

SOUTH BRONX ASTHMA RATES

For years, researchers have tried to come up with an explanation for why asthma rates for school-aged children in the South Bronx are nearly twice those of children living elsewhere in New York City. Until now, most studies of air quality in the area have relied on rooftop monitoring stations, but these readings do not accurately reflect the quality of the street level air that people breathe.

To get a better idea of on-the-ground air quality, the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study, a collaboration of NYU Wagner, the NYU School of Medicine, and four community groups in the Bronx, has been using several types of ground level monitoring, including a mobile van that collects pollution samples at eight different sites in the South Bronx and equipping asthmatic children with special air-quality monitoring backpacks. The study is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, with the support of Congressman Jose E. Serrano (D-NY).

Thirty students with asthma at three different schools participated in the backpack monitoring program. For three weeks the children wheeled around specially-designed backpacks containing devices

that track the various air pollutants released by fuel combustion in trucks and automobiles, and they also maintained personal health journals describing their asthma symptoms. NYU project staff then monitored the children's respiratory changes, using both the children's journals and daily peak flow readings of their lung capacity, and analyzed them in relation to local traffic and air quality levels.

So far, the study's results have shown that the concentration of industrial facilities in the area coupled with the heavy car and truck traffic exposes residents of the South Bronx to more air pollutants than other New Yorkers. Ground level carbon particulate levels were higher in the Bronx than in Manhattan, and neighborhoods with many industrial facilities had higher rates of asthma than those without industrial facilities. The severity of asthma also seems to vary by neighborhood as hospitalizations due to asthma were more likely to occur in low-income neighborhoods.

The final results of the study are being developed over the next year and are expected to equip community groups with tools on how to better understand

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IS THERE AN EDUCATION NATIVITY GAP?

Foreign-born children in New York City may actually perform better than native-born students on standardized math and reading tests, according to a recent study by NYU Wagner Professors Leanna Stiefel and Amy Ellen Schwartz.

Stiefel and Schwartz set out to determine how immigrant students in elementary and middle schools were distributed across the city, to assess how well they performed on tests compared to native-born students, and whether or not there was a "nativity gap" in which native-born students score significantly better than immigrant students on standardized tests.

They also looked at whether or not both groups had access to the same quality of resources, teachers, and schools. With about 17% of its students foreign-born, New York City provided "the perfect setting for the study," says Stiefel.

Analyzing results from the standardized math and reading exams that New York City public school students take each year, the researchers were surprised by what they found.

"It turns out that there is no 'nativity gap'," says Stiefel. "And where any discrepancies do exist, they appear, for now, to favor the immigrant students."

Not only did the foreign-born students have equal to better test scores, they also received comparable educational resources based on student educational characteristics. In addition teachers for both foreign- and native-born students were equivalent in terms of years of experience and education.

There are several possible explanations for the results, says Stiefel. One is that New York City schools are effectively allocating resources to help immigrant students, particularly those lacking English proficiency.

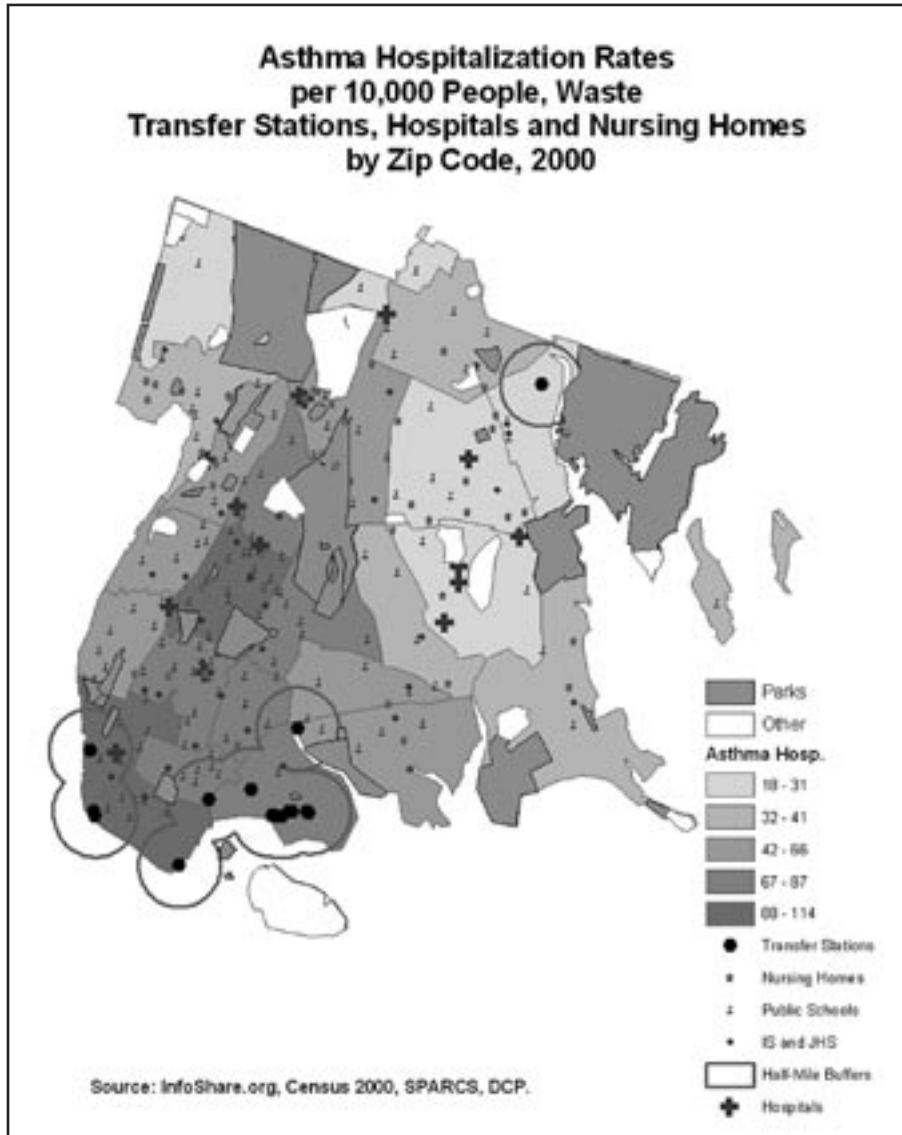
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AVERAGE ATTENDANCE RATE SELECTED GRADES, 2000-01

	Fall Semester			Spring Semester		
	1st	5th	8th	1st	5th	8th
Foreign-born	92.7	94.6	92.7	93.2	94.8	92.4
Native-born	91.7	93.5	90.4	91.6	93.1	89.4

South Bronx Asthma Rates

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the problem of poor air quality as well as to ways they can influence policy-making efforts. This summer and fall, the study's community partners will raise awareness of the impacts of air pollution in the South Bronx through the distribution of brochures about the study's findings, public service announcements, and by hosting public forums. The South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study has yielded a number of recommendations, including considering rezoning efforts that will increase park land, building new schools away from heavily congested roads and highways, and requiring existing schools to install air filtration systems. ■

Is There An Education Nativity Gap?

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It could also be that "immigrant families see education as one of the primary ways to succeed in America," says Stiefel. "Or perhaps they are coming to the U.S. with better educational backgrounds than previously thought."

Stiefel and Schwartz are now following cohorts of students to track their success as they progress through elementary and middle school, and also hope to begin to explore the success of foreign-born high school students.

Stiefel, L. and Schwartz, A. Is there a Nativity Gap? New Evidence on the Academic Performance of Immigrant Students. <http://urban.nyu.edu/research/immigattend.pdf>.

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CAREGIVING GRANDPARENTS MORE PRONE TO DEPRESSION

Having a dependent grandchild living in the home puts a grandparent at a significantly higher risk for depression, according to a recent study done by Jan Blustein, Sewin Chan, and Frederico Guanais, at NYU Wagner.

The impact of having a grandchild in the home affected some groups more than others. Single grandparents who were the primary adult caregiver for a child were more likely to be depressed than married grandparents, or those living with both an adult child and a grandchild.

The study also showed that the likelihood of having a dependent grandchild in the home varied with race and gender. Grandmothers were far more likely to care for their grandchildren than grandfathers. Non-white grandmothers were the most likely to be caregivers, with almost one in four having a grandchild living in their home. And only two percent of white grandfathers reported having a grandchild living in their home.

As a result, non-white, single grandmothers appear to be at the highest risk for depression.

“For them, it’s a double hit,” says Blustein. “Not only are they starting out with relatively high rates of depression [statistically, nonwhite women are at higher risk for depression than Caucasian women], they are also much more likely to have to care for a grandchild at some point in their lives.”

The study, which was funded by a grant from the federal Agency for Health Care Research and Quality and published in the December 2004 issue of *Health Services Research*, has important implications for both healthcare providers and policy makers, says Blustein. The work brought together Blustein and Chan, who have traditionally explored aging from different perspectives. Blustein has conducted significant research on the health of older Americans, while Chan’s focus has primarily been on the economics of aging and retirement.

For health care providers, the study shows that the stress induced by having a grandchild move into the home is significant and can put the grandparent at high risk for depression. Though it is difficult to make direct comparisons between stressful life events, Blustein says, the study estimates that the stress induced by having a grandchild move into one’s home is comparable to that of being the victim of a crime or of having one’s spouse become seriously ill.

For policymakers, the study offers evidence that grandparents are taking the place of the formal foster care system in many communities, and may need additional support as a result.

“We’ve known that grandparents were playing this role,” says Blustein. “But this study not only quantifies that fact, but shows that it comes at a considerable cost.”

The next step, says Blustein, is to assess whether grandparents and their grandchildren are receiving adequate health care support. Fortunately, recent U.S. Census data should be able to help yield some clues, as the 2000 Census included questions about the caregiving status of grandparents for the first time.

Blustein, J., Chan, S. and Guanais, F. Elevated Depressive Symptoms among Caregiving Grandparents. Health Services Research. 2004; 39 (6 Pt 1):1671-1688.

WAGNER FACULTY RESEARCH BRIEFS

Most child welfare agencies assign individual social workers to a given child or family, but the complex and stressful nature of the job suggests that a team of social workers may be more successful. NYU Wagner’s **Erica Foldy** is assessing a state child welfare agency that is currently trying a team approach to deliver social services to children and their families. She will track the teams over their first two years of work together, in an effort to identify factors that enable or inhibit their success, including the ways in which the racial diversity of a social work team affects the group’s interactions and effectiveness... Do students perform differently in schools that have kindergarten through eighth grades than those that are solely sixth through eighth grades? NYU Wagner’s **Leanna Stiefel** is studying the impact of school structure on student performance, and the research could have broad policy-making ramifications. New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced last year that the city will try to replace most of its 218 middle schools with K-8 schools in an effort to improve education for young adolescents... Researchers at NYU Wagner’s **Women of Color Policy Network** are currently completing a study on the disparities and needs of New York City’s community districts. Mirroring an approach used by the United Nations Development Program that analyzes disparities between developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries, the study created three indices that reflect the human development life chances for different population groups — one for youth, one for women, and one that’s an aggregate — and uses them to map the city into developed, developing, and underdeveloped areas. They hope that public decision-makers will use the indices to guide resource allocation to communities and public agencies.

How Effective Are Afterschool Programs?

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out.” There’s often an assumption that after school is something that kids either go to every day or don’t go to at all, she explains. But with the possible exception of elementary school programs, that’s really not the case. The evaluators found that adolescents actually turn out to be very selective in their scheduling, often going to after school programs only on certain days of the week, or only for specific activities that interest them.

The second myth, says Weitzman, is that “If you build it, they will come.” There’s been a persistent claim, she says, that there is a vast, unmet demand for after school services, and if programs were expanded, every student would attend. This also turns out not to be the case — the surveys revealed that many students, or their parents, simply are not interested in after school. Some are involved in other activities or don’t like the types of activities offered by the programs available to them.

The results of the evaluation could have significant policy implications, particularly if after school programs turn out to be less uniformly desired than was previously thought.

“A number of politicians have staked their careers on expanding after school,” says Weitzman. “There was this sense that if you could just convince people of after school’s importance, you’d be finished, problem solved.”

Results from the evaluation concerning after school will be included in a number of articles anticipated over the next 18 months.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS?

A major, 10-year initiative targeted at improving the health and safety of youth in poor urban areas is nearing its completion, and researchers at NYU Wagner are leading the national evaluation that will determine its effectiveness.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative was launched in 1995 with the goal of determining effective ways to improve health and safety for children and adolescents in economically distressed areas. Five cities -- Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond -- were selected to participate in the effort and each city implemented an eight-year plan to address the health and safety needs of its youth. Each city was encouraged to engage in multi-sector planning and systems reform and to use data and best practice models to create sustainable improvements.

NYU Wagner's Beth Weitzman heads the national evaluation team that has been following the activities across these cities and trying to understand the challenges they faced and the victories they have achieved. One focus

of the sites' activities and, overall, the evaluation is the expansion and improvement of after school programs in the five cities.

"There have been a lot of claims about the positive effects of after school programs, but a lot of them aren't backed by any research," says Weitzman.

Evaluating after school programs is quite a challenge. The effectiveness of a program depends on its purpose, says Weitzman. If, for example, the goal of an after school program is to put a dent in the amount of juvenile crime that occurs between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., then evaluators need to determine if the after school program is actually attracting kids who would otherwise be unsupervised and at high risk for dangerous or criminal behavior. Alternatively, if the goal of the program is to improve academic performance, evaluators need to determine if the students in after school programs are the same students who need academic support to avoid doing poorly.

After school programs also vary widely in their programming; some are very focused on academics (often in areas such as tutoring or

test preparation), while others focus on athletics or other "enrichment" activities. Others are essentially custodial -- a place for kids to kill time with basic adult supervision.

With these questions in mind, the evaluation team is using information gathered for the UHI evaluation -- telephone surveys, site visits, and interviews with local civic leaders -- to gather data about the students who participate in after school and the services that they receive.

"We wanted to find out what kinds of kids participate in after school," says Caitlyn Brazill, a member of the NYU Wagner evaluation team. "What age are they? What is their economic background? How many of them participate?"

To get a better idea of the demand for after school services, researchers asked parents and students about the types of programs and activities they would like to see provided in after school, and how often they attended existing programs. The answers seemed to dispel a number of long-held myths about after school.

The first myth, according to Weitzman, is that "You're either in after school, or you're

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