

2. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH: FOCUS GROUP ASSESSMENTS OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF ARAB AMERICANS IN METRO DETROIT

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INTRODUCTION

The use of focus groups is an accepted method of understanding and exploring people's knowledge. Focus groups are organized small group discussions. They are "focused" in that the persons being interviewed are similar in some cultural, socioeconomic, educational, professional, or other characteristics, and the purpose of the interview is to gather information about a single topic or narrow range of topics guided by a set of open discussion questions.^{1,2}

The intent of focus groups is to obtain information on insights, responses, and opinions rather than specific facts. They are used to bring out insights and understandings in ways that simple questionnaire items may not be able to tap.³ The result often is a richer understanding of what is needed by consumers (the community in the present study), what program responses they may find appealing or appropriate, and what programs are likely to make a difference for their families.

Focus groups help to identify needs because they give selected members of the community a chance to describe where their true interests lie. The interaction among focus group participants brings out differing perspectives on beliefs and attitudes. By using only one ethnic group (Arab Americans) in focus groups, cultural and language influences that can influence outcomes in general and household intervention specifically may be identified.⁴

STUDY PURPOSE

Increasing evidence shows that low-income, minority, and immigrant com-

munities in the United States may face a disproportionate risk of exposure to environmental hazards. However, little work has been done that examines the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about environmental justice or environmental health among specific cultural or ethnic populations. This study examined the perceptions about environmental issues among Arab Americans in three neighborhoods in the Metro Detroit area, as part of an initial assessment phase of a community-based participatory research project on environmental health of this population. According to the theory of reasoned action, identifying parents' beliefs is the first step in predicting their intentions and their behavior, and the focus group meetings were considered a key element in developing an intervention program, especially in an immigrant population.⁵

METHODS

Seven focus groups, with a total of 52 participants, were conducted in South Dearborn, Detroit, and Hamtramck. A bilingual facilitator conducted all sessions, in either Arabic or English, depending on the preference of participants. Each group was asked a series of questions about their understanding of environmental justice, environmental issues of concern in their community, the impact of these environmental hazards on their health, and possible individual and collective action that could be taken to correct the problems. Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed in English.

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RESULTS

The study revealed that the perceptions of environmental issues among Arab Americans differed by geographic area, sex, and possibly country of origin. The results of this study, the first to examine perceptions and opinions of Arab Americans about environmental health and environmental justice, provided valuable insight for our efforts to inform and engage the Arab-American community on these issues. The implica-

tions for developing culturally sensitive environmental health intervention programs in these communities was discussed, along with recommendations for further research.

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