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Practitioners' Essay

From Pedestrian Safety to Environmental Justice: The Evolution of a Chinatown Community Campaign

Julia Liou and Sherry Hirota

Abstract

Oakland Chinatown holds the record for the highest number of pedestrian and vehicle accidents in the City of Oakland. In response, Asian Health Services embarked on a local campaign focused on increasing awareness among community members about pedestrian safety issues. Recognizing the limits of addressing pedestrian injuries from an educational outreach approach focused on changing individual behavior, this campaign slowly evolved into an environmental justice campaign with a community capacity building perspective. Exemplifying the tenets of the Prevention Institute's California Campaign model to address health disparities, the current campaign, now entitled *Revive Chinatown!*, demonstrates how an ecological system approach can more effectively address a chronic public health problem, and how health centers can function as catalysts of community and economic development.

Introduction

Pedestrian injury is the second leading cause of unintentional injury-related death among children ages five to fourteen (Ernst and McCann 2002). In 2001, older pedestrians ages seventy years and older accounted for 18 percent of all pedestrian fatalities. Although there is a paucity of pedestrian fatality statistics in general, the information we do have indicates that ethnic and racial minorities are over-represented in pedestrian deaths (National Highway Transportation Safety Administration). With pedestrian trauma on the rise and injury responsible for 10 percent of health care ex-

penditures, injury prevention has been proposed as way to address disparities in health care (Benjamin 2004).

Promoting pedestrian safety is highly relevant to Oakland's Chinatown because it has the highest concentration of pedestrian and vehicle collisions in the City of Oakland, an alarming statistic given that the City of Oakland as a whole already has about twice the California state average of pedestrian injuries (City of Oakland). Chinatown is a major thoroughfare for vehicles, bearing the burden of constant downtown traffic flow and the presence of major state highways through and around its community. At the same time the neighborhood has an extraordinarily high volume of pedestrian traffic, with over 20,000 shoppers, tourists, and residents strolling the streets every weekend (Ong 2003). The combined high density of people and vehicles places community members at risk while doing even the most basic activities. Nearly one hundred pedestrian injuries and deaths have occurred between 1997-1999 in Chinatown (City of Oakland). The area is particularly dangerous for older pedestrians ages sixty-five and older who are more likely to die as a result of their injuries compared to other age groups. The elderly population makes up one out of every three pedestrians in Chinatown and accounts for 23 percent of all pedestrian fatalities (FHWA 1994).

One of those tragic victims was eighty-three-year old Mr. Hong Yee, the father of a board member of the Asian Health Services (AHS). In response to the death of Mr. Hong Yee and the overwhelming evidence of pedestrian safety issues, AHS embarked on a local community pedestrian safety campaign. AHS was, in many ways, an appropriate organization to undertake such an effort. As a nationally recognized comprehensive primary care community health center, it provides medical care, health education, insurance counseling and client advocacy services to the underserved Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities in eight different Asian languages. Today, AHS provides over 65,000 medical visits to almost 17,000 patients annually and has been highlighted as a model for serving a multiethnic, multilingual patient population. Its mission is to serve and advocate for the API community by ensuring access to health care services regardless of income, insurance status, immigration status, language, or culture. The community pedestrian safety campaign was well within the scope of relevant activities; however, what started with a focus to make

Chinatown safer, expanded into one to make the neighborhood a more economically viable, attractive community.

Re-defining the Problem

The effort to promote pedestrian safety has evolved over the past two years into an environmental justice project that reflects the principles of the California Campaign model. The local community pedestrian safety campaign initially incorporated the three E's of pedestrian and traffic safety ideology—Education, Engineering, and Enforcement. AHS conducted a multifaceted education effort incorporating youth organizing, community outreach, media, and the community arts in collaboration with several local organizations. After youth presented assessment data they had collected on Chinatown's pedestrian safety issues, the Oakland City Council allocated funding to install a scramble system, a four-way crosswalk that allows for a complete pedestrian-only phase, and a countdown signal at a key intersection in Chinatown. AHS' local pedestrian safety campaign provided many opportunities for collaboration and coalition building with business owners, residents, and other local community-based groups, as well as unlikely partners such as the Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce (OCCC) and city planning agencies.

Although AHS' local pedestrian campaign was successful in forging cross-sector collaborations and achieving short-term solutions, the limiting nature of conducting an educational campaign to reduce the number of pedestrian injuries was apparent. Rather than define the problem solely on an individual level, AHS began taking an ecological and political approach by viewing the problem from not solely an individual perspective, but from a community and policy level with community capacity building as its intention. In similar fashion the ecological model purports change on multiple levels (individual, social, organization, and community) by addressing the full range of the determinants of health in a seamless manner (McLeroy et al. 1988). The need to address the pedestrian safety issue in Chinatown in a multifaceted manner stems not only from the limited nature of AHS' first campaign, but also from recognizing the necessity to address three larger factors.

The first factor is the area's economic trajectory. Although Oakland Chinatown is the nation's fourth largest Chinatown, offering a multitude of multicultural dining, shopping, and enter-

tainment options, Oakland Chinatown has experienced a continuous decline both in economic development and in economic equity. The deterioration of gross business in Oakland Chinatown in recent years is due to the competition of other suburban Asian malls located in neighboring cities. This has resulted in a high rate of retail leakage.

The second factor is the physical development in the surrounding areas. Less than a year after the scramble system had been installed and successfully running, the City of Alameda proposed to build 4.2 million square feet of housing, business, and commercial developments estimated to generate 53,000 more vehicle trips to and from Alameda into Oakland on a daily basis. With Oakland Chinatown positioned as the front and backdoor to Alameda's traffic, the outcry of anger and concern from the Oakland Chinatown community reflected the notion that its local streets were transforming into freeway entrance ramps. Left with no choice, both AHS and the OCCC filed suit against the City of Alameda, which resulted in a large scaling back of the proposed development and an agreement by both Oakland and Alameda to contribute equal funding amounts for pedestrian and traffic improvements in Chinatown.

The third, but certainly not the least important, factor is a history of adverse transportation development. The contentious process and discriminatory gestures that colored the events leading up to the Alameda Point lawsuit was not a first. Chinatown in the East Bay, like many other Chinatowns, historically has experienced discrimination within the realm of community development that has resulted in constant threats of displacement throughout Oakland Chinatown's history of establishment. Streets were transformed into one-way configurations to facilitate traffic flow through the Chinatown community while new highway projects displaced thousands of community members both in Chinatown as well as other low-income communities within the vicinity of Chinatown (McLeroy et al. 1988). Chinatown soon became the crossroads of major highways, downtown Oakland, and City of Alameda traffic.

With Oakland Chinatown becoming the epicenter of both new Oakland and Alameda developments, threats of increasing traffic, increasing pedestrian safety injuries, and decreasing economic vigor necessitated the expansion of our purview in addressing these issues through the inclusion of physical and social

environmental interventions. The educational pedestrian campaign, implementation of the scramble system, the lawsuit, and the threat of new developments together played a role in making pedestrian safety a more recognizable public health and safety issue and provided the needed acknowledgement of Oakland Chinatown's historical transportation burden and discrimination as a low-income community. With this broadened scope the issue of pedestrian safety became re-conceptualized and re-defined as an environmental justice issue. These factors paved a foundation from which AHS was able to move forward with long-standing interests in a united effort to implement a project that incorporated community and policy interventions—an approach that would reflect a new strategy to eliminating health disparities as well as fostering community development.

Revive Chinatown!

AHS, OCCC, the Oakland Pedestrian Safety Project, and the City of Oakland envisioned a community transportation and planning project entitled *Revive Chinatown!* In 2003, the California Transportation Department awarded an Environmental Justice grant for this project. *Revive Chinatown's* goals are to create a safer pedestrian environment, enhance mobility and access for seniors and the disabled, improve the attractiveness of Chinatown's commercial district as a regional shopping destination, and involve the community in a process that empowers them to seek long-term solutions to quality-of-life issues. This project focused on working with the Chinatown community to devise a series of environmental improvements to make a safe, walkable, healthy, attractive and economically viable community.

The planning process included the use of a traffic-engineering firm to assess the traffic patterns in Chinatown to determine how to lessen the impact of vehicle traffic on the pedestrian environment. A streetscape design consultant helped to specify the elements required to create a pedestrian-friendly environment in Chinatown. As a result, AHS and its partners hope to reduce fatalities and injuries related to pedestrian and vehicle conflicts by 25 percent.

Much discussion has revolved around the need to develop a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach to eliminating health disparities by re-coupling the fields of planning and public health.

Although a paucity of data exists for Asian communities, studies have shown that communities of color experience disparities in traffic safety outcomes (Gantz et al. 2003). The evolution of AHS' pedestrian safety campaign into the advent of *Revive Chinatown!*, in many ways, has created such a bridge between these fields in its approach to decrease pedestrian safety injuries and exemplified urban planning approaches such as Smart Growth. The connection that *Revive Chinatown!* makes between planning and public health is best exemplified by the principles of a current model envisioned by The Prevention Institute and the American Public Health Association through their California Campaign to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities. That campaign links disparities in health to a set of physical and social environmental factors referred to as Community Clusters (see Table 1), and identifies the need to address the roots and pathways to health disparities. Without intention, *Revive Chinatown's* mission, vision and activities make a natural fit into this model.

Table 1 – California Campaign Model

- Built Environment
- 1. Activity-Promoting Environment
- 2. Nutrition-Promoting Environment
- 3. Housing
- 4. Transportation
- 5. Environmental Quality
- 6. Product Availability
- 7. Aesthetic/Ambiance
- Social Capital
- 8. Social Cohesion and Trust
- 9. Collective Efficacy
- 10. Civic Participation and Engagement
- 11. Social and Behavior Norms
- 12. Gender Norms
- Services and Institutions
- 13. Public Health, Health, and Human Services
- 14. Public Safety
- 15. Education and Literacy
- 16. Community-based organizations
- 17. Cultural and Artistic Opportunities
- Structural Factors
- 18. Economic Capital
- 19. Media and Marketing
- 20. Ethnic, Racial, and Intergroups Relations

The California Campaign refers to the Built-Environment cluster as the “man-made infrastructure of a community” that includes street design, public transportation, and permitted uses of buildings (The California Campaign to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health 2003). *Revive Chinatown!* emphasizes the creation of a more walkable, livable, and economically viable community in Oakland Chinatown. In regards to street design, *Revive Chinatown!* recommendations have included: (1) *Bulb-outs on key intersections*. These are sidewalk extensions which will not only decrease the distance a pedestrian is required to walk to cross an intersection, but also provides opportunities for streetscape options such as the inclusion of trees and street furniture. (2) *Pedestrian-scale cultural designed lighting*. The installation of these lights along the length of key streets will promote a sense of safety as well as a culturally appropriate environment. (3) *More scramble systems and pedestrian countdown signals*. The installation of at least four to five more scramble systems will reduce the opportunity for conflict between pedestrians and cars, and build on the success of the current scramble system. Countdown pedestrian signals will assist in helping pedestrians as well as drivers in making more informed decisions when crossing or driving across a street. Recently, the University of California, Berkeley Traffic Safety Center conducted a research evaluation of the scramble system, which demonstrated that the scramble system has helped reduce the number of pedestrian and vehicle conflicts by half (Bechtel and Ragland 2002). (4) *Conversion of one-way streets to two-way*. This would not only reduce traffic congestion by better balancing traffic flow, but also will re-route through traffic that tends to saturate the core of Chinatown. AHS and OCCC also have established a partnership with the Bay Area Rapid Transportation (BART) to increase ridership at a station located near Chinatown, which will assist in increasing access options and providing alternatives to driving.

The second cluster, Social Capital, refers to the “connections among individual-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Bechtel and Ragland 2002). *Revive Chinatown!* provides a collaborative framework through which private, public, and non-profit groups can articulate a broad set of concerns focused around pedestrian and traffic safety, transportation, and community revitalization. Due to the relationships AHS has built over the past thirty years within the Oakland

Chinatown community as well as OCCC's established relationships with Oakland Chinatown's merchants, businesses, and owners, the Chinatown community has been actively involved in the planning processes since the beginning. Through these processes, AHS and OCCC have helped to collect public input on needs, barriers and opportunities in the planning area.

A series of public meetings have been held to involve the community at several stages in the planning process. AHS and OCCC established a community advisory committee consisting of over fifteen to twenty key Oakland Chinatown stakeholders. This committee has helped not only to build constituency around the project as a vehicle for moving the project forward, but also has encouraged community members to increase their involvement in transportation decision-making processes in the long-term. The committee also has provided key input and feedback on the recommendations and solutions proposed, helping to ensure that a community vision is included in the project plan. Overall, the involvement of Chinatown's residents, workers, merchants, and community groups and family associations has raised awareness of pedestrian safety and transportation issues that have historically been overlooked.

Revive Chinatown! also has played a significant role in establishing a committee that has resulted in a significant political outcome. The Oakland Chinatown Advisory Committee, which consists of City of Alameda, Oakland, and Oakland Chinatown representatives, is a formal mechanism to ensure future developments in both Oakland and Alameda do not negatively impact Chinatown.

The Services-and-Institutions cluster emphasizes the importance of access to high quality, culturally competent, and coordinated public and private services and institutions. As a key partner that is a health center, AHS naturally brings the notion of access to health services to this project. Improving the safety of Oakland Chinatown's streets was an important aspect for AHS patients who access our services. AHS serves almost 17,000 patients on an annual basis, the majority who use the streets of Chinatown on a daily basis to utilize our services.

The last cluster, Structural Factors, includes employment and economic opportunities, and marketing and advertising practices which would promote an increase in business, reduced

crime, and better housing. As a way to foster a discussion on ways to reinvigorate Chinatown and its economic vitality and attraction, AHS and OCCC held a *Revive Chinatown!* Design Charrette open to the local community. Through this design symposium, local urban planners, designers, architects, urban planning students, and artists gathered together to brainstorm on ways to reinforce a sense of community currently lacking in the Oakland Chinatown community. With over thirty participants, ideas regarding revitalization were conceptualized. Ideas such as a night market and creating a center historical piece rather than creating a traditional gateway, which places limits on the boundaries of Chinatown, were some of the concepts proposed. These ideas have been helpful to the visioning of the *Revive Chinatown!* process.

Conclusion

Oakland's historic Chinatown is a culturally rich community that bears an unjust transportation burden due to the historic poor planning and constant downtown traffic flow and the presence of major state highways through and around its community. As a result, Oakland Chinatown has become a low-income community of immigrants and seniors that suffers from extraordinarily high pedestrian injuries and fatalities. Once ranked as one of the top five revenue generators within the City of Oakland, Chinatown has experienced a severe decline in economic vitality (Ong 2004). Recognizing that the way communities are designed can impact public health, AHS embarked on a project with its coalition members that broadened its interventional strategies from an individual level scope to a community level, thereby redefining the issue from pedestrian safety to environmental justice. Currently, *Revive Chinatown!* has been officially adopted by the Oakland City Council and has received state grant funding to implement a significant portion of these solutions. As a health center that upholds advocacy and service as its founding tenets, it has bridged the fields of public health and planning to address a health disparity within its community. Overall, AHS exemplifies the notion that health care centers can function as catalysts for community revitalization and economic development.

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