

Supporting thriving youth in Salinas, CA through community-informed environmental design strategies

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

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In Salinas, California, residents in neighborhoods are mobilizing to achieve community safety and prevent violence affecting youth. With a growing evidence base showing how environments can shape behavior, the Monterey County Health Department and Building Healthy Communities initiative are engaging residents in transforming the physical/built and social environments. Their goal is to support health, safety, wellbeing, and prevent violence. As the sexual and domestic violence prevention field increases its capacity to address shared risk and protective factors across forms of violence, environmental strategies like this are valuable to consider. While this work in Salinas specifically focuses on community violence and violence affecting youth, community violence is a known risk factor for multiple forms of violence including child maltreatment, sexual violence, youth violence, and bullying. Further, one of the objectives is to facilitate resident engagement in community-led problem-solving in a way that supports community cohesion. Research shows that poor neighborhood support and cohesion is a risk factor for teen dating and intimate partner violence.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE IN SALINAS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS CENTERED ON ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Coined the "salad bowl" of the world, Salinas serves as an important agricultural city in the central coast area of California. Historically, the city, and particularly the Alisal neighborhood, have been home to many agricultural and migrant workers who have been affected by high rates of poverty and housing instability in that area. Poor community conditions due to county and city neglect and a lack of social cohesion have led to a high level of violence and homicides in the city. As rates of violence in Salinas reached among the highest in all of California, a strong coalition chaired by the mayor and juvenile court judge came together to discuss what they could all do to prevent violence in the first place, before it occurs.

After the public health department was awarded a STRYVE grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce violence affecting youth and improve community safety, they decided to pursue a key environmental design strategy called Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). Recognizing the need for community involvement in this strategy, the Monterey County Health Department partnered with a local, community-driven initiative called Building Healthy Communities (BHC). CPTED combines changes to both the physical and social environments, such as greening and revitalizing public spaces to increase community connectedness and prevent crime and violence. This is a strategy that has become central to many of the community improvements in Salinas over the past several years.



Two youth interns present a map highlighting areas for improvement within the Alisal neighborhood. Photo provided by the Trojan Tribune (of Alisal High School) (<https://alisaltrojantribune.com/1667/uncategorized/cpted-salinas-creating-a-safer-city/>)

BRINGING RESIDENT VOICES TO THE FOREFRONT

With funding from The California Endowment, BHC in the Alisal neighborhood of Salinas has focused its efforts on community advocacy and multi-sector collaboration. The local initiative has been instrumental in bringing resident voices to the forefront of decision-making processes in the city, particularly in regard to updating the city's general plan elements as well as the Alisal Vibrancy Plan – a plan that addresses multiple issue areas within the neighborhood including economic development, community health and safety, transportation, quality of life (youth, art, parks/open space) and housing. CPTED has been utilized in the development of both plans, which is evident in the way that they call for equitable access to open green spaces throughout the city of Salinas. Paid youth interns were actively engaged and working alongside adults in the development of these plans, participating in community forums, and advocating at the city level for the allocation of more funding to put these plans into action. The interns have also conducted CPTED assessments in the community, noting areas and opportunities for environmental design improvements and presenting these opportunities to city officials. BHC supports the community of Alisal to work with the city to make many environmental changes to decrease violence and improve the quality of life for its residents.

BUILDING NEIGHBORHOODS FOR SAFETY AND COHESION

Research shows that unless the perception of safety is high within a park or public area, those spaces will not be used by the community. However, there are basic environmental design changes that can be implemented to increase safety, and thereby increase community usage and help to build social cohesion. For example, improving lighting or trimming back trees and shrubs can prevent violence and increase safety. These were specific actions that the city was able to fund at a multi-unit housing complex that had dark entrances and in city parks. By improving the lighting and trimming the trees, the city increased general visibility and made it safer for children to play at the park.

Safe public gathering spaces help residents build neighborhood cohesion. As Gabriela, the youth equity organizer for BHC puts it, "Improving the quality of a neighborhood's infrastructure brings people out and builds a sense of community – moving away from people 'watching each other' to people 'watching out for each other.'" One way, BHC has helped bring neighborhoods together is through an annual community-building event in Salinas is called Ciclovía Salinas. During this event, which is primarily youth-led, 1.6 miles of the busiest corridor in the Alisal neighborhood is shut down and open for an array of recreational activities. Through this event, residents come out into the streets to connect with one another and build community. Additionally, the youth who organize the event can build their leadership skills and recognize the power they have in bringing positive change to the community.

When advocating for improvements in the community, BHC and the public health department keep in mind the historical context that led to the current neighborhood conditions. Alisal has faced a lot of neglect by local government, which has had a huge impact on infrastructure and available resources. While advocating for changes to the environment, the team does so in a way that doesn't place blame on the community itself.

BHC is also wary of the potential threat of gentrification as infrastructure improvements are made. To push back against this threat, they are working with the community to develop strategies to make sure that residents can afford to stay. Two of these strategies are civic engagement and advocacy, which are crucial in terms of empowering residents to advocate for proper resources to be allocated to them – and keeping the city accountable to promised changes.



A community organizer shows before and after pictures of a housing complex in the Alisal neighborhood where lighting improvements were made to increase visibility -Photo provided by the Monterey County Public Health Department

ACHIEVING IMPROVEMENTS IN SAFETY AND SOCIAL COHESION

In Salinas, there has been a significant decline in the violent crime rate from 2007-2017. The work of BHC, the Monterey County Public Health Department, and other collaborative partners has coincided with an improvement of safety and a decrease in the number of community members affected by physical assault and gun violence. Hotspot maps have shown a decline in the density of violent assaults against youth between the ages of 10 and 24 and have also shown an overall decline in the density of crime in several neighborhoods in Salinas. There has also been a significant increase in social cohesion – something that has been measured by a National Institute of Health cohort study that has been tracking a group of Salinas students for 2.5 years.

Reflecting on her work and lessons learned through CPTED, Linda McGlone says, "...be willing to follow the community and let resident leaders show you the way." BHC serves as a great example of this lesson, letting residents lead the way in building relationships with the city and advocating for equity in the Alisal neighborhood.

Linda McGlone has 25 years of public health experience in Monterey County and has been the Coordinator of the CDC funded STRYVE Youth Violence Prevention Program, since the project's inception in 2011. In 2017, she received the "Community Peace Award" for Monterey County. Linda received a Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Illinois, in Urbana-Champaign; and a Master of Public Health Degree, from the University of Texas School of Public Health.

Gabriela Manzo has been raised in Salinas since the age of 6. She graduated from Everett Alvarez High School and earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology from Sonoma State University. She is currently the Youth Equity Organizer for Building Healthy Communities where she works with young leaders from our community in Ciclovía Salinas, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Her passion comes from actively including youth voices in decision-making processes. She is dedicated to building youth power through increased civic engagement within schools, land use projects, and other public institutions. She believes in the value of investing in youth development, supporting them as leaders in our community, not only increasing a sense of ownership but having them recognize the power of their voices.

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RESOURCES

- [CPTED Neighborhood Assessments in English and Spanish](#)
- [Healthy Development Without Displacement: Realizing the Vision of Healthy Communities for All](#)
- [Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design on the East Alisal Street Business Corridor in Salinas, CA](#)
- [The Problem with "Broken Windows" Policing](#)

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