

West Side Photovoice Project Reflection

Growing up in a middle class neighborhood on the outskirts of Parkersburg, WV sheltered me from many life's difficulties. As a child, I never worried about access to utilities, because my power grid and parents' finances were always stable. If I wanted to play, I just stepped outside and joined my friends in the creeks and meadows that ran adjacent to our homes. When we ran low on food, my family could drive to the store and purchase more. Drugs and crime were never prevalent so I rarely thought of them.

This is not the case for many of the children on the West Side of Charleston. Once a vibrant African-American community, it has faced many difficulties since its decline in the 1960s and 70s when countless businesses and professionals moved out and drugs poured in. Since that time, abandoned properties have littered the streets and served as hubs for drug activity. Up until the installation of an electrical substation in 2007, power could not be guaranteed, as gentle storms would consistently turn off the lights for several blocks. Another vital service, public transportation, does not extend to all parts of the neighborhood, leaving some to experience a half hour walk in order to reach a bus stop. Long journeys are also endured by those wishing to visit the only park in the area. Lying on the edge of the community, it can only be reached by crossing a four-lane highway, a prohibitory factor for many families. Economic development is still lacking. A single grocery serves as both the largest employer and sole vendor of fresh produce within the community. There are no local movie theaters, fitness centers, or bowling alleys leaving few sources of entertainment and leisure for the residents to enjoy.

With all of these adversities, it is not surprising that the West of Side has experienced worse population health outcomes than other communities in the Charleston area. As previously mentioned, one of the primary barriers to good health on the West Side is the lack of access to various services and resources. Whether it be healthcare facilities, parks, fitness centers, or grocery stores, the distance or the manner in which one must travel in order to reach these locations poses a significant problem to many inhabitants. Poverty is another factor that influences the health of the area. Families may not be able to afford the drugs or services a love one requires. Extending beyond the direct healthcare effects, it also limits what choices a person may have. When much of what is being treated in healthcare stems from the lack of proper nutrition and exercise, they may not be able to afford healthy groceries or gym memberships.

My involvement in this project has led me to think more about the struggles and circumstances of the patients I encounter in the hospital and clinic. I have more appreciation for what they must endure and overcome, and I believe that this opportunity will serve as a reminder going forward that there is more to healthcare than what lies inside a clinic or hospital.