Center for Human Environments

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DIRECTOR (ACTING for 2012): Susan Saegert
PHONE: (212) 817-1886
EMAIL: ssaegert@gc.cuny.edu

MANAGING DIRECTOR: Jared Becker
PHONE: (212) 817-1905
FAX: (212) 817-1564
EMAIL: jbecker@gc.cuny.edu
The past year found Center for Human Environments (CHE) researchers engaged in more than 30 externally funded projects, which ranged from federally funded health-related studies, to international projects on children’s rights, to local New York City-based projects focusing on such topics as secondary schooling reform, college access in low-income communities, and the NYPD’s “Stop and Frisk” policy.

CHE project funding in 2011-2012 was derived from a very wide array of sources: federal agencies (NIH, Dept. of the Interior/National Park Service, Dept. of Defense [for medical research]); New York State and New York City (for college access projects); international NGOs and agencies (Save the Children Norway, WorldVision, UNICEF); foundations and trusts (Ford, Surdna, Public Welfare, Brooklyn Community, Deutsche Bank Americas, Bowne, ADCO, The Helmsley Trust, and The New York Community Trust); and community based organizations that partner with CHE researchers (El Puente de Williamsburg, Cypress Hills Local Development Corp., Red Hook Initiative, Asian Americans for Equality, Inc).

With more than 30 years of history at the Graduate Center, CHE continues to carry out its mission of advancing understanding of the human/environment relationship through a unique consortium of specialized research sub-groups that address specific areas such as children’s environments, housing, health and society, participatory action research, public space, developmental psychology studies, and the evaluation of social change projects and programs.

Here are highlights from the past year’s work conducted by our research subgroups:

- The Children’s Environments Research Group (CERG) marked its fourth consecutive year of related UNICEF funding with a project to develop a new toolkit that engages children in evaluating their environment, in this case the temporary schools set up following natural disasters or other emergencies. The CERG “Education in Emergencies” toolkit was piloted in Haiti and the Philippines, has been positively reviewed at UNICEF headquarters in NYC, and will likely be adapted for wider use in the near future. In the past year, CERG researchers also traveled to Colombia and Nepal to pilot another toolkit, this one supporting children’s self-organizing in clubs, groups and associations (a right guaranteed in Article 15 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—hence the name of this NGO/UNICEF-funded project). By the end of the year, CERG researchers had also laid the groundwork for an expansion of the Article 15 project to include associations of working children, which at present are estimated to count 350,000,000 child members worldwide. Throughout its development of these toolkits, CERG’s aim has been to support children’s authentic participation in their communities, and to strengthen children’s understanding of their own rights and their ability to act on them.

- In June 2012, the Public Science Project (PSP) hosted the second annual edition of its “Critical Participatory Action Research” workshops, which drew 60 attendees from secondary and higher education, community based organizations, and nonprofits from across the US and Canada. In addition to presentations from PSP Co-Director Dr. Maria Torre, this year’s sessions featured a “Critical Statistics” unit led by John Jay faculty member Prof. Brett Stoudt. PSP’s portfolio for the past year also included research and
documentation projects with Brooklyn community based organizations El Puente de Williamsburg (which is receiving multi-year funding from the Kellogg Foundation to enhance educational and health prospects of participants in its youth programs) and the Red Hook Initiative (sponsor of a community study of healthcare provision for young women). In addition, PSP has collaborated on a study of the NYPD’s “Stop and Frisk” policy, seen through the lens of a community survey in a South Bronx neighborhood.

Last, PSP serves as the umbrella organization for “College Access: Research & Action,” which has grown in the past three years from a pilot program at two schools in central Brooklyn, to a comprehensive training and research organization that is helping more than 70 NYC high schools develop peer-led college access programs that markedly improve college application, enrollment, and persistence rates for students from low-income communities, many of whom are first generation college-goers.


- In the past year, ActKnowledge undertook two collaborative projects with Graduate Center researchers: a three-year evaluation of The Helmsley Trust’s education programming for two low-performing NYC public school districts in the Bronx (PI: Prof. Michelle Fine, Psychology); and a multi-year, National Park Service-funded ethnography of the Staten Island Unit of the Gateway National Recreation Area (PI: Prof. William Kornblum, Sociology; Project Director, Dana Taplin).

In recent years ActKnowledge has become steadily more international in its scope, as evidenced in 2011-2012 by its training sessions for evaluators in London; its Gates Foundation-funded work for the Alliance for Financial Inclusion (helping marginalized Global South economies modernize); and—a highlight—Director Heléne Clark’s keynote at The Advocacy Initiative in Dublin, where she shared the platform with the President of Ireland. Actknowledge also continues its work as the evaluator of several public school systems in the Northeast US, as well as the Quebec Community Learning Centres in Montreal. In recent years it has earned increasing recognition as an international leader in the provision of online tools for the evaluation of social change programs. (See its “Theory of Change” website at http://www.theoryofchange.org/, which to date has attracted more than 5,000 registered users from around the world.)

In the past year, ActKnowledge has also been pleased to provide employment and training opportunities for two current GC graduate students and a recent Baruch College graduate; and it has broadened its areas of staff expertise to include law (David Colby) and economics (Eoin Collins). In the coming year, Actknowledge is looking forward especially to its new collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation, for which it will be providing assistance in program conceptualization and evaluation.

- In 2010, the Public Space Research Group expanded the public engagement component of its work by launching a Public Space Working Group site on the CUNY Creative Commons at http://publicspace.commons.gc.cuny.edu/. One major result in the past year was a two-day international conference held at the GC, “Protest and Public Space,” organized with assistance from Fabio Mattioli, a Dept. of Anthropology graduate...
student, along with other members of the working group. Also in 2012, PSRG Director Setha Low became an inaugural member of the Max Planck Institute’s three-year working group on public space and diversity, formed to investigate the new types of public space that are emerging in urban contexts around the world, and what these places can tell us about broader patterns of social and political change. (Following its inaugural meeting in Berlin, the group met at the GC for two days in June 2012.) Prof. Low is also collaborating with Canadian colleagues on a research project sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, “Exploring Condominium Governance in Toronto and New York City.”

- In 2011-2012, the Housing Environments Research Group (HERG) formed the Alternative Housing Research Working Group, which is dedicated to supporting and developing alternative housing models in the wake of the foreclosure crisis. Its website can be found at http://opencuny.org/alternativehousingresearch/. Following up on their interests, the working group, led by HERG Director Susan Saegert, submitted a proposal to the Urban Studies Foundation (UK) for an international conference, “Collisions, Collusions, and Collaborations: Global Perspectives on Urban Housing (In)security in the Era of Financialization.” The conference is intended to explore the increased linkages between finance capital and housing provision, with a special focus on the impact of financialization on the quality and stability of housing for low-income urban residents, both in the Global North and in the Global South.

  A notable publication of 2012 from HERG: The Community Development Reader, 2nd edition (Routledge), co-edited by James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert. This expanded volume updates the original study of communities as sites of social change with new material on globalization, the foreclosure crisis, and emerging forms of community.

- In the second year of her three-year NIH/NICHD project, “Residential mobility and young children,” Health & Society Research Group (HSRG) Co-Director Mary Clare Lennon presented findings at several international meetings: the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (Bielefeld, Germany); a symposium in honor of Heather Joshi (London University, UK); and the International Conference on Social Stress Research (Dublin, Ireland). Anthony Buttaro, a doctoral candidate in Sociology who has served as the principal Research Associate on the NIH/NICHD project, collaborated with Prof. Lennon on the presentations at Bielefeld and Dublin. Prof. Lennon has also partnered with London University on a proposal to the Economic & Social Research Council (UK) for a comparative study of US and UK data on home moves in the early years and the impact on children’s health and well-being.

- In 2011-2012, HSRG Co-Director Tracey Revenson began work on two subawards from Mt. Sinai Medical School, both of them expected to run for a two-year period. These projects, which derive from NIH/National Cancer Institute and Dept. of Defense parent grants, both deal with interventions to improve quality of life of cancer survivors, one of Prof. Revenson’s longstanding research interests. In Spring 2012, Prof. Revenson also launched a new colloquium series, co-sponsored by CHE, entitled “Psychosocial Determinants of Health Disparities.” The series brought to the Graduate Center speakers from St. John’s University, Harvard Medical School, and the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.
In addition to the events mentioned above, CHE researchers sponsored or participated in many other significant conferences or meetings in the past year. Here is a sample:

- **9/11 Plus 10.** Graduate Center, Sept. 19, 2011. Speakers were Daniel Libeskind, architect of the Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center site, and Michael Arad, architect, memorial at WTC site. Roundtable discussion followed presentations. Organizers: Susan Opotow, John Jay; Michelle Fine, PSP.

- **Growing Up Policed: Survelling Racialized Sexualities.** Graduate Center, Dec. 1, 2011. Brought together researchers from Hunter College, John Jay, CUNY School of Law, and the GC, as well as representatives of community organizations, to examine issues of race, sexuality, and policing. Organizers: Michelle Fine, PSP; Michelle Billies, doctoral candidate in Social/Personality psychology at the GC.

- **Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education.** The Science Café series at CUNY, Dec. 5, 2011. Michelle Fine and Michael Fabricant discuss their new book from Teacher's College Press.

- **Qualitative Inquiry and the Challenge of Social Change.** At Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel, Feb. 6-8, 2012. GC doctoral students Rachel Liebert, Hillary Caldwell, Einat Manoff, Puleng Segalo, Jen Gieseking, and Wen Liu were invited participants, with travel support provided by the Public Science Project.


Finally, it must be noted that CHE research projects in the past year continued our Center's longstanding commitment to providing financial support as well as training and research opportunities to CUNY graduate students. In 2011-2012, 27 CUNY graduate students received fellowship or salary compensation from externally funded CHE projects, while simultaneously gaining valuable experience in a variety of research tasks, from formulating proposals, to designing research and analyzing data, to producing reports and publications based on the research work.
CENTER FOR HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS - CONTACT INFORMATION

MAILING ADDRESS:
THE CENTER FOR HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS
CUNY Graduate Center
365 5th Avenue, ROOM 6203.04
New York, NY 10016
PHONE: (212) 817-1905
FAX: (212) 817-1564

Website: http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/

DIRECTOR: Roger Hart (on leave 2012); Susan Saegert, Acting Director
OFFICE: 6203.10 (SS)
PHONE: (212) 817-1886 (SS)
EMAIL: Ssaegert@gc.cuny.edu

MANAGING DIRECTOR: Jared Becker
OFFICE: 6203.04
PHONE: (212) 817-1905
EMAIL: Jbecker@gc.cuny.edu
FAX: (212) 817-1564

CHILDREN’S ENVIRONMENTS RESEARCH GROUP
CO-DIRECTORS: Roger Hart and Pamela Wridt
OFFICE: 6203.13 (RH); 6203.01 (PW)
PHONE: (212) 817-1887 (RH); (212) 817-1889 (PW)
EMAIL: roghart@gmail.com; Pwridt@gc.cuny.edu

HEALTH AND SOCIETY RESEARCH GROUP
CO-DIRECTORS: Tracey Revenson and Mary Clare Lennon
OFFICE: 6304.18 (TR); 6112.13 (MCL)
PHONE: (212) 817-8709 (TR); (212) 817-8779
EMAIL: Trevenson@gc.cuny.edu; Mlennon@gc.cuny.edu

HOUSING ENVIRONMENTS RESEARCH GROUP
DIRECTOR: Susan Saegert
OFFICE: 6203.10
PHONE: (212) 817-1886
EMAIL: Ssaegert@gc.cuny.edu

PUBLIC SCIENCE PROJECT
CO-DIRECTORS: Michelle Fine and Maria Torre
OFFICE: 6203.15
PHONE: (212) 817-8710 (MF)(212) 817-1900 (MT)
EMAIL: Mfine@gc.cuny.edu; metorre@yahoo.com
PUBLIC SPACE RESEARCH GROUP
DIRECTOR: Setha Low
OFFICE: 6203.16
PHONE: (212) 817-8725
EMAIL: Slow@gc.cuny.edu

DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES RESEARCH GROUP
DIRECTOR: Colette Daiute
OFFICE: 6304.14
PHONE: (212) 817-8711
EMAIL: Cdaiute@gc.cuny.edu

ACTKNOWLEDGE
DIRECTOR: Helene Clark
OFFICE: 6304.21
PHONE: (212) 817-1905
EMAIL: Hclark@gc.cuny.edu