

Health in My Community: Conducting and Evaluating PhotoVoice as a Tool to Promote Environmental Health and Leadership Among Latino/a Youth

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What Is the Purpose of This Study?

- Evaluate the use of PhotoVoice in an environmental health leadership program with a group of Latino adolescents from an agricultural area.

What Is the Problem?

- Latinos and low-income communities bear a disproportionate burden of exposure to environmental contaminants that can lead to health disparities. Residents of the Salinas community are exposed to chemicals used in pesticides because of large scale agricultural production in the area.
- PhotoVoice has been used in a diverse array of communities; however, it has not been extensively tested with adolescents from agricultural communities.
- Few tools exist to help adolescents learn about environmental health hazards and to prepare them to take action to create healthier environments.

What Are the Findings?

- Sixteen youth participated in the project and took a total of 712 photographs. The key themes that emerged from their pictures and discussions were: poor access to affordable, healthy foods; limited access to safe spaces for physical activity; ease of access to tobacco products; and poor working conditions for farmworkers. Positive themes or assets included committed individuals and community organizations working for a stronger community and plenty of open spaces in surrounding areas (see photos and summaries at www.cerch.org.com/chamacosycc).
- Youth participants shared their photos and narrative summaries with members of their community at the main public library, an event at the local health department, on youth radio, and on public access television.
- The youth coordinated two action projects to address the issues identified through PhotoVoice. The first was a 5k Run/Walk in collaboration with another local health organization to bring attention to the lack of safe space for physical activity and provide an opportunity for the community to come together and exercise. Over 800 community members participated in the event. For the second action project, youth members took initial steps toward bringing a recycling program to one of the local high schools.
- Pre- and post- tests revealed that after the PhotoVoice project, youth participants were significantly more likely to report improvements in leadership, teamwork, and participatory behavior. No changes were observed on perceived ability to make a real difference in improving their city, or being able to work with other students on an issue that affects youth their city. Measurement timing issues may have resulted in under-estimation of changes observed. Exit interviews with participants showed more positive perceived impacts in ability to help make positive change and other areas than had the pretests and posttests.

- The biggest challenge of the project involved practical issues including: transportation to the meetings, conflicts with other activities that the youth members were involved in such as academics, sports, and extracurricular activities, and maintaining a supportive group environment.

Who Should Care Most?

- Communities and researchers who are interested in engaging youth in environmental health research and seek to strengthen their findings with perspectives from adolescent members of their communities.
- Youth development programs which work with Latino youth from agricultural areas.

Recommendation for Action

- PhotoVoice should be used in agricultural communities interested in building environmental health leadership in Latino youth. The focus of the work with youth should be to create a program that is engaging, informative, builds leadership, and is centered on action.
- New programs using this approach should anticipate and work to address common problems that may occur in areas including transportation, conflicting youth priorities, and effective group dynamics.
- New programs should also attempt to include policy makers from the beginning to ensure the successful implementation of any policy- related goals that may arise from the PhotoVoice process.