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**Article** in Human organization · August 2015
DOI: 10.17730/0018-7259-74.3.255

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**Witnesses to Hunger: Methods for Photovoice and Participatory Action Research in Public Health**

Molly Knowles, Jenny Rabinowich, Tianna Gaines-Turner, and Mariana Chilton

Food insecurity is an under-recognized public health crisis in the United States affecting 19.5 percent of households with children and 35.4 percent of female-headed households with children. In 2013, approximately 15.8 million children (21.4%) lived in households that reported food insecurity, and 8.5 million children (23.7%) under age six lived in food insecure households. Lack of public attention and recent decisions by policymakers to cut nutrition assistance programs call into question current efforts to raise awareness and communicate about hunger and its public health impacts. As one contribution, we describe the methods of Witnesses to Hunger, a photovoice and participatory action research model of collaboration with low-income caregivers of young children who participate in nutrition assistance programs and offer solutions to public health professionals, policymakers, and journalists.

**Key words:** photography/photovoice, participatory action research, public health, food insecurity, poverty

Witnesses to Hunger is an ongoing participatory action research (PAR) study in which we utilize photovoice methodology, ethnography, focus groups, and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to investigate the relationship between food insecurity and health and the effectiveness of public assistance programs, labor laws, and neighborhood efforts to address poverty. We work to create a platform in which families affected by poverty can engage in the national dialogue on hunger and health policy. Through photography, video, and written and oral commentary, Witnesses to Hunger participants share their experiences and challenge elected officials to engage with their constituents about issues that impact family health and well-being: access to healthful food, quality education, economic self-sufficiency, living wages, effective income support, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

**Background**

Female caregivers and their families are among the most affected by food insecurity, as 19.5 percent of all households with children and 34.4 percent of female-headed households with children reported household food insecurity in 2013. National rates of food insecurity obscure stark racial and ethnic disparities. Among White households with children, 14.4 percent report food insecurity, whereas 32.6 percent of Black non-Hispanic and 28 percent of Hispanic households with children reported food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Singh 2014). These enduring disparities are cause for reexamining programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). Health consequences of food insecurity include poor cognitive, social, and emotional development among young children (Frank et al. 2010a; Rose-Jacobs et al. 2008); suicidal ideation among adolescents (Alaimo, Olson,
and Frongillo 2002); depressive symptoms (Casey et al. 2004; Whitaker, Phillips, and Orzol 2006); and increased risk of diet-sensitive chronic disease and its complicating factors (Seligman, Laraia, and Kushel 2010) among adults.

One of the most important factors associated with food insecurity for mothers is social isolation (Chilton, Rabinovich, and Woolf 2013; Melchior et al. 2009). This includes isolation at the family, community, and political level. Women from low-income households are less likely to vote than the general public, in part because they feel disenfranchised from the political process and programmatic decision making (Chilton et al. 2009; Lawless and Fox 2001; Soss 1999; Van Esterik 1999). The mechanisms through which participants in public assistance can participate in the development of programs are minimal (Soss 1999). Head Start/Early Head Start is currently the only family-focused program among the public assistance programs that has a built-in parent and community engagement mechanism. Yet only 42 percent of eligible families are participating in Head Start, and approximately only 4 percent of eligible families participate in Early Head Start (Schmit and Matthews 2013). President Johnson’s stated “war on poverty,” begun in 1964, identified the need to systematize and strengthen community engagement in efforts to address poverty, of which Head Start is one such example. However, a large gap in true community engagement efforts for low-income families continues to be perpetuated by both structural and perceived barriers, and low-income women are still left out of programmatic decision making (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011).

To break through this social and political isolation, we developed Witnesses to Hunger in order to provide a platform for low-income parents to become involved in policy dialogues that may improve their conditions through structural change.

Theoretical Framework

Informed by principles of action anthropology, our methods are applied in a public health context using the PAR framework. At the core of this process is the participatory research method photovoice, in which researchers create opportunities for participants to record and reflect on strengths through photographs and to share those with key decision makers. Photography helps to support identification of community assets as well as needs and breaks down barriers to communication such as low literacy levels, inability to travel, stigma, and isolation (Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain 2006; Chilton et al. 2009; Fitzpatrick et al. 2010; Kramer et al. 2010; Rhodes et al. 2008; Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004; Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1997). The PAR framework of photovoice emphasizes equal partnerships between researchers and research participants, active involvement of participants in as many elements of the research as possible, and research infrastructure designed to enable advocacy and action (Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1997). Such action primarily consists of press coverage and policy-relevant dialogue through group discussions and public exhibitions, focusing particularly on issues that policymakers can and should address and creating opportunities to promote legislator accountability.

PAR and photovoice both draw on the concept of “critical consciousness,” developed by Paulo Freire (1970). Developed through reflection and action, critical consciousness includes a review of the dynamics of power in one’s relationships and in society and helps participants uncover needs and strengths based on lived experience and reflection rather than dominant societal views. Community-engaged public health efforts have based interventions on the concept of critical consciousness and group action to improve health outcomes, especially for women and families (Champeau and Shaw 2002; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988).

In developing Witnesses to Hunger, we followed in this tradition while also drawing on the human rights framework, which espouses and promotes the importance of civic participation to foster deeper understanding of human rights principles and provides opportunities for rights-holders to claim their rights. Inclusive participation and the creation of mechanisms for accountability are integral to protecting, respecting, and promoting the right to food (Chilton et al. 2009; Chilton and Rose 2009).

Deep, ongoing civic engagement by research participants is generally missing from mainstream food insecurity research and from other photovoice projects. As several reviews have noted, much of the food insecurity literature is quantitative, often utilizing large cross-sectional datasets (Gundersen 2013; Nord 2014) that have no mechanism for participant involvement in research dissemination or advocacy. The relatively fewer qualitative studies, while informative regarding the lived experience of food insecurity, are not participatory (Hamelin, Beaudry, and Habicht 2002; Hamelin, Habicht, and Beaudry 1999; Tarasuk 2001). Some programs promote community involvement in community food security, focusing on access to quality grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and community gardens (Growing Power 2014; Vásquez et al. 2007), yet these efforts often stay at the level of the local food environment and do not involve community-engaged research that informs the dialogue on a national level, especially in forums regarding the federal nutrition programs, housing subsidies, tax policies, and other policies that address issues for low-income families. In addition, although some known photovoice projects have culminated in an exhibit and/or a community-level meeting to discuss and address the issues raised (Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1997), few document ongoing participant involvement in policy-related advocacy at the state, regional, or national level or working with press or expanding exhibition viewings beyond project timelines (Catalani and Minkler 2010; Sanon, Evans-Agnew, and Boutain 2014).

To address this gap in research and practice, we present the Witnesses to Hunger methodology, including both the research methods as well as the ongoing engagement of Witnesses to Hunger participants in traveling exhibitions and
formal interactions with policymakers, the press, and advocates extending beyond the reach of previously documented photovoice projects.

Research Methods

We utilized a mixed-methods design to investigate caregivers’ experiences with employment, education, and public assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and how these programs and experiences impact family health. A key focus of this investigation was to learn more about and find effective ways to disseminate participants’ ideas for programmatic change at local, state, and national levels.

Participants and Recruitment

Sixty-nine participants engaged with Witnesses to Hunger through IRB-approved research and advocacy, while fourteen joined solely as advocates. Witnesses to Hunger began as a PAR study in Philadelphia through the recruitment of forty-two mothers of young children in Philadelphia. Most of the initial participants were recruited from Children’s HealthWatch, an ongoing five-city study investigating the impact of public assistance programs on the health and well-being of families with young children under age four. The study investigates maternal and child health, child development, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and energy insecurity. The methods are described elsewhere (Frank et al. 2010b).

Eligibility criteria for participation in the formal research aspects of Witnesses to Hunger included having at least one child under age four, participation in at least one public assistance program, and expressing a strong desire to describe how such programs can be improved. We focused on caregivers of very young children because of the significance of early childhood development for lifetime well-being (Shonkoff et al. 2012). Since 2008, the formal research and advocacy arm of the study has also continued to expand, with two more participants joining from Philadelphia, and twenty-five from Boston (n=8) and Baltimore (n=7) in 2011, and Camden, N.J. (n=10) in 2013. We recruited participants in Baltimore from the local Children’s HealthWatch site and partnered with local child care organizations to recruit participants in Boston and Camden. In all four sites, we also utilized snowball sampling.

Participant observation continues throughout our ongoing research related activities. Thus, the research and program staff are continuing to learn alongside the families of Witnesses to Hunger that are formally involved in the research aspects of the program. These encounters include ensuring that the social worker at the Witnesses to Hunger host site at Drexel University can assist the families as they navigate public assistance programs, housing support programs, legal issues, issues with their children’s schooling, child welfare, job readiness and training programs, job searches, and continuing education such as GED opportunities and community college. We also participate with the families in their advocacy efforts regarding hunger, housing, poverty, tax credits, cash assistance, child care, and education to inform legislators, the public, and the press. These experiences shape how we continue to understand the complex issues and structures affecting the lives of participant families and how their entrepreneurship, expertise, and insight shape their lives and the lives of their children.

Data Collection

For the four research sites, we carried out data collection in three phases: (1) an intake interview and survey, (2) a semi-structured interview guided by participants’ descriptions of photographs, and (3) participation in at least one focus group to select photos and prioritize emerging themes for the exhibit and associated advocacy.

Phase one: At the intake interview, most frequently conducted in the participant’s home, each participant responded to a survey regarding demographics and public assistance program participation. Other measures included the 18-point Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) to assess household and child food security status (Bickel et al. 2000); housing security, defined by overcrowding, multiple moves, and being behind on rent (Cutts et al. 2011); maternal depressive symptoms measured with the Kemper (Kemper, Kelleher, and Olson 2007); and self-rated health and caregiver-rated health of the child. During this meeting, we gave each participant a digital camera and provided basic training in taking and storing digital photographs and videos, as well as the process of obtaining permission and maintaining safety when taking photographs. As specified in the informed consent document, participants retained the copyright to all photographs and videos, granting researchers a license for educational use. We also provided participants with a theme sheet that briefly explained the purpose of the study and suggested a few possible questions to help them consider their experiences. Suggested topics included the experiences of buying, cooking, and serving food; housing; physical and mental health; transportation; money; education; work; discrimination; and self-esteem. We encouraged participants not to feel limited to these topics and to photograph anything related to their family’s health and well-being that they believed to be important to share with the public, press, and policymakers. At this juncture, participants were compensated $25 cash for their time.

Phase two: After two to three weeks during which time participants took photographs, we returned to conduct audio-recorded, semi-structured qualitative interviews using an adaptation of the SHOWeD technique developed by Wang (1999) and colleagues. This technique invites participants to explore the themes and conditions depicted in the photographs to identify the main problem or asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation, and develop strategies for changing the situation (Wang 1999). This interview usually lasted between two to three hours, and participants received $50 cash for their time.
Phase three: Once all participants completed this interview, we invited participants to take part in audio-recorded focus groups to discuss central issues with other participants, to share their experiences, identify representative themes of their work, provide feedback on initial findings of central themes, and to jointly select exhibit photographs. Participants received $50 cash for participating in the focus groups.

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were professionally transcribed and reviewed by the interviewers for accuracy. We then entered transcripts, photographs, and videos into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software tool. We continue to analyze the data, consisting of over 12,000 photographs and approximately 200 hours of transcribed interviews, with a grounded theory approach. The authors and several graduate assistants reviewed the photos and transcripts to develop the master codes for the coding scheme, consisting of over 300 codes, with approximately 18 code families (see Table 1 for an abbreviated list of selected codes). Those interested in learning more about analysis of the research data and preliminary ethnographic findings from the Philadelphia site can reference prior publications that relate to human rights, public assistance participation, and exposure to violence (Chilton et al. 2009; Chilton, Rabinowich, and Woolf 2013).

While the full research analysis will take more time to complete given the amount of data, coding, and interrelated meaning units, we conducted focused analyses in preparation for each site’s exhibits and associated advocacy events. In the focus groups, we collaborated with participants to select photographs that were representative of the themes they identified to communicate with policymakers and the public. We reviewed the interview transcripts to identify quotations in which participants described these photographs and their messages, and participants revised these statements to accompany the photographs in the exhibit. Themes identified by participants in the focus groups provided the framework for organizing exhibits and the direction for subsequent advocacy work.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Seventy-one participants enrolled in Witnesses to Hunger as research participants. One withdrew, and one was lost to follow-up prior to participating in the individual interview, resulting in a total of sixty-nine participants across four sites.

At the phase one interview, twenty-two participants (31.9 percent) were employed. Over two-thirds of participants had graduated from high school, and half had some post-secondary education. The majority of participants (91.3 percent) were unmarried. Most of the participants are mothers, with five grandmothers, one father, and one great-aunt also participating. Thirty-seven participants (53.6 percent) identified as Black or African-American, eighteen (26.1 percent) identified as Hispanic or Latina, four (5.8 percent) identified as White, one (1.4 percent) identified as Haitian, and nine (13.0 percent) reported more than one race or ethnicity. Forty-six participants (66.7 percent) reported household food insecurity, and ten (14.5 percent) reported food insecurity among their children. Almost half reported housing insecurity, and four were living in shelters or transitional housing facilities. At the time of their first interview, fifty-four (78.3 percent) described their child’s health as excellent or good compared with fair or poor, while forty-five (65.2 percent) described their own physical health as excellent or good. Forty-seven (68.1 percent) also reported depressive symptoms. All had experience with some type of public assistance, with thirty-five (50.7 percent) participating in TANF, 57 (82.6 percent) participating in SNAP, and fifty-eight (84.1 percent) participating in WIC.

Participants entered the program with the understanding that the program included both research and advocacy, with a culminating activity described as participation in a community forum and exhibition of their photographs. Throughout, participants had the ability to define their own level of engagement. Across the four research sites, seventeen participants chose to limit their involvement with the project to participation in the individual interviews, focus groups, and contribution of photos, while the majority participated in the first exhibit opening and became involved in planning and advocacy surrounding the exhibition of their photographs. We gave participants the option to maintain anonymity and assume a pseudonym for the duration of their engagement or to use their own names and participate more publicly in the process.

Photographs and Advocacy Themes

In their individual interviews and focus groups, participants identified the photographs they would like to display and described ideas and recommendations they hoped to relay to government officials. The advocacy work focuses on twelve themes identified by participants: (1) Food and Hunger, (2) Health, (3) Housing, (4) Education, (5) Employment and Entrepreneurship, (6) Financial Management, (7) Challenging Stereotypes, (8) Environment and Neighborhood, (9) Safety, Violence, Trauma, (10) Parenthood and Childhood, (11) Opportunity, and (12) Breaking the Cycle. Exhibit photos have been organized into these same categories. Selected photographs from the Witnesses to Hunger traveling exhibit are shown in Figure 1.

Exhibits, Education, and Action

The first exhibition set the precedent for subsequent advocacy activities stemming from the photographs and participant testimony. In December of 2008, two months after the completion of the initial data collection stage, we held the Witnesses to Hunger exhibit in Philadelphia. The exhibit launch stimulated news stories by local television channels and the Philadelphia Inquirer, and a syndicated article by the Associated Press appeared in approximately 200 news outlets throughout the United States and Mexico. Photographs for the exhibit were chosen by the researchers in consultation with
artists and the project participants, based around themes from the interviews and focus groups. Three one-minute videos were developed out of their photographs and audio-recorded voices to depict exposure to violence and trauma, frustration with low-wage work and broken public assistance programs, and celebration of hopes and dreams for their children. Each time a participant in Witnesses to Hunger attends an exhibit, they receive $50 cash for their time and expertise.

We launched the Witnesses to Hunger website (www.witnessestohunger.org) to coincide with the opening of the first exhibit. This website offers a platform for displaying the participants’ photographs in addition to profiles of each participant and the issues that are important to them. The website features the ongoing advocacy work of the participants, including exhibits of their photographs, speaking events, and media appearances. Following the initial 2008 exhibition in Philadelphia, we received invitations to bring the exhibit to various venues. The first request came from United States Senator Robert Casey, Jr. (D-PA) and included an invitation for all participants to travel to Washington, D.C. for the exhibit opening in the rotunda of the Senate Russell Building in 2009. The goal of the exhibit was to raise awareness of the importance of the child nutrition assistance programs funded in the Child Nutrition Bill now called “The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.” Following that exhibition, photographs have been displayed in dozens of venues at the invitation of advocacy groups, service organizations, and policymakers.

Table 1. Abbreviated Code Set of Witnesses to Hunger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family</th>
<th>Selected Sub-codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>dropping out of school, fighting/bullying/teasing in school, grades/success, support/encouragement for school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/Employment</td>
<td>childcare issues, formal work, work/school balance, unemployment, entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Health Care</td>
<td>maternal and child health, mental health, health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunger, Food, and Nutrition</td>
<td>causes of food shortages/hunger, experiences of hunger, programs to alleviate hunger, effects of hunger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and Housing</td>
<td>housing instability, homelessness, house-to-house, disrepair, utilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>financial services, financial aspirations, causes/results of financial shortfall, intergenerational financial experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Assistance</td>
<td>SNAP, TANF, WIC, effects – buffering food insecurity/financial hardship, case managers/personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence and Stress</td>
<td>community violence, abuse, neglect, sexual violence, breaking the cycle, intergenerational transmission of positive/negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>activities that create peace, desire for peace, lack of peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death and Dying</td>
<td>natural cause of death, violent death, grief/mourning, memorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>abandonment/loss, social support, child’s father/baby-father, responsibility for siblings/caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment and Stereotypes</td>
<td>racism/discrimination, judgment by public assistance workers, judgment by others, stereotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of Self</td>
<td>negative/positive self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger and Frustration</td>
<td>anger, disbelief/outrage, frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride and Joy</td>
<td>happy times, pride, strong positive feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience and Aspirations</td>
<td>bouncing back, creative thinking, positive self-attitude, aspirations for self/children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation Toward Future</td>
<td>being stuck, living day-by-day, goal-setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and Advocacy</td>
<td>descriptions of policy-related obstacles, recommendations for policy changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the 2009 exhibition, other organizations and agencies requested to host exhibits. These other locales recruited participants for advocacy efforts only, as opposed to being involved with the research. The recruitment of new participants in Pennsylvania was facilitated by the offices of Senator Casey in Scranton, PA, Harrisburg/Central Pennsylvania, and Johnstown, PA. Participants in Providence, RI were recruited through the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. One anonymous participant on Martha’s Vineyard Island, MA was recruited through a local food pantry. Although these
The digital exhibit on the website and the traveling physical photo exhibit are platforms through which the general public can see the photographs and read about the experiences of the parents and caregivers. The traveling exhibit also provides an opportunity to meet the photographers and other key leaders who seek to learn more about poverty-related issues. The exhibits are always coupled with hearings, panel discussions, or related speaking engagements. Before each major exhibit, Witnesses to Hunger staff provide trainings for the participants to ensure that each participant is familiar with the legislators with whom they will meet and the policy-related issues that their photographs inform (such as funding for SNAP or WIC). The participants then work with staff to create a plan of action for communication and follow-up. Examples include a weeklong exhibit at the United States Senate in May of 2009, with an opening attended by five United States Senators, to inform the Senate about the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act; and an exhibit at the House of Representatives in April 2014 with six United States Representatives to begin a dialogue about raising the minimum wage and the Child Nutrition Reauthorization of 2015. See Table 2 for a list of major exhibitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Exhibit Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2008</td>
<td>Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td>United States Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>Community Action Partnership Conference, Marriott, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>Senator Robert Casey, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2010</td>
<td>Senator Robert Casey, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2010</td>
<td>Senator Robert Casey, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010</td>
<td>Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, Capitol Hilton, Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>International Conference on Women's Health and Urban Development, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Providence, RI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2010</td>
<td>Vineyard Haven Public Library, Martha's Vineyard Island, MA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>State Representatives, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Beyond Hunger Conference, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Fighting Hunger in Maryland Conference, University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Campbell Soup Company Headquarters, Camden, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Gallery Eleven One, Camden, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Five-Year Anniversary Exhibit, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, Host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro and the Food Policy Council, Hosts</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
cuts to SNAP, or improvements to school nutrition programs. Such coverage includes stories in the *Washington Post*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, *Boston Globe*, and television and radio programs on CNN, CBS Evening News, NPR, Bill Moyers, and MSNBC. The participants have been speakers at forums, webinars, and panel discussions at agencies such as the National Institute of Health, the Institute of Medicine, and organizations such as the Center for American Progress, RESULTS, and the Food Research and Action Center. They also developed, organized, and facilitated each session of a three-day national conference called *Beyond Hunger: Real People, Real Solutions* in 2012, which brought together approximately 350 participants from low-income communities, federal agencies, advocacy organizations, and research institutions to discuss solutions to poverty. Finally, the participants assisted in making the feature-length documentary about hunger in America called *A Place at the Table*.

Although in each site the exhibition of photographs marked the formal end of the research portion of the project as outlined in the recruitment materials, additional involvement in advocacy work continued at the interest and request of the participants. They have been invited to give keynote speeches at national conferences, televised panel discussions, and lectures at local public and private schools; have written in social media and blogs; and have led webinars. Participants have submitted written testimony that has been included in congressional hearings on poverty in the United States and have been cited in the Congressional Record several times in Senate and House floor speeches. One participant testified in person before a formal House Budget Committee hearing on July 9, 2014 on the current status of the War on Poverty. The members of Witnesses to Hunger regularly visit their legislative representatives at the federal, state, and local levels.

When participants of Witnesses to Hunger spend time to prepare for forums, or to provide their expertise in formal settings, they receive an honorarium. If travel and/or significant time are involved, all costs are covered by the program, and stipends for time and effort are provided. Participants are not compensated for the use of their photographs if they appear in the press nor are they directly compensated for sharing their expertise with the press or elected officials.

**Implications for Public Health Research and Practice**

Although many photovoice projects include media coverage, advocacy events, and facilitated conversations with policymakers (Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1997), Witnesses to Hunger demonstrates a sustained, ongoing interaction with participants over multiple years. This type of engagement makes this program a unique and instructive program for many of us who do public health work that directly relates to poverty and public policy. Recognition from press, policymakers, and members of the general public exceeded the expectations of the researchers and participants alike, as has the commitment and involvement of the participants beyond the research phase of this project. Of the eighty-three participants who initially joined Witnesses to Hunger, approximately half participated in advocacy efforts beyond the original research timeline, and over a quarter have been engaged in a continuous, high level of advocacy that continues through the present.

Several factors might have contributed to the ongoing visibility and longevity of this project. When the program began, there was a significant absence of people most affected by hunger and poverty within anti-hunger advocacy activities, especially on the scale of national policy dialogues. There has been a notable shift in this trend over the last several years, and Witnesses to Hunger staff and participants have encouraged organizations to recognize the value of program participants’ innovative ideas and ability to organize around these issues. In addition, as has been found in other photovoice programs (McAllister et al. 2005; Wang 1999; Wang et al. 2004), photographs and videos presented in the traveling exhibition and on the website foster a personal and emotional connection to the struggles experienced by the participants that raises the level of public engagement with an issue. For example, Senator Casey explained in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that he voted against 2014 cuts to SNAP in part because of his interaction with Witnesses to Hunger, commenting that “rarely has one group of folks had more of an impact on how I look at an issue. … The Witnesses told me compelling stories of their real lives” (Lubrano 2014).

A major tenet of public health ethics, as identified by the American Public Health Association (APHA), is willingness to provide meaningful opportunities for participants in public health programs to be able to inform agencies about the design, implementation, and evaluation of those programs (Public Health Leadership Society 2002). Witnesses to Hunger fits squarely into that model and can inform how public health advocates continue their work. Public health professionals who intend to focus on issues meaningful to low-income families would do well to ensure that their priorities are aligned with the priorities of the families with whom they work. For instance, public health professionals focused on food security could create opportunities beyond the limited “listening sessions” by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and obscure calls for web-based input on programs to ensure that low-income SNAP participants inform the USDA and legislators directly about the effectiveness of program administration, breadth, and reach. Public health advocates sometimes ignore pressing needs of low-income families. As an example, during the dialogue surrounding the 2007 Farm Bill, public health advocates focused primarily on improving access to nutritious foods in communities, while low-income families were more interested in ensuring that the SNAP allotment was appropriate for family size and nutritional needs. When the most recent Farm Bill was passed in 2014, there was minimal involvement from APHA and other health-focused organizations in describing the public health implications of SNAP allotments. A greater engagement of public health voices, supported through informed investigation with low-income individuals, could help to bridge these divides.
and ensure that broad ranging health issues associated with poverty are addressed.

Additionally, working alongside program participants who have a vested interest in the well-being of their children and themselves, and who rely on the effectiveness of the programs that are meant to help millions of people across the country, including their friends, neighbors, and families, makes for strong, well-informed, and convincing advocacy. Health advocacy efforts have shown great success when they have included people directly impacted by the issue, including HIV/AIDS, cancer, and people with disabilities. There is a clear need for public health professionals to begin partnering with families struggling in poverty more effectively. This type of inclusion can also help to build the leadership skills of people who are rarely provided opportunities to lead in public health efforts.

Although the size and scope of Witnesses to Hunger may not be feasible for all researchers or institutions, many of the guiding principles and strategies can still be implemented on a smaller scale. The ethos of Witnesses to Hunger is to work directly with the participants to advance and advocate on issues important to the participants, their families, and communities, and to educate the public, the press, and legislators through exhibition in venues that are always free and open to the public. This entails openness to research directions that arise from participant priorities and commitment to including participants in advocacy and dissemination. We partner with Witnesses to Hunger participants in many aspects of the research, including co-authoring research presentations, journal articles, and peer reviewed manuscripts, and we actively solicit their participation in our ongoing advocacy related to hunger and poverty. Ensuring that participants can be compensated for their time and effort is an important consideration that must be included in project budgets. For researchers and advocates without the resources and support staff available in a university setting, collaborations with community-based organizations may provide opportunities for the sustainable, long-term advocacy work necessary for public policy change.

**Limitations and Challenges**

We did not design Witnesses to Hunger to be nationally representative, nor representative of a particular county or city. We meant it to be representative of inspired individuals who know hunger firsthand and who are willing to meet with community leaders, agency heads, and legislators about ways to improve systems and programs meant to serve low-income families. Generalizability is therefore limited because the research drew from a convenience sample, where participants were recruited through an existing outreach database and snowball sampling.

The participatory nature of this project carries with it some of the same challenges of other PAR. This includes the tension between protecting the identity of research participants and encouraging full public participation by those who want their own voices heard and identities known. To this end, we encouraged participants to choose whether or not they wanted their real identities used in the exhibit and on the website, and in some cases, we decided to leave certain photographs anonymous, even when participants granted permission to use their names. Although we sought full participation by all original members, participation at some stages of the project has been limited, including project design, final photograph selection for the first exhibit, and the final design of the project website.

Despite adoption of a method designed to subvert the unequal power dynamic between researchers and research participants, there is an inherent imbalance between paid staff and participants. This is an ongoing ethical concern for us; we have tried to be attentive to this by compensating participants for their time and effort at the rate we would pay research assistants and offering recommendations, connections, and support for participants as they pursue other work. As staff members of a research and advocacy center, we work on several projects and studies in addition to Witnesses to Hunger, which has at times led to participants’ confusion and distrust related to the direction of our time and funding toward these other projects. We have done our best to be transparent and equitable in our partnership with participants, but it remains an ongoing challenge.

Additionally, although we always cover transportation costs and provide stipends, full participation is constrained by the issues participants face on a regular basis: lack of reliable child care; challenges with literacy and computer competency; limited familiarity with the public policy landscape; and experiences with trauma, depression, and ongoing financial struggle. Over the six years of Witnesses to Hunger, participants have varied their level of participation as the other demands of their lives permit. Although many participants are more economically stable than they were when they first joined Witnesses to Hunger, others continue to experience significant hardship and crises related to poverty and trauma that have not yet been addressed by policy change. One of the challenges of focusing on issues of public policy rather than institutional policy is that it often takes longer to see changes. While continued hostility toward low-income families and lack of political support for the safety net has at times been demoralizing to participants, their perseverance has been an inspiration and helps us continue to advocate alongside them.

**Conclusions**

It is challenging to define and measure success in a project that focuses largely on participation in systems-level change. Although we might assess individual participants’ reports of self-efficacy and feeling engaged or reports from individual legislators regarding the impact of interacting with Witnesses to Hunger participants, the extent to which participants’ public education and advocacy work has informed public policy in a meaningful way might never be determined.

We remain confident, however, that despite this limitation, the level of participation in advocacy work demonstrated...
by this project marks a necessary shift in anti-poverty advocacy in the United States. When the national dialogue on hunger and poverty is rife with confusion, blame, punishment, or pity, Witnesses to Hunger offers a solid and meaningful alternative that provides a platform for participation of those most affected by policy decisions, legislative action, and dominant attitudes about the poor.

While the project has had many challenges along the way, the creativity and freshness of participants’ perspectives, the accessibility of the photos and their oral accompaniment, and the willingness of the parents and children of Witnesses to Hunger to engage with dignity, respect, and a strong sense of personal agency provide a viable solution to the deadening and often silenced disgrace of hunger and its consequences. It also provides an invaluable lens for researchers. It enriches the research questions, methods, results, and conclusions, pushing our science to be more creative and more accountable to those whom we hope to benefit.

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