



UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

## Section 6: Direct Observation and Photovoice (Rapid Appraisal)

### Purpose

Direct observation and photography helps to describe and visually depict community conditions. Observations and photographs are quick and relatively easy assessment methods that can be used to collect local data.

### Use direct observation or photography when you want

- To get more information about the physical surroundings and resources of a community not otherwise available from existing resources.
- To learn more about and understand an on-going behavior, situation or activity. For instance, observing teenagers interact with their peers and observing how they deal with peer pressure.
- To get physical evidence of a problem(s). Photos can visually document activities and neighborhood conditions not fully captured in written reports. For instance, pictures documenting tobacco advertisements around schools may reveal damaging smoking messages directed at youth.
- To record ethnic diversity and health beliefs in a non-obtrusive way.

### 6.1 Direct Observation

In our daily lives we all observe different behaviors, situations, and actions, but in a very casual way. We see and hear things but rarely document what we observe. Direct observation allows for a more structured way to record what we see in our community. Through this method we can observe and record many different things, such as physical settings, people's behaviors and actions, or delivery of services in the community. For example, one can observe the availability of safer-sex supplies. This may involve sending trained observers to record how easy it is for teenagers to access and purchase condoms from drug stores. The observers may notice where condoms are sold and where they are located or displayed in the store.

#### Observation recording methods:

Recording your observations can be done using one or several of the following recording methods:

1) *Observation Guides*. These are pre-printed observation forms that list the items to be observed and provide enough blank space to record observations.

2) *Recording sheets or checklists*. These forms typically have yes-no questions or a rating scale used to evaluate the surroundings of physical structures in the community. They may also be used to rate harmful activity such as the sale or use of drugs in a specific area.

3) *Field notes*. This is the least structured of the above recording methods. A notebook is used to record the environment and/or behaviors. Usually a wide margin on the right-hand side of the notebook paper is left blank in order to allow for additional notes and also to facilitate later analysis of the written observations. Field notes usually have the date, location and any relevant information explaining what was observed.

#### Who can be the observers:

Observers could be anyone in the community including:

- Partnership members
- Community residents
- Stakeholders
- Professional staff members
- Interns/Graduate students
- Volunteers

#### Conduct the direct observations:

After deciding what to observe in the community and who will be your observers, begin conducting your direct observations. First, it is important to create a timeline to determine when all the observations should be done and when data analysis of the observation forms/notes should begin. Second, establish a rapport with the community and let them know what you are doing. Third, train observers about the purpose of the observations, how the observations will be used, and what to look for and record. An overview of the observation forms and how to collect and record data on the forms should also be included in the training. Finally, allow sufficient time for observers to do the direct observations. Make sure you receive a significant number of observations in order to analyze your findings.

#### Summary:

Direct observations can provide a wealth of information about the community. Used in combination with other quantitative data they can provide a vivid picture of community strengths as well as problems and needs.

## 6.2 Photo Documentation (Photovoice)\*

Photovoice is a unique method that combines photography and social action. It provides cameras to community residents rather than professionals or outsiders. Thus, community residents have an opportunity to visually reflect their surroundings, and—most importantly—provide insight into their lives, experiences, and community problems through photographs. For example, through pictures community residents can document the number of alcohol advertisements and retailers in their neighborhood, and use their findings to restrict liquor licenses in the area.

According to photovoice developer, Caroline C. Wang, photovoice has three goals:

- 1) It allows community residents to show the strengths and problems of their communities.
- 2) It fosters dialogue about important issues through the photographs.
- 3) It provides a visual representation of community experiences and problems thereby engaging policymakers.

Photovoice allows residents to identify pressing issues and take steps to improve their communities through this photographic technique. It provides cameras to residents and enables them to photograph and write accompanying stories about community issues from their perspective. Finally, this process also allows them to organize and communicate their findings to policy makers.

### Planning the Photovoice method

The planning stages of photovoice include:

- Conceptualizing the problem.
- Defining photovoice goals and objectives.
- Training the community residents on the ethics behind the approach, power, ways of seeing the photographs, and a tutorial on using the cameras.
- Devising the initial themes for taking pictures.
- Taking pictures.
- Facilitating group discussion about the pictures taken.
- Critical reflection and dialogue.
  1. Selecting photographs for discussion. This involves selecting the photographs that most reflect the community's problems and available assets.
  2. Contextualizing - telling stories about what the photographs mean. Residents describe the meaning of their pictures.
  3. Coding issues, themes, and theories that emerge in the pictures taken.

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\* This section was adapted, in part, from Caroline Wang's "*Photovoice: Social Action Through Photography*". Retrieved February 16, 2004 from: <http://www.photovoice.com/index.html>.

- Documenting the stories.
- Reaching policy makers, funders, media, and others who may be mobilized to create change.

**Summary**

Photovoice is a unique tool, showing the community from the residents' point of view. It is a method that allows people to define for themselves and highlight to others what is going on in their communities and what needs to be changed. Instead of seeking outside assistance for solutions, participants proactively develop their own ideas of possible solutions and advocate with appropriate policy and decision makers.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Direct Observation and Photography**

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively easy and inexpensive</li> <li>• Data can be gathered quickly</li> <li>• Can create community input and participation</li> <li>• Provide descriptions and visual imagery that give meaning to quantitative data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be difficult to interpret and summarize photographs and observation notes</li> <li>• Can be difficult to represent the entire community experience</li> </ul>

**Reference**

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