

NCD LAB

WHO Global Coordination Mechanism on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (GCM/NCD)

Project Highlight - NCD Lab Cycle 1, 2021

Unmasking the drivers of type 2 diabetes through poetry and multimedia: The Bigger Picture public health literacy campaign (United States of America)



The NCD issue

Children and adolescents from marginalized communities are at disproportionate risk of noncommunicable diseases. In the United States of America, type 2 diabetes rates have tripled in Native American youth, doubled in African American youth, and increased by 25-50% in Asian Pacific Islanders and Hispanic youth over the last ten years. However, public discourse often emphasizes the diabetes epidemic as an individual behavioral problem rather than addressing its environmental and socioeconomic drivers. At the same time, affected communities often lack the platform to voice transformative health messaging that can change social policies to prevent diabetes.

The innovation

The Bigger Picture health literacy campaign works at the intersection of art and public health to shift the conversation about type 2 diabetes towards the environmental and socioeconomic inequities driving the epidemic. Amplifying the voices of talented youth from marginalized communities through poetry and multimedia formats, the project empowers young people to challenge the structural forces that promote unhealthy choices, actively transform their environments, and improve the health of their communities.

The plan

The Bigger Picture endorses a pedagogy encouraging young people to use language, metaphor, and imagery to improve public health literacy and boldly and creatively expose the structural drivers of type 2 diabetes. In dedicated writing workshops, artists from ages 14-19 from marginalized and low-income communities first interact with a public health expert and learn about the drivers of the diabetes epidemic. Supported by an artist-in-residence, they then create spoken word poems and perform them in school and other public settings. With the help of a professional filmmaker, they also co-create video-poems for wider online dissemination and social media use.

The impact

Since its launch in 2013, the Bigger Picture youth artists produced 25 award-winning and widely shared videos featuring their poems. In dedicated school assemblies organized by the artists themselves, the poems and supporting health messaging directly reached some 15,000 high school students, and the video poems have been viewed by more than 1 million people. The campaign also contributed to local policy change in California, and testimonies from young poets supported four successful sugary beverage tax initiatives.

