



SCRA Community Mini-Grant Spotlight

“Break Every Chain”: A Participatory Photovoice Study with African American Adult Men Experiencing Recovery/Reentry

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(Chicago, IL, USA)**

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The SCRA Community Mini-Grants was founded in 2010 with the intention of supporting small, time sensitive community-based projects that are consistent with SCRA’s mission, principles, and goals. We are excited about sharing the great work being done by SCRA members and their community partners, and even happier to be able to highlight examples of this work and share them with the GJCPP readership. Below, 2013 Mini-Grant awardee Anta Yu provides insight on her work surrounding the barriers that men living in urban, economically disadvantaged, predominantly African American neighborhoods face with the reentry/recovery process.



*Figure 1: “A lot of our Black males are in jail. But our community, with so much negativity and so much violence that’s going on, we feel like that we encaged, like we behind bars, even in our community. It’s a blurred picture of Lawndale because . . . the murder, the killing, the shooting is outweighing all this good stuff that’s going on on Ogden. Community behind bars...we need to break loose of this.” Community Behind Bars by John Smith**

Background

Over the last four decades, the rate of mass incarceration in the U.S. has increased dramatically, with ethnic minority men from urban, economically disadvantaged communities disproportionately represented at all levels of the legal system (Huizinga et al., 2007; Mauer & King, 2007). The communities to which prisoners are released are often vastly under resourced to provide needed services and support and may present risk factors for recidivism, such as exposure to drug use, drug trafficking, and criminal activity (Golembeski & Fullilove, 2005). Furthermore, little is actually known about the reentry process and what facilitates successful reentry, especially from the perspectives of those released from prison (Travis and Visher, 2005). This study sought to explore the following:

1. What do adult men living in an urban, economically disadvantaged, predominantly African American neighborhood perceive to be challenges/barriers of the reentry/recovery process?
2. What strategies and/or resources do these men rely on to overcome these barriers?
3. Where are opportunities for developing intervention(s) that will more appropriately address the needs of these men and build upon their existing strategies/resources?
4. How well does the photovoice method provide the means for these participants to voice their concerns?

North Lawndale

The current study was situated in North Lawndale, a neighborhood located on the West Side of Chicago. According to the

2010 U.S. Census, around 91% report as African American and 40% of households are living below the poverty line (Rob Paral and Associates, 2012a, 2012b). North Lawndale also experiences high rates of crime and incarceration (Chicago Police Department, 2016) and at the end of the last century, about a third of North Lawndale's adult population was incarcerated and missing from the community (Street, 2007). North Lawndale also has one of the highest concentrations of parolees in the state, with more than 2,700 parolees between the ages of 17 and 35 residing in the community (LaVigne et al., 2003). Given the context of intergenerational disinvestment and social exclusion experienced by members of this community, it is important that research conducted here incorporates a democratic approach (Millar, 2007); therefore, a participatory action research (PAR) orientation was adopted.

Hope House

In response to the needs of the community, Lawndale Community Church (LCC) established a recovery home called [Hope House](#) in 1995 to assist adult men who are seeking to recover from substance addiction and/or re-enter society after being released from prison. I approached the director of Hope House in March 2013 regarding possible interest in a PAR/photovoice project. The director expressed enthusiastic support and stated the project would be an opportunity for Hope House to help and give back. Over the next year, I held six meetings with residents where I facilitated discussions of the benefits and need for local community members to participate in research and knowledge-creation. I invited them to share their experiences through the

methodology of photovoice, a process where community members are handed cameras and asked to photograph their everyday lived experiences and realities. The three main goals of photovoice are “to enable people

1. to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns,
2. to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussion of photographs, and
3. to reach policymakers” (Wang, 1999, p. 185).



Figure 2: “I thank God for Hope House” by Albert*

Finding a Focus

Reaching a consensus on research questions and themes did not come without its challenges. Due to residents’ varied work schedules and residents’ unexpectedly leaving Hope House, every pre-project meeting included new individuals who were unfamiliar with previous discussions. At times when I asked for input on topics of interest, several responded with confusion, stating, “This is your project, what do you want us to take pictures of?” Some also voiced

concerns over the safety of photographing certain neighborhood areas, stating they may be seen as working for the police. The director and I assured that safety would be prioritized at all times and that participants would not be expected to take photos that would endanger them.

Despite these challenges, members were generally eager to share about their recovery, especially about the positive changes they experienced after coming to Hope House on individual, family, and community levels. Based on my field notes, I identified two broad themes of moving from (1) hopelessness to hope and (2) social exclusion to increased inclusion within family/community/society. After receiving confirmation regarding these themes, I decided to focus on research questions regarding barriers, facilitators, and recommended interventions to the process of recovery/reentry.

In March 2014, I began formally recruiting participants from current house residents and alumni of the program. While 14 men signed informed consent forms, due to unexpected dropout, the project was eventually completed by seven African American adult males across two groups, current residents (n=4) and alumni (n=3). The age of participants ranged from 27 to 56 years, and education level ranged from high school diploma/GED to two years of college. All participants reported growing up in neighborhoods on the West and South Side of Chicago, with length of residence in North Lawndale ranging from 5 years to their entire lives. All participants reported being in jail and/or prison at least once, with total length of incarceration ranging from 6 days to 12 years. Five participants (71%) reported being in recovery from substance addiction, with

length of sobriety ranging from 4 months to 9 years. Participants had varying levels of experience using cameras and none were familiar with photovoice. The men voted to name the project, “Break Every

Chain,” the title of a gospel song that represented their belief that God was helping them break free of barriers in recovery



Figure 3: Participants working together to group photos and provide conceptual labels

Participants and Photo-Discussions

The photovoice exhibit proceeded in the following phases: (a) training, (b) photography, and (c) discussion, with photography and discussion phases repeating across several assignments. Photography was conducted over the course of 9 weeks for residents and 5 weeks for alumni, with each group completing four assignments. At each discussion, participants were asked to share about three to four photos that they felt best represented the assignment. Participants then collaborated to categorize similar photos together and give each category a conceptual label. For each concept, I facilitated discussion on

why the community need or strength existed and what could be done to address it. At the end of each discussion, participants were prompted to answer the following questions: “Given what we have discussed so far, what should we look at next? What should be our next photo assignment?” Participants then decided as a group their next assignment, and we scheduled our next discussion session.

Photo Exhibit

In order to fulfill the third goal of photovoice to advocate for social action and policy change, we hosted a photovoice exhibit on July 19, 2014 at the Firehouse Community Arts Center. We

invited community members and leaders via mailed invitations, phone calls, and postcards passed out by Hope House residents. With the assistance of the principal investigator and research assistant, each participant selected two photos for display and wrote captions for the photos. We coordinated a panel where four participants shared alongside other community members involved with recovery/reentry. The exhibit also featured performances by the Hope House Men's Choir. The exhibit was attended by approximately 130 people, including the Cook County Clerk, a Cook County Commissioner, and representatives from the Cook County Sheriff's Office and 10th District Chicago Police Department.

At group and individual debriefings, participants shared that they were amazed with the turnout and response, which exceeded their expectations. One participant said that even though he had shared his story multiple times, using pictures allowed him to convey his message more powerfully than before. Another participant reflected that his panel participation helped him see his personal growth, and that he was grateful for opportunities to do positive things such as sit on a panel "and not in some jail cell." Community advisers also shared positive feedback from conversations with attendees, with one adviser saying this was a rare and wonderful event where several different program leaders were gathered together to discuss common issues.



Figure 4: Public exhibit of participants' photos and panel discussion

Views on Participation

In reflecting upon this project, I realized that my academic understanding of PAR ideals needed to be re-negotiated within the contexts, worldviews, and recovery journeys of my participants. While I had

hoped for participants to join me in a partnership to help change the community, many expressed a sense of hopelessness and helplessness ("ain' nothin' we can do about it!") As I continued to analyze the data, I realized this was congruent with

their narratives of victimization and powerlessness within a continually traumatizing environment. While the photo-discussions are not meant to be therapy, several men expressed that it was “therapeutic,” with men often identifying and mourning for the first time their chaotic and neglectful past. It was a humbling reminder for me as a clinician and researcher that within the context of trauma, a healing and developmental process needs to occur before participants can adopt roles as active and future-oriented change agents.

Furthermore, my insistence on verbalizing a democratic relationship prevented me from seeing that their offers of help were signs of positive growth in their recovery. Most participants stated they joined because they wanted “to help Anta get an A on her school project,” which was how the director continually encouraged them to do. This was an idea I resisted—I responded by emphasizing participatory values and explained (unsuccessfully) several times that a dissertation is pass/fail, but some participants still preferred to see me as a “boss” giving directions. In an exit interview, one participant expressed that it was beneficial for me to be a leader because I kept participants accountable and motivated to put forth their best effort and learn from the experience. As the project developed, one participant acknowledged a more mutual process, “God put you in my path to help you . . . well, for us to help each other because I’m learning from this [project] too . . . I ain’t got it all figured out yet, but I’ll figure it out, you know.” Despite my resistance to a top-down approach, I learned that I often had to first offer several ideas and options before the men responded with their ideas, sometimes

even surprising me with their choices for next assignments.

Overall, participants reported positive feelings and outcomes from being part of the project, such as increased competence in new skills, strengthened camaraderie with other project members, sharing and reflecting as a healing process, and seeing the community in a more critical light. Several expressed a new sense of responsibility and urgency to “take back our neighborhood,” especially by becoming positive mentors for youth. Participants were optimistic regarding photovoice’s utility in raising awareness and expressed interest in future photovoice projects.

When I finally completed data analysis for my dissertation a year later, several participants and community advisers attended my defense meeting, with many taking time off from work and driving an hour to my campus! I shared the grounded theory model of recovery/reentry that was developed, which described a daily cognitive crossroads of *considering two worlds*, where the men weigh the consequences of conforming to street life (*locked in the streets*) or actively *choosing and cultivating recovery*. Participants expressed congruence with the model, stating they had never imagined their participation could help produce a theory. Several thanked me for my willingness to come in as a learner, with one person sharing, “You listened to what we were saying, and you didn’t just listen, you had feelings about it. Anyone can write it down, but you really got it.”



Figure 5: “Break Every Chain” participants and advisers celebrate Anta’s successful dissertation defense

And yes, my team cheered for me when my committee announced that they were “giving [me] an A!”

Mini-Grant Supported Activities

Mini-Grant funding was used toward the purchase of cameras, digital storage cards, and cases for the project. Camera equipment was given to LCC, such that other outreach programs (e.g., Firehouse Community Arts Center, Lawndale Christian Legal Center) could also access/borrow the cameras for use with their program participants. The framed photos from the exhibit are currently displayed at the Freedom Center (1530 S. Hamlin St., Chicago, IL 60623), where many youth outreach programs are held. Community advisers had discussed the possibility of renaming the room to “Break Every Chain.” Funds also provided each participant with a \$20 gift card, an album of 30 self-chosen photo prints, and a digital copy of his photos. While other sources of funding allowed for the production of [photobooks](#) for participants/Hope House to keep, SCRA funding allowed for the purchase of a photobook to be kept at the Freedom Center for others to learn about the project.

For Further Reading

- Detailed results of the grounded theory model will be submitted for publication. Please visit <http://breakeverychain.photovoice.wordpress.com/> to see more information and pictures from the project.
- North Lawndale was also featured in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s June 2014 Atlantic feature article, “[The Case for Reparations](#)”.

*Pseudonyms chosen by participants have been used to protect their confidentiality.

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