

# Advocating for Occupational Therapy's Role in Underserved Communities:

## A Mixed Methods Study

By: Jabari Hoyte, OTS

Faculty Mentor: Stacey Willis, OTD, OTR/L & Site Mentor: Aaminah Hassell



### Introduction

In the city of East Orange, NJ there is evident disenfranchisement as the median household income from 2013-2017 was \$41,819 with 19.1 percent of the population in poverty, an owner-occupied housing unit rate of 26.3 percent, and 16.2 percent without any health insurance (U.S. Census East Orange, n.d.). This is significant when compared to the rest of the state of New Jersey who has a median household income of \$76,475 with only 9.5 percent of the population in poverty, a 64.1 percent owner-occupied housing unit rate, and 8.7 percent without any health insurance (U.S. Census New Jersey, n.d.).

Recognizing that such disparity can affect quality of life, the student researcher sought to be a unique contributor to the sparse research surrounding occupational therapy's role in addressing this issue. As AOTA's vision 2025, discusses the facilitation of participation in everyday living of not just an individual but an entire community, this project was meant to create an understanding of the occupational needs on a communal level (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017). By collecting and analyzing data on the current socioeconomic climate in East Orange and its effect on communal occupation, the intention was to highlight the importance of and the ways to address occupation, which may subsequently improve the quality of life of the residents, as well as create future implications and a possible niche for occupational therapists within urban renewal.

### DEI Site/Needs Assessment

Independence: A Family of Services, Inc., or IFS, is a non-profit organization in East Orange. IFS's mission is "to create pathways to success for at-risk and underserved residents in urban communities through innovative behavioral health, mental health, residential and educational programs." IFS has been servicing a target population of disenfranchised youth and families throughout urban Essex County, NJ, for over 46 years.

Underneath their Independence Community Development Corp. program, IFS will implement the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, as it is a part of their goal to improve the community by collaborating with residents and investors to increase access to affordable housing, recreational facilities, affordable quality health care, jobs, and enhanced public safety (About IFS, n.d.).

A needs assessment was conducted in the form of a semi-structured interview with the outreach coordinator and site mentor Aaminah Hassell:



### Literature Review

- Gentrification Impact** (Mehdipanah, Marra, Melis, & Gelormin, 2017)
- Higher rent and property tax may cause low income residents to seek other housing options, forcing them out of the community.
  - Evidence of discriminatory practices amongst realtors, bidding to high-income buyers, leaving these low-income buyers to find other options in neglected or less affluent areas.
  - Can cause significant psychosocial effects due to a loss of social connections, feelings of instability and helplessness, as well as higher stress levels.
  - The areas that low-income residents are being displaced to may increase the risk of food insecurity, exposure to higher crime rates, minimal job and educational opportunities, as well as decrease their access to adequate health care.

#### Older Adults

- Housing has become the highest financial burden to older adults impinging on other costs such as food, transportation, in home assistance, and medical care, greatly affecting health outcomes (Vega & Wallace, 2016).
- Linking affordable housing communities with health and supportive services was found to be beneficial (Sanders, 2017)

#### Occupational Therapy Connections

- Determinants of Health (Vega & Wallace, 2016)
  - 40 % Social and Economic Factors
  - 30 % Health Behaviors
  - 20 % Clinical Care
  - 10 % Physical Environment
- Occupational justice (Wilcock & Townsend, 2000)
  - Those of low socioeconomic status in underserved communities may experience barriers in access to occupational opportunities and resources, thus reducing their quality of life (Braveman & Suarez Balcazar, 2009)
- Empowerment (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009)
  - Increases participation
  - Improved psychological well-being
  - Allows for control over their own resources
  - Motivates individuals to improve their circumstance

### Theoretical Frameworks



Person Environment Occupation Model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996)



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)

### Learning Objectives

- By the end of the DEI I will have developed my skill in data collection by successfully obtaining data regarding the connection between occupation and urban renewal/planning.
- By the end of the DEI I will develop my skill in occupation based urban renewal/planning dependent upon my data collection.
- By the end of the DEI I will develop my skill in advocacy for the improvement of the quality of life of the residents through the concept of occupation as well as the role of occupational therapy in urban renewal/planning.

### Project Outcomes

Theme	Quotes
1. There is a lack of activities/programs for the community's youth	"I find us lacking creative art outlets for children, there's not enough dance in schools, piano lessons, acting, or art studios for kids to paint. There's nothing viable to help them express their creativity, so if they don't do a sport..they're just home! Even if they do a sport there's not that many outlets for that either."
2. There is a lack of employment opportunities within the community.	"Unless you have a college degree, or some other type of skill in electricity, plumbing, etc. you will not eat."
3. There are concerns of criminal activity and community violence.	"Much of the crime is due to young adults not having jobs or things to occupy them."
4. Housing is expensive or poorly maintained.	"Elderly people are being pushed out of their apartments because the landlord wants to get new money, and if they don't have family that lives in this town or other resources where are they supposed to go?"
5. Residents want to feel connected to their community	"If you give residents a role and have them feel useful, they will feel more responsibility and belonging towards their community."

### Scholarly Deliverables

- Community survey**
  - Acts as a tangible form of data collection for continued usage.
- Data analysis resource**
  - Student created a pdf resource on how to analyze the collected data
- Power point presentation**
  - A power point presentation was provided to IFS and the Non-profit Network of East Orange to summarize the study and advocate for occupational therapy.

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### Discussion and Implications

- Crime and Youth Violence** (Maschi, Perez, & Tyson, 2010)
  - Exposure to crime can have socioemotional, behavioral, and psychological effects on the youth.
- Community Based Cultural Arts** (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, & Rowe, 2012).
  - Enrichment programs have been shown to improve conflict resolution, communication skills, and task completion, life skills, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and school performance.
- Detriment of Unemployment** (Carlier, Schuring, Lötters, Bakker, Borgers, & Burdorf, 2013)
  - Periods of unemployment can lead to stress related symptoms such as stomach and head-aches, as well as to mental health symptoms, such as restlessness, aggressiveness, anxiety, dysphoria, depressiveness and sleeping problems.
  - This can greatly effect other occupations such as the care of others and social participation.
  - Re-employment has a positive effect on self rated health and quality of life.
- Gentrification** (Mehdipanah, Marra, Melis, & Gelormin, 2017)
  - Can cause significant psychosocial effects due to a loss of social connections, feelings of instability and helplessness, as well as higher stress levels.
  - The areas that low-income residents are being displaced to may increase the risk of food insecurity, exposure to higher crime rates, minimal job and educational opportunities, as well as decrease their access to adequate health care.
  - Homeownership has possible correlations to decreased violent crime rates and increased collective efficacy (Lindblad, Manturuk, & Quercia, 2013).
- Collective efficacy and Social Cohesion** (Bandura, 1993; Stanley, 2003)
  - Community service activities, block associations, and residential organizations can increase a sense of connectedness and contribute to collective efficacy and social cohesion (Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010).
  - Promotes empowerment and the discovering of strengths and aptitudes (Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010).
  - Allows for engagement in dialogue with each other creating an connection and understanding (Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010).
- Occupational Therapy Implications** (A. Pearson, personal communication, February 16, 2020; B. Edwards, personal communication, February 17, 2020).
  - Therapists have the ability to address not only the described psychosocial effects created by the circumstances within the community, but all health factors influenced by occupation.
  - Therapists can facilitate empowerment and build the capacity of the residents by developing self advocacy skills.
  - A therapist can continue collaboration by creating and implementing programs to address the occupational needs of the resident, advocacy, allocation of grant funding, and add to the gaps in literature through data collection.

\*References are available upon request.