

# STRONG CHILDREN'S RESEARCH CENTER

## Summer Research Scholar

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### ABSTRACT

**Title:** *A Qualitative Exploration of Community and Personal Challenges to Health and Wellness for Urban At-Risk Youth.*

**Background:** Rochester's Champion Academy, is a unique youth development program that uses intensive mentoring to reduce risky behaviors among at-risk adolescents. A CBPR framework approach can emphasize healthy living principles during adolescence to build community engagement to promote healthy habits.

**Objective:** To: 1) assess urban youth perspectives on health and wellness; 2) assess understanding of environmental health problems, including climate change effects on health and the environment; 3) guide future curricular development to expand teaching on environmental health and benefits of healthy eating habits.

We conducted face-to face in-depth interviews with a subset of youth participants (n=8), alumni (n=2) and staff and key stakeholders (n=5) of Champion Academy. Youth, alumni, and program staff were invited to participate in completing an interview if they were attending a Champion Academy program activity in Summer 2022. Participation in the audio-recorded interviews was optional. Two research-trained staff independently reviewed de-identified transcripts and reviewed key themes according to principles of thematic analysis. Major and minor themes were analyzed independently and reviewed with general consensus. Where there were disagreements, a third researcher reviewed data. Data from these interviews were used to inform training for new orientation of Champion Academy participants (n=120). Quantitative data using baseline health and wellness assessment of new Champion Academy youth will be collected in July 2022, when we will do a training session on health and wellness directed by youth- and community-identified needs. Ongoing training on health and wellness will engage youth to participate in youth-directed advocacy projects.

**Results:** Youth ranged in age from 12 to 18 years,(100%) were black (100%) and had participated in Champion Academy at least 1 year. Key themes for youth (Table 1) were: (1) Pervasiveness of community violence; (2) Impact of systemic racism; (3) Limited power to make change. Key themes for adults (Table 2). were: (1) Environmental issues and violence have been normalized in the youth's communities; (2) The youth are often trying to just survive, which prevents them from putting direct attention towards modifying health and wellness; (3) Current educational efforts are lacking accessible and not accessible to youth. Educational interventions need to be grounded in reality and interactive; (4) Poor access to healthy foods ; (5) Mindsets need to change along with the issues. Primary areas to explore for health and wellness are: (1) what is a healthy diet?; (2) what does health and wellness mean to you and your family? ;(3) what do youth want to learn about health, wellness, and their environment?

**Conclusion:** Youth engaged in a youth development program have a specific understanding of what a "healthy environment" means to them. Crafting curricula to teach them about healthy living principles needs to be rooted in acceptable messaging that is relevant to their daily experience. Next steps are to build on engaging youth in adopting health behaviors during

adolescence, with the hopes that they will teach their peers, and invest in their own long-term health and wellness.