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Addressing Economic Devastation and Built Environment Degradation to Prevent Violence: A Photovoice Project of Detroit Youth Passages

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This project increased awareness about issues of violence to youth, their communities, and policy makers through the technique of photovoice and its translation into photo exhibitions and other community events. Youth participants learned photography skills, engaged in critical communal discussions about important issues affecting their health, wrote reflective stories about their photos, and engaged in policy change efforts. Their photos depict the need to address economic devastation and built environment degradation to prevent violence in their communities. Youth presented policy makers and community leaders with an “insider’s perspective” of the issues facing their communities, with the hope of promoting policy change.

Detroit Youth Passages (DYP) strives to amplify voices, promote understanding, and create change by working with Latino youth and young African-American cisgender and transgender women (Lopez et al.). Using a praxis-based approach, DYP seeks to examine and positively transform the structural conditions that contribute to sexual vulnerabilities. The project is a partnership between the University of Michigan School of Public Health, the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC), Alternatives For Girls (AFG), and the Ruth Ellis Center (REC). DYP leaders invited young people to participate on the DYP steering committee at the project’s inception. Project leadership recognized the importance of a youth-driven space from which young people could help shape the project’s direction and lead activities with greater autonomy, outside of the project’s steering committee, which is led by researchers. The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was established in the spring of 2011, and comprised nine representatives between 18-24 years of age from communities served by the Detroit-based partner organizations: DHDC, AFG, and REC (Table 1).

The partner organizations were engaged as community stakeholders from the beginning of the DYP project. DHDC creates opportunities for Latino youth and their families by providing high-quality, innovative and culturally appropriate programs and services that focus on employment, education, and violence prevention. AFG serves homeless and high-risk girls and young women by providing safe shelter, street outreach, and educational support, among other critical services. REC provides residential and drop-in programs for LGBTQ youth and helps young people find pathways to safety and independence.

In the summer of 2011, DYP leaders secured funding from the Detroit Community-Academic Urban Research Center’s (URC) planning grant initiative to sup-

port the DYP Youth Advisory Board. The Detroit URC is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnership that conducts interventions to reduce and ultimately eliminate health inequities. The YAB provided its members with the resources they needed to identify challenges and assets in their communities. Using a consensus-based approach, the YAB settled on violence as a core issue facing many youth communities in Detroit.

Table 1: Youth Advisory Board Demographics

Demographics	N
Ethnicity	
African-American	6
Latino	3
Gender	
Cis-Men	2
Cis-Women	4
Trans-Women	3
Education	
Currently in HS	6
Not currently in HS and not completed	1
GED	2
Average Age	19

This article focuses on a youth-driven photovoice project that contributes to public discourse on causes and prevention of violence across communities positioned differently vis-à-vis race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and sexual vulnerability: young Latino men and women, and African-American cisgender and transgender women. Photography served as a medium to both amplify youth voices and to gather research data on structural factors that influence experiences of violence. This photovoice project sought to address violence and its possible solutions in Detroit youth communities. It further intended to generate dialogue and action among youth, community leaders, and policy makers toward violence prevention.

Detroit Context

In part due to the collapse of the auto industry and foreclosure crises, Detroit had—at the height of the recent economic recession (2009)—the highest unemployment rate of any urban center in the nation (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Homelessness was unrivaled by other US cities, with a rate of 216 per 10,000 residents (Homelessness Research Institute)—nearly twice as high as the second-ranking urban area in the United States. HIV rates among African-American and Latino youth were also high and growing rapidly (Michigan Department of Community Health). Nevertheless, the re-

solve of Detroit communities was strong, as evident in the work and successes of our partner organizations.

The negative impacts of these structural conditions were greatest among youth. In 2009, 31% of Detroit Public School students reported being in a physical fight, 20% missed school because they did not feel safe, and 9% carried a weapon (Bing 3). The homicide rate among youth aged 15-24 was 80.5 deaths per 100,000, a rate more than five times the rate outside of Wayne County, within which Detroit is located (Bing 3). Also, one in five women in Michigan with current partners was the victim of physical violence in that relationship according to a representative survey (Healthy Michigan). The average age of photovoice participants was 19 years old, the majority of the group was currently completing high school, and YAB members included Black and Latino men and cis- and transgender women.

Detroit is a microcosm of national violence trends for underserved Black and Latino communities in urban centers. For example, in 2009, homicide was one of the ten leading causes of death for both Blacks and Latinos, with 19.9 and 6.6 homicides per 100,000 population, respectively (Heron 7). For Latino men ages 20-24, the approximate age range of YAB members, the homicide rate climbed to 28.4 per 100,000. While there are no sample statistics that can accurately estimate population parameters, the little data that exists estimates the number of hate crimes perpetrated against transgender individuals to be 213 per year over a ten-year period (Stotzer 170-179).

These marginalized populations further face challenges due to diminished social networks resulting from incarceration, immigration status, or tensions related to gender transition practices. To address these articulating economic and health contexts, DYP focused on the relationships between residential instability, joblessness, and situations or environments that undermine healthy sexual identity development and sexual health. The YAB began to link structural factors to everyday violence. That youth would want to both elucidate and address the effects of this violence in their lives was not surprising, and photovoice could provide a means to do so.

Method

As word spread about DYP through the partner organizations, staff recruited interested youth to serve on the YAB. The YAB description and announcement solicited individuals committed to issues of social justice for young people in Detroit who were responsible enough to follow through on commitments and able to dedicate approximately five hours per week to the project. Youth who chose to participate received: \$100 per month; an opportunity to share with their friends and communities research findings from the DYP project gathered during the summer; and training in research, recruitment, and communication strategies. Consistent with the principles of CBPR, the YAB was encouraged by DYP leadership to structure its own rules and regulations regarding participation.

Ultimately, members were expected to attend regularly scheduled meetings and trainings for project activities; provide feedback to the larger DYP team on research findings; and practice community leadership skills by sharing their experiences and knowledge with other youth in their communities.¹ Participants used a co-chair and subcommittee organizational structure for the YAB and developed their own agree-

ments (Table 2). After much discussion, they decided that although their respective communities were affected by different kinds of violence such as sexual, transphobic, and gang violence, violence itself was endemic. The YAB was interested in actively addressing violence, not simply learning about it. DYP leadership suggested photovoice as a research method, since it extends beyond data collection and analysis, to effect intentional, policy-relevant action.

Table 2: Youth Advisory Board Rules and Regulations as created by team members

- Keep an open mind—I will be meeting and working with a diverse group of young people from around Detroit. It is important that I treat everyone with respect.
- Participate—I understand that there are approximately eight hours a month of activities and meetings for the project.
- Be Consistent—I understand that regular attendance at meetings and trainings is necessary for project activities to run smoothly.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory research method that blends a grassroots approach to photography with social action (Wang 185-192). It involves participants taking photos, telling stories, and building their capacity to act as catalysts for social change in their communities. This research method is a participatory means of sharing experiences and influencing public policy through the immediacy of visual images and their accompanying narratives. Photovoice has three main goals: 1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large- and small-group discussion of photographs; and 3) to reach policy makers (Wang).

Photovoice has been used successfully by researchers, health departments, and community organizations to assess the needs of communities while eliciting the self-described concerns of those communities (Duffy), including young people living in Detroit (Schultz et al.). This method acknowledges community members as empowered critical thinkers and problem solvers—assets to their communities. The current study was approved by the University of Michigan's Health and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board. Inclusion criteria included the following: Detroit metropolitan area residents between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, who self-identified as either: Latino/a or African-American woman (cisgender, transgender, or other designation).

Data Collection and Analysis

Over three half-days, DYP project leadership trained youth in, (1) the ethics and safety considerations of photographing in their communities, (2) photography tech-

niques, and (3) Holga camera use. This training included instructions on avoiding the documentation of identifiable faces and illicit activity, such as gang activity. Participants brainstormed potential risk situations and effective ways of dealing with them. Locations deemed unsafe were added to a list of prohibited areas. DYP leaders offered location alternatives that were similar enough to convey the intended visual message while keeping YAB members safe. If a participant wanted to take a photo of a house known for its illicit drug activity, for instance, s/he collaborated with project leadership to find a similar house in a safer situation. In their storytelling and discussion about the photo, youth could mention that this house was not a drug house, but looked very similar to another where they felt unsafe photographing.

Youth were encouraged to be creative, to photograph in groups, and to carry the list of prohibited places and activities with them when taking photos. For the same safety concerns, youth were discouraged from taking photos at night. Youth first signed a consent form according to protocol. Cameras with black-and-white film were distributed to YAB members, who were asked to take ten photos over the course of one week that captured causes of violence in their communities.

Film cameras were used to: 1) offer youth the option of double exposure shots (i.e., using same segment of film to capture multiple images that overlay), 2) improve youth photography skills by encouraging them to focus on the camera and setting to capture a good shot initially, rather than relying on the trial-and-error technique used with digital cameras (i.e., view image immediately, and if not to liking, delete and shoot again), and 3) discourage sharing or downloading images (e.g., share through social media), which was prohibited. The following week, DYP staff developed the film and destroyed or modified (e.g., blurred faces) any implicating photos before they were shown to the YAB as a group. The photos were then returned to their owners, who had an opportunity to take additional photos during the next week, if they were not satisfied with their first shoot. During the final week, participants met at the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation for two to three hours to discuss their photos.

DYP project leaders led YAB youth in the SHOWeD analysis (Table 3), which entailed critical reflection, dialogue, writing, and narrative-sharing (Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki). In this study, each member of the YAB was asked to select two photos to share for group discussion. Through answering the SHOWeD questions and combining their photos with text, youth and project leadership began to delineate themes, and to theorize the relationships between these themes. During the course

Table 3: SHOWeD Analysis

1. What did you See happening here?
2. What is really Happening?
3. How does this relate to Our lives?
4. Why does this problem/condition/asset exist?
5. What can we Do about it?

of this discussion, if youth felt that any of their other eight photos were similar to, or resonated with, any of the other YAB member photos discussed, they could introduce the photo to be included in the discussion.

Youth then selected 10 of the 18 photos for which to summarize their collective response to each question. The group abstracted themes from across response summaries. Photos representing similar themes were grouped for presentation. This process was repeated using color film to take photos that youth believed captured how violence is prevented or successfully addressed in their communities. Black and white film was used: 1) prior to the use of color film because of black and white film's versatility (i.e., suits almost any type of photography and adapts well to all lighting situations) since youth were still learning and becoming familiar with photography; and 2) to help create contrast between photos that represented causes of violence and those representing ways of addressing violence, which were captured on color film.

Color film was used to capture ways of addressing violence to capitalize on its attention-grabbing and connotative qualities and range. The YAB wanted these photos to elicit feelings of hopefulness, possibility, and a vibrant Detroit. DYP leaders took detailed notes throughout each discussion session with YAB members, focusing on non-verbal information, over-talk dialogue, and descriptions of how photo names and captions were developed. Finally, youth wrote captions and titles for the twenty selected photos: ten black-and-white photos representing causes of violence, and ten color photos representing ways to address violence.

Findings: Causes of Violence

YAB youth had been prompted to "take photos that capture causes of violence in your community." From these photos and the accompanying discussion of SHOWeD questions, two themes emerged: Youth believed that, 1) Economic desperation silences communities, destroys families (e.g., through divorce and decreased social support), and contributes to gang and drug activity; and, 2) Abandoned and forgotten spaces are conducive to serving as sites of violence, including rape and murder.

Economic Desperation

Photos of money, graffiti, and cars that represented drug sales, apprehension by police while stealing, and entertainment constituted one set of the black-and-white photographs. The youth photographers discussed how families lack income to survive,



Figure 1. Money in the shadows.

and how this financial lack causes neighborhood problems like violence and a heavy police presence. These conditions make it more difficult to earn money, as businesses leave and property values fall—a never ending cycle of "needing money to make money." The economic desperation felt by some in these communities drove them to robberies, theft, and gang violence related to the drug economy. Financial strain contributed to relationship challenges within families, which were in turn related to parental divorce and residential instability among young people.

Youth focused on how drugs are perceived by some as an escape from problems related to economic insecurity, and how gang members and other youth "tag" (make graffiti) to mark symbolic territory because they have little to call their own, and because they feel silenced. This silencing sometimes leads them to "lash out." Young people create graffiti art as a way of indicating symbolic ownership of their neighborhood. The cycle of poverty, drug use, and violence was found earlier in interviews conducted with young people of similar age and demographics in Detroit (Lopez et al.).

Participants felt that the images could educate their communities by communicating that people do not prefer to buy and sell drugs, yet they need more income; and by getting people to understand the generational elements of violence related to poverty. Lastly, youth conveyed that higher paying jobs, more businesses, and a greater city-wide policy and programmatic focus on youth could help remediate economic desperation and associated violence.

Abandoned Spaces

The second set of black-and-white photos principally featured deserted fields, lots, and buildings, capturing the widespread loss of homes and businesses in Detroit. YAB members dialogued about how rundown spaces are areas where violence may



Figure 2. Danger.

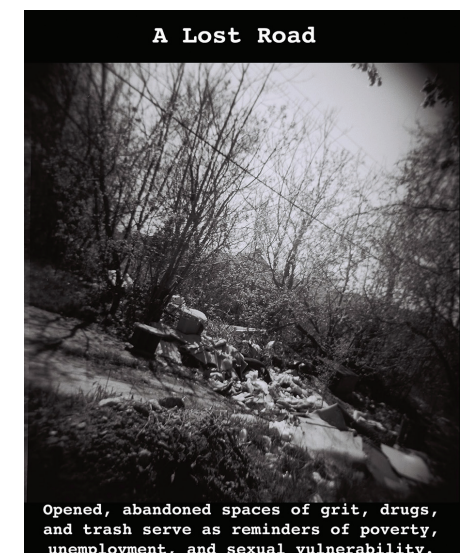


Figure 3. A lost road.

concentrate, and where murders and rapes more easily occurred and yet are some of the few places children have to play. They concluded that abandoned spaces remain abandoned because no one takes responsibility for them, and city-wide injustices—like governmental corruption—hamstring redevelopment. Youth thought their photographic images could educate policy-makers about the need to clean up, rebuild, and invest in underdeveloped neighborhoods.

Findings: Violence Prevention

After documenting causes of violence, youth were prompted to “take photos that capture how violence is prevented or successfully addressed in your community.” Two themes from the photos on prevention (or, how violence has been successfully addressed in some instances) emerged: 1) local institutions providing resources and services to help alleviate economic devastation and support economically depressed communities help preempt violence, and 2) a focus on youth education, recreation, and neighborhood development creates economic opportunities for youth and addresses built environment degradation.

Resources and Services

The first set of color photos featured organizations and centers such as museums, churches, and drug abuse recovery agencies that offer facilities, assistance, and jobs to marginalized communities. Conversations around the photos concentrated on how such agencies help in the areas of health, income, and childcare, alleviating the economic devastation that contributes to violence. Youth thought these community organizations arose from the commitment and dedication of their leadership, and suggested that their images illustrated how funding and motivation can stabilize neighborhoods by addressing inequities and violence. Lastly, they indicated that there should be efforts to leverage, enhance, and expand community assets by increasing decision-making diversity and better promoting community resources and services, particularly by celebrating those who have stayed in Detroit and are creating opportunities for others.



Figure 4. *Helping hand.*

Education, Recreation, and Development

The second set of color photos featured schools, musical instruments, and playgrounds, symbolizing learning, culture, and fun. Youth reflected on how they feel empowered when they learn about their history and are able to exercise their creativity through art. They felt that if more youth had such opportunities, those youth would be less inclined toward violence, and would learn nonviolent forms of resistance to oppression. Participants decided that their assets, such as education, culture, and empowerment, are rooted in their talents, luck, and the kindness and love of teachers, family, and community, the beginning of what it will take to address community violence. The youth hoped that their communities could capitalize on their visual representation of community assets by increasing the number of safe spaces for young artists to gather and perform, by supporting entrepreneurship programs, and by showing pride in the city. Entrepreneurship opportunities could mitigate the economic desperation that contributes to violence, and showing more pride in the city could help decrease the number of abandoned spaces available for violence to occur.



Figure 5. *Speaking with music.*



Figure 6. *Nothing will stop us.*

Mobilizing Community Awareness and Policy Change

The YAB organized community exhibitions of their photos and stories. The first gallery exhibition took place in June of 2012 at the Ford Foundation's convening for grantees of the Youth, Sexuality, Health, and Rights initiative. Held at the University of Michigan, Detroit Center, DYP leadership introduced the project and YAB members circulated throughout the gallery, adding their stories and answering questions from university scholars, community partners, students, and youth from across the country. Invitees to the gallery were moved by the experience. The YAB was enthusiastic about presenting at the convening because they wanted to paint a picture of Detroit, as seen through their eyes, for those from outside of Michigan. All those

involved in the DYP project thought there may be synergistic experiences between youth in Detroit and youth working with the other Ford-funded projects that could form the basis of future collaborations.

The YAB also organized a violence prevention forum, UProar (Urging Peace through Resilience, Opportunity, Action and Restoration), in which photos were exhibited to funders, local policy makers, community leaders, representatives from community-based organizations, and other youth. Through UProar, which took place on June 21, 2012, the YAB sought to raise awareness, further dialogue, and strategize solutions to youth violence in Detroit. UProar took place at Alternatives For Girls (AFG) where Detroit Mayor Dave Bing's Violence Prevention Initiative representatives, the Youth Violence Prevention Taskforce Co-chair, City Councilman James Tate, and Dr. Kofi Adoma of the Ruth Ellis Center all gave keynote addresses. Speakers told personal stories of how violence had impacted their lives, talked about past and current prevention efforts, and encouraged youth to get more involved. They also fielded challenging questions from youth about how city government works, governmental transparency, and acting on youth ideas for violence prevention.

The event featured a domestic violence discussion lead by YAB members, a gang violence workshop led by AFG staff, and an Urban Arts Academy training led by Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC) staff. UProar also featured youth performers from DHDC and Ruth Ellis Center, a screening of the documentary, *Interrupters*, and the presence of a number of community-based organizations and programs. All youth in attendance took a youth violence prevention pledge. Around fifty people attended; 35% percent of attendees had been the victim of violence, and 25% had at some point perpetrated violence against others. The YAB participated in several further events showcasing their photos.

Conclusion

A community-based participatory approach using visual methods enabled youth to contribute to the production of knowledge about ways to address sexual, domestic, gang, and other acts of violence. This project aimed to contribute to improved social and health-related climates for youth by providing evidence of the ways that environments contribute to vulnerabilities using aesthetic forms of knowledge dissemination to generate dialogue on how policy-makers and stakeholders might work together to improve conditions and maximize resilience (Meyer; Graham) for youth. The project helped to build community capacity by empowering youth to creatively express what they felt were the most important issues in their communities. It is the authors' hope that the project might assist other youth groups who want to undertake a similar project, particularly those who seek to extend the use of photovoice to understudied and underserved populations, by providing useful information and evidence of success.

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Endnotes

1. Most YAB members adhered to the membership agreements for the majority of the project period. At times, some members had difficulty with transportation and managing time commitments, causing them to miss some meetings or be delayed in completing an assigned task. YAB members and DYP staff worked to support young people with rides, when needed, and the honorariums appeared sufficient to assist members with other expenses they may have incurred in participation. All participants completed the project.

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Paying to Listen: Notes from a Survey of Sexual Commerce

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As the study of sexual commerce has grown dramatically in recent decades due to interest in HIV/AIDS, an expanded literature has scrutinized how research teams manage the operational challenges of accessing spaces that typically resist scrutiny. This paper ventures a combination of both scholarly reflections on the utility of ethical listening and specific methodologies for working with hard-to-reach populations, and selective use of field notes to illustrate the ethical and operational challenges of data collection with marginalized youth. The paper highlights several pivotal commitments and procedures for generating an effective community-based research project, the extent of time demanded for such research, and collective reflections on the potential for both harm and good in such projects. Efforts to understand the social context in which young adults engage in sexual exchange—both on the street and in erotic dance clubs—requires a commitment to ethical listening, and to progressive learning.

Background: Detroit Youth Passages (DYP)

The survey described in these notes is part of a larger project designed to explore the structural factors affecting the sexual health and well-being of Detroit youth. The Detroit Youth Passages (DYP) study is a four-year, mixed-methods project that utilizes a human rights framework, and uses research to design and develop new interventions for empowering communities of young people in Detroit. The primary methods of the study have been described elsewhere (Lopez et al.), but included more than 300 hours of participant observation; 60 semi-structured interviews; more than 30 life histories with residentially unstable youth and former sex workers; and a survey of 278 young people working in a variety of venues for sexual commerce, including street-based sex work and erotic and lap dancing in strip clubs. The project leverages a partnership between the University of Michigan and three community-based organizations (CBOs) in Detroit that provide social services to residentially unstable youth: the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC), which serves Latino/as at risk of gang violence; Alternatives for Girls (AFG), which serves young women engaged in erotic dancing and commercial sex; and the Ruth Ellis Center (REC), which serves homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth.

The venue-based survey described in this paper built on more than a year of ethnographic study, including outreach volunteering with community partner agen-