

Future FINDINGS

A Decade of Work Toward a Healthier Detroit

Ten years ago, then-Surgeon General David Satcher created urban research centers in three United States cities: Seattle, New York, and Detroit. The primary goal, remembers **Barbara Israel**, principal investigator of the Detroit Community-Academic Urban Research Center, or URC, was to identify and address the social and physical environmental determinants that lead to health disparities. It's still the key goal of the Detroit URC today.

Equally important, says Israel, a professor of health behavior and health education in the School of Public Health, is that the URC be a joint community-academic collaboration. "We were all committed to this not being driven by researchers but rather by community needs," she says.

“What keeps me going is the incredible energy and hope and commitment on the part of the people we work with who live in the city of Detroit.”

In its ten years of existence, the center has become a nexus of research activity. In collaboration with community-based organizations and health service agencies, Israel and her colleagues have conducted 16 separate research projects aimed at understanding and addressing a range of health issues, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and women's health.

Academic and community partners agreed early on that the URC could not undertake the near-impossible task of addressing health problems citywide, but should focus instead on smaller communities within Detroit, where there was both a history of community participation in problem-solving and a clear public health need.



Barbara Israel

They chose two communities whose combined populations exceed 125,000: eastside Detroit, which is 97% African-American, and southwest Detroit, where the highest percentage of the city's Latinos reside.

Initially, the key priorities of the URC were violence prevention, access to care and quality of care, and the physical environment as it relates to health, but these areas have since expanded.

Led by SPH Research Associate Professor Amy Schulz, researchers in one URC project are studying the role of the physical environment, ethnicity, and income as these relate to cardiovascular disease. In another project, directed by Richard Lichtenstein, an associate professor of health management and policy and co-PI of the URC, researchers and community partners are working to improve access to health care in eastside Detroit.

Tom Robins, professor of environmental health sciences, is leading a third project, Community Action Against Asthma, whose focus is on understanding environmental trig-

gers of childhood asthma. Part of that project is an intervention study, directed by SPH Associate Professor Edith Parker, which is designed to reduce those triggers.

With each and every project, Israel and her colleagues put "tremendous emphasis" on disseminating study results in concert with community partners, both through peer-reviewed publications and distribution in local communities.

Looking ahead, Israel says the issues in Detroit are "so complex" that she and her URC colleagues and partners have only scratched the surface. They are eager to translate more research into policy, and they believe the URC can play a key role in coordinating that process. Recently, the URC was selected as one of four finalists for the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration.

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