The Issue at Hand: The prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States is a public health concern. The prevalence of obesity can start at a very young age. In San Diego, 11.7% of teens ages 12-17 are considered obese[1]. In the US 12.7% of children ages 2-5 years old are considered obese. The rates increase for 6- to 12 -year-olds (20.7%) and 12- to 19-year-olds (22.2%). This isn't just about numbers; it's about real lives. Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black children are more likely to be obese than their non-Hispanic White peers[2]. Childhood obesity is a complex issue with numerous factors contributing to its prevalence.

Our approach: Researchers at UC San Diego conducted a place-based study in San Diego County to understand the social and environmental factors impacting childhood obesity using a strengths-based approach. **Researchers asked three questions:** 1) What matters to you in your community? 2) What do you like in your community? 3) What could be improved in your community?

We teamed up with 11 local organizations to collect people's stories from April 2022 to August 2023 (Figure 1). Nearly 1,500 San Diegans shared approximately 8,000 stories from across the county (Figure 2) on a web-based platform called Streetwyze. Participants shared their experience about a range of places and topics (Table 1). A full report is forthcoming. This is a brief synopsis of the study, findings, and proposed actions.
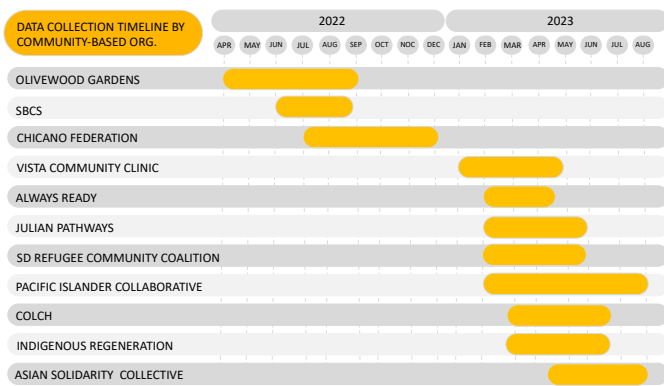

Figure 1. Data collection timeline by community-based organization. CBOs serve a racially diverse population in rural and
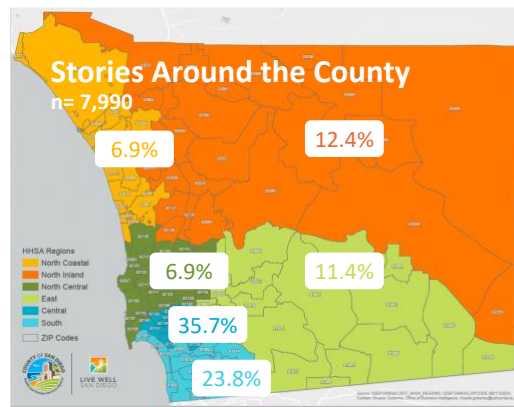

Figure 2. Stories around the county. The majority of stories participants shared were about places in Central and South County.

Table 1. Description of topics

Topic	Description	Topic	Description
Business	Business includes stories about private business that do not fall under other categories such as hair salon, mechanic, etc.	Food	Food is defined as the places where the community goes to get food such as food banks, supermarkets and restaurants.
Community Pride	Community Pride is defined as places that give individuals a sense of identity and belonging to their community.	Health	Health includes stories of both health and healthcare. Stories about clinics, exercise, or healthy eating were placed under this category.
Community Support	Community Support is defined as places (i.e. parks, churches) where community members go to spend time with other members of the community.	Housing	Housing includes stories people's housing experience such as location, affordability, conditions, access, social services, and homelessness.
COVID	The COVID topic is about people's experiences with getting support and resources during the COVID-19 global pandemic.	Public space	Public Space is defined as an area that is accessible and open to the general public such as parks, sidewalks, and streets.
Discrimination	Stories about discrimination are dictated by how certain places and people have made community members are treated differently than others.	Safety	Safety is defined as places in the neighborhood that make the community feel safe/unsafe.
Education	Education in any form that happens at daycares, schools, colleges, adult schools, or universities is categorized under this topic.	Resources	Resources is defined as tangible materials, internet access, and technology provided to the community to help them fulfill needs or address challenges.
		Other	Other includes stories that do not fall under the categories above.

[1] County of San Diego Health and Human Services (2022, August). *Childhood Obesity*.
[2] Center for Disease Control (2022, May 17). *Childhood Obesity Facts*. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html

"More help is needed to live with dignity."

Academic researchers partnered with community researchers to ground the data synthesis in people's lived experiences (Figure 3) and drafted community-centered policy priority recommendations for the San Diego Childhood Obesity Initiative (COI).

Figure 3. Photo of the COI Community Council with the backbone team at one of two data sense-making sessions.

What We Found: Our community wants to *"live with dignity."* This is difficult as incomes are incongruent with the real cost of living in San Diego County[3]. Housing is a major concern. Many are forced to choose between rent and food, with too many left without homes. One person said, *"It takes too long for someone to get approved for housing assistance, and that will lead to homelessness."* Participants expressed a need for *"authorities in charge to provide help."*

The COI recognizes that the housing crisis is affecting people's ability to afford other basic necessities and therefore impacting population health. The COI will partner with other collaboratives to advance housing equity while focusing on other areas of high concern and most closely related to childhood obesity which are food, health, and neighborhood well-being (public space and safety). These struggles are linked to the health of our children, impacting their nutrition and overall well-being.

Next Step: To address childhood obesity, we must confront and dismantle harmful historical and systematic structures**.** This requires a commitment to decolonize and de-imperialize systems that create and perpetuate inequities. It calls for a shift away from profit-driven motives to community-centric sustainable practices. The community wants to engage in participatory decision making wherein projects are generated at the community level as dreamed of by local residents. **The COI Community Council is calling for action in three key community-centered policy areas: food justice, health justice, and neighborhood justice.**

Food Justice: Foster equitable access to land, resource, and knowledge to improve access to fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate food and water.

- Remove barriers to wealth building in the food system. For example, remove income limits on Cottage Foods and Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations.
- Update land use polices to grow and share food in public and private spaces to create local abundant food systems for a thriving natural world.
- Promote food producing trees and shrubs in city, county and regional plans such as Hazard Mitigation and Climate Action Plans.
- Evaluate and update school wellness plans to ensure children and staff have access healthy food and water while eliminating sugar- sweetened beverages.
- Expand electronic benefit transfer (EBT) capabilities to small and diverse businesses to increase access foods.
- Enforce food and water regulations to improve sanitation.
- Expand existing food programs to enhance food security (e.g. SNAP, Mas Fresco, meal preparation).

Health Justice: Eliminate health disparities through equitable and fair distribution of health benefits and burdens within San Diego.

- Advance healthcare for all by promoting Medi-Cal expansion program for undocumented residents.
- Provide behavioral healthcare services at schools to improve speed and access to healthcare.
- Track, monitor, and educate the public about CA Proposition 1, Behavioral Health Services Program and Bond Measure (March 2024).
- Improve access to telehealth by providing internet access and training on how to use telehealth.
- Enhance the quality of care through education. (e.g. train medical staff on cultural competency and recruit multicultural staff)

Neighborhood Justice: Nurture healing centered engagement to address discriminatory practices - rooted in systematic racism - that has perpetuated inequality in neighborhoods.

- Advocate for reliable multi-model transportation to healthcare facilities and other critical social infrastructure (e.g. schools, parks, libraries, healthcare facilities, etc.). For example, participate in SANDAG Active Transportation, Vision Zero and other related plan updates.
- Invest in critical social infrastructure safety, maintenance, and programming to enhance belonging and civic muscle.
- Increase sanitation maintenance in all public spaces to reduce health hazards.
- Support collaboratives advancing housing equity.

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[3] United Way (2023). *The Real Cost Measure in California 2023*. https://unitedwaysca.org/realcost/