

WHAT WE LEARNED AND MOVING FORWARD



Our assignment contributed to our understanding of factors that influence childhood obesity, especially among African American children locally. Social determinants contribute to African American children in urban environments experiencing expanding waistlines in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts in suburban areas.

Going forward, it is important to work with community groups and involve children more directly in order to help them understand their communities and their own health. With the use of photovoice children can capture important images of where they live, play, eat and learn. Through discussion of the photographs, children can then help concerned partners understand their perspectives and feelings. This information can then be integrated into initiatives to that work to improve children's health.

Select References:

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Photo Source: Google Images

ABOUT THE STUDENTS

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Margaret Wetzler: Received a BS in Women's Studies from The Pennsylvania State University in 2009. She is currently enrolled in the MPH program at USciences. She recently completed an internship with the Philadelphia Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC). As an intern, Margaret assisted in educating underserved youth on health behaviors, fitness and advocacy. Presently, she is an intern with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Her aim is to integrate her public health skills in order to expand awareness of health disparities—both pre and post-disaster.

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PICTURES, PLACES, AND HEALTH: MPH STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON A HEALTH DISPARITIES PHOTO VOICE ASSIGNMENT

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MEMBERS & YOUTH LEADING THE WAY
TO HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES



OUR PROJECT: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY

Path. Our journey began in our Fall 2011 Health Disparities class. We were given the task of completing a Photovoice assignment focused upon a relevant public health topic. We asked ourselves, “What area of interest is currently important to each of us as public health students?” Obesity among African American children was the first issue that came to mind as USciences is located in West Philadelphia, which has a predominantly African American population. More importantly, we wanted to learn more about the community and factors potentially impacting children’s weight status.

Problem. Nationally, about 30 percent of children were overweight or obese in 2008 (CDC, 2012). Being overweight or obese is more prevalent among African American children than white children. In the areas surrounding our university about 30 percent of children are obese and the majority of these children are also African American (PDOH, 2010).

Processes. In order for us to further understand the problem of childhood obesity, we needed to understand how social and environmental determinants influence disparities in health. We accomplished this by identifying specific zip codes in proximity to the university as well as in surrounding suburban areas. One of the primary reasons we selected suburban areas was to try to understand any differences in obesity status among African American children in West Philadelphia and Caucasian children in suburban communities.

We reviewed relevant data about each zip code using the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) community health database (CHDB). We also examined public health and other literature related to social determinants of health, childhood obesity, physical (in)activity, etc.



Photos. In order to help explain as well as “bring life” to the many statistics and information we sorted through, we captured images through the lenses of our cameras that would come to tell a story about social and environmental determinants in each zip code. We engaged ourselves in the various communities by walking around and taking in aspects of everyday life. We captured photos of markets, corner stores, playgrounds, schools and recreation areas, etc. Ultimately, the photos taught us that the statistics about childhood obesity were more than just numbers. They represented information about real communities, real children and real concerns. The photos helped us discuss as well as illustrate some reasons why childhood obesity rates vary by community.



Purpose and Principles. Photovoice is a qualitative method that provided the means for us to understand more about community contexts. The images became “data” that complimented our coursework. By examining different communities, we came to recognize the importance of the quality and types of resources that exist—or that do not exist—within communities. We observed many social determinants that may actually help reduce childhood obesity. Also, in learning about community-based participatory research (CBPR), we came to understand that without trust and mutual respect among community members and stakeholders, health initiatives will go nowhere.

Engaging in discussion around the images we captured helped us synthesize the multiple connections that exist between a child’s environment and his/her health status. If we can gain a more nuanced understanding through images in a class assignment, we recognize that by engaging children, their parents, community members, decision-makers and others, we can all benefit. Images can be a starting point for change that can positively impact health.

Policy. An additional component of our assignment required us to develop policy recommendations. We developed a resolution in draft form that highlighted many of the principles we would like to see implemented on a local level. Primarily, we feel decision makers ought to support legislation around stronger food regulations in schools and more structured nutritional programs and physical activity in schools as well as communities. We identified Get Healthy Philly as an important partner, but also recognize that other community partners are vital and necessary to successfully address childhood obesity in West Philadelphia. We encourage outreach and community involvement in order to help create meaningful and effective policies that can provide tangible, and hopefully, sustainable results.