



## Using Photovoice as a Community-Building Tool<sup>1</sup>

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*“The Photovoice process allowed participants to think critically about the challenges of their neighborhood and to give value to its strengths, favoring the development of a deeper sense of community.”*



Figure 1. Participants use their own photography to create exhibits showcasing their community. Used with permission from the author.

Communities with high levels of crime, drug dealing, and other indicators of low quality of life are typically characterized by minimal neighborhood activism among youth. Teenagers often perceive themselves as victims of uncontrollable superior forces and lack the confidence and ability to succeed. While teenagers can contribute to social problems in a community, they can also be active factors of positive neighborhood change.

Community psychologists from the Center of Community Research and Action at University of Seville ([CESPYD](http://www.cespyd.es)<sup>2</sup>) show how artistic expression can spur activism among youth. Guariso et al. use Photovoice, a series of photographs taken by youth photographers, as a research-intervention strategy. The study participants reflected on the challenges and the strengths of their community. Photovoice promoted individual reflection, group dialogue, and individual and social change. Intervention and research can blend to break a vicious circle of poverty, drugs, and apathy. Photovoice is an innovative and transformative way to encourage high-risk teenagers to become active agents of change in their environments. Given the relationship between neighborhood inequity and well-being, neighborhood activism is an important form of participation to address community problems that impede the youth's well-being.

<sup>1</sup> Original Article: Guariso, G., Paloma, V., Arias, S., Garrido, R., García-Ramierz, M. (2016). Photovoice as a Research-Intervention Tool for Youth Neighborhood Activism in Societally Vulnerable Contexts. *Global Journal of community Psychology*. 7 (3). <http://www.gicpp.org/en/article.php?issue=23&article=140>

<sup>2</sup> [www.cespyd.es](http://www.cespyd.es)

## Highlights

**Photovoice is an artistic expression that can build community.**

**Using technology engages young participants to think about their communities in new ways.**

**Photovoice ultimately encouraged reluctant teens to open up and get involved in their community.**

## Methods

Sixteen women with different cultural roots, between the ages of 13 and 18, from Su Eminencia (Andalusia, Spain) participated in the study. Half of the participants were assigned to the intervention group, while the other eight participants were studied as comparison. Participants took photographs of community life and explained things which, from their perspective, characterize their neighborhood. The data collection was multimethod. A pre- and postintervention questionnaire was administered to both the participant and comparison group measuring sociodemographics, psychological sense of community, and empowerment, and forecasting future participation in the community. The study team also analyzed the participant pictures and posters, observational data, and posters created by visitors of the final exhibition. In addition, Guariso et al. convened focus groups and discussions about the content and meaning behind the photographs.

## Study Results

- The intervention group reached a greater psychological sense of community as compared to the comparison group. This result is consistent with previous findings showing that young people producing awareness for action in their communities develop a strong sense of community and responsibility to others.
- After the intervention, the participant group presented a greater interest in community participation, including cleaning up the streets and greater respect for gathering places such as the neighborhood parks.
- Sources of community pride were identified by participants. Gathering places are particularly important as they show where teens experience reciprocal trust and sharing, thereby contributing to social networks in the community.
- Sources of concern reflected in the photographs include the neighborhood's dirtiness, unemployment, and drug use. Although these social issues primarily impact adults in their community, they nonetheless influence the teenagers' perspective of future.



Figure 2. Examples of participant Photovoice contribution. Used with permission from the author.

## HOW A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORMED THE UNDERSTANDING NEWS YOU CAN USE

Photovoice increased the level of psychological sense of community and the wish for future participation in a group of teenagers who live in a vulnerable, multicultural neighborhood in southern Spain. This pilot study followed a research-intervention approach, where the diagnosis of the situation of teenagers met with an intervention aimed at increasing the participants' neighborhood activism. For this reason, this study considered the research process not to be a simple collection of data, but also a stimulus for sharing impressions about their own neighborhood, for the development of critical reflection about their community, and for the reinforcement of hope in the possibility of bringing about change.

Photovoice was demonstrated as a tool capable of opening up new opportunities for increasing neighborhood activism among young populations and thus, breaking the vicious cycle of vulnerability by transforming neighborhoods into fairer ones.



Figure 3. Examples of participant Photovoice contribution. Used with permission from the author.

### What Does This Mean For?

*Research and Evaluation*—Research can be a source of empowerment. Photovoice is an innovative and flexible tool that triggers community awareness, identification of community strengths and challenges, and evaluation of teens' own role in the environmental dynamics. This awareness and evaluation can lead to transformational youth neighborhood activism.

*Social Action*—Concrete actions such as the artistic expression inherent in photography can be effective ways in which to engage teenagers in community change. Building interest in the community is a good first step to clarifying teenagers' roles and power to make changes in their environment.

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