
Engaging Homeless Youth in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Case Study From Skid Row, Los Angeles

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Growing evidence highlights the benefits to youth of involvement in community-based participatory research. Less attention has been paid, however, to the contributions youth can make to helping change health-promoting policy through such work. We describe a multi-method case study of a policy-focused community-based participatory research project in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles, California, where a small group of homeless youth worked with adult mentors to develop and conduct a survey of 96 homeless youth and used the findings to help secure health-promoting policy change. We review the partnership's work at each stage of the policy-making process; its successes in changing policy regarding recreation, juvenile justice, and education; and the challenges encountered, especially with policy enforcement. We share lessons learned, including the importance of strong adult mentors and of policy environments conducive to sustainable, health-promoting change for marginalized youth.

Keywords: *child/adolescent health; community-based participatory research; health research; public health laws/policies; partnerships/coalitions*

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Although community-based participatory research (CBPR) has gained growing respect from academics, community organizations, and funders alike as an approach to studying and addressing health and social disparities, the advantages of more active engagement of youth as genuine partners is more recently receiving attention.

By accenting community participation and the lived experience of residents, CBPR relinquishes an “expert-driven” approach, resulting in a research process that

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is accessible and relevant for community and other stakeholders. 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 (Minkler, 2010; Morello-Frosch, Pastor, Sadd, Porras, & Prichard, 2005).

Traditional CBPR approaches engage all partners (e.g., academic, community residents, and organizations) in the research process, from the identification and systematic study of a problem through the development and use of strategies to translate actionable findings into change. But the more recent engagement of youth of the respective communities has helped bring to the forefront the voices of young people who can play a key role in these processes. Growing evidence highlights the benefits to both young people and their communities with the meaningful involvement of youth in participatory action research (Bozlak & Kelly, 2010; Breckwich-Vasquez et al., 2007; Mitra, 2004; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger, Kandawalla, & Kurlaender, 2008; Wright, 2007). Youth in participatory action research may demonstrate increased self-efficacy (Ozer et al., 2010) and be less likely to engage in risk-taking behavior and more likely to engage in subsequent civic activities (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009; Brindis, Geierstanger, & Faxio, 2009; Holden, Crankshaw, Nimsch, Hinnant, & Hund, 2004; Mitra, 2004; Ribisl et al., 2004; Soleimanpour et al., 2008). For example, Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk (2003) document their work with a group of youth in Flint, Michigan, who used photovoice as a method to identify their community concerns and engage in critical dialogue and action. The youth's work helped leverage the political will of local elected officials to implement the group's policy recommendations (Wang et al., 2003).

Building on such groundwork, this article examines a youth-focused CBPR project in the Central City East area of downtown Los Angeles, also known as Skid Row, where a core group of 15 African American and Latino young people worked with adult mentors at a local community-based organization and a university to study and address the concerns of youth in their neighborhood. Following a brief overview of the geographic and social context of Skid Row, we describe the key partners involved and the methods used in this case study analysis. We then explore partnership roles, research and policy advocacy processes, and their outcomes in securing changes in policy related to recreation, education, and juvenile justice. We discuss as well the challenges encountered, particularly in policy enforcement. We conclude with lessons learned and implications for other such partnerships.

► BACKGROUND

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 of Los Angeles also includes a less visible population of families with children (Dyrness, Spoto, & Thompson, 2003). Despite a dense network of social services, Skid Row is not designed or equipped to meet their needs. For children in Skid Row neighborhoods, exposure to violence, coupled with the emotional distress of living under extreme conditions, has been shown to result in higher risk for a host of health and mental health problems (Dyrness et al., 2003). As community leader Zelenne L. Cardenas notes, living in these conditions has taken Skid Row youth from being “at risk” to being “in risk” (United Coalition East Prevention Project [UCEPP], 2005).

United Coalition East Prevention Project and CBPR Partnership

The United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc., was founded in 1996 to address alcohol- and other drug-related problems in the Skid Row area. Within a social justice framework, UCEPP mobilizes vulnerable populations by engaging them in grassroots community organizing, assessment, research, and civic engagement with the aim of achieving change that promotes neighborhood wellness, cohesiveness, and safety.

In 2003, UCEPP began informally connecting with local youth who had begun dropping by on a regular basis. Although living in a heavily stigmatized neighborhood without a strong or positive sense of community, UCEPP youth also live within a communal context that is culturally informed. Respecting this, UCEPP's use and understanding of culturally grounded interventions was a key element of its engagement of Latino and African American youth. This community-centric multicultural strategy (Grills, 2012) encourages a community-building approach that contributes to sense of community, develops and encourages a desire in youth to give back to the community through research activism, and includes attention to cultural values, cultural awareness, and sense of identity. All of these must be seamlessly interwoven throughout project activities serving to reinforce and activate basic cultural principles to guide behavior and inspire resilience. This approach was particularly important given the collective cultures of Latinos and people of African ancestry.

The basic premise in UCEPP's approach is that psychological well-being is anchored within the community through a strong cultural foundation and strong racial self-identity (Grills, 2009; Kambon, 1999; Nobles, 1986). This creates spaces and mechanisms for mutual support, socialization, governance, growth, and collective action. UCEPP's strategies were designed to help local residents influence the social context, which in turn affects individual behavior.

Within this cultural and philosophical framework, UCEPP began working with teens and preteens on their concerns, including the absence of recreational activities and unsupportive school and community environments. A youth, who had just witnessed the stabbing death of a friend's mother, for example, asked UCEPP's staff for, and was lent, a video camera, which he and his friends used to document the strength, resilience, and concerns of Skid Row youth, by interviewing young people in their neighborhood context. UCEPP then linked the youth with Paul Rogers, Owner, Producer, and Editor of BMV Productions, who alongside staff and the youth, edited the raw footage and helped them produce the documentary "We're Not Bad Kids" (Social Model Recovery Systems, 2004). The film achieved local and national attention, with the youth project leader invited to appear on several national televised programs filmed locally and in New York.

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 experienced by their peers, setting the stage for the CBPR project explored here.

► METHOD

Following Yin's (2003) case study protocol, two members of the University of California, Berkeley, research team conducting the retrospective case study analysis of the Skid Row partnership (UCEPP, Loyola Marymount University, and 15 local youth) initially visited Los Angeles' Skid Row in 2009, conducting key source semistructured interviews with UCEPP leaders (Zelenne L. Cardenas and Charles Porter) and their academic partner at Loyola Marymount University (Dr. Cheryl Grills), a focus group with four youth, and an interview with a fifth, each of whom signed a consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of California, Berkeley. Phone interviews with two local policy makers also were conducted, along with a guided tour of the neighborhood, participant observation, and archival review of relevant internal documents and media coverage. Follow-up phone and in-person interviews were conducted with two youth and an adult community partner in 2010, along with additional participant observation.

A coding template was used that included key domains of interest (e.g., partnership genesis, activities and project outcomes, and capacity building). Audiotapes of interviews and focus group were professionally transcribed and ATLAS.ti™ used to help manage the data. Two rounds of coding independently were conducted by the two authors from University of California, Berkeley, who compared and reconciled findings. Consistent with CBPR principles, key members of UCEPP's CBPR partnership provided important member checking of the outside researchers' findings and data interpretation as well as making direct contributions to the writing and editing of this article.

► FINDINGS

Partnership Genesis

As noted above, the UCEPP partnership grew out of a growing connection between UCEPP and neighborhood youth, and the latter's development of a video, with the support of UCEPP and BMV Productions. In response to the youth's interest in more carefully documenting issues the youth had uncovered, UCEPP staff contacted a psychology professor at Loyola Marymount University who partnered with UCEPP staff, and a core group of 15 young African American and Latino youth aged 11 to 19 years, to form Youth Coalition X. The "X" represented the unknown factors in the youths' lives, the question of who they truly are, and who they would become given the circumstances they were living in and the uncertainty that surrounded them.

UCEPP Partnership Research Methods, Roles, and Findings

With assistance from their adult mentors, the youth played a key role in the design of a survey that included 10 questions, with subquestions, about Skid Row youth's attitudes and experiences in their neighborhood and at school. Using convenience sampling, the survey was administered by the youth to 96 young people living in Skid Row, and few refusals were reported. Survey responses captured four key domains: 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 were analyzed by the academic partner, who presented the results back to UCEPP staff and youth and facilitated a collaborative process of interpreting the findings. As part of this 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 clothes or uniforms, and 43% had been ticketed for minor offenses, most often jaywalking (66%). Nearly half (49%) of the youth interviewed had witnessed a death. Contrary to the image of Skid Row youth, more than three quarters (76%) reported not having tried illicit drugs, and the great majority reported living with a parent or family member. More than 70% had lived in the neighborhood for at least a year, and 30% for 4 or more years (UCEPP, 2005).

To increase still further the relevance and importance of these findings, the partnership supplemented and “humanized” them through narratives from some of the study participants and from others who had participated in the video. As the academic partner noted, the stories further “validated [the youths’] lived experience,” revealing both the strengths and the often painful reality associated with living in Skid Row. The partnership’s survey findings, quotes from the youth and their adult mentors, and the 23 recommendations for action they collectively developed were presented by UCEPP in a widely publicized report, *Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row* (UCEPP, 2005).

Moving From Research to Action

Although policy making typically is a circuitous process (Kingdon, 2003), several steps commonly are included. These are the following: problem definition, creating awareness and getting on the policy agenda, constructing policy alternatives and deciding on a policy to pursue, and working through multiple channels to get a policy adopted and implemented.

Problem definition. Through their survey, youth partners 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. The findings also shed light on the families living in Skid Row. This was critical for framing the problem contextually and for providing evidence needed in this and later stages of the policy process.

Creating Awareness and Getting on the Policy Agenda

In 2004, the UCEPP partnership released the findings from the survey at a local community event but

was unsuccessful in garnering media attention and support. The California Wellness Foundation recognized the importance of this youth-led initiative and in November, 2005, was instrumental in rereleasing the survey results at a community forum at Little Tokyo’s Japanese American National Museum, a few blocks from Skid Row, where five youth interviewers discussed their findings and experiences, and the academic partner corroborated their experiences with data. Their concerns attracted key policy makers, including representatives of current Mayor Villaraigosa’s office and of several City Council members, the director of the county Department of Public Health, a popular and recently retired pastor who then was a member of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Commission, an assemblyman who went on to serve on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, a state senator, representatives from the Los Angeles Police Department, and other community leaders. The strategic effort on behalf of The California Wellness Foundation to bring these key stakeholders together provided legitimacy, credibility to the findings, and served as the “magnet” that brought key policy makers to the table. The 2005 release of *Toxic Playground* was the impetus for a multistrategy awareness campaign that continued over several years, starting with a feature story on a local television series, “Life & Times” (KCET Films, 2005). Integrated into this campaign were media advocacy strategies, including a youth’s article in the *LA Weekly* about her experience living in Skid Row (Cornett, 2008) as well as local media stories designed to reach the Latino and African American community. Press conferences and youth participation on a panel at Loyola Marymount University’s annual “Bellarmine Forum” also proved an important opportunity for creating increased awareness. This presentation before 200 people gave “a whole new light to understanding children and homelessness . . . the character . . . nature and issues in Skid Row, Los Angeles.” Moreover, UCEPP’s expanded *Youth Video* kept allies abreast of the issues, as the video covered a 4-year span of the plight of the homeless children (Social Model Recovery Systems, 2008).

Youth partners also attended numerous public hearings at the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), advocating for services for homeless youth, and talking about the frequency of problems like “[getting] kicked out of school for coming in with the dirty clothing,” which had been highlighted in their survey and were part of their own experience.

Constructing Policy Alternatives and Deciding on a Policy to Pursue

UCEPP staff arranged several daylong strategic planning process sessions, in which youth actively participated in activities, including conducting a power analysis of the various issues that had been identified in the survey. Through a power analysis, participants identify 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, Minkler, Ni, & Halpin, 2008).

As Bardach (2000) notes, 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. Through a respectful dialogue and discussion of the partnership's priorities, recommendations and strategies were narrowed down. UCEPP adult mentors helped the youth think through 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 are 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 contextualize and address what "the data brought to the surface," and the associated policy implications. The youth and their adult partner members then moved from a comprehensive list of 23 recommendations to three priority areas and corresponding city departments and targets: The Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, and the LAUSD. Two major policy needs and respective targets "jumped up," regarding the school district and recreation, prompting the partnership to focus the action phase of its work in these areas.

Policy Goal 1: Equitable treatment of homeless youth throughout the LAUSD. According to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which is an integral part of 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" (<http://pupil-services.lausd.net/homeless-education-program>). However, as candidly expressed by a youth partner in a *Los Angeles Times* article, "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 13,500 homeless students. Prejudicial practices identified in the partnership's survey, including homeless youth being sent home for not having clean clothes, were cited as examples of ways in which the LAUSD was noncompliant with federal law.

Policy Goal 2: A safe and healthy place to play: Taking on the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. The partnership's survey data documented that a major concern of youth, with direct relevance to health promotion, was their lack of safe and accessible outdoor open spaces. The only playground in the neighborhood was in poor condition and prohibited unaccompanied youth from entering. The UCEPP partnership learned that although the park belonged to the city, it was managed by a local nonprofit, which instituted its own rules regarding who could access the park, ironically denying young people 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 (Themba-Nixon, Minkler, & Freudenberg, 2008). An adult mentor had already played a key role in this regard, researching and finding the little-known provision in No Child Left Behind that called for equal treatment for youth who lacked permanent homes. Together, this information and the survey findings were used by the partnership to organize a media advocacy campaign that included several strong *Los Angeles Times* pieces by a UCEPP leader (Cardenas, 2004, 2008), and related articles (Cornett, 2008; Rivera, 2004, 2005). This media work was combined with several community forums that brought local elected officials into Skid Row to hear youth speak about the adversities they and their peers faced living in Skid Row. These advocacy efforts further raised awareness and helped garner community support and that of key policy maker advocates, culminating in a call to action.

Policy Outcomes, Implementation, Setbacks

The combination of powerful study findings, personal stories, and community activism, together with effective policy advocacy in which youth played a key role, helped achieve several policy victories. Among

these was local implementation of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act, part of No Child Left Behind. On January 24, 2006, LAUSD School Board adopted the “Access for All Resolution,” pertaining to the educational rights and equitable treatment of homeless students. The Resolution included provisions that expanded the LAUSD’s Homeless Education Program and increased the number of staff assigned to work with the District’s close to 13,500 homeless youth and their families from 1.5 to 15. The positions included Counselors/Advocates, Parent Resource Liaisons, and Pupil Services and Attendance Aides. Other provisions contained in the Resolution included training local District and school site personnel regarding the educational rights of all homeless students; identifying and training the homeless education liaisons at the school sites and the District; establishing a Homeless Collaborative that includes District personnel, county agencies, community-based agencies, and parents and caregivers; and providing a biannual update to the Board of Education on the status of homeless students as well as implementation of the Homeless Education Program. These policy changes were key responses to UCEPP’s effort. Several new District-wide policies, systems, and practices inclusive and supportive of homeless youth similarly were introduced, including new forms and procedures 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 to and demands for a safe and accessible place to play, the partnership was also successful in getting dedicated time for local youth to play in the park, which was later cleaned up and painted. Yet the brightly colored play area, although heavily populated by youth when open, is at this writing still typically closed to youth, with the exception of 2 hours on Friday afternoons (during which time adults are banned from the park). Even on some Friday afternoons, however, the park remains closed, with youth “outside looking in.” Our participant observation indeed revealed two particularly poignant scenes. Several disappointed-looking youth, coming into UCEPP’s headquarters on a sunny Friday afternoon, basketballs in hand, to report that the park was indeed locked—again. And on another Friday afternoon a year later, a slightly older youth being handcuffed while pressed against the bars of the locked playground. We also observed the playground in full swing one Friday, with some 30 children and youth happily playing inside—a sight that would be taken for granted in many other neighborhoods.

As noted above, although the education reforms to which the UCEPP partnership contributed were important but very limited given the need, success of 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 2 hours per week access to the park to be a victory but rather a “response to our advocacy.” Indeed, so many of their “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, albeit with a dismal implementation record, made UCEPP and its youth-involved CBPR partnership, a potent example of the power of youth voices in policy advocacy. The resilience of young people, even under the most difficult circumstances, also was well demonstrated in this case study. More than 5 years after the park “victory,” UCEPP is still working toward 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.

Unintended Consequences: Skid Row Families Displaced

In an effort to contest the very limited nature of the park victory, the partnership brought the issue to their long-standing ally and supporter, a former member of the LAUSD Board of Education and current council member for the district, who had championed the *Access for All Resolution* at the LAUSD. 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. The county-wide campaign, *Zero Tolerance Policy for Homeless Families*, emphasized removing families from Skid Row (UCEPP, 2005). Additionally, the majority of the housing stock in the Skid Row community is single-room occupancy residential hotels—a small room, shared bathroom, and often no kitchen—with limitations on the number and type of occupants. These restrictions, coupled with the revitalization and increased rent for the four single-room occupancy hotels that housed the majority of the youth and their families, further institutionalized the displacement of youth. The partnership’s forceful efforts to counter the systematic displacement of homeless families with children were no match for the “well-intended” policy and the money and power of those vested in freeing up this property for gentrification. Partially as a result, many of the youth partners

who worked on the survey were later displaced. This was true of a young mother and articulate youth partner, whom we interviewed twice, and who temporarily lost custody of her daughter because she was homeless. Ironically, moreover, some of the displaced youth reported that they and their families ended up in areas that were more dangerous, with greater safety concerns than those in Skid Row.

The *Zero Tolerance* campaign only affected the youth for several years, since as they grew into adulthood, several relocated back to Skid Row to access the needed services that are central to this community. Those that returned to the community have reengaged with UCEPP and the new cohort of youth leaders. Additionally, UCEPP's culturally grounded interventions created long-lasting bonds that could not be broken by the physical separation that occurred. To date, UCEPP staff maintains contact and/or continues to assist approximately 80% of the Youth Coalition X members. This occurs through the youth visiting the UCEPP office, calling, and/or checking in via social media, often sharing photos to personalize their experience and maintain the connection that began years ago. A few of the youth have gone on to college, several have gained meaningful employment, others have built families of their own, and a few have been incarcerated. When reflecting on whether UCEPP staff and youth would implement a project of this magnitude again in the Skid Row neighborhood, UCEPP staff emphasized that their organizational mission was not necessarily to engage youth. Rather, the work that transpired stemmed from the belief that staff had a moral and ethical obligation to respond to the plight of the children growing up in Skid Row and to partner with them to change their neighborhood. The genuineness of the work and cultural understanding led to a lifelong connectedness that has transcended time and space.

In retrospect, there are a few elements of this project that are essential to a successful collaborative attempting a similar effort. First and foremost is the importance of partnering with those bringing the authentic voices of a community and allowing the process to unfold, regardless of an organizational or academic partner's time frame. Working successfully with young people requires a special kind of person who respects youth culture and is committed to bringing out young people's innate and sometimes extraordinary gifts. As one young member points out, "if you look past the ugly, there is good people down here [in Skid Row]." Additionally, it is essential to have the resources to maintain the momentum of the group and, thereafter, to ensure the enforcement of the achieved policy

changes. The lack of these resources hinders one's ability to respond to community needs and may well result in a hollow victory while also jeopardizing the credibility of the work.

► DISCUSSION

The success of the UCEPP partnership may be attributed in part to its emphasis on building a sense of community among local youth through a strong cultural foundation and racial self-identity (Grills, 2009; Kambon, 1999; Nobles, 1986). In this way, UCEPP helped create spaces and mechanisms for mutual support, socialization, governance, growth, and collective research and action. Understanding prevailing contextual conditions, building resiliency, and using creative mediums to convey alternative messages and challenge disparities are in fact classic strategies for raising critical consciousness (Freire, 1974) used throughout the history of African American and Latino communities in responses to oppressive and unjust conditions (Grills, 2009; Lorde, 1983; McDonald, Catalani, & Minkler, 2012).

The success of the UCEPP partnership was also attributed in part to its effectiveness in generating purposeful and genuine youth engagement in research and policy advocacy processes. The partnership's work in this regard complements earlier studies (Bozlak & Kelley, 2010; Breckwich-Vasquez et al., 2007; Hennessey-Lavery et al., 2005; Soleimanpour et al., 2008) by providing further evidence that youth, even in the most marginalized urban communities, have substantial potential, strengths, and assets as partners in policy-focused CBPR. As in these earlier studies, moreover, the consistent role of adult mentors in an environment where youth lack stability, options, and acceptance proved to be an important factor in partnership success.

Earlier research has shown that adult-youth partnerships may prove difficult because of the uneven power structure that inherently 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 (Breckwich-Vasquez et al., 2007; Ozer et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2006; Wright, 2007). Although the youth of Skid Row had a history of distrust of adults who had failed them, UCEPP adult mentors, and later the Loyola Marymount academic partner, were able to break through these barriers by establishing relationships through culturally grounded interventions, mutual trust, respect, and communication, enabling the youth and their adult partners to work collaboratively and effectively on shared

concerns. For example, prior to the formalization of the partnership, UCEPP's "no questions asked" lending of a video camera to youth who wanted to make a film documenting the lives of other young people in Skid Row underscored the organization's faith in them and, in the process, fostered stronger bidirectional ties. The UCEPP partnership also reinforced findings of earlier studies (Breckwich-Vasquez et al., 2007) demonstrating the importance of strategic investment in building and establishing relationships with elected officials and other policy makers, which in turn contributed to advancing the partnerships' agendas.

The CBPR process served as an invaluable tool that stirred public debate about the status of homeless children and the issues of poverty and racial disparities in the community. Moreover, it affected the entire neighborhood and created wellness while enhancing social cohesion, which in turn helped build resiliency among the youth. The policy victories that were achieved in substantial part as a result of UCEPP's CBPR partnership made a qualitative difference in the lives of the youth living in Skid Row as they challenged systemic conditions and social disparities affecting their lives and the environment in which they lived. These victories would not have been possible without Youth Coalition X members who willingly shared their painful personal stories and, despite their hardships, continued to move ahead with their lives and improve their circumstances with dignity and pride. The presence of youth leaders in the neighborhood also made a noticeable impression on adults, who were inspired by their initiative, resolve, and passion.

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 (Minkler et al., 2008). 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 transform themselves, while making some initial (albeit limited) headway in transforming aspects of their community as well. The CBPR process, unlike more traditional "top-down" approaches to inquiry, actively engages community members and other stakeholders throughout the research process (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). In the UCEPP partnership case study, local youth were empowered to pose their own questions based on their lived experience, and sought out other neighborhood youth to participate in a survey. The local wisdom and etiologies shared, captured, and transformed

long-known anecdotal information into data—evidence that was later used to help leverage change.

A hallmark of CBPR is the equitable inclusion of all partners in the action, and not merely the data collection phases of the work (Israel et al., 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). In Los Angeles' Skid Row, the CBPR process was key in helping achieve several policy wins, but it could not overcome lax enforcement of these policies. The UCEPP partnership created 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. Aided by their adult mentors, and through systematic inquiry that included 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. But the youth also learned about the slowness of change and the many setbacks that can occur along the way, in particular the lack of policy enforcement and unintended consequences. Despite such realism, however, the youth partners remained cautiously optimistic. In the words of one youth partner: "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."

► CONCLUSION

Policy-focused CBPR with youth, which normally is fought with challenges, may be even more difficult in areas such as Los Angeles' Skid Row, in part because of contextual factors, such as pressures for gentrification. As this case study illustrates, however, even youth living in extremely vulnerable communities have strengths and assets and, particularly with supportive adult mentors, may have the motivation and skills to help make a difference. The creation of a policy environment genuinely concerned about the health and well-being of its children and youth, regardless of where they live, is critical for such work to help achieve sustainable change and health and social equity.

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