

In executing the Community Health Assessment, ABC worked closely with project partners, community allies and local residents to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes of the localized health disparities. This study differs from other more traditional health assessments in that it was not formulated simply by the tabulation of quantitative health data and research, but more significantly, it is also informed by the feedback and life experiences of local residents. The gathering of this community data was done through a series of meetings with community-based organizations, interactive community mapping sessions with residents, and information gathered through community engagement efforts as part of the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative in Boyle Heights.

During the interactive community mapping sessions, ABC, in partnership with Healthy City and local stakeholder groups, convened more than 230 residents and youth. The goal of these meetings was to identify and discuss the most pressing health concerns, caused by the physical makeup of their neighborhood, what contributing factors cause them and possible remedies.

ABC's efforts resulted in the following findings and strategic recommendations.



## Findings

In the community mapping sessions residents were able to clearly identified destinations for recreation and grocery outlets. However, of approximately 11 parks and green spaces identified, almost all were deemed inaccessible by some participants due to poor infrastructure, distance, gang activity, perceived threats and fear of violence and crime.

In regards to recreation space Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles have deceptively large amounts of open space. When looking at a map of the area, much of the large swaths of green space, are actually cemeteries that would not be considered recreation space. One exception is the Evergreen Cemetery





Jogging Path which is a 1.5 mile rubberized jogging path that circles the Evergreen Cemetery. This creative use of space has actually been met with great success in activating underutilized public space for physical activity and should be a model for transforming public spaces.

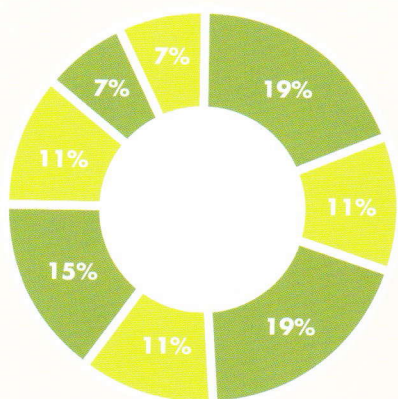
Similarly, of the eight major local grocery stores identified by residents as food resources, most were described negatively due to poor quality of food, unfavorable customer service, high prices, inaccessibility, and safety concerns at or around store locations. Public safety was also a cross cutting theme among many of the discussions with residents.



*“I don’t feel safe. There are drive-bys. The park has resources, but people can’t access them because they feel unsafe.”*

- RESIDENT DESCRIBES A LOCAL PARK

## Distribution of All Identified Environmental Design Issues



- 19% POOR LIGHTING
- 11% STREET/SIDEWALK
- 19% GRAFFITI/VANDALISM
- 11% PROBLEM BUSINESS
- 15% INAPPROPRIATE POLICING
- 11% POORLY MAINTAINED PROPERTY
- 7% TRANSPORTATION
- 7% OTHER

Community residents were asked to identify the most common environmental design issues they encountered in their community that act as a barrier to accessing resources.



# Recommendations

## 1 Create schools as centers for healthy eating and physical activity.

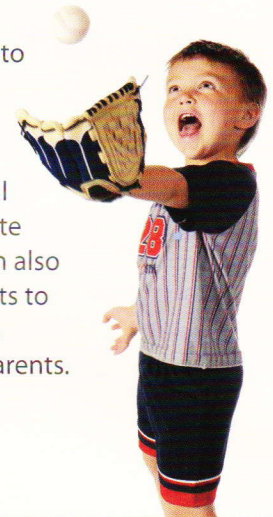
Transform local schools into epicenters for healthy living in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles by increasing physical activity on and around school campuses during school and non-school hours. In addition, schools should be a center for both promoting and providing healthy, affordable food.

Schools are often the hub for community engagement and advocacy efforts, and are a direct connection to families and youth in the community. This is especially true in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles where schools are closely connected to local community-based organizations and advocacy efforts. This entry point should be maximized to promote healthy living in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles.

In order to increase recreation space available to the community joint use agreements should be utilized so that residents can have greater access to school campuses during non-school hours. Joint use agreements provide a safe, local space for organized physical activities for youth, families and the community at large.

In addition, because of their close proximity to large residential areas, school facilities are naturally the most accessible space to provide alternative, healthy food options. Schools can provide the setting for innovative programs such as school site farmer's markets, community gardens, farm-to-school programs, food pantries, and a variety of other food alternatives that can cater to the needs of the community. With well over 80% of students participating in the area in Free and Reduced Meal programs, the need for quality, healthy food on school campuses is even more immediate.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Studies of programs in similar communities across California have shown huge successes in not only providing additional healthy food sources for low-income families, but also in providing "hands on" educational experiences for youth and families to learn the importance and ease of healthy eating.<sup>xxix xxx</sup> This "hands on" learning has proven more effective than standard educational material and programs that promote healthy eating. These programs can also provide an opportunities for parents to become involved at their children's schools, as many are led by local parents.





## 2 Establish a Health and Safety Buffer around school campuses.

Infrastructure improvements should be concentrated around campuses to ensure safe routes to schools; the selling of unhealthy food are prohibited/limited while the sale of healthy food options around school campus are encouraged and incentivized; and community policing groups work with law enforcement to increase public safety on and around campuses.

School campuses, and the area immediately surrounding them, should be a space that youth and families can occupy safely. By concentrating infrastructure improvements (i.e. illuminated cross walks, sidewalk repairs, extended curbs, bike lanes, tree shade, traffic calming measures, etc.) around school campuses and coordinating community policing programs, these spaces can once again be reclaimed by the community, providing safe and direct paths to and from school campuses, improving resident's mobility to encourage walking and bicycling. Childhood obesity rates among children and teens have tripled in the last 25 years.



Rates within our low-income communities of color have grown at an even more alarming rate.<sup>xxxix</sup> Many advocates suggest that easy access to unhealthy, low nutritious food around school campuses can be a direct link to rising obesity rates in our low-income communities.<sup>xxxix</sup> By creating an ordinance around campuses to promote the sale of healthy food, one can directly impact the over-saturation of unhealthy food outlets around school campuses. Part of this might include supporting the federal government's proposed \$400 million Healthy Food Financing Initiative which could eventually lead to more healthy grocery stores in these neighborhoods.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles mobile food vendors selling unhealthy, high-calorie food to youth and families greatly contribute to the health problems in the area. Suppression and enforcement are NOT recommended in dealing with this issue, since this informal economy is engrained into the cultural and social practices of the community, and accounts for a large portion of the local economy. Instead, a more collaborative approach is recommended by working with mobile vendors and neighborhood stores we can inform them on their impact to the local public health and develop mutually beneficial agreements that outline when, where and what they can sell near school campuses.





### 3 Take back local parks.

Efforts should focus on creating active, safe recreation space that accommodates the activities and needs of the community. Advocacy efforts must focus on infrastructure improvements at local parks (i.e. improved lighting, permanent exercise equipment, clean park facilities, etc.) and changing the use of the parks to support community programs for both passive and active recreation.

The threat of violence and crime, be it actual or perceived, is often a key determinant in whether the community will use local parks and green spaces. This fear can create a significant barrier to using local open space for recreation. A study by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that individuals who perceived their neighborhood as unsafe were more likely to be physically inactive.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The same study also found that neighborhood safety was one of five key determinants identified by parents as important factors in allowing their children to participate in physical activity.



The increased use of parks and open space will help improve the fitness of local residents, and serve as an intervention strategy for youth getting involved in gangs and crime. Studies have shown that youth who participate in physical activity and organized sports are less likely to have low self-esteem and are less at risk for engaging in criminal behavior than their sedentary counterparts.<sup>xxxv</sup>

By taking back local parks with alterations to the design, maintenance and use of those spaces, local parks can once again become comfortable and safe destinations for families and children to engage in recreational activities.





## *From Recommendations to Action*

All the recommendations presented address the need for more opportunities for physical activity and increased access to more nutritious food options. These improvements can be made through better use and design of public and private spaces, strategic public policy and the enhanced and deliberate use of resources.

Although it may be possible to achieve these wins in isolation from the community, we fully understand that the sustainability, buy-in and ultimate success will come through the participation and leadership of residents, local businesses, and community groups.



### In the Schools

Our recommendations have placed schools as the leading vehicle in driving the healthy living movement in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. This is due to ABC's long history working with schools and our success in mobilizing parents, families and communities to advocate for changes on their campuses. For this reason we propose the establishment of a Parent and Student Health Taskforce at school sites or cluster of schools. This group of parents and youth would partner with local community-based organizations and school

administration to lead community engagement and advocacy efforts on campuses.

Each Taskforce would address the immediate and unique health needs of their students and families on and around their campus and would address issues of health and safety, specifically those called out in this report. The Taskforce would act as a permanent vehicle for organized advocacy efforts to ensure that school sites are not only the place for obtaining a high quality education, but also a space that supports and promotes healthy living for all students and their families.



*"...parents and youth would partner with local community-based organizations and school administration to lead community engagement and advocacy efforts on campuses."*





## In the Community

Although our recommendations are focused primarily on the power and potential of school-based networks and resources, we are aware that other important opportunities are also developing outside school walls. In each of the following initiatives, we plan to build partnerships to drive these recommendations forward.

Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles are in a critical state in their history, with tremendous investment and collaboration currently taking place. In 2009, Boyle Heights was identified as one of the California Endowment's 14 sites selected to receive concentrated funding and support, over the next 10 years, through their Building Healthy Communities Initiative. This initiative has created an opportunity for local organizations, policy makers and residents to work collectively to transform Boyle Heights into a healthy, prosperous community. This collaborative provides an additional vehicle to advance the proposed policy recommendations from this report and improve the health and wellbeing of Boyle Heights residents.

In addition to the Building Healthy Communities work, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles are also the setting for additional investment and development that should be leveraged. Both communities are at an important moment in their development, as they are both updating their Community Plans. These efforts, led by the LA City

Department of City Planning and the LA County Department of Planning, will impact the physical, social and economic landscape of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles for decades to come. Community participation is imperative to creating a successful plan that supports the long term needs of the community.

Boyle Heights will also be a pilot site for the LA County Department of Public Health's RENEW (Renew Environments for Nutrition, Exercise, and Wellness) Initiative aimed at expanding additional joint use opportunities in the community in an effort to increase access to safe recreation space.

Other local efforts to be leveraged include the selection of East Los Angeles as one of First 5 LA's Best Start communities, the Gold Line Metro extension, future infrastructure improvement projects of Los Angeles's Community Redevelopment Agency, the submission of a federal grant application for the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative in Boyle Heights and the long history of a strong and active network of community-based organizations. Through these ongoing efforts, ABC will promote the proposed recommendations by building long term sustainability and broad based support.

All of these concentrated investments and collaborative efforts provide an opportunity to transform Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles into healthy, safe and active communities.







## Conclusion

It has become well-known that a poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle can increase one's risk for many chronic diseases. However, participating in social activities and having easy access to basic amenities that support a healthy and active lifestyle are often hindered by physical and social uses of spaces and the urban design of one's community.

It is important to recognize that many of the barriers low-income communities face in living a healthy life are a result of crime, violence, fear, inadequate food security, education, unsafe housing, poorly maintained sidewalks and streets, crumbling infrastructure, and a lack of economic opportunities. Healthy choices and behaviors must be nurtured throughout one's lifetime, but without a supportive environment, both physically and socially, those healthy behaviors become difficult to maintain.

Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles are at a pivotal moment where traditional norms, community development practices and flawed public policy can be transformed through the collective efforts of a community poised for action. Through comprehensive community planning, improved urban design, supportive public policy and strategic coordination of resources, healthy behaviors can become the social, political and cultural norm of these communities that will support a safe and healthy life for all residents of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles for generations to come.

## Mission Statement

The Alliance for a Better Community (ABC) promotes equity for Latinos in education, health, economic development and civic engagement for the betterment of the Los Angeles region.

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