Angeles School District

According to the “No Child Left Behind” Act and related legislation, “All school-aged homeless children are entitled to the same free and appropriate education that is provided to non-homeless students. Schools are required to remove barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and academic success of homeless students” (LAUSD, Homeless Education Unit, 2011). However, as candidly expressed by a Coalition X member in an article published in the Los Angeles Times, “the President and Congress passed the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’. But they didn’t just leave us behind, they hid us, and they’re acting like they don’t see us” (Rivera, 2005). The LAUSD was failing to implement the legislation by allocating resources for only a 1.5 full time case manager position to coordinate services for an estimated 13,000 homeless students in a 702 square mile radius. Prejudicial practices that resulted in homeless youth being sent home for not having clean clothes or proper uniforms were further evidence of ways in which the LAUSD was non-compliant with federal law, by not allocating the needed funding or equitable treatment through improved service delivery to homeless youth and families.

Policy goal #2:

A safe and healthy place to play: Taking on the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation

The partnership’s survey data confirmed what had long been known by Skid Row residents, but ignored by the city’s Parks and Recreation department, namely that the children and youth living in Skid Row lacked options for accessible outdoor open spaces. The only playground in the neighborhood was in poor condition and locked, inaccessible to young people. The UCEPP partnership learned that although the park belonged to the city of Los Angeles, it was managed by a
local non-profit organization which instituted its own rules regarding who could access the park, ironically denying young any access because it was deemed “too dangerous” for children and youth.

**ADVOCACY STEPS**

A key part of being an effective advocate is doing your homework (Minkler and Fruedenberg, 2010). An adult mentor had already played a key role in this regard in researching, and finding the little known provision in “The No Child Left Behind” legislation that called for equal treatment for youth who lacked permanent homes. Together, this information and the data results from the survey were used by the partnership to organize a mass media advocacy campaign that included publications in the LA Times (Cardenas, 2003; Rivera, 2004; 2005; 2008), and other local news press coverage, including a strong Op Ed piece by a UCEPP leader (Cardenas, 2008) and the earlier mentioned first person article by of one of the Coalition X youth (Roshawn, 2007). This media work was combined with numerous community forums and Policy Breakfasts that brought local elected officials into Skid Row to hear youth speak about the adversities they and their peers faced living on Skid Row. The media and related policy advocacy efforts influenced the policy process by raising awareness, bringing outside attention to Skid Row, garnering community wide support, and political will, thus, infusing an urgent call to action for improvements to the quality of life for youth and families on Skid Row.

**Advocacy strategies on 2 key policy goals:**

**The right to an education**

In order to garner attention and support for the issue of equal treatment of homeless youth by the LAUSD, the UCEPP partnership collaborated with the Los Angeles Homeless Service Agency, as well as several CBOs, mobilizing members to attend numerous public hearings at the school district, advocating for services for homeless youth. Youth voices were especially important in these hearings, telling the board, “you’re not meeting our needs and you’re supposed to.” The active participation of the homeless youth at the public hearings was no easy task, especially with meetings lasting more than 5 hours, which for some youth put in jeopardy their space for the evening at the local mission in which they were seeking temporary shelter. But their sacrifice and voices proved to be a powerful and effective organizing and advocacy strategy that resulted in the support of a key Los Angeles school board member, and now, Los Angeles City Councilmember.

**Advocacy for a safe place to play**

Two critical incidents forced the city to take notice and action on the park issue. First, the much-publicized cover of the report, Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row, showcased a poignant picture of the locked park, with a fence around it and a young girl looking in. Second, in 2006, a year after the release of the report, one of the homeless youth partners wrote an article for the LA Times (Roshawn, 2007) in which she wrote, “across the street is a small park where young people are not allowed to go there because it’s considered too dangerous.” The “strategic” placement and use of the picture as the cover for the report and the article garnered the attention of city officials, pressuring the city to take some responsibility. The policy breakfasts and media advocacy also played critical roles in making the case for change by candidly uncovering the daily
challenges and inequities that plague families living on Skid Row, such as, lacking safe places to play, and living in an environment that is not conducive to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle.

POLICY OUTCOMES, IMPLEMENTATION, SETBACKS

The combination of powerful research, personal stories, and community activism, together with effective policy advocacy including, in particular, public testimony and media advocacy in which youth played a key role, helped achieve several policy victories. Among these was the implementation of the MC-KinneyVento Homeless Assistance Act, an integral component of “No Child Left Behind Act,” which stipulated the creation of a Homeless Education Unit, and the substantial (albeit still inadequate) increase in the number of case managers and support staff assigned to work with approximately 13,445 identified homeless youth in the LAUSD from 1.5 to 15 (LAUSD, 2011). Several new school wide policies, systems and practices inclusive and supportive of all youth similarly were introduced, including new forms and district wide training for all staff to facilitate enrollment of homeless children and youth. As noted later, however, enforcement of these changes proved problematic.

In the wake of the attention and demands for a safe and accessible place to play, the partnership also was credited with helping get the Department of Parks and Recreation to clean up the park and install new playground structures. Yet the brightly colored play area, while heavily populated by youth playing basketball and using its new play structure when open, is still typically locked with the exception of 2 hours on Friday afternoons, and even some Fridays it remains closed, with youth “outside looking in.” My participant observation indeed revealed two particularly poignant scenes. Several disappointed looking youth, coming in to UCEPP headquarters on a beautiful Friday afternoon, basketballs in hand, to report that the park was indeed locked—again. And on another Friday afternoon, a slightly older youth, being handcuffed while pressed against the bars of the locked playground. I also observed the playground in full swing one sunny Friday, with some 30 children and youth happily playing inside—a sight I would take for granted in many other neighborhoods, but not in LA’s Skid Row.

As noted above, although the education reforms to which the UCEPP partnership contributed were important but very limited given the need, success on the partnership’s second goal – access to a safe recreational area -- appeared even more elusive. Despite the “win”, the UCEPP partnership does not consider the two hours per week access to the park to be a victory, rather a “response to our advocacy.” Indeed, so many of these “victories” were severely curtailed by lack of enforcement and adequate resources that the slowness of change has been a major source of frustration. Yet the very fact that politicians took notice, and felt compelled to act, even given a dismal subsequent implementation record, made UCEPP and its youth involved CBPR partnership a potent example of the power of youth voices standing up for their right to be respected and have a safe place in which to learn, live and play. The resilience of young people, even under the most difficult circumstances, also was well demonstrated in this case study. To this day, the partnership is still working towards getting the city “to treat the park like it treats every other park in the city”, investing its resources to maintain and open the park for all children, youth and seniors.

OUTCOMES AND SET BACKS

Although the partnership has “partial policy victories” to its name, it encountered a series of unprecedented setbacks and outcomes, posing significant challenges in advancing its policy agenda. As Bardach (2005), reminds us, it is critical to consider each policy alternative, and the
corresponding outcome or impact that will both be a realistic projection and impose minimal cost. In the case of the UCEPP partnership, their preferred policy goal of improving access and conditions of a neighborhood park appeared realistic with minimal financial costs associated. But what was unaccounted for was the human costs that would unfortunately result.

**Unintended consequences- Skid Row families displaced**

In an effort to contest the partial park victory, the partnership brought the issue to their longstanding ally and supporter, the councilmember for their district, who had championed the Homeless Education Policy at the school district. However, the partnership’s well-intentioned media advocacy efforts added fuel to an already powerful political movement to get families out of Skid Row because it was not considered “safe” for them to live there. This ignited a county-wide campaign, the “Zero Tolerance Policy for Homeless Families” (UCEPP, 2005) focused on removing families from the Skid Row neighborhood rather than focusing efforts and resources on improving conditions for families living on Skid Row. The partnership’s forceful efforts to counter the argument were no match for the money and power of those vested in freeing up this property for gentrification, and partially as a result, 90% of the youth partners who worked on the survey have been displaced, are homeless and/or no longer live on Skid Row. This was true of a young mother and articulate member of Coalition X, whom we interviewed twice, and who temporary lost custody of her daughter because she was homeless. Ironically, moreover, the families that have been displaced are often now in areas that are more dangerous, with greater safety concerns than those presented by living on Skid Row. One of the youth recalls being told by a local political figure, “It’s so dangerous. Nobody should live here”. But he contested that by defending what had been his “home” for over six years, responding,

“There’s other places way dangerous, especially all of the gang members in other places…they are always shooting…down here its mainly drugs, and I don’t think it should be dangerous for a child…nobody is going to mess with kids, and once you get into the community (Skid Row), all these homeless people ‘like all scary’ end up being some of your best friends, and they are not going to let nothing happen to you either.”

As noted by a key informant, “as difficult as it is to make policy change, it is so much more difficult to live in communities that must confront daily all of the challenges we’ve identified, and face the real-world consequences of those challenges.”

**The “two faces” of gentrification**

As noted above, the partnership’s longstanding efforts to improve conditions on Skid Row for residents living on Skid Row, unfortunately, also fell short to the wave of gentrification. The partnership was caught in the midst of two conflicting campaigns and has since been dealing with those consequences; poor families were forced out, and labeled as neglectful for putting their children “at risk” by living on Skid Row, while families with money, on the contrary, were invited into Skid Row to purchase new lofts and labeled as “Pioneers” for leading the way to a new face of Skid Row. In the words of an adult mentor from UCEPP, “If you have money, you are brave for coming downtown at a time of change and redevelopment.”

**Youth-Related Outcomes**

A hallmark of CBPR is the equitable partnership and inclusion of community members in the action, and not merely the data collection phases of the work (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008; Israel et al. 1998 and 2005). Engaging youth partners in a CBPR process, such as the UCEPP partnership, helped fostered a sense of self-worth and efficacy, empowering youth to “cultivate their
own voice,” “articulate the issues,” and provide “direction” on how to do things differently. And, although there is a logical connection between building healthier communities and creating the contexts that promotes positive healthy youth development, Perkins et al. (2001) suggest that most communities have yet to understand how to engage youth, and take action in an effort to promote positive youth development. The critical role of the youth partners within the UCEPP CBPR partnership proved to be timely and relevant on multiple fronts, yielding a level of respect and attention, and sense of self-efficacy and power on behalf of the youth that was unimaginable earlier because of the obscurity of the lives they led in Skid Row. Coming into their own, having a voice, and rising from obscurity—where no one knew they existed—was a stunning transformation that brought to the forefront youths’ confidence in their ability to speak and be heard, and demand equitable community-wide changes. As the academic partner noted, “they really have a lot to say about how to best access their own world, and what in their world is important to look at, and we have to listen to that...when they frame it, they own it, and they take it through completion.” In the words of a Coalition X member, “If you put forth the effort, people will listen. People will come out of the woodwork and they’ll implement change. You have to be willing to do it and know that it doesn’t happen overnight.”

DISCUSSION

The success of the UCEPP partnership may be credited in large part to the purposeful, meaningful and genuine youth engagement process, complementing earlier studies (Bozlak & Kelley, 2010; Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007; Soleimanpour et al. 2008) by providing further evidence that youth, even in the most marginalized urban communities, have substantial potentiality, strengths, and assets as partners in policy-focused CBPR. Moreover, the consistent role of adult mentors in an environment where youth lack stability, options, and acceptance, proved to also be an important success factor of the partnership. Earlier research has shown that adult-youth partnerships may prove difficult due to the uneven power structure that innately exists between youth and adults. Such research, however, also highlights a successful strategy to help counter this imbalance by bringing youth and their adult allies together early in the participatory action research process (Ozer, 2010; Wang, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). The relationship between the youth and adult members of the UCEPP partnership was initiated by a group of youth who sought the connection and relationship with positive adults who could provide structure and guidance. Although the youth had a history of distrust of adults who had failed them, the partnership was able to break through these barriers by investing in establishing relationships from the onset that were founded in mutual trust, respect and communication, enabling the youth and the adult partners to work collaboratively and effectively, raising questions and concerns about their environment.

CBPR as an orientation to research bridges the traditional academic-community divide by engaging those most affected by an issue as part of the solution. The UCEPP CBPR partnership brought together a group of concerned youth, seeking to find answers in an unjust environment in which they were daily targets of discrimination and harassment on behalf of multiple city agencies. By joining forces with an organization that accepted them on their own terms, the youth, along with their adult partners, sought to find answers, and helped to transform themselves, while making some initial (albeit limited) headway in transforming aspects of their community as well. The CBPR process, unlike other traditional methods, is place-based, and begins with a “systematic inquiry” (Green et al. 2005). Through this process, the youth were empowered to pose their own questions based on their lived experience, and sought out to talk to other youth like themselves. The local wisdom and etiologies, facilitated a process that captured and transformed long-known anecdotal information into data, evidence that was later used to help leverage change.
The CBPR process was key in helping achieve the multiple policy wins, but fell short in enforcement of said policies. As with most partnerships, Wong (2005, p. 105) has described “youth-driven participation as ideal for positive youth development and empowerment.” The youth-initiated UCEPP partnership resulted in policy-focused work, creating opportunities for youth civic engagement, giving way to a new level of self-awareness and critical consciousness that empowered the youth partners to believe in the power they had as agents of change. Through a systematic inquiry process of identifying problems, responsible persons/change targets, and potential solutions, the Coalition X members initiated a research-based and action-oriented process that led them to “understand advocacy,” and help affect community change. Consistent with PYD, through youth-driven participation, Coalition X members acquired advocacy and research skills, building on their assets, engaging in positive behaviors, and ultimately empowering them to believe in their collective ability and possibilities for a future.

The findings from this study are consistent with those of other youth policy-focused CBPR studies (Bozlak & Kelley, 2010; Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007), with youth playing key roles in both the research and policy action. Such efforts, like the Skid Row study, demonstrate the importance of an adult mentor, and the potentiality of youth-adult partnerships in helping secure the enactment of relevant local policy. One feature distinguishing the UCEPP partnership from the above-mentioned studies, however, involves the circumstances that surround the youth involved in Skid Row and the unique challenges they confront on a daily basis as transient and homeless youth. These characteristics and contextual factors, however, further evidence of the resiliency of youth in the face of adversity.

Limitations

An important limitation of this study involved the fact that given the organic and real time nature of the partnership research process, the youth and staff at UCEPP did not have an opportunity to consult with the academic partner prior to the development of the survey. The survey instrument, therefore, was not pilot tested, and survey items did not benefit from the insights and guidance of a trained researcher. Although both UCEPP adult mentors and the academic partner were detailed in depth, with additional phone and e-mail clarifications and updates, only five Coalition X members were available to be interviewed. Further, a time-lapse of several years between the documented activities and our study resulted in a potential loss of some details. However, the survey results confirmed the youth testimonials captured in the documentary that preceded the survey implementation. The use of triangulation (e.g., though interviews with diverse sources, as well as archival review and participant observation) and the uncovering of similar results through these various approaches, helped give credence to study findings.

Key informant interviews with partners, policy makers and media account potentially over or understated the role of the youth and the partnership in the research and advocacy that contributed to the policy wins. The use of triangulation was helpful in this regard too, however, with eight interviews conducted and further confirmed by interviews with elected officials and school district personnel.

As stated in the literature, policy making is influenced by an iterative, non-linear process with circuitous movement, for example, from media and policy advocacy in creating awareness stage, with a return to that stage once the specific policy goals and targets had been identified. This is highly consistent with contextual and other factors impacting the policymaking process, which “shape the content, course, pace and development of policy and may contribute to the relative success of some policies over others” (Brekwich, et al., 2007).
Challenges

Although the partnership’s work resulted in policy wins and individual level outcomes with the youth that promoted PYD, it did not do so without its share of unforeseen challenges and problems that jeopardized the partnership’s efforts. As seen in other CBPR policy-focused studies, enforcement has been a consistent problem due to lack of funding, political will, and/or personnel (Gonzalez, et al. 2011; Minkler et al. 2010). As observed in some earlier CBPR studies, moreover, enforcement is also sometimes an “after thought” or not part of the process. The length of time required to achieve (and then enforce) policy wins, limited resources (financial, time, and staffing), along with the competing life priorities of community partners (particularly well exemplified in the case of homeless youth), pose challenges to the longer-term efficacy of this work. The policy “wins” that sometimes are perceived as the end, are, in reality, only the beginning of a much longer process, particularly in times of fiscal retrenchment and limited enforcement. In the Skid Row case study, although the UCEPP partnership was well aware of the need for continued vigilance regarding oversight and enforcement, the lack of infrastructure for tracking the implementation and enforcement of rules, policies or programs posed a challenge. And, while the partnership made a concerted effort to contest their “park victory” with the Parks and Recreation Department, arguing that having the park open to the public 2 hours per week is totally unacceptable, and demanding increased access to the only park in Skid Row, the partnership has had to address competing priorities at both the organizational and individual level. The Coalition X members also confronted the harsh reality of the change in political climate, and of the “false promises” made by elected officials or city offices, and have learned that in order for change to occur, they have to be patient and persistent, without losing sight of their goal.

The youth participating in this study were also, unfortunately, victims of their own efforts. As their media advocacy efforts grew, and their voices were captured in print and on television, garnering attention from their elected officials, some were displaced out of Skid Row, in part an unintended consequence of their work. But despite the obstacles and the hardships endured, the youth continued their community activism and never lost sight of their vision, improving conditions in Skid Row, for children and youth, and creating an environment in which they can live, play and learn. As their accomplishments remind us, even youth living in extremely vulnerable communities have strengths, assets, and the power to make changes. Their voices must be heard, but they and their adult partners cannot make change alone, and the creation of a policy environment genuinely concerned about the health and well being of its children and youth is critical for such work to really contribute to sustainable change.

Conclusion

The youth of Coalition X sought to make a difference in their community, and improve conditions for their families, neighbors and friends. Their collective effort taught us that despite the adversity, stressors in their lives, and life struggles, they had the courage to stand up and take action against the injustice and discrimination.

“If you put forth the effort, people will listen. People will come out of the woodwork and they’ll implement change. You have to be willing to do it and know that it doesn’t happen overnight”
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Promotoras in the Environmental Justice Movement:
A Case study of a Latino community in California

Introduction
Impoverished communities of color suffer an undue burden of adverse health outcomes and are host to a myriad of environmental hazards, such as air pollution and lack safe and open spaces (Bell & Rubin, 2007; Flournoy, 2010; Hricko, 2006; Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Lee et al. 2011). Community wisdom and knowledge of local social etiologies can provide critical insights into economic, political and institutional factors driving the inequities in communities that contribute to health disparities but often are under the radar of scholars, public health practitioners, and policy makers (Corburn, 2007; Perez & Martinez, 2008). Increasingly, the engagement of community health worker (CHWs) or promotoras has proven a valuable means to engage those most affected by an issue as part of the research and subsequent data informed problem solving process (Love et al. 1997; Eng & Young, 1992; Eng, 2009; Perez & Martinez, 2008; Stone, 2007). The opportunities that result from working with CHWs, as instrumental “insiders” with information and knowledge of their community, people, and etiologies, can be critical in bridging the divide between a medical provider or researcher and community residents (Acury et al. 2009; Bryant-Stephens et al. 2009; Love et al. 1997; Rhodes et al. 2007; Stone et al. 2007; Eng et al 2009). Variations exist in the terminology used for CHWs, but for the purposes of this paper, with its focus on Latino health, I will be utilizing the term promotoras, short for promotoras de la salud or health promoters.

The active engagement of promotoras, who typically are members of low-income communities of color disproportionately affected by health inequities, can serve as a powerful means of helping to identify and study local concerns and advocating for policies that can contribute to improving environments to reduce health disparities. Through participation in the research and civic action process, promotoras are provided opportunities to collaborate in more deeply understanding the connections of place and health in their neighborhoods, while sharing their stories and taking ownership of their lived experience (Corburn 2007; Johnson et al. 2005; Israel et al. 2001). Such participation allows them to collect and share evidence of the ways in which a variety of sociostructural and other factors may be negatively affecting their health. The engagement of “community experts” (in this case promotoras) along with “scientific experts” can produce opportunities to work in tandem, maximizing the impact on public discussion and public policy (Perez & Martinez, 2007; Corburn 2007). The intersections of place, environmental justice, and Latino health are important to examine, as they collectively and individually play an important role in the well-being and health outcomes of Latinos in the United States.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is defined as:

“a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities.” (Kellogg Health Scholars Program, 2001; Israel et al. 1998)
In recent decades, CBPR has provided an important means through which community members can “equitably participate in action oriented research.” The guiding principles of CBPR include recognizing community as a unit of identity; promoting co-learning and capacity building among all partners; integrating a balance between research and action; and committing to long-term engagement and sustainable change (Israel et al. 1998, 2005).

CBPR often has involved the training and hiring promotoras or lay health workers as research partners and created opportunities for community engagement in policy advocacy and other action arenas (Johnson et al. 2005; Krieger et al. 2005; May et al. 2003; Parker et al. 2003; Ramos et al. 2001). With the growing numbers of promotora programs, initiatives and interventions, the present study is of significance because it aims to capture an organic, grassroots process systematically, and offer lessons and best practices to other communities currently working with promotoras or planning to incorporate promotoras into their work in the future. Furthermore, this study firmly positions the role of promotoras within a larger context, contributing to the literature the engagement of promotoras working on environmental health issues.

The paper aims to elucidate the role and value of promotoras in CBPR partnerships engaging in environmental justice work. I begin by providing background on promotoras, followed by a brief review of health-focused CBPR studies since 2000, which involve lay health workers or promotoras in key roles. I then turn to a more detailed examination of the Environmental Health Coalition’s Toxic Free Neighborhood Campaign in Old Town National City, San Diego, CA. and the centrality of its promotora program to the impressive individual and community level outcomes achieved. I focus in particular on (1) the role and contributions of promotoras to science and research-based advocacy which in turn helped change policy and improve the policy environment and (2) self-reported individual level changes in the promotoras themselves that also contributed to broader family and community capacity building.

Background

Case studies have documented the growing recognition and utility of Lay Health Advisors, or promotoras, as important community change agents and advocates who live in, and are respected leaders of their communities (Arizmendi & Ortiz, 2004; Eng 2009; Kreiger et al. 2005; Ingram et al. 2008; Parker et al. 2003; Plescia et al. 2008; Ramos et al. 2001; Rhodes et al. 2007; Williams 2001). A systematic qualitative review of 37 lay health advisor (LHA) interventions among Hispanics (Rhodes et al. 2007) noted the emergence of LHA strategies to reduce or eliminate health disparities. Across the 37 LHA interventions examined, the role of LHAs varied from health advising — serving as sources of information, support and referrals to assistance with recruitment and data collection, to advocacy (Rhodes et al. 2007). Scholars have documented the utility of promotoras by describing their role in various clinical and community wide interventions focused on chronic disease, environmental health, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, and prenatal care (Arcury et al., 2009; Balcazar, et al. 2009; Eng et al. 2009; McCloskey, 2009; Meister et al. 1992; Ramos et al. 2001). Numerous promotora training models exist across the above-mentioned issue areas. For example, Balcazar and colleagues (2009) published results from a cardiovascular health intervention along the U.S. Mexico border utilizing promotoras as a strategy to improve health outcomes in high-risk Latino communities. The multi-level intervention, which included a training component, curriculum implementation, and an innovative collaboration between the medical staff and the promotoras, demonstrated significant increase from baseline in positive changes in heart-healthy behaviors among participants (n=85). Balcazar et al’s study underscored the utility of an integrative approach
including both community and clinical settings as a strategy to improve the delivery of clinical services and health outcomes.

Other studies have documented positive individual level change in the promotoras themselves as a result of participating in a Lay Health Advisor program (Plescia et al. 2008). In another study along the Texas-Mexico border, promotoras participated in a pilot education program grounded in a train-the-trainers model focused on minimizing exposure to environmental hazards. In this pilot intervention, the promotoras acted as researchers and educators by assisting in the development of the research questions, and the design and implementation of the training (Ramos et al. 2001).

The engagement of promotoras in both clinical and community setting as change agents and source of pertinent health information has been shown in earlier studies to contribute to the sustainability of interventions. Promotoras are representatives of their communities, and in most cases, will remain active members of their neighborhood beyond any funded intervention. Studies have documented their often extraordinary capacity, skills and knowledge in community health education efforts, bridging the gap in the delivery of clinical service, and mobilizing residents for social and political change (Arizmendi & Ortiz, 2004; Eng & Young, 1992; Eng et al. 2009; Ingram et al. 2008; Plescia et al. 2008; Ramos et al. 2001; Rhodes et al. 2007; Williams, 2001).

For the most part, however, the literature to date fails to capture the engagement of the training of promotoras as co-researcher and advocates in CBPR in the environmental justice movement, and the subsequent community and individual level outcomes of their engagement. Through its in-depth examination of the role of promotoras as co-researchers and advocates in The Toxics Free Neighborhood Campaign in Old Town, National City, this paper attempts to help fill this gap. I explore the training and subsequent roles of the Coalition’s promotoras, and how their contributions to the science and broader community mobilization played a key role in shaping recommendations and helping secure passage of the city’s Specific Plan and related policy outcomes (EHC 2005, 2009). I also examine the women’s personal transformations, and both individual and community outcomes of this growth and development, in part to the sustainability of leadership and change into the future. Following a brief description of the methods of this case study analysis, I provide background on the Environmental Health Coalition and the early involvement and training of promotoras in the Coalition’s Toxic Free Neighborhoods Campaign. I then focus in more detail on the project’s more recent efforts, the pivotal role of the promotoras in the research and community, as well as their personal growth and reflections.

Methods

This case study was part of a larger research effort focused on CBPR projects that have demonstrated evidence of contributing to changes in policy and/or the policy environment in California. Key informant interviews were completed with EHC staff, and National City policymakers. Focus groups were completed in Spanish with eight graduates of the EHC SALTA training program for promotoras. In accordance with our IRB approval, all of the information was audio-recorded, transcribed and, as needed, translated into English. Participant observation was conducted at a San Diego hearing, and at other partnership events. Internal documents review of reports, newspaper articles, blogs and other sources also was conducted. This triangulation of data helped improve construct validity through the convergence of multiple sources of information (Yin, 2003).

The Environmental Health Coalition and its SALTA Program for Promotoras Program: Background and early development
Old Town National City (OTNC) is a primarily Latino community, in just a six-by-fifteen block radius, nestled 10 miles south of the popular tourist destination, “Old Town” San Diego. For decades, OTNC has suffered a history of disrespect by its city planners who treated a once thriving Latino residential neighborhood, “as a dumping ground” for industry and warehouses, resulting in incompatible land use (EHC, 2005). The Environmental Health Coalition is an environmental and social justice organization committed to achieving justice through its community partnerships, organizing and advocacy efforts (EHC, 2010). For over 30 years, EHC has engaged in numerous successful environmental justice campaigns aimed at protecting the health of individuals and environments threatened by toxic pollution (EHC, 2010). A hallmark of EHC’s organizing strategies is their in-house training entitled SALTA, or Salud Ambiental Lideres Tomando Acción, (Environmental Health Leaders Taking Action). The program is focused on training promotoras de salud “lay health workers” as community advocates and co-researchers (EHC, 2005). Although EHC also boasts strong ties to academic researchers in nearby universities, as well as a full time in-house public health researcher (EHC, 2005; Minkler et al., 2010), the training and subsequent research and advocacy of the EHC promotoras has been critical to the Coalition’s efforts and achievements.

EHC has a history of close to three decades of training cohorts of promotoras living in the San Diego Area and along the Tijuana, Mexico-US border. In 1995, EHC designed its SALTA training focused on the development of “promotoras de la salud” or “lay health workers” as community advocates and co-researchers (EHC, 2005). The SALTA trainings have dual components: (1) training the women, who are recruited through local outreach efforts, on core leadership skills that include public speaking and understanding and participating in the policy making process (EHC, 2005), and (2) providing issue specific training which can include vocabulary on land use and planning, redevelopment and/or local city politics.

The Toxics Free Neighborhood Campaign

The Toxics Free Neighborhood Campaign began in OTNC in 2005 in an effort to study and organize around “land use and planning reform, relocation of hazardous industry, and reduction of toxic air contaminants released by industry, and the abatement of lead hazards in the home”(EHC, 2005, p.1). In 2004, the new City Council of OTNC announced that they would fund a Specific Plan for National City that would “lay out the future of neighborhood” (EHC, 2005, p.3). The window of opportunity that resulted galvanized an informal partnership made up of the Old Town Neighborhood Council, St. Anthony’s Organizing Ministry and the EHC, all of who had been concerned for years with the unhealthy mixture of industry and residential land use. Their collective goal was to prepare the residents of OTNC to be at the decision-making table with city government officials, as active participants in the planning process of the Specific Plan, ensuring that their concerns and ideas for their neighborhood would be well articulated, captured and incorporated into the new Specific Plan (EHC, 2005).

With the new Specific Plan on the horizon, EHC and its community partners understood that it was of paramount importance to move beyond anecdotal information on the impact of existing adverse land use conditions on OTNC families, to a systematic and methodological approach of documenting the evidence needed to present a compelling and convincing case that would capture the residents’ concerns and their vision for a healthier OTNC in which families and children could thrive.

Recruitment and Training of Promotoras for work on the Specific Plan

In 2005, EHC designed a new SALTA training, tailored to the Specific Plan, but with the same mission of previous SALTA trainings, to build the capacity of residents to mobilize for social
and environmental justice. EHC staff actively recruited participants through their existing community wide education efforts of lead prevention at the local elementary school, Catholic Church, English as a second language (ESL) classes and through word of mouth. In recounting why she became engaged, one promotora shared that:

“I got involved because I was volunteering at my kids’ school, and EHC presented to the parents on the topic of lead, and how it affects our children…I wanted to learn more, I was blind to what was happening around me and I wanted to get more information about prevention and how to protect my children’s health.”

The recruitment efforts yielded 18 community residents who participated and successfully completed the SALTA training. All of the participants were Latinas, mothers, and/or recent immigrants, and primarily monolingual Spanish speakers. Many of the women had children with asthma, and all were interested in learning about the hazards in their home and their community. The trainings were scheduled over an eight-week period, two hours per week, with special consideration and accommodations to the personal responsibilities and obligations of participants. A child-friendly space was available for on-site childcare, and food was provided to both participants and their children. The training modules included a curriculum on the Specific Plan process, land-use, redevelopment, environmental health, community organizing, and data collection. A special emphasis was placed on how to develop and conduct a survey, while limiting bias (EHC, 2005). The promotoras were also provided with ongoing training on media advocacy, the policymaking process, and public speaking. The training included interactive exercises on topics such as the social determinants of health and the use of power mapping to better understand for a given issue which individuals or institutions had the power to make change, and who allies and likely opposition might be in moving forward. In the words of one promotora who participated:

“Although we lived here [National City], we did not know there was a problem. We could not identify it; it's like being accustomed to living where there is a problem. They taught us how to talk to people in an adequate way, how to express the problem, how to make them [fellow residents] aware that we are living in an area with a problem, and the importance of them being informed. That we have the right to express our concern to city council members, how to stand in front of them, how to express ourselves, expose our problems.”

**Survey Design & Implementation**

As trusted leaders and representatives of OTNC, and equipped with a new set of skills and knowledge about the Specific Plan process, the cadre of promotoras partnered with EHC staff to build upon an earlier survey designed by the local church, which asked residents to discuss what they wanted and did not want in their neighborhood. Although the earlier survey was a good starting point, the promotoras expressed to the EHC staff that there needed to be more substantive data that could capture the residents’ priorities and opinions in relation to the new Specific Plan. Consequently, eight promotoras, along with the EHC staff and researchers, co-led the design of a new 56-question survey. The iterative process resulted in improved survey content, with special attention to language and framing of questions; improved survey design, encouraging the use of visuals, such as pictures depicting various heights of residential housing complexes to aid in the description of neighborhood height limitations, etc.

In preparation for the survey administration, the EHC staff and promotoras organized community meetings at the local school to inform parents of the forthcoming visits to their homes. The bilingual teams of promotoras and EHC staff walked door-to-door, and administered the comprehensive survey to a convenient sample of 119 households over a two-week period, with few
refusals. The survey required 20 to 30 minutes to complete and was comprised of both open and close-ended questions, and pictures of residential complexes. The grassroots and community organizing approach strengthen the research process and improved the response rate, resulting in EHC’s ability to collect relevant and timely information from OTNC residents.

**Survey Results**

Demographic data from the 119 households that responded indicated that 80% could afford no more than $1,000 per month for rent. Households included an average of 3.6 persons, and 66.5% of respondents self-identified as renters. The survey findings also revealed high rates of asthma in the area, confirming what residents have been expressing to EHC and city council officials for some time. Approximately 14% of children had been diagnosed with asthma, double the state average of 7%, while one in three children, and one in two adults lacked health insurance. Since many of the 33% of children without insurance were likely also to have asthma, the 14% of diagnosed cases was believed to be a significant underestimate (Minkler et al. 2010).

On the issue of incompatible mixed-use, respondents overwhelmingly approved a plan to relocate the over 20 auto body shops in the six-by-fifteen block radius of OTNC to a proposed auto body park outside the area. Affordable housing to people living in OTNC was reported as a priority by 81% of respondents. Finally, respondents were asked to ranked their top three priorities out of the 17 changes that could be potentially be included in the Specific Plan, and 1) affordable housing, 2) relocation of auto body shops and 3) changes in zoning laws that prohibit industrial uses were identified as their top priorities. The data gathered by the promotoras was key in identifying these concerns. As one promotora remarked,

“We completed 119 surveys, based on [survey responses] we came to the three points of what people wanted...there were a lot of things on that questionnaire, but the necessities that people had are what were highlighted: housing, relocation of auto body shops and prohibiting the use of our community space for industrial purposes.”

**Research to Action**

“A hallmark of CBPR is its commitment to action” with the opportunity to leverage research results to impact on policy (Fawcett et al. 1995; Israel et al. 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Cacari Stone, 2007). The role of the EHC promotoras in the OTNC Toxic Neighborhoods Campaign did not end with the research process or study findings, but rather marked the beginning of a five-year effort that translated the findings into core community principles and ultimately into policy changes. As a result of the SALTA training, the promotoras involved in the campaign could fluidly transition from community researchers to advocates. Their lived experience and training positioned them as credible advocates for environmental justice. The promotoras began by joining the EHC staff in setting a policy agenda, constructing policy alternative and deciding upon a policy to pursue, while also creating awareness through a myriad of community events, demonstrations, public testimony, briefing of officials and media advocacy. Through collaborative efforts, the promotoras worked closely with EHC staff in critically examining the policy alternatives to consider. For example, EHC conducted numerous campaign wide strategic planning processes, which brought together all of its key allies. Through research and consultation with the University of San Diego Law Clinic, the EHC team learned that pursuing a re-zoning policy...
would not be enough because they would be “stuck” with all of the polluters. A market solution (eminent domain) would also not suffice due to the lack of trust in both the market and the government. Consequently, ECH and the promotoras opted to pursue an amortization ordinance, which would establish a reasonable period for the operator of a nonconforming land use to make the necessary changes or phase out and recoup their losses prior to being terminated. Once this policy goal was agreed upon, the EHC promotoras and community residents built their case and made their voices heard at their local city council hearing, public forums and in the streets. A promotora involved in this process noted,

“It was important for the community to be informed of the problems we wanted to present and expose to city council. [To prepare] we would organize ourselves by meeting for 2 hours. Everyone wrote about what they feel is a priority, and we review it and then we go in front of the city council—we present our problems, we state how long we have been dealing with the problem.”

Through community organizing and outreach strategies such as door-to-door invitations to hearings, and the distribution of flyers at the local Catholic church after Sunday mass and at grocery outlets exposing the toxic dangers affecting their community, the EHC partnerships built momentum on the issue and garnered community wide support. The promotoras were known for filling hearing rooms to capacity with families and children dressed in bright blue t-shirts. The EHC facilitated attendance by carpooling families to and from city council offices and providing snacks and food. EHC staff and promotoras always aimed to arrive about an hour before the hearing, to secure seating space for the majority of their constituency.

Leading up to the hearing, the EHC promotoras spent many hours preparing for the hearing by speaking to their neighbors to capture their stories of health complications and hardships, and to put into words their personal experiences. In one case, for example, a promotora was unaware of the source that was causing her two children to suffer from prolonged and consistent asthma attacks at night. Through her training and collaboration with EHC, she learned that her house was infested with lead and that the auto body shop adjacent to her home was illegally operating at night. It was stories like these that prepared the promotoras to write compelling arguments about the problems they and their neighbors were experiencing because of incompatible land use in their community. The testimonials were a hybrid of their personal stories and the survey findings. The EHC promotoras could confidently speak about their children’s health, while also demonstrating the breadth of their knowledge base on existing zoning policies, and ineffective enforcement of laws pertaining to the local auto body shops that were polluting their neighborhood. As a promotora noted,

“We have had successes because at city council meetings they see that a lot of us from the community get together… we put our t-shirt on, there is certain pressure from the community on the city council members—they have never seen this level of participation… It is important for them to know that people are present and listening to what is happening.”

Combining their personal testimony with survey data, made the promotoras’ arguments real and compelling, putting a face to the statistics. The promotoras’ training and support from the EHC positioned them to eloquently convey their concerns as parents, residents of OTNC and as promotoras who were respected leaders in their community. Finally, and in addition to their testimony at hearings, the promotoras meet with individual elected officials to discuss in more detail information pertaining to their objectives, goals, and propose ideas of how they could work together on the issue at stake.
Outcomes

The outcomes of this case study may be seen at the levels of policy, community, and the individual promotoras who played a central role in helping achieve the other two (see Table 1).

Table 1. Multi-level outcomes of promotora engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Passage of the amortization ordinance in August of 2006</td>
<td>➢ $180,000 for a city-funded feasibility study for an industrial park</td>
<td>➢ Self-reported increased confidence, efficacy, empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ OTNC Specific Plan passed in 2010</td>
<td>➢ 250 unit affordable housing project with 5 acres of restored marshland and recreation space</td>
<td>➢ Self-reported increased civic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Place at the decision making table</td>
<td>➢ Social networks and capital</td>
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</table>

Policy level outcomes

EHC’s research, advocacy and community organizing strategies have been credited with helping secure the passage of the amortization ordinance in August of 2006, and the allocation of $180,000 for a city-funded feasibility study for an industrial park outside the neighborhood where auto body shops and other polluters could relocate (Minkler et al. 2010; EHC, 2005; 2009). Also, since the top priority identified in the promotoras’ survey was affordable housing, EHC and its allies worked to win agreement from National City to convert a 10 acre “brownfield” in the middle of Old Town into a 250 unit affordable housing project with 5 acres of restored marshland and recreation space (EHC, 2005; 2009). National City hired an architect in September 2008 to conduct a community outreach process to develop city plans. In October of 2009, OTNC became the first municipal in California to include health and environmental justice language in its General Plan (EHC, 2005; 2009). Lastly, the OTNC Specific Plan, which prompted this cadre of promotoras to come together in the first place, passed in March 2010. Although the culmination of a lengthy, five-year process, the recommendations and priorities that resulted from the survey developed and administered by EHC promotoras are now an official component of the Specific Plan.

Several National City elected officials interviewed have credited the survey the promotoras helped to develop and administer as a critical component of building a strong and compelling argument in the case against the unhealthy mixed use of industry and residential housing in OTNC, which ultimately resulted in a revised Specific Plan.

As one policy maker noted:
“Numbers and statistics make or break an argument. In the initial survey in 2005-06, the residents evaluated the [height of buildings] stories people would tolerate, 3 was the highest, they went door-to-door, they have that type of statistic… is it 1000 surveys? No. But they went to 119 households, they had detailed diagnoses of the community tolerance. We can put a number to the acceptance or disgruntles of decisions.”

The contributions the promotoras made to the research process were substantial. An elected official noted that without the data and stories presented by the promotoras, who live in the communities about which they are making decisions, the elected officials’ decision-making would be incomplete. According to a policy maker,

“…(the) role of community member in the decision making process is critical because of the experiences they have… they see the impacts on their neighborhood, the priorities at that point in time, they get organized, and get all of the information by going door to door, and provide us with their testimonial.”

Individual level outcomes for promotoras

While only a small number of promotoras were involved in the OTNC campaign and were interviewed for this study, the personal transformation of the women who became promotoras through the Toxic Free Neighborhoods Campaign SALTA training became evident through their self-reported increased self-confidence and capacity to bring about change in their community. In the words of one promotora:

“It is the great preparation that has benefited me the most on my journey as a promotora. They [EHC staff] give you the self-confidence, they teach you how to look at the TV cameras, speak to reporters. We also are featured in the local newspaper, they ask us questions, about the “rates of asthma”—we are confident and prepared, because the organization gives you that security. You are speaking on a topic that is real, that you are living in your community. So, you don’t need that much preparation, because it is your own experience. That is what makes us real, authentic, that we live here.”

As another promotora noted,

“We had to attend so many meetings, often changing the times, we would get home around 9-10 pm, but we think, this is worthwhile, it matters. Sometimes we face obstacles, but we have stand strong, and that is important, not giving up, keep fighting, keep your goal in mind, what you want to accomplish and where you want to go—and that in itself is a success, because you have already visualized what you want in the future, what you are going to leave for your children and community.”

The empowerment expressed and felt by the promotoras as a result of the training fostered new ideas of citizenship and civic involvement. Through their training, they learned about their rights and strategies to organize their fellow constituents. One promotora vividly recalled the fear she felt the first time she stood in front of city council officials to testify. She shared that she initially felt that she was alone, but soon realized that although she was the only person speaking, there were hundreds of people standing behind her. The power of numbers and the support she felt from her neighbors gave her the strength to tell her story. The promotoras also learned the importance of establishing relationships and open lines of communication with elected officials. Several promotoras expressed that although there is a hierarchy of political power, the elected officials have a responsibility to their constituents.

CHALLENGES
Despite the positive outcomes described above and articulated by the promotoras themselves, the woman took a risk by organizing in their community against the environmental injustices they had endured for many years. They challenged the status quo on multiple fronts. First, they overcame a personal challenge and build up the courage to take a stand and become involved in the promotoras training sponsored by EHC. All of the promotoras involved in this campaign were women; many were recent immigrants and most were monolingual Spanish speakers, with limited English proficiency. In many instances they were ridiculed by their neighbors, accused of being “chismosas,” a derogatory term in Spanish implying that they are women who gossip and are up to no good, when attempting to talk about the pollutants and hazards in their community. Other community members, especially life-long residents of OTNC, would express to the promotoras that they were “wasting” their time because nothing had ever changed in OTNC and what made “them” think they had the power to change conditions now? Promotoras for example, reported hearing from an older woman “I’ve been in Old Town for more than 40 years…what makes you think you can change things?” Additionally, the role of promotoras challenged the women’s roles in their homes and families. The training and preparation to become a promotora was time intensive and required consistent participation over a substantial course of time. And although the training sessions were scheduled during times and days that best fit participants, many women reported experiencing tension in the home with their husbands. Prior to their involvement in the program, many of the women spent their days in the home, attending to their families, and would only step away alone to drop off and pick up their children from school. The EHC promotoras training provided them with an opportunity to learn new skills, meet other residents and advocate for change. However, this became an issue for some of the women, when they not only had to spend hours preparing for hearings, but also attend hearings that often ran late in the evening. The shifts in traditional family roles were a shock and a source of tension, for not only the husband but for the children as well. Initially, the promotoras were confronted with questions about their involvement and their participation in the late night hearings. They reported that their husbands often wondered what they were doing for so many hours, while the children complained about the long hours they had to endure with their mothers at city council meetings. To address their concerns and counter their fears, a male EHC staff member invited the husbands to a social hour, taking them out for beer and dispelling concerns that he or the women’s involvement in the program posed a threat to their familial roles. Further, a colorful, dedicated space at EHC for childcare and environmental education of children provided a safe, educational environment as well as staff who helped the children successfully complete their homework. Further, as the husbands were invited to participate in the advocacy activities alongside their wives, and were witnessed to their transformation, and saw the motivation, excitement and passion in their newfound role as promotoras, they too became allies in the fight against environmental injustice. As one promotora recounted,

“The first obstacle was my husband. Sometimes, your husband will oppose what you are doing or question it… why do you go so frequently, what do you do there? I invited him to come with me. When he came to participate he learned what I was doing here. And he also got involved, although sometime his work does not permit him to be here…”

DISCUSSION

The EHC’s SALTA training and the successful participation of promotoras in Toxics Free Neighborhood campaign is an example of the valuable contributions promotoras can make in the environmental justice movement. Although the findings from this partnership are not generalizable
they can provide valuable insight and lessons for future promotoras training as a strategy to promote policy and social change. The findings of this multi-method case study analysis further supports what other studies have concluded about the value and role of promotoras as co-researchers and community change agents (Arizmendi & Ortiz, 2004; Eng & Young, 1992; Ingram et al. 2008; Krieger et al. 2005; Parker et al. 2003; Plescia et al. 2008; Ramos et al. 2001; Rhodes et al. 2007; Williams 2001). For example, a recent study by the University of San Diego documented the role of promotoras in the built environment movement of a community adjacent to National City. That study in particular highlighted the role of promotoras in bridging relationships between the church, community residents and academics, which in turn helped contribute to policy change making possible the beautification of a park and improved safety (Arredondo et al. in press). Similarly, the Seattle-King County Healthy Homes Project documented the role of community health workers in an environmental exposure assessment to identify toxic exposures in the home (Krieger et al., 2005). As in other studies (Parker et al. 2008), the contributions of the CHW contributed to a culturally appropriate research design, with relevant data collection methods based on the local knowledge of the CHWs, and improving the accuracy of the findings (Krieger et al. 2005).

The EHC brought together a diverse group a people with a common goal in the fight against the environmental injustices that had long plagued OTNC. The window of opportunity that resulted from the consideration and potential funding of a Specific Plan in 2005 was a critical and timely juncture for the residents of OTNC. The creation of opportunities for active community and civic engagement in a process that would not otherwise have been inclusive of community voices or visions, contributed to the success of the partnership. The five-year process was slow in achieving its ultimate goal of passing the Specific Plan, but during that time the promotoras and the partnership gained attention, credibility, and respect from community residents and elected officials alike. What began as a training to capture residents’ opinions about the future of their community evolved into the active role of promotoras as co-researchers and advocates. As in other recent CBPR efforts involving promotoras and other trained community residents as partners (Arredondo et al. in press; Gaydos et al. 2011; Gonzales et al. 2011; Johnson et al. 2005; Krieger et al. 2005; Minkler et al. 2010; Parker et al. 2003) promotoras reshaped the design of the survey instrument and data collection, improving the validity of survey, as well as the response rate. As other investigators have noted, (Cashman et al. 2007) community partners typically have neither the time for, nor the interest in active involvement in data analysis. However, they frequently play a critical role in data interpretation, helping add nuance and key insights, as well as developing data based recommendations and helping disseminate findings. In the present study, once the findings were analyzed by EHC, the promotoras had an important role in interpreting, disseminating results and identifying the priorities that would be recommended to the city council. For example, when the high number of individuals without health insurance or a regular physician were revealed, they provided information to EHC on the barriers to access, while also generating dialogue on the high numbers of potentially afflicted children in their neighborhood, that were not documented through the survey has having been “diagnosed” with asthma. This was followed by hours of preparation to provide testimonials at hearings and establish personal relationships with elected officials.

The passing of the Specific Plan involved a long and arduous journey that brought with it a series of challenges and obstacles for the promotoras and the campaign. But contributing to the momentum throughout was the promotoras’ tenacious spirit and determination to tackle other issues along the way while celebrating their successes one step at a time. The importance of celebrating small victories also is consistent with the CBPR literature (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

The preparation, support and training the EHC provided the promotoras equipped them with a new skill set, knowledge, and experience that resulted in a newfound confidence, and
increased capacity for tackling timely and important issues. The promotoras in turn were increasingly regarded as community leaders and sought after by the school and church communities to address new issues, ranging from access to health care, lead in popular candy brought in from Mexico, to the closing of a truck driving school that was responsible for noise and pollution 200 yards from an elementary school classroom and playground. The opportunity to engage in other campaigns broadened the scope of work for the promotoras, affording them the opportunity to maintain the momentum of participation and activism. The EHC promotoras are an example of what is possible when community residents are invited to be at the table to participate as part of the solution in creating sustainable strategies for community change that can lead to improved health outcomes.

The promotoras in this particular case study played a crucial role in the fight for environmental justice. Despite the length and intensity of the campaign, their commitment did not waver, and with every battle and setback encountered they regrouped, re-adjusted their strategies and fought back. CBPR partnerships are non-linear, iterative in nature, and require a long-term investment on behalf of all partners involved (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Israel et al, 2005). The promotoras as residents of Old Town and as mothers of sick or exposed children were uniquely positioned to be strong advocates for their community and families. Their experience with environmental toxics in and outside of their homes, and the training and education received from EHC positioned them to fight against the injustice in their community. As other studies have documented, the promotoras had insider information on a myriad of environmental health violations that health inspectors often missed (e.g., due to the inspections being conducted during regular business, while violations were occurring during the late or early morning hours). The indoor air study of the East Side Village Health Workers in Detroit, MI (Parket et al. 2003) and other such long term such studies (Krieger et al. 2005) have documented to the important contributions of residents as research partners in the development of research questions, data collection and interpretation and in identifying the health priorities (Israel et al. 2001). Similarly, the EHC promotoras case study described in this paper provides a potent example of the contributions of promotoras, even in a very small, largely monolingual Spanish community, and the important outcomes that changed both the business as usual motto of National City and the lives of residents and the promotoras themselves.

Conclusion

This case study of an environmental justice CBPR partnership in Old Town National City offered an opportunity to examine the role of promotoras as partners in the research process and subsequent action leading to concrete change on several levels. The participation of promotoras in the development and implementation of the survey instrument, and their role in interpreting the survey findings that resulted in the joint recommendations and priority areas for the CBPR partnership were key in building the case for rectifying the environmental injustices experienced in National City. By placing a face to the numbers, and speaking as mothers, concerned community residents and researcher/advocates, they had to power to influence a process that until then had not been inclusive of community. Through this case study I attempted to illustrate the opportunities involved in partnering with residents, extending the “relevance and reach” of the research (Morello-Frosch et al. 2005) as was the case in the questions that were developed and the participants that completed the survey instrument. The equitable and respectful engagement of the community partners throughout the entire campaign contributed to the success of the outcomes. Although initially the partnership sought to achieve policy level change, in the process they transformed a community and a group of women, who now, as a result of their participation have a belief in who
they are, their contributions and the ability to institute change in community that had endured decades of environmental injustice.

References


National childhood obesity rates have more than doubled in the last 20 years for children 6-11, from 6.5% to 17%, and more than tripled for youth 12-19, from 5% to 17.6% (Center for Disease Control, 2011). The national public health epidemics of childhood obesity and chronic illnesses (Center for Disease Control, 2011) call for immediate attention to multi-level, transdisciplinary interventions that create healthier environments, promote physical activity, and encourage and enable healthy choices on the individual and family levels.

In this context, increasing attention is being paid to improving the built environment, defined as physical structures or infrastructures in an environment that are human-made (Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Papas et al. 2007; Sallis & Glanz, 2006). Built environments that are accessible, safe, and promote physical activity have potential for positively impacting health outcomes throughout the lifespan (CCROP Report, 2008; CDC, 2011; Kramer, Schwartz, Cheadle, et al. 2010; Sallis and Glanz, 2006). Although a growing body of evidence linking the built environment to increased physical activity exists (Sallis & Glanz, 2006; Bell & Rubin, 2007), the data linking a healthy environment to reduced obesity rates is inconclusive, primarily due to the infancy of the research in this area (Sallis & Glanz, 2006). We do know, however, that poorer neighborhoods often lack accessible and safe spaces, inhibiting the promotion of physical activity for families, and house an abundance of fast food restaurants and liquor stores, limiting the healthy food options for families (Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007; Flournoy, 2010).

The effects of racial, social and economic inequalities perpetuating poor health and conditions such as obesity and chronic illness in communities of color are well documented and are also known to have an important role in the quality of life and overall well being of residents of these communities (Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Sallis & Glanz, 2006; Unnatural Causes, 2010). Segregation of neighborhoods by race and socio-economic status, compounded by political and economic disinvestment give way to a host of barriers in accessing equitable resources and services (Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Bell & Rubin, 2007). Where we live matters and geography is typically not a matter of choice but rather a conglomerate of circumstances that, for better or worse, can be a good predictor of health outcomes throughout the lifecourse (Leung & Takeuchi, 2011; Bell & Rubin, 2007; Unnatural Causes, 2010).

The active engagement of low-income youth residing in communities of color, which are disproportionately affected by health inequities, can serve as a powerful tool to advocate for policies that can contribute to reducing health disparities and changing the landscape of environments (Finholt, Michael & Davis, 2010; Kramer, Schwartz, Cheadle, et al. 2010; Suminski, Petosa, Jones, Hall, & Posten, 2009). For example, youth-involved research and subsequent policy advocacy on food access in a low-income neighborhood (Breckwich-Vasquez et al, 2007) demonstrated the role of such engagement in successfully contributing to policy outcomes on the neighborhood, municipal and state levels. Similarly, the North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study (NC YES) illuminated the role of youth in policy advocacy efforts, which led to the initiation and implementation of tobacco free policies throughout North Carolina school districts (Ribisl et al, 2004). Brindis and colleagues (2009) examined the role of seven teen pregnancy prevention initiative grantees in California that trained youth advocates to support, advance and strengthen teen pregnancy prevention policies and comprehensive teen pregnancy prevention education. The training, participation and engagement of youth in conducting research, preparing policy briefs and meeting with policy makers, contributed to local and state policy wins in this important area (Brindis et al 2009).
Instrumental to much of this work was community-based participatory research (CBPR), an orientation to research involving diverse methods and equitable participation of partners with an accent on “action” as part of the research process itself (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008; Israel et al., 1998 and 2005). CBPR has been defined by the Kellogg Health Scholars Program (2001) as a:

“collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities.” (Kellogg Health Scholars Program, 2001; Israel et al., 1998)

This paper aims to elucidate the processes and outcomes of a successful CBPR partnership in Bakersfield, California, comprised of a local mothers’ organization, the Greenfield Walking Group; the Kern County Public Health Department; the Central California Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP); and a district wide leadership program for middle school aged students. Following a more in-depth discussion of CBPR, which forms a conceptual framework for the paper, I provide an overview of the genesis and evolution of the Greenfield Walking Group which laid the groundwork for an effective CBPR project at a local park. This is followed by a description of the participatory and visual methodologies employed by both the youth and the mothers’ leadership groups, with a discussion of the partnership’s role in leveraging its research findings to successfully transform a local park, and change the city government’s “business as usual” approach by securing for residents a place at the decision making table. I conclude with key themes and lessons learned for placed-based policy-focused CBPR and implications for practice, research and policy.

Community-Based Participatory Research

CBPR has been defined as a “collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings” (Kellogg Health Scholars Program, 2001; Israel et al., 1998). As noted above, CBPR is not a research method but an orientation to research through which “systematic inquiry, with the participation of those affected by the issue being studied,” is undertaken toward the end of both building local capacity and contributing to education and action for change (Green et al., 1994; Israel et al., 2005). Increasingly, action on the policy level has been recognized as a preferred emphasis of CBPR, particularly in the area of work focused on studying and eliminating health disparities (Minkler et al., 2008a; Wallerstein & Cacari Stone, 2007).

CBPR can lead to innovative intervention strategies, help in proposing and enacting new policies at multiple levels, or enforcement of existing laws and codes, potentially improving health outcomes and eliminating health disparities (O’Fallon, L & Dearry, A. 2002; Wallerstein & Cacari Stone, 2007; Minkler et al., 2008a). With its guiding principles, in short, CBPR may help establish trust, build on existing strengths and resources, foster co-learning, and critically examine community-identified health problems (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). A commitment to action distinguishes CBPR from other research approaches and in recent decades this approach has gained momentum in identifying, studying and finding placed-based solutions to a wide range of health and social problems (Minkler et al., 2008; Israel et al., 2005; Fawcett et al, 1995).

The collaborative, participatory nature of CBPR ensures an equitable engagement of its community partners in both the research and action processes, and the myriad of participatory methods involved positions it to be inclusive of youth as partners and experts on their own lived experience (Finholt et al, 2010; Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowarn, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009; Yonas, Burke, Bennet, Kelly, & Gielen, 2009; Wang, 2006). A systematic study of four CBPR projects engaging youth as
partners in the research and evaluation process documented the benefits of this work for positive youth development, defined by Damon (2004) as the “potentiality rather than the supposed incapacities of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories” (p. 17), emphasizing a solutions-based analysis, rather than a risk-based analysis or intervention approach focused on community environments, rather than individualized orientation. The study further demonstrated youth contributions across projects to the research process, while also highlighting opportunities for intergenerational partnerships and enhanced interest in social issues (Powers & Tiffany, 2006).

A growing body of literature documents the use of CBPR participatory research methods as both community assessment and evaluation tools (Brekwich-Vasquez et al., 2007; Kramer et al., 2010; Necheles et al., 2007; Yonas et al., 2009; Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Pies 2004; Wilson et al., 2006). As many of these studies also demonstrate, youth can also play a vital role in leveraging their research findings to influence public discussion and help bring about changes in local policies (Soleimanpour et al., 2008). Youth are powerful community change agents with the potentiality to have an important role, alongside their adult counterparts, in combating the childhood obesity epidemic, positively influencing environmental changes in their communities (Finholt, Michael & Davis 2010; Kramer, Shwartz, Cheadle, Borton, Wright et al., 2010). I turn now to the methods, history, findings, and policy advocacy components of a youth-involved CBPR project in Bakersfield, CA, aimed at helping study and promote changes in the physical environment. Although it is too early to determine whether this project succeeded in improving physical activity and obesity and related health problems in this community over the long term, intermediate outcomes of the project, including policy outcomes, are discussed.

**METHODS**

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) partnership examined here was one of six policy-focused CBPR partnerships in California included in a broader study, funded by The California Endowment, to explore the role of CBPR as a strategy for linking place-based work and policy to promote healthier communities. Following Yin’s (2003) case study protocol, two members of the research team visited Bakersfield, CA in 2009, conducting key source interviews with the lead community and academic partners and a focus group with four youth, each of whom signed a consent form approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board. In 2010, follow up phone interviews were conducted with the community and health department partner. Additionally, phone interviews with a local policy maker, and a city department representative were undertaken, along with a guided tour of the Stiern Park neighborhood, and archival review of relevant internal documents and media coverage.

Data analysis followed a procedure developed and successfully used in an earlier cross-site case study analysis of 10 CBPR partnerships undertaking policy-focused work across the U.S. (Minkler et al., 2008a and b; Israel). A coding template developed for the national study included key domains that were also of interest in the present study (e.g., partnership genesis, research methods, policy goals, activities and outcomes, contextual factors, capacity building, and sustainability). In addition, and based on subsequent literature and discussions with experts in the field, new coding categories were added, including changes in the policy environment, and what needs to be in place for successful work to occur on the policy level? Audiotapes of the interviews and focus group were professionally transcribed and an initial round of coding independently conducted by two of the authors, who identified key themes and codes, compared their findings and returned to the data to reconcile any discrepancies. The qualitative software package, ATLAS.ti ™ (version 5.5) then was used to group
all key domains by site and generate reports. A second round of coding was conducted using the reports, and a similar reconciliation process undertaken. Consistent with CBPR principles, a preliminary case study report based on the findings was shared with community partners for member checking to help ensure the accuracy of data interpretation.

The genesis of a CBPR partnership at Stiern Park

The community of Bakersfield, nestled in Kern County- the fourth largest agricultural community in the country- is located in the San Joaquin Central Valley, and is best described by its agriculture and the diversity of its residents (CCROPP Report, 2008; City of Bakersfield, 2011). With a total population of 350,000, Latinos make up nearly 50% of the total Bakersfield population, with African Americans, Asian, Whites and other races comprising the remainder 50% (City of Bakersfield, 2011). The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program is an initiative funded through The California Endowment that is focused on the reduction of disparities in obesity and diabetes throughout the San Joaquin Valley, with an emphasis on policy and environmental change for healthier communities (CCROPP Report, 2008).

Bakersfield residents and health and other professionals understood the importance of safe and open spaces, and were concerned about the lack of access to spaces, such as a local neighborhood park which could promote physical activity and ideally help ameliorate the obesity rates among children and adults. This became more evident when 20 mostly Latina mothers in the community completed a nutrition and wellness course. Equipped with new knowledge and resources on healthy eating, they desired to form a walking group that would take their knowledge from the classroom to the community, promoting physical activity and bringing families and neighbors together. These highly motivated residents realized, however, that the only park in their community, Stiern Park, was home to a host of problems, i.e. broken playground equipment, crime, compounded with the unprecedented challenges of a “no walking group” rule on behalf of the center. They therefore determined to make it part of their mission to “take back” their park, but realized that they lacked the tools, resources and support needed to do so.

At the same time, as a strategy to address the obesity epidemic, CCROPP was seeking to establish partnerships between health departments and communities to form an obesity prevention task force for Kern County with the goal of implementing environmental and policy changes. As the regional coordinator recalls,

"when I looked at the description of who should be on the task force, it included community residents… in my experience, up to that point, collaboratives get formed by organizations and they are making decisions that are affecting neighborhoods but nobody who lives in the neighborhood is at the table."

The strategy to form a task force from the ground up, with neighborhood leaders, or “natural leaders” at the forefront, spearheading the process, dramatically shifted the collaborative culture to be inclusive, respectful, and sensitive to resident leadership. The coordinator elected to “start where the people are” (Nyswander, 1956) and “did her homework” by first seeking out existing networks, partnership or collaborations engaged in policy-focused work. She was quickly guided to the Greenfield Resource Center, where she met two extraordinary community leaders. Instead of presenting her agenda and recruiting them to participate in a task force for environmental change, which would have been lost in translation, both culturally and linguistically, the coordinator met these resident leaders on their terms. In her words, “I met with them and learned first about what they wanted to do. It was really about what was important to them.” Through her conversations with the Greenfield mothers, she learned about the idea of creating a walking group, but was quickly
informed of the host of issues at Stiern Park, making it inaccessible to families. The CCROPP coordinator committed to helping the group, and although at that moment their strategies were unclear, it was clear that the conditions at Stiern Park needed to change.

In a different part of town, the academic year was just beginning for a group of middle school aged teens and pre teens that were eager to come together for the first time as the Cesar Chavez Leadership Group. The district wide after school program was founded on the legacy of community activist Cesar Chavez and the core values he exemplified through his commitment to working with farm workers and their families to improve their working and living conditions based on the principles of sacrifice, service to others, celebration of community, and respect. The popular leadership program was comprised of 35 students between the ages of 11-13, and the criteria for participation in the program included a commitment to the betterment of their community, community activism, and interest in the civic process.

The Cesar Chavez Leadership program students, with the guidance of the program coordinator, were beginning the process of identifying a community project when an incident that resulted in the death of a student at Stiern Park mobilized the youth to take action. The youth were convinced that the physical conditions of the park led to the unfortunate and preventable incident, “and they knew change needed to happen and they weren’t afraid…with the proper help to make sure that change came about.” The CCROPP coordinator learned about the youth and their intentions to make Stiern park the central foci of their program, and quickly saw this as an opportunity to bridge two generations while ensuring that each group (youth and Greenfield mother group) had its place at the table to present their ideas for the future of Stiern park. The CCROPP coordinator vividly recalls, “I asked the person who oversees the program to ask the youth’s permission … for me to come talk to them. I feel for youth, [that] the adults are always taking over, and it's really hard to find you own voice.” The youth shared with the coordinator their project ideas for improving conditions at Stiern Park, which included helping paint over graffiti, sifting through playground sand to take out broken glass and trash and planting flowers. Instead of the adults seeing this as a problem of duplicating efforts, the coordinator asked the youth if the two groups, the mothers and youth, could work together towards their common goal, improving conditions at Stiern Park for all families to enjoy.

By simply asking the youth for permission to work together, rather than instructing them to do so, the adults demonstrated a level of respect and validation that contributed to the leadership development and capacity of the youth, and to the process of helping transform a park and a community.

RESEARCH TO ACTION

The timely convergence of the above mentioned circumstances in Stiern Park resulted in the genesis of an organic CBPR partnership between The Greenfield Walking Group, CCROPP and the Cesar Chavez Leadership Group, setting the foundation for a mutually beneficial, respectful relationship and longstanding partnership that is still thriving today.

Participatory methodologies transform Stiern Park

With the assistance of the coordinator, the youth conducted their own assessment of Stiern Park. In preparation for the proposed projects at Stiern Park the coordinator organized a series of speakers including the Bakersfield Policy Department’s Crime Prevention Unit to talk to the youth about graffiti abatement and steps they could take to combat it. She also organized skills
development trainings, which included technical assistance by California WALKS and the local Health Department as discussed further below.

I. Photovoice- As an Assessment and Evaluation tool

Photovoice, a participatory research methodology aligned with CBPR principles, was created by Caroline Wang (1999) as a methodology involving providing people with cameras to capture everyday reality on film, engage in group dialogue about the meaning of the pictures and subsequent potential actions, and help bring about policy change through an empowering and empowered process of participant engagement (Wang, 1999, 2006). Through its three goals, photovoice aims to: (1) record and represent their people’s everyday realities; (2) promote critical dialogue about community strengths and concerns; and (3) reach policymakers (Wang, 1999, 2006). As both an assessment and evaluation tool, photovoice promotes reflection through a process of critical dialogue, often using the SHOWeD technique: “What do we See?  What’s really Happening? How does it relate to our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength Exist? What can we Do about it?” (Shaffer, 1983) Through this technique and in subsequent discussion, participants are helped to develop an analysis of their environment, with an emphasis on a plan for action. In some cases, photovoice is repeated as a follow up or evaluation of the subsequent outcome (Wang, 1999, 2006; Hegenrather 2009). Youth participation in photovoice has been documented “as a strategy for engaging youth in policy advocacy and community change” (Hegenrather et al, 2009; Wang, 1999, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Pies 2004). The youth of the Cesar Leadership Academy completed a photovoice project at Stiern Park by taking pictures to illustrate their concerns about risks and problems in the park and using a problem posing method to discuss their pictures and use them as the basis for action (Wang and Burris, 1997). A 13-year old participant recalls, “we took pictures with disposable cameras and everybody shared, and almost everyone got their chance to take pictures of what they wanted to change.” Another noted, “the adults processed [the pictures], and then they brought them back to us. We talked about the pictures and what we did.” Similar to the (SHOWeD) problem-posing method outlined by Wang (1999), the youth first began by describing their favorite pictures to the group (See), talked about their experience in the park (Happening), expressed how it related to their lives (Our), discussed possibilities for the current condition of the park (Exist) and suggested what they could do as a group to improve the park conditions (Do).

Table 1. SHOWeD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you See here?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s really Happening here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does this relate to Our lives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can we Do about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shaffer, 1983

As the CCROPP coordinator noted,

“I wrote down what they said verbatim-I’m not changing it. One of the photovoice’s says, ‘when I went down this, I fell down and broke my head.’ You and I would probably edit, but that’s what was said so that’s what I’m writing. I asked ‘does anyone have a problem with this?’ I encouraged them to express what it is that they really have in their minds.”
Students also completed “free writes’ in which they answered the SHOWeD questions for their own pictures, as typified in the example below.

**Water Fountain** (Before)

‘We see a water fountain with graffiti. The water does not come out very high, it is not cold and sometimes the water that comes out is not clear and the fountain is dirty. Little kids can’t reach it because it is too high. We could get sick by drinking that water if it is dirty. It affects people who visit the park. They will think people don’t care about their community. This problem exists because people graffiti and don’t take care of their environment. There are no policemen to secure the area from tagging. We can help make a smaller water fountain for the little kids. We can tell people not to graffiti. We can call the graffiti hotline. We can put up signs that say Neighborhood Watch or we can put cameras in the park. Neighbors, the people who live here, are the best people to look over the park.”

**II. Walkability Assessment**

The Cesar Chavez Leadership Program youth & Greenfield residents partnered with California WALKS and received technical assistance and training on neighborhood walk audits. Similar to photovoice, walkability assessments are an increasingly popular tool for community residents, including youth, to use in helping to capture the strengths and problems in parks, or whole blocks or neighborhoods. Typically in simple check sheet forms, such assessments are available on line through a number of sources including California Walks (2011), and may be conducted individually or in small groups. As shown in Figure 1, the particular assessment tools
used in this case study included 9 items such as: “How do you usually get to and from school?” and “How many streets did you cross to get to school?”

On an early Saturday morning, the youth, the Greenfield mothers and the invited local city officials met at a home across the street from Stiern Park, and in groups of 3-4, with a balance between the youth and adults, took to the streets closely documenting their observations using their neighborhood assessment. Upon completion of the walk the group went back to a resident’s home, and in their groups, mapped out key barriers, problems and issues, pooling information from their assessments and adding additional information from their own experience. They also noted corresponding city offices. As discussed below, the combination of their careful documentation and knowing who held the power to make needed change proved critical to their subsequent strategic efforts to secure responses on the wide range of issues identified during the walk.

**Figure 1. Walkability Checklist Sample Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On your walk...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.a. Did you have a sidewalk or path for the whole trip?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How many times did you have to walk off the sidewalk or path because something was in your way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No _____ times _____ streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.a. How many streets did you cross to get to school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Who or what helped you cross the busiest street?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle all that apply: Crossing guard Stop Sign Crosswalk Traffic Light Other people crossing the street Nothing Other: ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Put an X in one box in each row to show us how many drivers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Drove slowly and safely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Waited for you to cross the street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Blocked the crosswalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Sped through an intersection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. What else did drivers do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: California WALKS 2011

**Findings**

The photovoice and walkability assessment revealed a host of problems such as an inaccessible walking path, and broken equipment. The walkability assessment results were further connected to regional data compiled through the CCROP initiative. The participation of city officials in the neighborhood audit facilitated a dialogue and course of action, building and strengthening relationships between city offices and youth. Local decision makers were also invited to meet with the youth to discuss their findings, strategize, and commit to solutions. In the words of an 11-year old-youth who participated in the photovoice project:

“Gosh, they [playground equipment] were dangerous. Like the monkey bars, they were all broken and there were hardly any bars to climb on anymore. And there were holes in some of the equipment and all things that held it on the ground, they were all rusted”

A 13 year old further noted,
“And there was like this little bridge that you would walk across, but it was chains, so they put this caution tape to cut it off because it was supposedly going to fall and stuff…why do people just put the caution tape instead of actually try to fix it?”

From Data to Action

Once the park assessment was completed, using both the photovoice and walkability assessment tools, the youth elected to host an exhibit of their blown up pictures for the community at large, with the corresponding narratives or free writes about each picture in three different languages, English, Spanish and Punjabi. In collaboration with the Greenfield mothers, who had planned a community clean up day at Stiern Park, the youth held their exhibits at the park, prominently displaying their pictures along a cracked walking path. Local media covered the event, and local politicians, such as the Mayor and Vice Mayor of Bakersfield also attended. Although the youth wanted to bring attention to a host of issues, immediate change at Stiern Park was of the utmost importance. Thanks in part to the media coverage and the participation of city officials at Stiern Park, the Parks and Recreation staff learned about the Cesar Chavez Leadership Group and immediately contacted the coordinator, requesting a meeting with the youth. The youth presented their photovoice pictures and findings from the walkability assessment, and proceeded to ask her questions. “There were a lot of things that the youth wanted to change but Parks and Recreation responses included ‘we can’t do that for this’ and ‘this is here because it’s a law.’ But the playground was the common ground and that’s how we knew we were going to put a playground together.”

That initial meeting resulted in a commitment on behalf of the city to do something about the playground, and although funding was unclear, it was evident that the youth would have an important role in the design and selection of new playground equipment. The Director recalled her first encounter with the youth, “we initiated the meeting with the youth, and after meeting them and seeing their photovoice exhibit, we were excited to partner and work with them.” A 12-year old youth recounted their meeting with Parks and Recreation, remarking, “we met with people from Parks and Recreation to make a design for the park, like for the equipment…we chose what we wanted to put into the park, [for example] in the little kids’ playground and we’d help them, and we were told they were going to talk to Kaiser Permanent about given us the loan of the money.” The Director of Parks and Recreation vividly recalls her experience working with the youth, remarking, “I personally met with the youth and discussed the park with them. I helped them think through what goes on when planning a playground. I wanted to instill in them that ‘yes it can happen, and you can do this.’ When youth are involved in projects, such as the transformation of Stiern Park, it instills a sense of ownership and pride in them.”

Outcomes

The youth and their adult partners successfully sought $ 75,000 in foundation funding for new park equipment, and worked closely with Parks and Recreation to implement changes. The youth were able to choose the playground equipment, but quickly learned that they had to adhere to a budget. A 12-year old recalls, “It was hard to pick the equipment because we only had so much money to spend and a lot of the things cost a lot of money. At every meeting they would we have a certain budget…they said ‘budget’ a lot at our meetings.”

The youth’s participation and leadership had a direct effect on the environmental changes achieved. Their findings and advocacy efforts armed them with the evidence and “political punch” needed to hold the city accountable for neglect of their community park. As several youth were
invited to be a part of a process, treated as equals, and given the power to make important decisions, they expressed enthusiasm in being part of an important change in their community.

The youths’ before and after pictures captured a range of environmental changes such as broken lights repaired, graffiti painted over, and playground changes. Stray dogs had been impounded, and drug dealers had left the park. Furthermore, the collaboration with city offices and the local health department, positively changed the way these institutions view and work with the local communities. The Director of Parks and Recreation credits the partnership with playing a major role in achieving the changes at Stiern Park. Not only was the partnership critical in raising awareness of the park problems, but it also was instrumental in helping address the problems and implement change. In part as a result of their work, Bakersfield was the second city in California to have a policy in place through its Department of Parks and Recreation encouraging collaborative work with the community. The partnership’s work enhanced the policy by setting a model for other community groups seeking to collaborate with city departments. As the Directors of Parks and Recreation noted, “our staff was excited to work with the youth. Once the park changes were implemented, we observed a change in the youth, a sense of ownership and pride.”

In the eyes of the youth, the most unsuccessful part of their project was limitations with their $75,000 budget. Although the amount initially appeared to be a lot of money, they learned that the playground equipment was expensive, and they had to prioritize and negotiate with the city. Unfortunately, they were not able to cover the costs of a much-needed bathroom for the park. To date this continues to be a point of discussion, with budgetary restrictions as the cause for delay.

On an individual level, the youth’s experience was transformative as they self-reported their ability to institute community change, such as the environmental changes achieved at Stiern Park, creating a safe place to play for children and families. As noted by an 11-year old, “we can do more than we expect we can…when you put your mind to something you succeed…kids can clean up a park.” The youth had important insider information about the park that their adult counterparts were unaware of. For example, they conveyed their concern for stray animals, and glass and beer bottles in sand, which surprised the adults. But what was most impressive was their creativity. The coordinator noted, “they were coming up with solutions to problems, they not only mentioned the problems, but they mentioned ways to help remedy the problem that was very important to me.”

The youth exemplified their leadership through their ideas and actions, “they knew change needed to happen and they were unafraid, with the proper help to make sure that change came about.” This could not be more evident than in the recognition The Cesar Chavez Leadership Program received when it was awarded, in 2009, the CCROPP Regional Cultivator Award for the Build Environment for their efforts in making Stiern Park a safer place to play, including the funding of the new playground. The students and their families were bussed to Fresno for an awards dinner, and presented with legislative certificates congratulating them on their achievement by the Director of Parks and Recreation, and the head of the Bakersfield Policy Department Crime Prevention Unit. Although the recognition was merited and the youth excited to be recognized they noted,

“you don’t even have to do it for the reward- do it for the community…your reward is doing it and feeling good ‘cuz it feels good to help people. Look at our reward, it was the icing on the cake.”
The youth have also received media coverage by local newspapers, television and radio, and have been invited to share their experiences on a regional and state level at conferences and meetings. They have also been part of statewide youth leadership caucuses in which they have shared their photovoice exhibit, lessons learned at Stiern Park, and most recently completed a videovoice (Catalani et al. in press) of their efforts at Stiern Park. Similar to photovoice, videovoice puts video cameras in the hands of community members who learn the technique of videography and use it for capturing the strengths and needs of their community; through subsequent dialogue and collective action, they use the footage to help work for policy change. In addition to the videovoice evaluation, completion of a second photovoice project as part of an evaluation tool to capture the environmental changes at Stiern Park, garnered attention from the mayor and vice-mayor, and both the Youth Leadership Group and the Greenfield Walking Group have become respected community advocates and leaders with the power to help bring about change.

**DISCUSSION**

The environmental changes achieved at Stiern Park are an illustration of the important role youth and community members can play in helping study and address the factors involved in combating the national childhood obesity epidemic, as well as other problems of local concern. Documented before and after observations of Stiern Park depict a stark reality of the insecurity felt by residents due to the gangs, crime and drugs. The city’s earlier installment of video cameras on broken light poles to capture crime on film, and the caution tape placed on broken playground equipment did not fix the problem rather exacerbated it. The city had long neglected Stiern Park and as a result had become inaccessible for families and children. Although many families were well aware of the health benefits of physical activity, they were limited by the adverse environmental conditions of the only park in their neighborhood.

The utility of a CBPR approach for studying and addressing a community-identified problem followed by action-oriented problem solving has been documented (Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007; Minkler et al. 2008). The CBPR partnership between the youth, adults and the CCROPP coordinator yield impressive results that helped transform Stiern Park into a beautiful, safe and accessible environment for families to enjoy. This case study highlights important themes that can serve as lessons to other partnerships interested in engaging in environmental change in their respective communities.

The success of the CCROPP partnership is credited to the long-term investment in building and maintaining relationships with its residents, youth, and city offices. As noted by one of the community partners,

> "relationship building is part of sustainability… I think that policy and environmental change comes only after you understand what the community is about. So what happens… I feel [funders want to know] ‘where is the policy change? Where is the environmental change? You are funded for a certain outcome, but we have not seen that outcome.’ And really I think you have to understand, building relationships and trust is a huge process in itself. Sometimes I feel that the relationship building or the bringing together of partners gets overlooked as a real essential piece."

All of the partners involved agreed that the process involved in achieving the intended outcomes is equally as important as the policy change. This too is consistent with a growing body of literature suggesting the importance of strong, equalitarian partnerships and attention to partnership building
and maintenance as critical prerequisites to effective work for change on the policy level (Israel et al. 2005; Minkler et al., 2008a; Minkler, 2010; Ritas, 2003).

The process of recruiting natural leaders to serve on an obesity prevention task force and produce environmental changes to ameliorate the childhood obesity epidemic in a primarily monolingual Spanish speaking Latino community proved to be challenging on multiple fronts. First, it required an immediate change in the use of language, and framing of the issue. The coordinator recalls her struggle, “now, did we put on our recruitment flyer, ‘walkability assessment’, no right? How do you say walkability assessment in Spanish? So what we did was ask residents to ‘tell us your story about Stiern Park’.” The new terminology reflecting a change in framing was necessary in order to be effective, accessible and non-threatening to both youth and adults. Establishing relationships with city offices i.e., the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Police Department proved to be critical in connecting with targets in a position to help bring about change, and facilitating response and action on a number of problems that often could be easily addressed by making a phone call. Without such prior relationships, however, such entry and leveraging of resources for change would have been unlikely or even impossible. The organic evolution of the partnership by “starting where the people are” (Nysswander, 1956) also contributed to the success of the partnership. Instead of telling the youth what to do and how to do it, the adults met them where they were, shifting the mindset of city officials and their approach to working with young people in the process.

The passion, ownership, and pride exemplified by the Cesar Chavez Leadership youth is a testament to their development as leaders, advocates and allies and their commitment to the betterment of their community. The leadership capacity and potentiality of youth, as illustrated in the Cesar Chavez Leadership group, is a reminder of the significant contributions youth can make to improving environments and helping to influence the policy making process. The experiences of the youth in the CCROPP partnership complemented that of other CBPR and related efforts in which youth leaders have significantly contributed to policy change on: teen access to reproductive health (Brindis et al., 2009), food insecurity and improving access to healthy foods (Brechwich Vasquez et al., 2007), and school policies regarding suspension, gang violence and related issues (Wallerstein, 2002). In the case of the CROPP partnership, the recognition and value placed on the youths’ roles as leaders influenced them to take part in other civic activities, such as serving on regional and statewide boards as the student voice. Finally, in the case of both the mothers’ group and the CROPP youth, increased opportunities to participate on boards and task forces, and an increasing tendency to be called upon as spokespersons for their community, was emblematic of the “procedural justice” which this case study entailed. Getting and keeping a place at the policy making table indeed is critical to changing the broader policy environment, and to the kind of sustainability that real change requires.

CONCLUSION
The transformation of Stiern Park in Bakersfield, CA, has been attributed by policy makers and others in large part to the efforts of local youths’ Cesar Chavez Leadership Academy and to the Greenfield Walking Group comprised of local mostly Latino mothers. Their collective effort to take back their park against all odds is a testament to their genuine concern and desire for change. By working across sectors with adults, the youth helped bridge an intergenerational gap that often views youth as part of a problem not a solution. The partnerships forged leveled the playing field giving
two often disenfranchised groups—youth and largely monolingual Latino women—\textemdash a voice and a place at the table to help inform and guide decision making processes. Their role in transforming Stiern Park inspired others and helped in leveraging thousands of dollars for additional projects. In the words of one of the youth,

\begin{displayquote}
\textit{\''hopefully this could influence other kids to start early and doing community projects...because I think it will get them farther in life...just look at what we did at our age...you can too!''}\end{displayquote}
References


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Implications

This research has important implications for research, practice and policy. First it will help us better understand the public health value added when women and youth participation is included in the research process to improve the scientific quality and rigor of the research. Relatable, it will illuminate the added value of women and youth participation in terms of advancing policy. Second, the intersection of positive youth development, health social movements, and relevant health policy making frameworks can inform such research by suggesting a conceptual model that examines youth civic engagement in policy-oriented CBPR partnerships.

Much can be learned from a case study analysis, illuminating the pathways to achieve policy change, and helping us understand how CBPR can improve the “relevance, rigor and reach” of the science itself (Morello-Frosch et al., 2005). Further, particular insights can be gleaned into the ways in which women and youth as co-researchers can contribute to research processes and outcomes, including their roles in advancing policy change.

Evidence is needed to better highlight the pathways through which promotora and youth civic engagement may help in achieving policy and environmental changes that are long lasting, and sustainable. The findings from this study may help further elucidate these processes and leverage opportunities for future funding for independent youth and promotora CBPR partnerships. The study findings further may highlight the wisdom of investing in more intergenerational CBPR partnership, between adults and youth, helping bridge the generational divide. This is of special importance, with the recent philanthropic investment in places, utilizing a placed-based approach to building healthier communities.

When addressing the myriad of health disparities in low-income communities, CBPR has served as a promising strategy for better engaging individuals, in this case, promotoras and youth, and in the process addressing some of the gaps in traditional research approaches. This multi-site case study analysis, together with other case studies of the impacts of CBPR on multiple levels (Bozak & Kelley, 2010; Breckwich-Vasquez et al. 2007; Johnson et al. 2005; Krieger et al. 2005; Minkler et al. 2008; Morello-Frosch et al. 2005), also demonstrates how this approach can improve public health interventions, building capacity and sustainability within communities. The particular case studies explored in this dissertation can further inform CBPR researchers, community based organizations and community groups interested in engaging in promotoras and youth CBPR to move policy. Additionally, organizations serving women and youth can potentially engage them in scientific training and civic engagement as an avenue to building capacity.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to describe, document and analyze the potentiality of women and youth in three CBPR partnerships; Skid Row Los Angeles, Bakersfield and National City, CA. Through its equitable and respectful engagement of youth and women as partners in the research process, CBPR is aligned to work effectively with communities (Israel et al. 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). By developing leaders, and building community capacity, CBPR can contribute to long-term sustainable changes. The advocacy, alliances and community organizing employed by each site perfectly positioned each group with the recognition, and power to have a place at the decision table and to influence the process. Although each case captures a different demographic (immigrants vs. US citizens), place (rural vs. urban), age (youth vs. adults), language (English vs. Spanish), CBPR, with its participatory and inclusive framework was the common link. Despite differences, the CBPR
partnerships brought diverse groups of people together, to achieve policy outcomes, and in the process, empowered themselves to believe that change is possible, never wavering in the face of adversity.
References


