Common Pathways Toward Informing Policy and Environmental Strategies to Promote Health: A Study of CDC’s Prevention Research Centers

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This study examined the roles academic researchers can play to inform policy and environmental strategies that promote health and prevent disease. Prevention Research Centers (PRCs) engage in academic-community partnerships to conduct applied public health research. Interviews were used to collect data on the roles played by 32 PRCs to inform policy and environmental strategies that were implemented between September 2009 and September 2010. Descriptive statistics were calculated in SAS 9.2. A difference in roles played was observed depending on whether strategies were policy or environmental. Of the policy initiatives, the most common roles were education, research, and partnership. In contrast, the most prevalent roles the PRCs played in environmental approaches were research and providing health promotion resources. Academic research centers play various roles to help inform policy and environmental strategies.

Keywords: public health laws/policies; chronic disease; community-based participatory research

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, federal and state health agencies have increased interest in policy and environmental strategies (PE strategies) that promote health and prevent disease (Dilley, Reuer, Colman, & Norman, 2007). The term policy includes a “law, regulation, administrative action, incentive or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.-b). Policy initiatives can be informal (e.g., a classroom adoption rule) or formal (e.g., a legislature passing a law). Environmental approaches purposefully enhance healthy options or expanding healthy choices that promote health, PE strategies have the ability to make healthy choice the default choice, thus potentially shaping individual behavior and population health.

Although a number of studies have highlighted processes used to facilitate and implement PE strategies, little attention has focused on understanding the roles researchers play in informing such strategies (Food Trust, n.d.; Golub, Charlop, Groisman-Perelstein, Ruddock, & Calman, 2011; Karpyn et al., 2010; O’Brien & Witaker, 2001; Petersen, Minkler, Vasquez, & Bud, 2006). This study begins to address this gap by examining roles federally funded comprehensive Prevention Research Centers (PRCs) played in informing PE strategies. Identifying and understanding these roles is important for future research and practice.
Community-based participatory research (CBPR) generates interventions that are responsive to the community's defined needs (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998), identified roles in the common roles used to inform PE strategies. A description of the common roles played in PE strategies is important for researchers who often disseminate evidence-based recommendations. Considering the potential significant impact of PE strategies on health promotion, we must document effective roles used by academic researchers to facilitate and inform these strategies.

Roles in Implemented Policy and Environmental Strategies That Promote Health

Few studies have explored roles played by academic researchers in informing PE strategies. Several