

# Assessing an Effort to Promote Safe Parks, Streets and Schools in Washington Heights/Inwood

Assessing urban infrastructure conditions as determinants of physical activity

## SUMMARY

Researchers from the [Mailman School of Public Health](#) at Columbia University prepared a case study of CODES (Community Outreach and Development Efforts Save). CODES is a coalition of 35 people and organizations in northern Manhattan committed to promoting safe streets, parks and schools.

The case study analyzed the factors that prompted CODES' creation and implementation and the tensions that led to its demise.

## Key Findings

- CODES demonstrated successes in:
  - Quickly mobilizing residents and leaders in a concerted effort to keep their neighborhood safe.
  - Promoting and demonstrating leadership among Dominican people who suffer from negative stereotypes.
- CODES' successes were diminished by:
  - Member agencies' beliefs that the local City Council member's office exerted too much control and made unilateral decisions.
  - Time and resource demands placed on overburdened agencies and people.

This project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) [Active Living Research](#) program (for more information see [Program Results](#)). The program funds research that improves knowledge and policies regarding ways that environmental factors affect physical activity, particularly for children.

## **Funding**

RWJF supported the project with a *solicited* grant of \$30,000 between July 2005 and June 2006.

## **THE PROBLEM**

In urban areas, physical activity is accomplished as part of the routines of daily living that take people from one part of their neighborhood to another. Cities are full of streets, sidewalks and parks that provide space for recreation.

Washington Heights/Inwood is the northernmost section of the borough of Manhattan in New York City. Parks occupy about half of the area, which has been home to successive waves of immigrants. Currently, about half of its residents come from the Dominican Republic.

The neighborhood itself is segregated. Whites live on the west side and minorities live on the east. Violence in the area has generally been viewed as a problem among Dominicans, with little meaning for people living elsewhere in the area.

Until the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, residents of Washington Heights/Inwood freely congregated in open spaces and played in parks and schoolyards. Crack-related violence forced people to retreat from open areas and stay inside their homes.

After intensive anti-drug campaigns, police action and the natural slowing of the crack epidemic, it seemed safe to walk outside in the neighborhood. Then, in 2004, a gang of youths attacked two middle-school children walking with their mother after Little League practice.

## **The CODES Coalition**

The students' mother went to her City Council member demanding that something be done. Council member Miguel Martinez convened community leaders and residents to search for ways to prevent future occurrences of violence. As a result, some 35 political, civic, religious, research, recreation and youth organizations formed the CODES (Community Outreach and Development Efforts Save) coalition.

CODES was not incorporated as a formal nonprofit entity. Participating agencies did not receive reimbursement for their involvement. They donated staff time and resources as part of their commitment to creating a safe and healthy neighborhood.

## CONTEXT

RWJF has developed three integrated strategies to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic: evidence, action and advocacy.

### Evidence

Investments in building the evidence base will help ensure that the most promising efforts are replicated throughout the nation.

- The Foundation's major research efforts in this area—[Active Living Research](#), [Healthy Eating Research](#) and [Bridging the Gap](#)—are contributing to the nation's collective knowledge about the changes to policies and to community and school environments that are most effective in increasing physical activity and improving nutrition for kids.

RWJF also seeks to evaluate innovative approaches under way in states, schools and communities across the country.

- For instance, RWJF supported an independent evaluation of efforts to implement [Arkansas Act 1220](#), which mandated a comprehensive approach to addressing childhood obesity in public schools.
- The Foundation also funded a separate initiative to analyze body mass index (BMI) data for all Arkansas public school students. Already, the BMI analysis has indicated that, in just three years, Arkansas has halted the progression of the epidemic in the state.

### Action

RWJF's action strategy for communities and schools focuses on engaging partners at the local level, building coalitions and promoting the most promising approaches.

RWJF is working with the Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has been [bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania](#), and with RWJF is working together to replicate those results nationwide.

RWJF is also working closely with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (a partnership of the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation) to support its efforts to improve nutrition, physical activity and staff wellness in schools nationwide.

### Advocacy

As staff learns from the evidence and action strategies, RWJF shares results by educating leaders and investing in advocacy, building a broad national constituency for childhood obesity prevention.

RWJF supported the National Governors Association when Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee designated wellness in schools, homes, and workplaces as his Chairman's Initiative for 2005–2006.

Through the *Leadership for Healthy Communities* initiative, RWJF works closely with national organizations that represent elected and appointed officials—such as the National Conference of State Legislatures and the U.S. Conference of Mayors—to educate their members about successful approaches to increasing physical activity and healthy eating among kids. The goal is to support leaders and decision-makers in their efforts to create healthier states, counties and cities.

## THE PROJECT

Mindy Fullilove, MD, and colleagues at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University prepared a case study describing the development and implementation of CODES. This project was part of RWJF's *Active Living Research* program (for more information see [Program Results](#)). The program funds research that improves knowledge and policies regarding ways that environmental factors affect physical activity, particularly for children.

### Methodology

Researchers employed situation analysis to conduct the study. Situation analysis is a method of qualitative research that examines both an interpersonal episode and the context within which it occurs. It requires researchers to collect information about how different people perceive the episode and the larger forces that surround it.

Researchers:

- Interviewed people working at different levels in the organizations that comprised CODES, and compared and contrasted their perceptions of the coalition.
- Sat in on CODES meetings.
- Reviewed meeting notes, memos and other documents.
- Spent time in the streets and parks where people walked and congregated.

## FINDINGS

Fullilove and colleagues reported findings from the analysis in an unpublished policy brief entitled "Will We Have Street Violence or Physical Activity? A Community Decides":

- CODES demonstrated some successes.
  - The quick response of organizations and political leaders demonstrated that many groups could and would gather to make their neighborhood safer, a goal that none could achieve alone.
  - The quick response indicated that residents placed a high value on youth activity and safe streets.
  - The leadership and participation of a number of organizations led by Dominicans demonstrated a political maturity in the Dominican community. This helped counter the stereotype of Dominicans as drug dealers.
  - CODES carried out initiatives and events that promoted organized activities and highlighted inadequacies in the training opportunities available to youth:
    - Schools agreed to police their grounds for sticks and other weapons, and they introduced staggered dismissal times.
    - CODES organizations created "Youth Peace Jam," a street talent show starring neighborhood youth, and "Project Post," a series of parties and sports activities held on Post Avenue, a historically embattled street.
- Tensions within CODES appeared, and it began to fall apart.
  - Council member Martinez, a strong and early supporter of CODES, felt a need to show results quickly. His office took some actions that frustrated member agencies:
    - Martinez helped secure funding for the coalition. Rather than working with the coalition in deciding how to allocate the funds, his office unilaterally placed the money in one particular agency.
    - The agency Martinez selected was a well-established community based organization, but it was at times in competition for resources with other CODES member agencies.
    - Council staff exerted what some believed was excessive control at coalition meetings.
    - Staff from member agencies felt these actions reduced CODES to a vehicle for the council member's own priorities and a coalition in name only. Attendance at meetings began to drop.

- CODES did not bring adequate new resources to solve the massive problems that underlay the outbreak of youth violence. It was a volunteer activity of agencies and individuals and not an official component of participating organizations' programs.
- The mobilization that occurred was focused on the western, Caucasian part of the neighborhood, a natural outgrowth of the segregated nature of the area. One interviewee said "There is a class issue between the west side of Broadway and the east side.... There's a lot of work to be done to unify the community."

At the time this study ended in 2007, CODES was no longer a strong presence in Washington Heights/Inwood.

## CONCLUSIONS

Fullilove and colleagues reached the following conclusions from the study (reported in the unpublished policy brief entitled "Will We Have Street Violence or Physical Activity? A Community Decides"):

- "At the heart of the problems we observed was that of the ownership of the coalition." At the start, the coalition prospered, not because there were new funds, but because each group contributed its resources to promote the common good. "While financially starved schools, police precincts and community based organizations were willing to undertake these tasks, they were not ethically or financially able to see their meager resources used to benefit another—and perhaps competing—agency."
- "Though the coalition was weakened at the time our fieldwork ended, each of the organizations had a more explicit engagement with physical activity, both as a positive method for engaging youth and as the outcome of efforts to keep the streets and public spaces safe."
- Although the epidemic of violence had subsided, violence had left its mark on the area. Inter-block rivalry continued to restrict movement. Large tracks of lands in the parks were still abandoned.
- "The failure to educate youth poses a danger not simply to physical activity, but to all urban activity." Many youth are not prepared for productive roles in post-industrial society. "The potential of this group to reassert itself as an 'occupying army' of the public space is unlimited and perhaps inevitable."
- "As long as some groups believe that they are safe, their interest in joining neighborhood coalitions will be limited. .... [T]he assumption that concentration of problems represents containment of problems is false.... [S]egregation augments problems so that they undermine the health of all."

## LESSONS LEARNED

### 1. Consider using situation analysis when conducting qualitative research.

Systematically gathering different perspectives about an episode and its context is an efficient way of securing important and rich information. (Project Director)

## AFTERWARD

Researchers formed a coalition to build a hiking trail connecting New York City's Central Park to Washington Heights/Inwood through several city parks. As of January 2008, planning for that trail is under way.

In January 2008, Lourdes Hernandez-Cordero, DrPH, one of the researchers participating in the case study, received another *Active Living Research* grant (ID# 063782) focused on children and families in Washington Heights.

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