The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre
Systems and solutions for better health

Citizen Science in Prevention Community of Practice

Toowoomba Healthy Towns: Co-creating physical activity supportive environments

30 November 2022

Presenter

Tracy Kolbe-Alexander,
Professor, The Centre of Health Research and School of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Southern Queensland
Tracy.Kolbe-Alexander@usq.edu.au
https://staffprofile.usq.edu.au/profile/tracy-kolbe-alexander

Session overview

This session focused on Toowoomba Healthy Towns, a citizen science initiative which aimed to give citizens a voice and support them to advocate for healthy, walkable and cycling communities in Toowoomba and Oakey, Queensland.

- Toowoomba has greater rates of adult obesity and physical inactivity than the Queensland average, with private vehicles being the primary mode of transport and walking and cycling accounting for only 7% and 1% of trips, respectively.
- The 'Healthy Towns' project aims to engage citizen scientists to document features of their neighbourhood and the built environment that impacts their physical activity and active transport.
- The project employed the 'Our Voice Citizen Science' methodology, which has been implemented in more than 20 countries globally. The Our Voice methodology comprises four phases: discover, discuss, advocate and change, with the overarching purpose to empower community members to assess and advocate for healthier neighbourhoods and communities.
- Four groups of citizen scientists were recruited in the project, including children aged 10-12 years (n=10) in Oakey, Queensland and adults aged 18-59 (n=11) and older adults aged >60 years (n=10) in Toowoomba, Queensland.
- Citizen scientists took a walk in their neighbourhood and used the Stanford Our Voice Discovery tool to take photos of neighbourhood features that support or hinder walking and cycling.
- Citizen scientists then met in group meetings to discuss and organise their photos into themes based on features and discussed potential solutions. Themes identified by citizen scientists included safety, crossings, signage, cycling connectivity, walkways, water, and aesthetics/nature. The actions prioritised by citizen scientists to address identified issues including crossings (e.g. more zebra crossings), nature (e.g. trees and gardens, native plants, improved air quality), parking (e.g. close to CBD), and maintenance and signs (e.g. more toilets).
- Two children and two adult citizen scientists volunteered to present their findings and advocate for their priority actions with local decision makers and councillors, which was well received. At the time of this presentation, priority actions raised by citizen scientists were under consideration by Toowoomba Council.
- Tracy reflected on challenges they encountered through the project including recruitment, especially due to COVID-19 and recruiting children due to the need for children to be accompanied by a caregiver, hesitation by older adults to use the technology as well as challenges in aligning citizen scientists' priority actions with costs and feasibility considerations.
- Tracy also reflected on several successes from the project including how engaged their citizen scientists were once getting on board with the project; the buy-in and receptiveness from council decision makers to hear the citizen scientists' findings; good timing which led to a window of opportunity for the project findings and advocacy efforts to contribute to a new local walking action group.
- This project is being expanded to Ipswich, Queensland in collaboration with Ipswich Council.