

Proctor Creek Community Collaborative Health Survey

PLAN A PROJECT TOGETHER & EXECUTE A PROJECT TOGETHER

This case study focuses on a participatory research initiative that created structure and process for/with residents of Atlanta's flood-prone neighborhoods to empower themselves, document environmental conditions, and advocate for improved health outcomes through community-driven data collection, analysis and action.

Contributed by:

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Fueled by concerns voiced by local residents and aiming to provide actionable insights for community advocacy, I approached Professor Andrea Winquist at Emory University with a proposal for a collaborative study focused on addressing environmental health issues in Atlanta's flood-prone neighborhoods. Our goal was to investigate the impact of environmental conditions on health in the Vine City and English Avenue areas.

With the support of Emory [HERCULES](#) funding, we launched the Proctor Creek Community Collaborative Health Survey in the spring of 2014. This project was a collaborative effort involving Emory University's Professor Andrea Winquist, ECO-Action, the Community Improvement Association, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, the English Avenue Neighborhood Association, and various other community partners. The research design was deeply influenced by community input, ensuring that the study addressed their most pressing concerns.



Proctor Creek Area
Credit: Christopher T. Martin

LESSON LEARNED

“Make sure to set realistic expectations and deliver on promises. Communities are quick to notice when researchers fail to meet their commitments, and unmet promises can erode trust and hinder future collaboration.”

We employed a participatory approach from the outset. The study utilized the photovoice method, allowing community members to take photographs and document their environmental conditions and health concerns. This method was chosen collaboratively with the residents to capture their firsthand experiences. The community played a central role in the design of the survey, including decisions on sampling locations, and they were actively involved in the data collection process.

LESSON LEARNED

“Community-engaged research is often underfunded, and funding constraints can sometimes unduly influence project design. Advocate for adequate funding that supports the integrity of the project and aligns with the community’s needs rather than letting financial limitations dictate the research direction. Begin with community project ideation rather than imposing external research agendas. The community should lead the way in identifying issues and shaping the project, ensuring that the research is genuinely relevant and responsive to their needs.”

Two trained community members, along with Emory University students, collected the samples, while Emory staff handled the analysis. The findings from this study, published in the *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, did not establish direct causal effects but provided valuable insights into the environmental conditions affecting residents' health. The results proved instrumental for community advocacy. After the study’s findings were disseminated, the community leveraged the data to drive local action and policy changes.

LESSON LEARNED

“It is crucial to respect and honor the community’s local knowledge and use it appropriately. Acknowledge and give credit to community members for their insights and contributions, ensuring that their expertise is recognized and valued throughout the research process.”

Residents used the results to advocate for improvements in watershed management and urban development. They engaged in activities such as tracking illegal dumping, educating neighbors about lead contamination, and participating in neighborhood water monitoring. The data also informed the City of Atlanta’s Department of Watershed Management, leading to better integration of community knowledge in their planning processes. Additionally, the research findings were converted into action strategies. Community members created flyers to raise awareness and continued to use the data to push for increased green infrastructure and equitable development. The photovoice exhibitions and community discussions facilitated ongoing engagement and activism, fostering a stronger sense of agency among residents.

LESSON LEARNED

“Establish genuine, transformational relationships with the community rather than treating interactions as mere transactions. Authentic engagement fosters deeper trust and collaboration, which are essential for addressing complex issues effectively. Additionally, recognize that addressing community issues requires a strong foundation of trust. Without establishing and nurturing transformational relationships, it will be challenging to achieve meaningful outcomes and sustain long-term impact.”



Data collection team
Credit: Hercules Exposome Research Center

Principles in Action

- » *E2 - Sustainable Outcomes:* Design project outcomes that will continue to support the community's vision for the future after the project ends.
- » *F1 - Formative Evaluation:* Implement a formative evaluation process: solicit input from community leaders and residents, assess data on a regular basis, and make project adjustments as needed.

This project involved community organizations and residents in both the design and execution of the Proctor Creek Community Collaborative Health Survey. The project created a foundation for continued community action and advocacy even after the research concluded. The findings were translated into actionable strategies and empowered residents to advocate for better environmental management and equitable development, aligning with the community’s vision for future improvements.

The research process included regular input from community leaders and residents, with their feedback guiding both the design and implementation phases. Community members were actively involved in data collection and analysis, ensuring that the project

remained responsive to their needs and concerns. This iterative process allowed for ongoing adjustments based on community input, enhancing the relevance and impact of the study's findings and ensuring that the project evolved in alignment with community priorities.

Related Resources:

- [HERCULES funds Proctor Creek Collaborative Health Survey](#)
- [Proctor Creek Survey Findings Community Brochure](#)
- [Local Knowledge: The Key to Restoring Proctor Creek](#)
- [Celebrating Black History Month: Honoring Juanita Wallace, a Local Watershed Warrior](#)
- [A Citizen-Science Study Documents Environmental Exposures and Asthma Prevalence in Two Communities](#)