Nursing-2013
OMICS Group Conferences
Accelerating Scientific Discovery
International Conference on
Nursing & Emergency Medicine
December 2-4, 2013 Las Vegas, USA

Learning through research: Involving students to increase understanding of the role neighborhoods play in health

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Abstract

Physical inactivity is prevalent in the US and is more prevalent in the South and in minorities. Addressing health disparities in African Americans (AA) and geographic location requires an understanding of behavioral risk factors, including physical activity (PA). Despite national efforts, most Americans still have insufficient activity for optimal health, leading many researchers to adopt a macro-level or socioecological approach to investigate the role that neighborhood environments have on shaping health and health behavior.

The purpose of this ongoing experience is to involve students in a program of research of physical activity and neighborhood context to help them better understand the role of neighborhood social, economic, and built environment on community health.

Nursing and health related professional students at the undergraduate, masters, and PhD levels were integrated into an ongoing program of research. Students collected community level data using geographic information systems (GIS) generated maps and a newly designed community asset tool, created data files, entered data, pilot tested in the field real-time data collection, and conducted some preliminary data analysis.

Students gained research experience, served as mentors to each other, gained confidence and became more independent, played an important role in the research team, and gained an appreciation of how neighborhood factors help to shape individual health and health behavior. Students reported that they previously were unaware of many of the barriers and supports within communities that affect health. Integrating students into an ongoing program of research provided them with multiple opportunities to learn about communities and research.

Biography

Dr. Robinson's research involves physical activity (PA) and neighborhood context, as well as health disparities associated with geographic location and socioeconomic status. She is involved in a trial on diet and PA interventions, a study to develop a neighborhood asset mapping instrument, and has previously researched the neighborhood effect on PA in African Americans in Detroit and Jackson. She has expertise with geographic information systems (GIS) and experience with large epidemiological studies. Her dissertation focused on neighborhood social and contextual determinants of individual PA. Dr. Robinson has experience teaching at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels.