Youth CAN: Cultivating Community Change through Youth-Driven Health Initiatives

Ana Alatares, MS candidate¹, Savannah Hobbs, MEd, PhD candidate¹, Dana Sobel, MPH candidate³, Tracy Nelson, PhD, MPH²,³, Magdalena Serpa, MD, MPH⁴, Laura Bellows, PhD, MPH, RDN¹,²

¹Department of Food Science & Human Nutrition, ²Colorado School of Public Health, ³Department of Health and Exercise Science, ⁴One Health Institute, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO

INTRODUCTION

Youth CAN (Change Activity.Nutrition) is a program that engages and empowers adolescents to become agents of change for health promotion within their community. Youth represent a population that are often unheard. However, empowered youth bring a fresh and novel approach to existing community policies that may foster sociopolitical change in their community.

Objective: Through Youth CAN, Denver youth will identify an issue, connect with community stakeholders; and propose, develop and implement a community-based project to promote healthy eating and active living.

BACKGROUND

Youth CAN is based in the Globeville-Elyria-Swansea (GES) neighborhood, located in industrial NE Denver (Figure 1)

- High minority population - Hispanic residents make up: 84% in Elyria-Swansea 68% in Globeville
- Low income - Average household income: $44,700 in Elyria-Swansea $39,200 in Globeville
- Prevalence of overweight and obesity, ages 12-19, is over 33%, compared to 19.3% in Colorado
- Residents report limited access to healthy food and physical activity

Figure 1. I-70 through GES, Denver, CO

GES is divided between I-70 and the National Western Center in NE Denver.

This urban community has experienced many health inequities over the years and infrastructure redevelopment has put residents at further risk.

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) is an innovative approach to youth-driven community assessment and project development. Youth take on an active researcher role to assess their community, identify facilitators and barriers to healthy eating and physical activity, and design and implement a project to promote health.

Previous research has only explored singular applications of YPAR. In an effort to engage more youth, high school students from GES explored three different applications of YPAR to share their lived experiences (first arrow in Figure 2).

COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS & NEXT STEPS

GES Youth Discussions
Youth presented YPAR projects to peers and community agencies. World Café was then used to facilitate discussions between youth and agencies. This enabled students to collaborate and generate ideas for community projects.

Student project ideas generated from the World Café discussions included:
- Food truck to deliver healthy produce
- Community farm
- Increased PE requirements
- Better nutrition education for youth
- Grocery Store
- More affordable gym memberships

Next steps for Youth CAN will include connecting students and community stakeholders to develop project(s). Once a project idea is generated, youth will (1) campaign for their project, (2) research previous projects similar to their own and (3) reach out to additional stakeholders in their community. Students will then design and implement an action plan to promote health in GES.