

SUNY ESF & Community Members AmeriCorps Research Project

Adapting in Place: Exploring community & environmental wellness in the time of climate change

SUNY ESF & Community Partners of Syracuse, New York Years 1 + 2 Synthesis 2023/2024





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Introduction:

This AmeriCorps funded project stands at the intersection of understanding, awareness, and action at the nexus between neighborhood conditions and the health and well-being of residents. Our aim is to to collaboratively discover and address gaps in environmental education, make sense of how the physical dimensions of the neighborhood and its civic infrastructure relate to community wellness, and explore connections between community and environmental wellness and civic engagement. Employing a blend of traditional research and participatory methodologies, our SUNY- College of Environmental Science and Forestry faculty, research assistants, and community advisory board members utilize a blend of environmental sociology, community design, and local experiences to delve into how residents perceive their neighborhood's environmental and physical aspects in relation to community welfare and civic engagement.

Adapting in Place Year 1 Project Goals:

- Better understand community member knowledge & interest in the conditions of their neighborhood and how it impacts their health.
- Bring awareness and attention to the importance of environmental and physical conditions of neighborhoods to health and well-being.
- Investigate and encourage civic engagement and collaboration in making changes to improve health and equity.

Adapting in Place Year 2 Project Goals:

1) Learn How to Take Action: Continue the exploration of community members' knowledge of environmental health and well-being while also advancing their understanding and skills in what it takes to make change happen.

2) Collaboration + Kinship: Explore the value and influence of coalitions that cross neighborhood boundaries, to more effectively address environmental health issues and inequities that are present in all or most neighborhoods. Meeting and talking with people in other neighborhoods around topics that relate to everyone's health and well-being.

3) Planning for the Future: Introduce community members to the concept and value of planning for the future as a way of directing or encouraging changes that support what they consider to be essential for their health.

Methods, Questions, Research Objectives:

Methods:

We used a focus group approach in Year One, including 2 focus groups with a total of 50+ participants, brainstorming and mapping techniques were used to gather data. Based on the results from Focus Group 1, these findings informed the second set of Focus Groups using the Q-Methodology. Q-Methodology complements a participatory approach to research. *Findings from Year 1 informed Year 2 activities, and the process and approach for Year 1 and Year 2 are relevant to other communities. However, the specific findings are unique to the neighborhoods that we engaged and are not generalizable.*

Guiding Year 1 Questions:

- How do you define health and well-being?
- What makes a healthy neighborhood?
- How do you define your neighborhood? What aspects contribute to your health and well-being?
- What aspects detract from your health and well-being?

Objectives:

- Establish Relationships between the research team & community participants through development of an advisory committee of engaged neighborhood residents.

- Respect the Value of Diversity and Difference by seeking participants of different ages and from neighborhoods that represent a range of conditions and experiences

- Expand Participants' Knowledge of their own and other neighborhoods by providing opportunities to share their stories within a neighborhood-based focus group.

- Introduce Community Education Opportunities that respect local knowledge while expanding understanding of potential issues and strategies for addressing them.

- Reinforce the Importance of Civic Engagement and Democracy in Action on strengthening + improving quality of life for all residents.

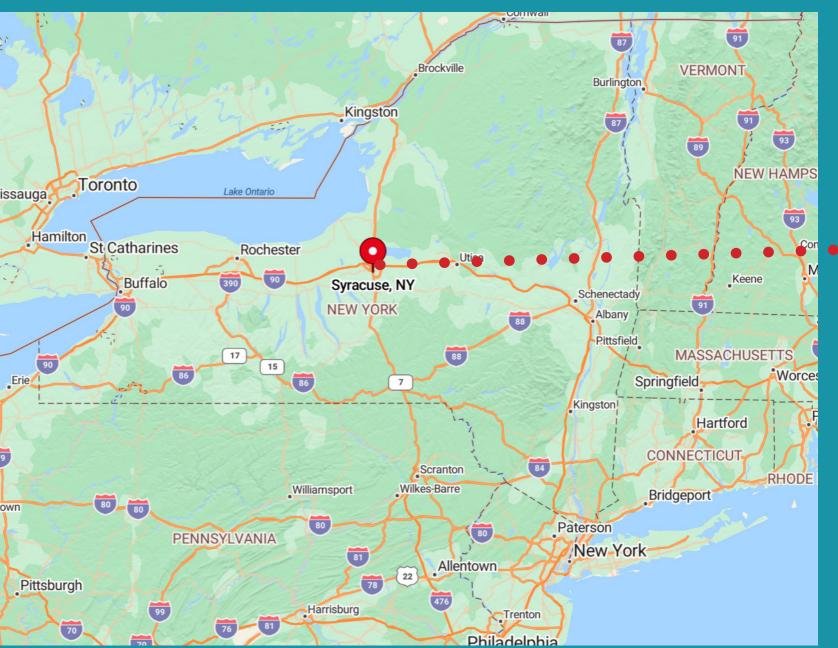
Residents report on which aspects of

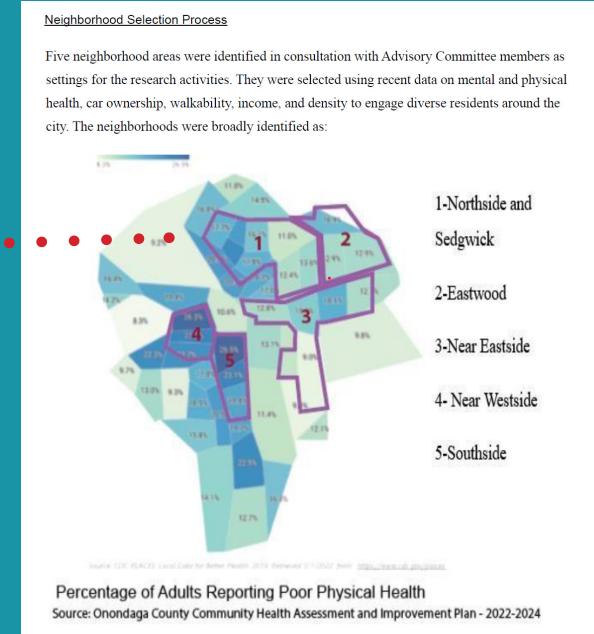
neighborhood environmental and physical conditions influence their community welfare and civic engagement in Syracuse, New York.

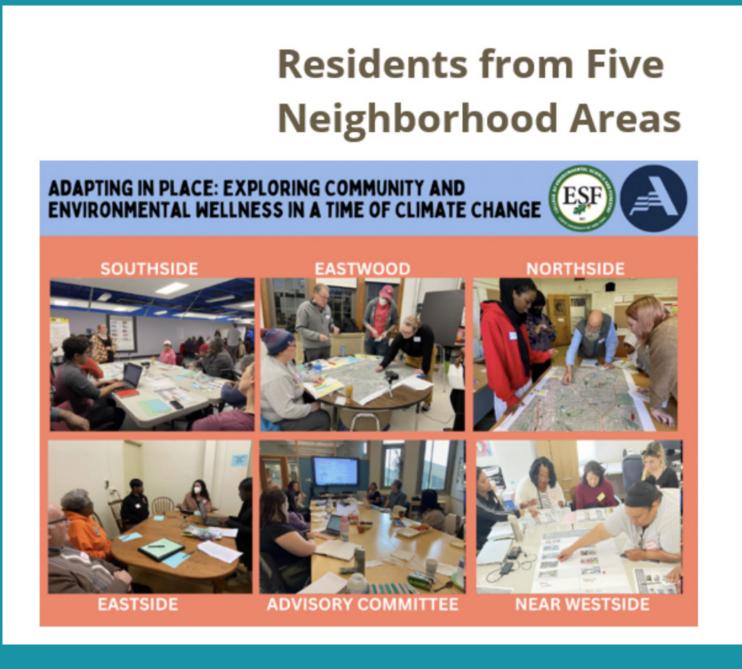


Year 1 Findings:

- 1. Participants have "planning fatigue" from involvement with other on-going projects with few positive changes. They want to know how to make positive changes, even if modest.
- 2. Participants have a better collective sense of the community assets and characteristics that are contributing to their health and well-being, and what should be changed or improved.
- 3. There is very little inter-neighborhood or cross neighborhood understanding or relationships even among those that have leadership roles in their neighborhoods.
- 4. Consensus categories of housing, food, greenspace and mobility/walkability emerged and were used to develop scope of Year 2 Action Projects.







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Visit our project website to learn more about Adapting in Place: https://sites.google.com/view/adapting-in-place/home Follow Us on Instagram: @syrneighbors_esf_adaptinplace Email us: sunyesfamericorps@gmail.com



Research Design & Data

Using traditional and participatory research methods, alongside Q-Methodology and urban environmental education, this project is interested in how members of different neighborhood communities understand and adjust to neighborhood conditions/changes and gives voice to community members lived experiences that are typically not present in composite health statistics. Our intergenerational team applies environmental sociology, landscape design, and local lived experience to explore how people's understanding of environmental and physical conditions in their neighborhood relates to community wellbeing and civic

The research design uses mixed methods such as:

- Surveys and Questionnaires
- Focus Groups
- Storytelling and Photovoice
- Brainstorming

Year 1 Research Design - Understanding and Knowledge of Neighborhoods and Health Neighborhood Selection, Focus Groups and Gathering Events. Team Members from the project Community Advisory Board helped identify five different and diverse Syracuse neighborhoods and recruit participants for a series of two focus groups held in each

Year 2 Research Design - Co-Learning for and by Taking Action. Community Organizing Event, Expanding Partner ships, Action Project Selection and Implementation.

In Year 2, community action projects have been chosen from the following 4 thematic catagories

- 1.) Affordable Housing
- 2.) Green Infrstrucutre & Physical Beautification
- 3.) Food Access/Food ways 4.) Mobility and Safe Streets
- 5 actions projects have been chosen and will be supported/followed through July-September 2024:
- 1.) Take Back the Streets Street Calming and Beautification Event by Alchemical Nursery
- 2.) Lodi Triangle Placemaking, Mural Painting, Beautification Event by Hopeprint
- 3.) Safe Street Ambassadors Training Program by Northside Learning Center/Northside Futures 4.) CNY Community Housing Fair - Free Housing Training and Information by CNY Fair Housing
- 5.) Syracuse Food Distribution Network Pilot Project by Brady Farm and Faith Center

Partner Organizations:

- Alchemical Nursery Northside Learning Center/Northside Futures
- Onondaga Earth Corps
- Syracuse Peacemaking Project - Northeast Community Center
- Syracuse City Planning, Neighborhood & **Business Development**
- Brady Farm and Faith Center
- CNY Fair Housing

These organizations either play supporting roles as coming to meetings and providing input and feedback, or they are directly working with our team as they implement an action project. Over the last two years, many local organizations have joined us, along with

local residents to brainstorm, plan, and now implement





What are the potential opportunities to apply the study findings?

By understanding how neighborhood level environmental conditions are driving the health and well-being of Syracuse residents, it is our hope that these research findings can be created into "Toolkits", "How to Guides", "Library of Resident Knowledge" that showcase instructions on what worked for successful planning, creating, funding, and implementing of action projects that tackle concerns such as safe streets, traffic calming, beautification, vacant lot restoration, community composting/gardening, community clubs or health groups, neighborhood clean ups or fix ups, and more.

Our hope is that this work contributes greater awareness to the inseparable connection between neighborhood conditions and resident health and well-being, while empowering residents everywhere to engage and participate in land planning and policy to better their life, their families, their communities, and within the larger region where they live, work, play, and call home. Central New York does have its share of obstacles, we see these as huge areas of potential in an unpredictable future in need of new initiatives and projects that can create sustainable, equitable, safe, healthy, clean and green neighborhoods and communities.