



# PhotoVoice

## ADVOCATING FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE LENS AND VOICES OF YOUTH

### BACKGROUND

In 2006, the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) began working with communities to identify challenges to healthy eating and active living. It became apparent that there was a void between what communities were experiencing, and the awareness of these challenges among the community at large and with decision-makers in particular.

CCROPP's Youth Photovoice Project recognizes young people as critical partners in creating healthier communities. In 2007, the Youth Photovoice Projects was established to identify the root causes of obesity at the community level. CCROPP engaged youth in the following communities: Fresno, Delano, Kettleman City, Fairmead, Merced, Stockton, Ceres and Pixley. Through the view and words of youth, challenges or assets to healthy eating and active living were documented and communicated to key stakeholders. Captured in these photos were people within the context of their environments, which represented graphic examples of the problems the youth wanted to solve. This effort cultivated positive change in communities by harnessing the power of youth.

### WHAT IS PHOTOVOICE?

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research and empowerment tool that allows people to document the strengths and concerns of their community and make them known to policy makers through photography and words. Photovoice gives community members, who often times do not have a prominent voice in their community, the opportunity to be heard and to advocate for positive change by sharing images and stories, they consider important.

"Photovoice entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities."

- Caroline Wang, creator of the Photovoice methodology, 1994



"It's hard to be active because the school is closed."



"This is a problem because we have no water to drink."



"What we can do about it is open the store back up so we can get food."



"This affects the community because people are more likely to consume soda."



"This affects the community because people are more likely to consume soda."



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## PHOTOVOICE AS AN ADVOCACY TOOL FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Photovoice is a versatile tool that allows youth to advocate for change around almost any issue affecting their communities, whether it is related to health, the environment, safety or other social justice issues. Photovoice is a tool for advocacy as well as a tool that can assist in community mobilization and leadership development. For example, participants develop leadership skills, they engage in civic participation and develop relationships with elected officials and other decision-makers and they learn about evaluation and research.

### 1. Advocacy for Change

Advocacy for change occurs when the project participants present and discuss their photos and stories with policymakers and other stakeholders. Armed with the evidence of community issues through Photovoice, youth can share the findings directly with elected officials, school boards or other decision-making bodies that are targets. Advocacy can also take place when the photos and stories are shared through exhibits in public venues, on Web sites, in publications or through the media. This evidence of the need for change can be the call to action to addressing community issues or help to guide and inform change.

### 2. Leadership Development

Engaging in the Photovoice process allows youth to view their communities with a critical eye and question the status quo. For example, participants may begin to ask, *Why are there so many fast food establishments in my neighborhood? Why don't we have a park where I can play safely?* This reflection leads to the formalizing of recommendations for action. *We need a park in our community. We need a grocery store that sells fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy food.* These recommendations then naturally lead to advocacy with decision makers to create change. Through Photovoice, youth are transformed into photographers and then storytellers. Storytellers become spokespersons, and spokespersons become leaders for change.

### 3. Civic Participation

Youth participate in open and honest discussions about strengths and challenges in their community, among themselves, and with policymakers during meetings and community presentations. The dialogue between community members builds relationships and strengthens a community voice. The dialogue between community members and policymakers brings light to issues in the community and begins the process of positive change. Youth learn that they have power in informing their decision makers and that they have a power to exercise their vote for change.

### 4. Community-Led Participatory Research

Community participants lead Photovoice; it starts as soon as youth begin to frame the strengths and challenges in their communities and continues through the moment of sharing their personal stories behind each image with their community and policy makers. Photovoice is designed so the youth are the investigators leading the research, documentation and discussions around the community issue. Photovoice is a technique for documenting community issues and well as for evaluating if change is successful; once learned, community members have the opportunity to apply the Photovoice participatory research skills to many settings.

## OUTCOMES

Youth engaged in the CCROPP Photovoice Process identified the need for interventions like shared-use/joint-use policies that would give them access to locked school property, park renovations including the installation of safe playground equipment, operable drinking water fountains, clean and unlocked restrooms as well as the need for safe routes to school and violence prevention. In addition, many themes emerged related to healthy affordable food access such as improved school meals, limited neighborhood grocery stores, over availability of fast food restaurants and the overabundance of sugar-sweetened beverages.

The Photovoice Project has empowered youth to become advocates within their communities and schools. As a result, youth have used their photos to educate policy makers and the media on the connections between obesogenic environment and health. Their work has resulted in new health elements written into general plans, improved wellness policies and park improvements. Their voices are serving as guiding force for local, regional and state decision makers. Photos and voice are helping to gain justice and power.

### ***For more information on the CCROPP Photovoice project, please contact:***

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