

## Healthy Communities Photo Voice Project Synopsis

In the summer of 2010, the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) program, in cooperation with all programs of the Healthy Living Service, implemented a Photo Voice project. The purpose of the project was to engage youth in a meaningful way, and provide them an opportunity to contribute to the development of the Healthy Communities Community Picture.

The Photo Voice project asked youth to address the question: Does my community make it “easier” – or not – for me to be healthy? Youth were encouraged to answer that question, keeping the Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport (MHPS)’s six priority areas in mind: healthy eating, physical activity and sport, tobacco use/exposure, alcohol and substance misuse, injury prevention and mental health promotion.

The project was completed in two phases, the first in late summer 2010 and the second in late spring 2011. Sixty-nine youth (representing 69% of the original target number), ages 15–19, took part. Of those, 63% (approximately  $\frac{2}{3}$ ) were female. The average age of participants was 17 (16.68) years. A total of eight groups of students were formed: three groups in Barrie, and one in each of Midland, South Simcoe, Orillia, Huntsville and Collingwood. Groups were led by specially trained Healthy Living Service staff, who facilitated skill-building activities and discussion about the photos taken. Each group determined which photos were most representative of the issues their particular community faced.

Three main themes emerged from the notes and discussion points generated by the Photovoice groups involved in this project: the **Built Environment**; **Misuse of Alcohol and Other Drugs**; and **Healthy Mind, Healthy Body**.

The **Built Environment** seemed to flow quite naturally out of the group’s discussion about Physical Activity in particular, but also with issues related to Injury Prevention and Mental Health. For example, Orillia spoke to the importance of accessibility not only to physical activity opportunities, but also to the community as a whole; Barrie 2 raised the need for green spaces within their discussion of physical activity; and Barrie 3 spoke to the fact that although opportunities for physical activity exist within the community, they do not appear to be well used.

Barrie 1 focused more on issues of safety in various areas of their community. Participants in Collingwood indicated a disconnect between local residents and tourists who they view as treating the community disrespectfully.

Barrie 1 participants also made an interesting observation about the rules attached to use of infrastructure assets, and obstacles to use of those assets. Photos show signposts with long lists of activities *not* permitted in parks and on trails, and obstacles such as a fire hydrant in the middle of a pathway or a gate across a trail.

The Muskoka youth returned to the built environment theme repeatedly, indicating that they have ‘many trails but...’ limited sidewalk access and no bicycle racks. These youth were single-minded in their comments about the local bridge in Huntsville which suggest this area is of particular concern, both aesthetically and in terms of personal safety. Perhaps this poignant statement sums it up best:

“A lot of effort goes into making Huntsville look good for tourists; what about the people who live here?” *Quote taken from student notes in the Muskoka Group.*

South Simcoe participants also experience the effects of a built environment which still has much room for improvement, particularly in terms of sidewalks, street lighting and distance to amenities from residential areas. These things also contribute to the potential for negative behaviours around alcohol, substance and tobacco misuse, and hinder physical activity.

A majority of the groups identified **alcohol, tobacco and other substance misuse** as a top priority. Tobacco, alcohol and other drugs are viewed as being equally negative. Muskoka participants spoke to the availability of drugs, consequences for their misuse, and cited a lack of constructive activity for youth as being among the causes for use. The link between drug misuse and the built environment was made in discussion of areas known to be less safe than others because of the drug related activities that take place there.

Barrie 1 and 2 participants focused on the normalization of alcohol, tobacco, and some other drugs. Relative ease of access, frequency and focus of advertising, and the presence of these substances in every day life were cited as influencing factors.

Barrie 2 identified that the availability of over-the-counter drugs made it more difficult to “stay clean” but also affirmed that “parties” were a significant source of mental health, such that opportunities to have fun with friends and relax are beneficial. This logical disconnect is also observed in the community around them: Highly processed, less healthy food is significantly cheaper and more readily accessed than healthier, whole food choices; although most young people spend the majority of their day at school, they feel that schools do not promote active living apart from organized sports.

There was a close relationship between substance misuse and mental health in the photos, and also in the discussion the groups had; Mental health also emerged as a factor in the built environment through issues related to physical activity/healthy eating (for example, weight, body image, etc.). Peer and media influences, and the “culture of cool” continue to be identified as contributing factors to substance misuse. Interestingly, these were also identified as playing a significant role in food choices.

While Muskoka youth did not specifically address mental health in their discussion or with the photos they took, it does appear as a consistent undercurrent in their thoughts about substance misuse, lack of connectedness to their community and areas of town where they do not feel safe. All of these things will have a significant effect on mental health and resiliency. Barrie 2 youth also underscored the negative effect of unsafe trails and walking paths have on both a **healthy mind and healthy body**.

Collingwood youth highlighted music as being “very important to youth in that it helps them ‘get through things’ as it helps to energize them and make them happy. Sad songs can also support them by telling a story they identify with and by helping them to feel that they are not alone.” *Quote from facilitator notes in the Collingwood Photovoice Group.*

Youth photo contributions also speak to related issues of homelessness (Barrie 1) and need for mental health support networks and services (Barrie 2 and 3). Collingwood youth seemed more hopeful overall, and referred to their community as “moving in the right direction despite obstacles” and “out of the darkness and into the light.” *Quote from facilitator notes in the Collingwood Photovoice Group.* Midland participants seemed to have a disparate view, citing both peers and parents as being negative influences, and lack of law enforcement as one of their major themes.

The link between mental health and physical health is clearly embraced by youth in our communities, demonstrating that they have a deeper understanding of the complexity and interconnectedness of issues. It is clear that youth took the opportunity to have their say in setting future priorities seriously and their photos reflect that.