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# Mapping Emotion To Improve Neighborhood Health

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*At-risk youth use big data and creative expression to understand dynamic correlations between personal perspectives, streetscapes, and neighborhood health.*

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## *The Shady Side*

*"I say hell's risen  
If you even think about the Shady Side -  
Where the shade reside -  
And understand where the  
grimey people put your space rely.  
I couldn't even trust us,  
Satan would lie.  
What you thinking? Nothing else  
When they demonize,  
Using everything that they brutalize.  
Even if you trying to think  
About most of your friends  
Who've been scrutinized -  
You had to get it off the land"*

***--Tameel Marshall***

Rap artist Tameel Marshall is reflecting on "Shady Side Park," a spot that he and other young men from his neighborhood have selected for analysis along Brownsville, Brooklyn's notorious Rockaway Avenue. His performance takes place in his community, but not on a traditional stage—he is in a room in Brownsville's Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center where he and urban designer Alan Waxman are running a therapeutic program that focuses on the power of place and its impact on health with a group of at-risk youth.

The program is part of the new Urban Rhythms Studio initiative being conducted with AW Ecosocial Design. The team uses wearable technology (body sensors) and group

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feedback maps to show how community members perceive their environment. The method allows young people often thought of as victims or caught up in violent activities, to see themselves as powerful actors who can reduce street violence and improve health in their neighborhood. Brookdale partnered with the group by offering a safe space—protected by HIPPA law—where Marshall and others can openly explore the dimensions and risks in their environment through rap and other forms of creative expression, without fear of incrimination.

In Brownsville, as with many other neighborhoods around the country, violence has long been a part of life. But this neighborhood's residents endure some of the most intransigent violence and chronic disease rates in the city. In 2015, Brownsville had some of the highest rates of hospitalizations in New York city; assault hospitalizations were 180/100,000 population, roughly three times higher than in the city as a whole; psychiatric hospitalizations were 1,727/ 100,000 population, three times the city average.

For generations, residents young and old have learned to carefully shift from street to street, hoping to avoid getting caught in the crossfire of gang turf wars. As Brownsville elder Viola Robinson describes, “[in the] 1950s it was nice; there was gangs, they were fighting... I was down in Amboy street; I didn't venture, you know there was gangs and you stayed in your area.”

In addition to the direct impact of violence on victims and their families, several studies have shown links between community violence and poor mental and physical health in adolescent and adult residents, including higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and severe asthma.

In an attempt to devise an effective solution, Urban Rhythms works with at-risk youth who are closest to the violence. For the program, participants use smartphones to record their daily walks through the streets, alleys, and parks known to be the most threatening in the community, like the “Shady Side.” Then, in the installation space at Brookdale, the group watches the videos of themselves negotiating those streets.

As the group observes the spaces most likely to erupt into violence, they hear a background audio beat programmed with data reflecting pedestrian use, violence rates, tenant occupation rates, and other factors that may correlate with the social determinants of health. The group’s body sensors record changes in heartbeat and breathing as they watch. When their heart rates spike, the video slows to a crawl or stops and the group is asked to explore what about that particular location makes their hearts race and their blood pressure rise. The resulting poignant, place-based dialogue and poetry offer a powerful and otherwise elusive window into neighborhood social networks and dynamics.

As they reflect on neighborhood streets, wearables trace their collective anxiety and reflections. The resulting data generates a map of the neighborhood revealing hotspots

that trigger emotion, and behavior among program participants. On the map, the hotspots are correlated with data aggregated from electronic health records from the community. Observers of the complete picture can then see the impact of violence on the community and how adaptations in behavior among at-risk groups may change neighborhood health for themselves and their neighbors. Beyond helping the young people understand the impact of behavior change on health, the data map is a resource for health care providers and payers to better comprehend the potential lives and dollars saved by working closely with at-risk community members to fully grasp daily life in neighborhoods challenged by violence or other issues that threaten health and wellbeing.

The intent is that as at-risk individuals see and understand the exact power of their social network in community spaces, they will begin to be taken seriously by physicians, designers, and public health specialists and collaborate with them to create safer streets and spaces that support better health for everyone. In this way, rappers such as Tameel, can play a powerful role in neighborhood healing and design.

**Alan Waxman is an urban designer in NYC and director of AW Ecosocial Design. He reported on his new project at the Academy.**

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