eXposed

using photography to expose the social impacts of poverty and racism in Black Creek

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Access Alliance 2009
Multicultural Health and Community Services
This project would not have been possible without the successful collaboration and support of numerous community members, advocates, volunteers and organizations. Our warm thanks to our generous funders: Metcalf Foundation, The Wellesley Institute, Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council. Thank you to Black Creek Community Health Centre for providing child care and meeting space, and to Working Women Community Centre for their support in recruitment and arranging space in Seneca College to hold our weekly photobook sessions. Special thanks to Mohamed Abdelrham, Community Outreach Worker for the Exposed Photovoice project, who provided invaluable support during the recruitment, data collection and dissemination phases of the project. Rodrigo Moreno lent his photography skills to the project, teaching community members photographic techniques and acting as a mentor throughout the data collection process. Seon Kyen (SK) Kim and Jiha Kim generously volunteered their time and analysis to the project as facilitators and offered valuable feedback and support to the photo-researchers. Our special thank you to Theon Harrichand (Access Design) for doing such beautiful layout and design for this photobook. Theon also provided valuable support in project evaluation, data analysis and writing. Finally, we’d like to give special recognition to all of the photo-researchers. This book is a reflection of their artistic visions, thoughtful analysis, and courage to expose the social impacts of poverty and racism in Black Creek. We dedicate this photobook to them.

The photo-researchers involved in this project include:


The 'Exposed' Photovoice project is a community-based, arts-informed research project conducted in 2008 by the Income Security, Race and Health (ISRH) research working group of Toronto. The main goal of the project was to use an arts-based research method called photovoice to 'expose' the social impacts of poverty on low-income families. The project was located in Black Creek – a low-income area located in the north-west inner suburb of Toronto.

This photobook captures the diverse perspectives that different residents have about important issues such as gangs and safety or different landmarks in the community. For example, several photo-researchers perceived York University as an innovative use of photos and narratives to express the inequalities and discriminations that they face. This photobook thus begins with the section on strengths and community knowledge in Black Creek. We dedicate this photobook to them.

The 'Exposed' Photovoice project was led by Ruth Wilson and Dr Yogendra B. Shakya from Access Alliance and Dr Sarah Flicker from York University. We recruited 14 residents of Black Creek to be "photo-researchers" for the project. Each photo-researcher was provided with a digital camera and received training in photographic techniques and in photovoice method. Renowned Toronto photographer Rodrigo Moreno provided the photography training and mentoring, serving as Photographer-in-Residence for the project.

Over a period of 9 weeks, the 14 photo-researchers took photos related to the research project, analyzed and discussed their photos in the weekly photovoice group discussion sessions, and wrote narratives for relevant photos. The title of the project ‘exposed’ was also selected by peer researchers involved in this project.

This photobook is a compilation of some of the key photos and narratives produced by these 14 photo-researchers. The photos and narratives produced by the photo-researchers offer a nuanced, multilayered, and rich picture of the everyday realities of living in a low-income neighborhood in Toronto. For example, photo-researchers combined photos and narratives to document everyday challenges and experiences associated with safety and security issues associated with living in a low-income neighborhood. The photos and narratives highlighted the presence and private security companies provide a false sense of safety and security. Photo-researchers also captured the ‘neglect’ and disinvestment in the Black Creek area by government agencies and their failure to provide adequate garbage collection services and properly maintain public spaces and facilities in the neighborhood. The deteriorating and substandard condition of housing in the neighborhood is also highlighted through the photos and narratives. Photo-researchers also made innovative use of photos and narratives to express what certain signs in the neighborhood mean to them, capture ‘hidden borders,’ and geographical expressions of the inequalities and discriminations that they face.

About ‘Exposed’ Photovoice Project

Note: All text accompanying the photos consists of words from project participants, from one-on-one interviews, group discussions or written narratives. Text attributed to “Photo-researcher” is taken from either a group discussion or an anonymous interview.
What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is an arts-based research method that combines the visual documentation powers of photography with the explanatory insights of reflective narrative. Arts-based research methods like photovoice are gaining popularity among researchers for many reasons. First, using arts-based methods like photovoice can make research more accessible, creative and fun. Second, combining photos and narratives can help to produce high-quality findings that cannot be captured by conventional methods of research. Third, arts-based research methods like photovoice facilitate sharing findings more widely in accessible formats (such as exhibits and photobooks like this one). Also, there is a growing track record of photovoice research leading to positive service or policy change. For example, another photovoice project conducted by Dr Sarah Flicker with youth in social housing in Toronto documented how lack of good lighting in the hallways and premises of their buildings made the building unsafe; this finding led to Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) to add more lights within TCHC housing premises.

We believe that photo-researchers from this ‘Exposed’ photovoice project have managed to capture important findings about the everyday realities and challenges of what it is like to be a person of color living in a low-income neighborhood in Toronto. We will be sharing these findings widely, and using these findings to mobilize relevant service and policy improvements on issues that have been highlighted by the photo-researchers. In our evaluation of the photovoice project, photo-researchers mentioned many benefits from being involved in the project. The following are some quotes from photo-researchers regarding their experience being involved in the Exposed photovoice project.

I would say that, my eyes have opened even more so to photo, to print, to words that I see. Like there are some things that obviously grasp you and some things you pay no attention to. But I found that I have a heightened sense now of paying attention to every advertisement. Everything that I see now I feel like I have to rethink about, wonder, you know, is that really true? It has opened my eyes and I also ask my kids as well. Before commercials was that time that you go to the washroom, now we’re discussing the commercials: what does that mean? It’s just opened our eyes to think more outside of the box of what’s going on around us. You know what to take in, what to leave out, what’s good for us, and what’s not. So that was my enlightenment and I’ve brought that onto my kids and now they reflect it back to me that they’re aware now. Before when I was taking some photos I used to take a lot of photos of like babies or babies and stuff and then that was just it. Oh yeah, that baby looked cute in the picture and that was kind of it, but now it’s like this whole world of advertisement and things out there, messages you know and stuff so now I’m just more aware I have more of an awareness of my whole environment.

-Photo-researcher

I am a Karen from Burma. I was born in Burma but I was brought up in a Karen refugee camp located on the Thai-Burma border. I don’t remember my life in Burma since I was very young when we came to the camp. I spent by whole life in the camp before coming to Canada. One day a resettlement worker came and announced the opportunity for this workshop. So I joined the project. In the future, I want to be a photo journalist reporting the news about Karen people to the world. Millions of Karens are now suffering inside of Burma and not many people know about it. This project inspires me to become a photo journalist.

-Sha
About the Income Security, Race and Health Research Working Group

Canadian census data, in addition to many other studies highlights that, compared to people from European backgrounds, ‘people of color’ (racialized communities) face higher levels of unemployment and poverty, are more likely to be concentrated in low-paying, part-time, unstable jobs, and are more likely to be living in low-income neighbourhoods with sub-standard housing and inadequate service, in combination with other forms of marginalizing ‘Race and Health (ISRH) research working group was established in 2006 under the leadership of Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (AAMCHC) to investigate why racialized groups in Toronto are facing these employment and income inequalities. The ISRH working group conducts research that is likely to be in the goal of mobilizing service and policy changes required to overcome the systemic barriers and factors leading to these inequalities that people of color face. The ISRH working group will also assess the health impacts of these negative trends so that we advocate for appropriate supports and services to address negative health impacts. For the first phase of the project, we are focusing on the Black Creek neighborhood.

A quick note about some of the terms the ISRH working group uses. First, instead of using terms like ‘visible minority,’ ‘ethnic-racial groups’ or ‘ethnic minority’ to refer to people of color, we use ‘racialized groups.’ This is because we feel that the former terms such as ‘visible minority’ is more static and relates primarily to number and colour. In contrast, the latter term (racialized groups) recognizes that people of colour and experiences of inequality and discrimination. Racialization is the process by which racial categories are constructed as different and unequal in ways that result in regressive social, economic and political impacts (Galabuzi, 2001). The key goal of the ISRH working group is to conduct community-based research (CBR) to investigate and overcome the growing ‘racialization of poverty’ in Canada. The Exposed photovoice project is the first component of a two-part research project that the ISRH group is conducting. The Exposed photovoice component of the research project documents the impact of poverty on racialized families living in low-income neighborhoods. The second part of the research project involves a longitudinal ethnographic study to find out why people of color are facing difficulties in getting good, stable jobs in their fields (in spite of having necessary qualifications and in spite of using multiple strategies); this second research component is scheduled to be completed by the end of December 2009.

The ISRH research working group is made up of academics, staff from community agencies, and community members from Black Creek (we refer to them as ‘peer researchers’). The group includes: Safy Ahouraiz, Peer Researcher; Michelle Ashen, Toronto Public Health; Kenza Belaid, Peer Researcher; Diane Broad, Griffin Centre; Lisa Brown, Black Creek Community Health Centre; Felix Cabrera, Peer Researcher; Sarah Flicker, York University; Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Ryerson University; Tha Dar Hsae, Peer Researcher; Michaela Hynie, York University; Naomi Ives, Delta Family Resource Centre; Colena Knight, Working Women’s Community Centre; Griffin Centre; Working Women’s Community Centre, York University-TD Community Engagement Centre. Other partners include Delta Family and Resource Centre, Griffin Centre, Working Women’s Community Centre, and York University-TD Community Engagement Centre.

Why Black Creek?

The Black Creek area is a composite of four neighborhoods (Humber Summit, Humbermede, Black Creek, Glenfeld-Jane Heights) located in the northwest inner suburb area of Toronto. The Black Creek community is bounded by Streets Avenue in the north, Keele Street in the east, Humber River in the west, and Wilson Avenue in the south, and includes 20, 30, and 40 Falstaff. Many people know the Black Creek area as the “Jane and Finch” area as well. We decided to base our project in the Black Creek area not just because it is a low-income neighborhood with a high proportion of racialized people, but also because of the rich history of social activism in this community. We have developed strong partnerships in the Black Creek community. The Black Creek Health Community Centre, for example, is one of the lead agencies that helped to found the ISRH research working group. Other partners include Delta Family and Resource Centre, Griffin Centre, Working Women’s Community Centre, and York University-TD Community Engagement Centre.

According to Census 2001 data, 74.8% of the population in Black Creek area identified themselves as “visible minorities” 62.6% of residents are immigrants. The unemployment rate, average household income, and low-income rate in Black Creek area are two or three times above the average rate for the city of Toronto (Census 2001). At the same time, the Black Creek community has a rich history of social activism. In the early 1970s, a group of residents, politicians, and community workers banded together to begin addressing community issues. Their main efforts were to improve the community’s negative image and to create a sense of community pride. The results of this dedication has led to the development of over 30 grassroots associations based on principles of mutual aid, including social and health service organizations. The organizations that exist today include the Black Creek Community Health Centre, The Spot, Driftwood Community Centre, Oakdale Community Centre, Firgrove Community Centre, Jane/Finch Community Centre, Belka Enrichment Centre, and Delta Family Resource Centre. In 1998, the Jane and Finch community was made a National Trilliums Site of Significance. Residents in the Jane and Finch community are also very active in a number of festivals and events like International Women’s Day, International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Caribana, Canadian Hispanic Day Parade, and Driftwood Community Centre’s Annual Multicultural Festival.

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Community Strengths

Photo-researchers were very critical of the negative ways their communities have been and continue to be portrayed by the mainstream media and government reports. Thus all of them felt strongly that this photovoice project should also document the strengths and knowledge of their community in order to challenge the negative stereotypes attached to the Jane and Finch area. For example, photo-researchers took photos of what they perceived as positive spaces in the community. Positive spaces captured in their photos include the Black Creek Community Health Centre, The Spot, The Jane and Finch Boys and Girls Club and the Jane and Finch Mall. The narratives and discussions linked to these photos highlight the importance of the range of local services that these community agencies provide, including programs to keep young people out of trouble.

Mainstream media particularly tends to portray youth from Black Creek in a negative light (e.g. all youth are involved in gangs and violence). In direct contrast, photo-researchers from this project captured the positive roles that youth play in the community, including being involved in advocating on issues important to the whole community. The younger photo-researchers were keen on including photos of themselves (sometimes overlaid on top of their community) as a way to reassert the positive spirit that youth represent in the community.

Photo-researchers also discussed the community’s capacity to effectively come together and advocate for change. In fact, participants mentioned that the community’s tendency to aid each other in times of need and emergency significantly contributed to their ability to rise above the structural barriers and challenges facing many people living in poverty in Black Creek. Additionally, residents located sources of knowledge in older residents in the community, and thought that intergenerational programs that transferred this knowledge to youth would be helpful. Finally, photo-researchers captured a lot of beautiful spaces and scenery located in their community, including pictures of children, sunsets, views from their balconies, and green spaces.

“People think we can’t build up our neighborhood but we need to prove them wrong and build up and try to be strong. We must continue to build our neighborhood.”

“I was just walking home and then I just really took a picture because I wanted to take a picture of the community having fun, not just a negative thing to make the media talk more about our community.”

“we can see how the community is changing. People are going outside more and not doing bad things. Positive programs create positive people and more programs will help us get jobs. This picture teaches other people that our community is not bad.”

“I believe our seniors and adults and our elders have a lot to offer and a lot to teach our youth and I think they’re willing and they’re out there but there’s again there’s no programs that or not enough programs that offer that or they offer it with such rigid things that don’t fit into people’s schedule and things like that so it’s unrealistic to happen.”

“If Jane and Finch does a good thing, media are the last to say it. When there is gun violence, they are the first to say it.”

“[The Jane and Finch Boys and Girls Club] is my favourite place where children and youth can come and relax and get away from like, the whole drama of the outside world.”

“our community is never lazy and wants to do something active.”

“I decided to focus on the positive stuff in my community because like even though we live in like these low income housing or whatever I wanted to show that just because you can’t have the finer things in life doesn’t mean you still can’t live your life.”

Community Strengths
This sign tells people where they are going. The sign leads to new places. This sign represents my community. It is the entrance to my community. This sign tells people where we live. We live in a strong community, even though we don’t have as much money as other neighborhoods, we are still strong. This sign is high up which means that we will rise above. The wires show that nothing can hold us down. When other people see this sign they get scared. The sign tells us where we are from – we are proud of where we are from.

-Group Discussion

Second Chance

“I took this photo to show that even though bad stuff happens in our community, we all still stick together. The fire occurred in my neighbourhood and it was very bad. The community banded together to help the families. Gave lodging to the residents so they were able to gather themselves and move somewhere else.”

-Photo-researcher
This picture is about kids having fun on a nice sunny day. Kids always have their fun. They don’t pick on their playmates. Whoever is friendly or playful will fit into their fun. Children don’t know anything so they accept everything the way it is. They don’t know what ‘racism’ is. Even though it exists everywhere. Children don’t discriminate like people do. Learn from kids. Learn to live together in harmony. Just like kids, people all around the world should be able to welcome anyone to be a "part of their fun".

-Muzna

This is a place for youth. Any student can come here after school or anytime to relax and engage in activities, rather than getting into doing any wrong things when there’s no where else to go or nothing else to do. Students get suspended, kicked out, or whatever it is they get into, they will always have ‘the Spot’ to rely on. This type of diversion is specially needed in poverty stricken areas, where without anything to do, students can easily get sidetracked into wrong doing.

-Muzna

“We wish there were more places like this one, a place where you can go and get help finding jobs, safe fun places to go after school”

-Photo-researcher

“Where Youth Wanna Be

This is a place for youth. Any student can come here after school or anytime to relax and engage in activities, rather than getting into doing any wrong things when they there’s no where else to go or nothing else to do. Students get suspended, kicked out, or whatever it is they get into, they will always have ‘the Spot’ to rely on. This type of diversion is specially needed in poverty stricken areas, where without anything to do, students can easily get sidetracked into wrong doing.

-Muzna

“'I took a picture of the Spot because it is like a mini community centre in the mall and it can help people with differences during programs. It can really help people’s weaknesses and it’s a spot to just chill. You can go on computers have fun go video game programs. Just a spot to chill at’.”

-Photo-researcher
Our Youth
This is a picture represents the humble nature of our youth. He was the first person to pose for my camera. There are good youth living in this neighborhood that are willing to learn and provide mentorship for other youth. We need to encourage them to keep mentoring.
- Ann-Marie

Light in Dark Places
These are pictures of my friend; I took these pictures because I felt that they said a lot about what is happening in our community. They show that even in our darkest hour there is still light and if we embrace the light rather than fear it we will be able to shine as bright as we want. To me, the photos represent hope, the light is the interest and my friend represents hope. She shows that we can all shine in our own way.
There is one photo where my friend is sitting next to a wall. I took this photo to show the confusion and noise that happens in my community and that through all of it a clear path is there if you need it. To me, this photo represents a brighter tomorrow because it shows that it only takes one person to make a difference in the world. So no matter how small a difference you make, your voice can still be heard.
- Stanley
I Am Here

Rising Above

Collage by: Anthony

Collage by: Ann-Marie

Stanley
I see a painting of a boy and his friends having fun, with kids that are telling a story. It shows that even though there are problems in the world, kids still have fun in the same way. Its here because a person got permission to paint how he feels on the wall. I can enjoy it until it goes away.

- Stanley

A Glimmer of Hope

This is a picture of the Black Creek Community Health Centre, which is a nonprofit service agency in my neighborhood. Centre’s such as BCCHC offer programs and services free of charge to a lot of marginalized residents in the neighborhood, who would not otherwise be able to access such services.

- Safy
My Neighborhood

This is a picture of my neighborhood. The life that is happening in my neighborhood is built up by its people. We live in it so we must try to keep it. People think we can’t build up our neighborhood and we try to prove them wrong and show that we can build up and be strong. We must continue to build and try to keep our neighborhood safe.

- Brian

Safety and Security