



## **Module 3: Social Determinants of Health**

### Part 5: Community Based Participatory Research

Carolyn: For our last segment of this module, I want to focus on positive change, the opportunity for communities to engage in realizing the goals of Healthy People 2020, and in improving the conditions for health wherever you might be.

Community based participatory research offers really an interesting strategy that's gaining more and more momentum for engaging residents to understand and improve the conditions for health in their communities.

If you look at the Healthy People 2020 online resources, there's this wonderful strategy, the Map-It strategy and guide for using Healthy People 2020 in your community. Some of the basic principles of Map-It can be used to organize your own efforts in your community.

First, you'll want to think about mobilizing, and the questions you'll want to ask and answer are: what's the vision and mission of the coalition, what do we want to accomplish here, why do I want to bring people together, who should be represented, and who are the potential partners in my community? It's important to know that great change in the social context for health, the community context for health, takes the work of many different partners.

Then, you'll want to assess who is affected by this problem and how? What resources do we already have that we can make best use of? What resources do we need?

Then, you'll want to go through a planning process with your coalition partners. What is our goal? What do we need to reach our goal? Who will do it? How will we know when we've reached our goal?

And then in implementation, it's important to always look back to that plan and determine whether or not we're following the plan, and what we can do better.

And then finally, how are we evaluating our work? Did we follow the plan? What did we change? An important issue that reflects back to really the introduction of this module is that we need to measure and track with surveillance the status of health in our communities. It's a fundamental strategy in population health. But also for our specific projects, we want some information about how we're doing and the effect that we're having so that we can make midcourse corrections if necessary or so that we can ramp up and deploy programs that are beneficial so that more citizens can benefit.

I'm going to give an example to you of a community based participatory research project that I've been involved in that I have been inspired by. Many of my students have worked on this project and have been wonderful partners, and we've tremendously enjoyed the collaboration.



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of many different city agencies, especially the city of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. But then also non-profit organizations, WHYY, the radio station, the public radio station here in Philadelphia, students, community residents, and especially disadvantaged youth.

The purpose of this project – the project was called A Place to Call Home, and our mission was really to understand young people's experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness. We wanted to amplify those stories; we wanted to help give voice to people whose voices are often not heard.

And here is part of our original assessment. We conducted a study to understand not only what the scope of housing insecurity and homelessness was for youth in Philadelphia, but also to understand what the health implications of that housing insecurity or homelessness were for youth. We developed this white paper that could be an easy access resource for all of the collaborators who were part of the coalition, but also for the press so that they wouldn't have to do all of their own research on the health implications of housing insecurity and homelessness, but they could have this resource, this cheat sheet, so to speak, on why housing insecurity and homelessness mattered for health.

One of the recommendations that I would make coming out of a program like this is that it was so useful to have compiled that information so that all of our community partners could have easy access to it. And as public health researchers and practitioners, that's something that you can offer and bring that will make your coalition partners' jobs easier. It makes their jobs easier when they're applying for grants to support their work, and it makes their jobs easier when they're asked to communicate to people in the press or the media.

One of the things that we did in this project was we engaged disadvantaged youth as partners. They were research partners who were our greatest informants about what it's like to live in insecure housing conditions, but they also helped to understand what the conditions for housing are like across the community.

We went through an exercise – and you may want to do this in your own community – think about how can we systematically understand one aspect, a small aspect; pick a small aspect of the social conditions in the neighborhood. We asked the young people to walk with us from river to river in the city along one residential corridor and photograph just the doorways of houses, and to use the doorways as a way of thinking about how safe or unsafe people felt, how secure or insecure their houses may have been, and what kinds of challenges or opportunities people face across the socioeconomic gradient.

The youth helped us take these photographs and do this observation, and I think it also opened their eyes and helped them think about how housing is a universal need, and their own struggles with housing insecurity are struggles that other people also share.



We then asked those young people to take photographs of what home meant to them, and people shared wonderful stories about who their – unlikely sometimes – support people were. This young woman who was pregnant at the time talked to us about how her boyfriend's grandmother, who spoke only Vietnamese while she herself spoke only English, this woman provided such wonderful support to her at a time when she otherwise felt quite alone in her life.

Young people talked to us about trying to carve out sanctuaries in their own homes; they talked about how the kitchen was the center of their own family home; they talked about the stress and the strain of their lives; the loneliness they sometimes felt; and also the responsibility they felt to find an improved circumstance for their next generation.

Here, one of the youth we worked with, Pedro, who was very vocal and involved and outreached to the press, talked about how he wanted his own child to have safer life circumstances than he himself had faced.

The young people then worked with us in the neighborhood, which turned out to be a real point of pride for them. This neighborhood, Mantua in Philadelphia, has suffered from crime and violence, drug trade, and declining housing conditions. The youth worked on a major arts based initiative on this block. On the left, you see this house which had been a crack house which the youth turned into an art house, and during this temporary installation, there were resources, housing resources, referral resources to social services and referrals to healthcare and other needed resources in this art house, which was part of a bigger installation in which the youth had their art showcased.

Artists Ernel Martinez, Damon Reaves, and Shira Walinsky turned the youth stories into some unexpected things. And in this case, Ernel Martinez turned the stories literally into furniture, and I had never had any of my research interviews turned into art before, and this was a wonderful new way of amplifying the youth stories and it was an inviting way for people to come in and read about the young people's thoughts about home.

The youth were proud to be part of this. This is one of Shira Walinsky's murals. Part of the agenda of the project was to get housing insecurity and homelessness onto the docket as part of the local conversation, but also to engage the young people in talking to civic leaders and policy makers. Here, they are testifying at City Hall. So one of the major goals of the project was to help the young people connect to services they need, to help their voices be heard, but also to help model for them how to be engaged citizens.

These are some of the youth art projects, and more of Shira Walinsky's murals drawing attention to basic human needs. Another of Shira Walinsky's murals. And here's the block itself that we worked on, Melon Street in Philadelphia, a site of very active drug trade and limited social cohesion; a lot of fear among neighbors and not a lot of conversation among neighbors.



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And here is the neighborhood, the block, as it's been painted by Ernel Martinez. Part of what happened was the neighbors came out and painted, people came out and painted with them, and neighbors talked to one another as part of this project, and came out onto the street, which had otherwise been quite desolate, and there was an opportunity to celebrate and to play together.

One of the most important parts of this project for me was seeing how changing the physical environment can relate to changing the social environment and relate to changing the opportunities for conversation, social connection, play, and improvement of the conditions for health. And that ultimately is our goal in Healthy People 2020 and our overarching goal in public health. It's a privilege to be a part of this work.