

# The COVID-19 Community Pesquisa Project: Community-Based Participatory Action Research in an Evolving Public Health Disaster

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## Background

- New York City was the first US epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The Bronx is both the sickest county in New York state and home to the poorest congressional district in the country.<sup>2,3</sup>
- The Bronx experienced a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 cases and suffered the greatest economic impacts of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>
- Disaster vulnerability can be attributed to economic and politically marginalized status.<sup>5</sup>
- However, community resilience, the ability to prevent, withstand and mitigate the stress of a disaster and a theoretical buffer for disaster-vulnerable communities is recognized as a key domain of disaster preparedness and response.<sup>6,7</sup> Thus, interventions to build community resilience are essential to pandemic response and recovery in the South Bronx.
- Definitions of community resilience emphasize the essential roles of connection and collaboration between community members, community-based organizations and government, in addition to pre-disaster health status and information about the disaster.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 1. Chandra et al. Conceptual Framework of Community Resilience<sup>8</sup>

### Study Objectives

- The COVID-19 Community Pesquisa Project is a community based participatory action research group that aims to partner with South Bronx community-based organizations and advocacy groups to build the five components of Chandra's community resilience model.
- Objectives of this pilot are (1) building partnerships between a tenant association, community-based organizations, health professionals, and local pre-health professionals students, (2) developing, using focus group methodology, and deploying a mixed-methods survey of medical, psychosocial, and material impacts, (3) providing real-time referral to community resources.

## Methods

- Starting June, 2020 our research team physicians, public health students, medical students, and pre-health professional students initiated collaboration with South Bronx community groups (see Community Collaborators and Coalition Building).
- Using the social determinants of health, we designed a qualitative and quantitative survey tool of 58 questions to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on our research population. Next, we designed a questionnaire to assess the strengths and topics of interest of residents at two tenant buildings.
- We also conducted Saturday outreach events to collect the questionnaire data, recruit participants for a Spanish and English focus group, and determine the educational themes our team would present to future research participants.
- Our research team conducted two focus groups, one in English and one in Spanish, to assess the comprehensibility of the language, cultural competence, and significance of the survey tool. The focus group data and another research review done by the Bronx Community Research Review Board helped to further refine our survey tool.

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## Results



Figure 2. The Pilot Site and the South-Bronx Community Groups involved in our COVID-19 study, aiding in volunteers, translation and social services, as well as organization of Coalition building.

### Tenant Educational Workshop Requests

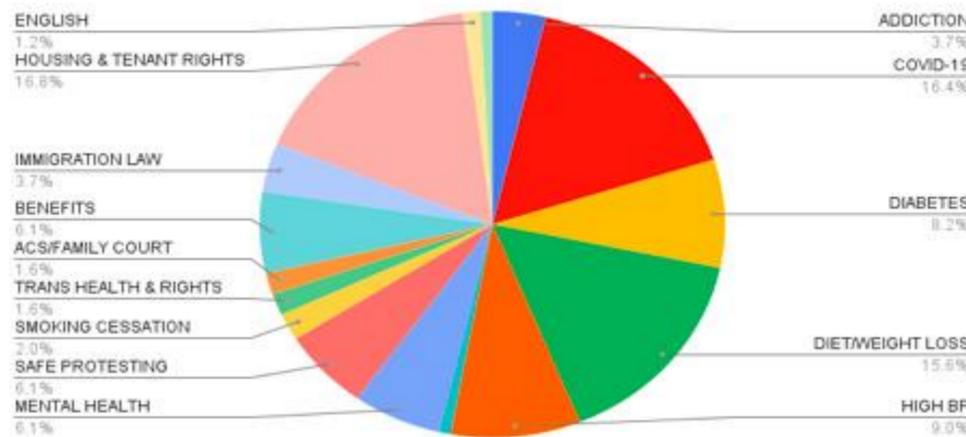


Figure 3. Proportion of interest in health and structural determinants of health topics (n=87 tenants) Of the eighty-seven tenants that completed the questionnaire, the highest proportion of concerns were in regards to housing issues (16.8%), COVID-19 (16.4%), and weight management (15.6%).

Spanish Focus Group	English Focus Group	Both
Emphasized lack of language access to materials and resources relevant to COVID-19	Discussed stigma associated with domestic abuse and insisted on closed-ended questions instead of open-ended ones for victims	
Intentional word choice was a chief concern given that there may not be a singular shared understanding of what e.g., "family" or "mental health" mean	Suggested questions regarding the impact of remote education on children and on adult stress	Raised concerns regarding the disclosure of migration status
	Suggested delivery of the survey via electronic means (i.e., email or tablet) due to its length	

Figure 4. Both focus groups recommended that we avoid questions requiring disclosure of migration status, while the Spanish focus group noted the importance of shared terminology, and the English focus group suggested adding questions about people's experiences with remote education and reframing our approach to questions about domestic violence.

## Results, continued

- Aligning with the five components of Chandra's resilience model, during outreach events, our research team distributed nutritious food, personal protective equipment (PPE), bilingual educational flyers and pamphlets about COVID-19 and community resources, and had bilingual health and social service navigators, from ContraCovid, our community partner, to provide direct referrals to social services, COVID-19 testing, and vaccination.
- The IRB process for CBPAR, in particular the approval of non-institutionally affiliated participants, delayed collection of data for 19 months, leading to a severe impediment in residents participating in the research survey. Participants expressed "survey burnout" due to the high demand of surveys being completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in decreased response rates over time.
- Regarding survey administration, the English language focus group suggested delivery of the survey via electronic means (i.e., email or tablet) due to its length and for greater likelihood of honesty amongst participants.
- Ultimately, the findings gathered during the meeting of the participating focus groups led to revisions and a final version of the survey that all pilot building tenants received.
- Though we have a finalized version of the survey, we have thus far been unable to widely disseminate it for data collection purposes.

## Discussion

- Tenant associations, activist groups such as Take Back the Bronx, and local leadership coalitions such as South/Bronx Community Health Leaders, collaborated in the research process and in the compilation of community resources towards resilience.
- Our focus groups identified cultural and language barriers which diminished community resilience and also identified community assets and resiliency topics that are important to our community.
- Barriers included differing understandings of mental health and family units, poor communication of COVID-19 information in Spanish, active misinformation about COVID-19, and difficulty of discussing stigma-associated or sensitive topics such as COVID-19, DV, and migratory status.
- Data gathered from the Spanish focus group highlighted the unique challenges of monolingual Spanish speakers in navigating the information space due to the lack of adequately translated COVID-19 information in Spanish.
- We experienced several obstacles in our CBPAR in the South Bronx, which delayed data collection and decreased community participation.
- Community hesitancy due to historical research abuses and COVID-19 stigma.
- Nevertheless, community partners such as individual leaders and groups showed willingness to participate and contribute to CBPAR initiatives and initial focus groups and surveys, leading to collection of preliminary data.
- From these data, the knowledge of barriers, stigmas, and relevance of resiliency topics to the community guided survey design and aided in the development of culturally sensitive contact protocols with participants, as well as serving as rallying points for community participation and incremental CBPAR progress.

## Conclusion / Future Directions

- As a community-engaged resilience intervention, the COVID-19 Community Pesquisa Research Project has successfully identified multiple impacts and hazards of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of one building in Hunts Point.
- Along with assessing tenants' concerns during COVID-19 through community outreach, our community partner, ContraCOVID, provided resource navigation services for tenants to better address their needs.
- COVID-19, followed by diet/weight loss, diabetes, and high blood pressure were the topics of greatest interest to the people surveyed.
- Data gathered from the Spanish focus group highlighted the unique challenges of monolingual Spanish speakers in navigating the information space due to the lack of adequately translated COVID-19 information in Spanish.
- The short-term next steps include actively engaging the aforementioned residents to participate in the survey and continued outreach for community engagement.
- Additional long-term goals include using the data to further advocate for targeted investment in the South Bronx, aid in the development of public health planning projects for the community, advocate for more trusted Spanish-speaking sources of public information, and the expansion of the research into other public housing complexes.
- Lastly, we also plan to explore ways to overcome the limitations of social distancing and remote participation when conversing with participants familiar with technology.

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- This project was approved by the Columbia University Institutional Review Board and BronxCRRB