

Photovoice as a Tool for Youth Policy Advocacy





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Youth in several California communities are making their schools and neighborhoods healthier places to live, work, and play. In just few short years, these young community advocates have:

- Improved local streets and sidewalks so residents can easily get from one place to another
- Removed unhealthy foods from checkout displays in school and local stores
- Reinstated salad bars in local schools
- Changed school menus to include healthier options, such as baked potatoes instead of just French fries
- Built new playgrounds in city parks.

Using a strategy called *Photovoice*, young people advocated for their ideas, and worked with policymakers to turn their ideas into reality.

Background

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Photovoice is a technique that allows community residents to use photographs of their community to identify problems and work for solutions. The pictures serve as catalysts for change by showing the reality of people's everyday lives—the conditions in which people live and work every day. Images and stories provide persuasive evidence and they become tools for residents to get involved in changing public policy. Photovoice invites people to reflect on their lives through photography and to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what works and what needs to be changed.

Using Photovoice, youth in California communities such as Baldwin Park, South Los Angeles, Fresno, and South Shasta County have improved community parks and recreation options, and increased availability of healthy foods in their schools and neighborhoods. Here, we describe how one community achieved change, and how your community can use Photovoice to advocate for change. We also offer tips and recommend a few resources to help you get started.

Photovoice: A Powerful Advocacy Tool

We realized that if we want to help young people be healthy, we have to allow our young people to direct us.

Going out in a group is a great way to foster discussion and creativity.

In early 2005, The California Endowment recruited six California communities to participate in the Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) Program and in 2006 funded six counties in California's Central Valley to be part of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP). These projects aimed to change local food and activity environments to create communities that truly support healthy eating and physical activity; which is to say, that support healthier lives. Advocates in Baldwin Park, one of the six HEAC communities, recognized an opportunity to really engage youth in the policy process. "Photovoice seemed like a good fit for us because Baldwin Park is a very young community. More than 65% of the population is under age 35. We realized that if we want to help young people be healthy, we have to allow our young people to direct us," said Rosa Soto, Regional Director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and HEAC Project Director in Baldwin Park.

Since Baldwin Park advocates were already working with young people, they incorporated Photovoice into their existing efforts. Youth learned general photography techniques, such as how to use a camera and how to take photographs for maximum impact, as well as specific Photovoice skills, such as:

- How to tell a story using photographs
- How to show that an issue is influenced by community infrastructure
- How to show a clear policy implication, e.g. that there is a policy that can clearly make a difference
- How to show the injustice in the current situation

After they were trained, young people went into the community to take pictures in a group and on their own. Ms. Soto explained that the value of the group session was in the process itself. "Going out in a group is a great way to foster discussion and creativity. The kids talk to each other, point things out, and discuss what they are seeing in real time." After developing the photos, youth and adults discussed what they thought the pictures showed and brainstormed possible solutions.

The young people in Baldwin Park used these images to create a photo gallery that highlighted the positive and negative things going on in their community. The youth presented their findings and policy recommendations to community leaders, including the Director of Recreation and Community Services. Their efforts paid off. The youth successfully advocated to incorporate their recommendations into the city's Parks Master Plan, a document that guides city planning for park design and programming.

Other communities in California have had similar successes. In Fresno, youth and adults used Photovoice to advocate for a community garden and new farmer's markets. Youth advocates in Shasta County convinced the local Wal-Mart to remove candy and other unhealthy snacks from several check-out stands. And, in Los Angeles, youth persuaded several corner store owners to increase the number and improve placement of healthy foods sold in their stores.



Lessons Learned

Young people, Ms. Soto notes, are constantly being underestimated by adults.

It is important to keep the framework broad enough to allow the young people to feel ownership.

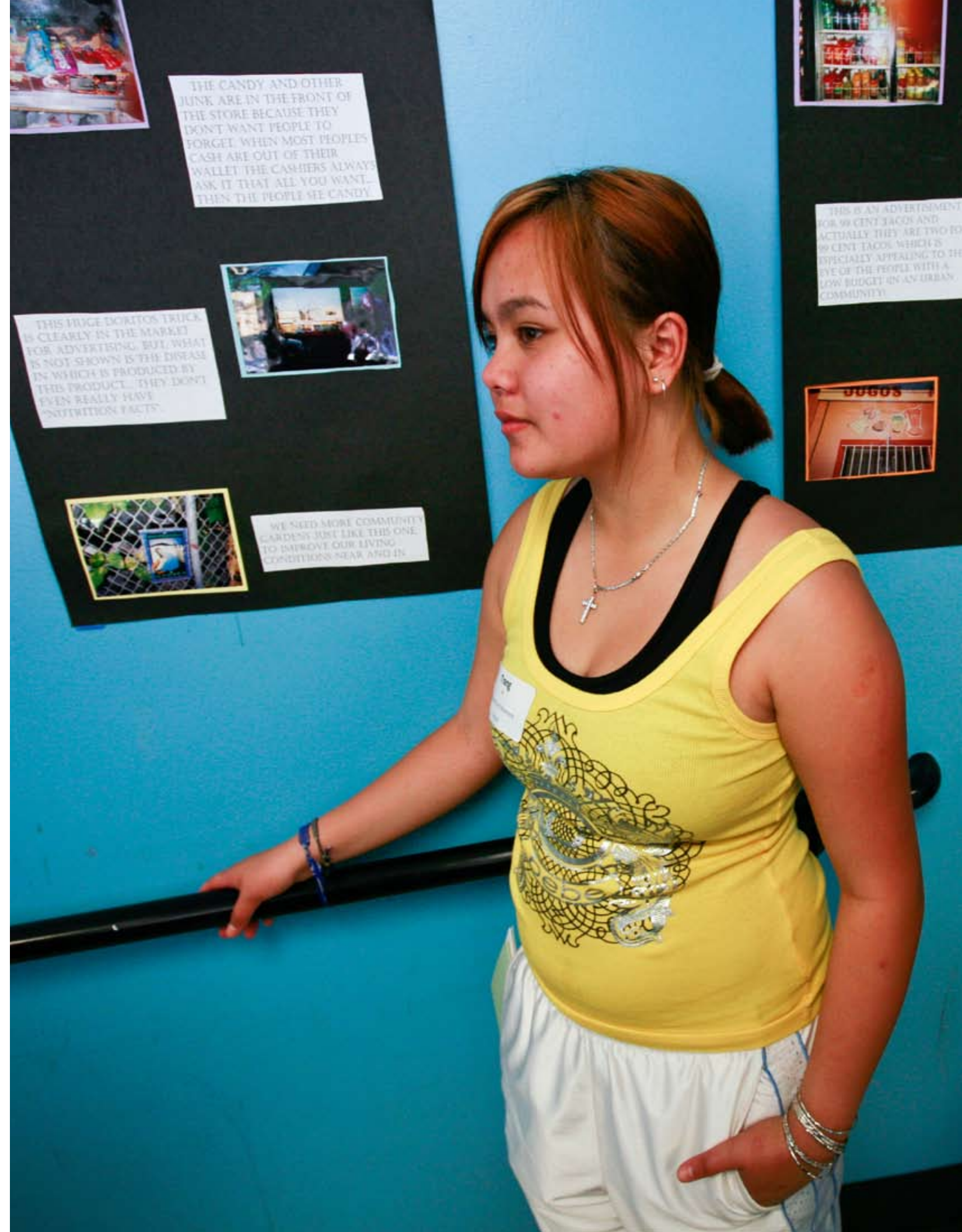
Trust is Critical to Success

Ms. Soto emphasizes that in order to use Photovoice with youth successfully, you must create an atmosphere of trust between adults and young people. “It is very important to find adults who are committed to making this a youth-driven process,” she said. “It is too easy to step in and push the group in a direction that you want to go.” Young people, she notes, are constantly being underestimated by adults. “As adults, we too often tell young people about things rather than ask them; we don’t give them an opportunity to be a part of the solution. Consequently, young people don’t trust adults to treat them as equals.” Aurora Flores, Project Coordinator at the Los Angeles HEAC site, adds, “It is important to identify barriers for young people who want to make a change. They need to understand the pressures and forces that shape people’s decisions so that they don’t waste their energy on something that can’t be changed.” Ms. Soto agrees. “If you know that a certain issue or solution isn’t something you can tackle, then communicate that to the young people directly. It’s the only way to build trust,” she said.

Adults, too, need to feel that they can trust the young people with whom they are working. Because the adults are responsible for the young people, it is important to discuss goals, expectations, and responsibilities for the entire project, from taking pictures to choosing policy solutions, clearly and in an upfront manner.

Youth Must Lead the Process

As noted, building trust goes hand in hand with respect for youth vision and leadership in a successful Photovoice project. For adult advocates, that meant letting the young people choose the issues, pick the photographs, develop solutions, and present their ideas to policymakers. Ms. Soto explains that they tried to plan everything with young people in mind. “We brought in trainers that they knew and trusted, gave young people the opportunity to teach each other, and provided support and guidance when needed. But we did not try to direct young people in choosing policy goals or developing recommendations.” Michele Erickson, HEAC coordinator in Shasta County, agrees. “It is important to keep the framework broad enough to allow the young people to feel ownership. They have to be the ones setting the story and the project.”



COUNCIL CHAMBERS



Lessons Learned

Youth get excited about being advocates for their community. They feel they have the power to do something and really make a difference.

Results

Photovoice can help you to make some concrete changes in your community and it can help you work with young people. But its real power is in developing the next generation of advocates.

Youth Become Powerful Advocates

Photovoice also changes the young people involved by providing opportunities to develop skills and build confidence. According to one of the Photovoice youth coordinators, Photovoice enables young people “to take photos of what they envision or want to express. It gives them confidence, self esteem and makes them feel more valued and listened to.” Lorena Ramos with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program notes that, “Youth get excited about being advocates for their community. They feel they have the power to do something and really make a difference.”

And youth participants become *powerful* advocates for their communities. Another youth coordinator says that, “it is much more difficult for decision makers to ignore or explain away concerns when they are expressed directly by youth. The pictures make statements and allow [young people] to speak to leaders and decision makers with whom they otherwise feel they could not communicate.” Ms. Flores agrees. “Youth are compelling,” she said. “Policymakers are responsive to young people and when youth see they can make a difference, they become advocates for life.”

Photovoice offers a dynamic tool for policy advocacy and youth engagement. Through the advocacy process young people make positive change in their world, and improve the community’s overall well being. Just as importantly, the Photovoice experience engages and transforms the youth involved. “Young people will see themselves as advocates long after the project has ended,” said Ms. Soto “Photovoice can help you to make some concrete changes in your community and it can help you work with young people. But its real power is in developing the next generation of advocates.”

Using Photovoice in Your Advocacy Efforts

The following tips from the HEAC and CCROPP experience with Photovoice can help you make your Photovoice effort a success. If you haven't worked with young people before or are just starting a coalition, see the Resources section to help you get started.

1. Work with a group of young people that are connected to each other and with an adult coordinator.

Trust is very important in implementing a successful Photovoice project. You can link with an existing youth group and adult allies or pull together a new group for Photovoice-related efforts. In all cases, spend time developing trust, ensuring the group will be consistent throughout the project and communicating expectations, goals, and responsibilities, before you start taking pictures.

2. Make a strong commitment to allowing youth to lead the group where they think they change is needed.

Youth have a natural desire to change the wrongs they see in the world. They have insightful and innovative ideas about how to solve problems. Tap into their natural creativity and allow them to lead the process.

3. Provide substantial training about the issue(s), policy advocacy, and Photovoice.

Young people need enough training to ensure that they understand the problem, the goals of the project, and the Photovoice process. Make sure you include training on using a camera and photography techniques, such as framing a shot and using pictures to tell a story. Try to find local experts to train young people, including other young people. Finally, take time during the training portion of the project to discuss the constraints and parameters of the project. Adults need to provide a framework for the advocacy process. For an effective policy-focused process, ensure that a portion of the training defines how activities or actions can be addressed through policy changes that make change permanent.

4. Allow ample time for young people to take pictures.

The Baldwin Park group recommends taking everyone out together on a photography field trip, in addition to their solo photography activities. This provides young people with an opportunity to discuss and process what they are seeing, to support each other and to share ideas while taking pictures. It also fosters rapport among youth and the sense that they are part of a movement. Finally, set aside time after the picture taking sessions for young people to discuss all of their thoughts, questions, or concerns about the experience. Adults should serve as note takers and facilitators.

5. Bring the group together to reflect and discuss the pictures after they have been developed.

Questions to consider: Why was each picture taken? What barriers to healthy eating and physical activity (or your community health goals) are described? What is the story we want to tell? Adults should reflect back the discussion from the initial meeting and help young people chose policy objectives based on what can be accomplished and what is likely to have the greatest impact. Youth should develop a list that identifies potential policy action objectives.

6. Allow youth to develop achievable policy priorities.

Policy selection is not the time for adults to take over. Instead, they can support the young people to create a list of achievable policy solutions, to choose the right pictures to support their case, and to prepare to advocate with policymakers. Be sure that the group assesses the timeline for completing their work and selects only the policy solutions (one, or more if time allows) that can be presented and adopted within the set timeline.

Using Photovoice in Your Advocacy Efforts

*7. Find champions/
leaders that will be the
liaison between youth
and policy bodies.*

It is critical to find one or more people who can serve as champions for the proposed policy change. This is a hallmark of policy advocacy but is especially important in cases of youth advocacy. Because young people are often discounted or devalued, it is crucial to have someone “on the inside” who can open doors. A “strategy session” with this policymaker champion can ensure that sufficient time is allotted for the group to make their case to the entire policymaking body.

*8. Put the youth in front
of the policymakers.*

Although adult allies may be asked to explain the background and goals of the group, young people should be advocating for the policy changes they want. This is another opportunity to ensure the young people exert the leadership skills they’ve developed through this process. They will remember the experience for the rest of their lives! And they can be much more effective at securing policymakers’ commitments to their proposals than if the message comes from someone else. The group should select a point of contact to continue to follow up, throughout the policy adoption process.

*9. Keep young people
engaged in ongoing
policy development
and implementation.*

It is tempting to think that once a policy has been adopted or accepted that the work is over. But in most cases, the real work comes after the “yes” vote. Young people need to stay involved in the policy process in order to make sure that policies are implemented, so that their efforts result in real life changes, in real improvements to their community.



Resources

General Advocacy

California Center for Public Health Advocacy:

www.publichealthadvocacy.org

Healthy Eating Active Living:

www.healthyeatingactivecommunities.org

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program:

www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes_programs/CCROPP/

PolicyLink:

<http://www.policylink.org/>

Environmental Nutrition and Activity Community Tool (ENACT):

www.preventioninstitute.org/sa/enact

Youth Engagement

Center for Civic Participation and Youth Engagement:

<http://www.californiacenter.org/>

CANFit:

<http://www.canfit.org/>

Photovoice

The PhotoVoice Manual

Comprehensive guide on how to set up and facilitate a Photovoice project

<http://www.photovoice.org/html/galleryandshop/publications>

Photovoice (Youth Voices)

Short guide on how to use photovoice in community action efforts

http://photovoiceworldwide.com/photovoice_giving_youth_a_voice.htm

Flint's Youth Violence Prevention Center

www.sph.umich.edu/yvpc/projects/photovoice/index.shtml

Kids with Cameras:

www.kids-with-cameras.org/home/

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