Living healthy, well and strong in our neighbourhoods
A Photovoice project

How can we find out about living healthy, well, and strong in our neighbourhoods?

This was the question posed by partners who came together to do research on being well in neighbourhoods in Guelph.

The project was framed in several ways. First, we defined being well quite broadly, to include many kinds of well-being and health—physical, social, economic and spiritual.

Second, we used an ecological approach that includes a range of sites and circumstances where health and well-being play out: in our families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces, or in our personal and community relationships.

Finally, we also thought about the social determinants of health and how they determine or contribute to aspects of our well-being:

...the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices.

http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

Process

Between March and October 2011, twenty community members, U of G students, faculty and staff were trained over two days on Photovoice methodology. Using a social determinant of health framework, we were asked to consider questions such as:

• what does living well mean to you?
• what puts your health at risk?
• what needs to change to promote health and wellness in your neighbourhood?

Following the training, researchers were divided into three geographic groups and for four months we took photographs capturing images that illustrated opportunities or barriers. Bi-weekly groups met to discuss and share the photographs they took and to promote critical dialogue about community strengths and concerns.

Dissemination

Community researchers become advocates for themselves and their neighbourhoods, researchers wanted their photos, themes and recommendations publicly available. Large posters displaying representative photos, text and recommendations were printed and put on display in a downtown indoor mall, in city hall, in a community organization, and in a participating neighbourhood. Our research project caught the attention of the public and decisions makers.

How can we find out about living healthy, well, and strong in our neighbourhoods?

Themes included:

Accessibility

While community planners are better at taking geographical location and physical accessibility into account, we need to become better at understanding and addressing psycho-social barriers.

Unique aspects of our communities

Different communities within the city have a flavour that is unique to that area of the city and the members of that community take pride in their favourite qualities.

Transition and change

This past year the evidence of growth and change has permeated every corner of the city, it is not surprising that the island, surrounding the downtown core, needs to adapt to accommodate the city’s growing population.

Supports for Living Healthy, Well, and Strong

Local neighbourhood organizations can be the primary sources of support for families and people living in poverty. Community members can gather to be a positive space to discuss issues that affect the local food.

Community groups are platforms for people who traditionally lack power, to come together with a collective voice and advocate for justice and change.

Barriers to Living Healthy, Well, and Strong

Lack of adequate income is the first barrier to living healthy, well, and strong, with associated challenges such as access to public transportation, substandard housing, inadequate emergency food support, and lack of facilities for affordable recreation and exercise.

Recommendations

Increase social assistance and the minimum wage, and support advocacy programs. Improve public transportation. Increase access to healthy and affordable food. Support accessible health care. Annual free city-wide large item garbage collection. Equitable distribution of city resources for recreation. Reduce the red tape… Research results-based methods of increasing inclusion. Protect our green spaces. Acknowledge and address the transportation problem in the city. Support and empower neighbourhood groups.

View full recommendations and images at photovoice.drupalgardens.com

Partnership Development

Building on relationships with community members from previous projects and initiatives, partners from the City of Guelph, Family & Children’s Services of Guelph & Wellington, Neighbourhood Groups, Guelph-Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and the Research Shop at the University of Guelph worked collaboratively on this project. The Research Shop provided technical expertise and facilitated training of community researchers. Mavis Morton, the Principal Investigator, is a faculty member in the department of Sociology/Anthropology at the University of Guelph.

Themes and recommendations for change

Analysis and reflection led to identifying, exploring, formulating and interpreting themes that included barriers (lack of access to income, housing, food, health care, recreational facilities etc.) and supports (neighbourhood groups & community partners, access to nature, sustainable practices etc.) Identified themes led to ideas and recommendations for action and change.

Researchers for the Living Healthy, Well and Strong in Our Neighbourhood project:

Carlene Gunn-Carr
Delilah Keang
Gayle Goldstone
Janet Dilley
Jenny Walker
Kathleen Bowron
Linda Hawkins
Lyme Kloostra
Martha Inglis
Matt Reeves
Michelle Libon
Michelle Pilgrim
Montanna Goldstone
Niki Henry
Reeve Orr
Sally Belgos
Sarah Wilbee
Sonia Wiarach
Stephanie Baker
Susan Richardson
Tina Brophy

When asked by the Guelph Tribune about her biggest surprise for 2011, Mayor Karen Farbridge named the Photovoice project:

"I was blown away by the size of it, the depth it achieved, the power of the photos that were taken and the interpretations… and the learnings they reveal.”

http://www.guelphtribune.ca/community/mayor-charts-guelphs-future-path/