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## Strategies Employed by Inner-City Activists to Reduce Alcohol-Related Problems and Advance Social Justice

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**Article Title:**

Strategies employed by inner-city activists to reduce alcohol-related problems and advance social justice

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**Abstract:**

This study explored strategies employed by activists engaged in efforts to change policies and laws related to selling and promoting alcoholic beverages based on in-depth interviews with 184 social activists in seven U.S. major cities. Nine strategies aimed at improving local conditions and influencing policy were described by activists across regional contexts. Grassroots mobilization was central to all other strategies, which included creation or enforcement of laws, meeting with elected officials, media advocacy, working with police/law enforcement, education and training, direct action, changing community norms, and negotiating with store owners.

**Key Words:**

Alcohol policy, environmental prevention, racial minorities, community activism, urban populations, grassroots organizing

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# **Strategies employed by inner-city activists to reduce alcohol-related problems and advance social justice**

## **Introduction**

In the context of increasing awareness of the impact of alcohol on individual and community health, grassroots groups in the United States have mobilized to respond to alcohol-related problems by changing policies and social environments. Environmental approaches to addressing alcohol-related problems include community level interventions such as reducing underage access to alcohol, lowering the density and numbers of outlets in local communities, limiting days and hours of operation for alcohol outlets, and limiting the types and locations for alcohol advertising such as billboards (Babor et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2009; Gruenewald, 2011; Holder, 2002; Jernigan & Wright, 1996; Toomey & Lenk, 2011). Community-based efforts to reduce alcohol-related problems by changing the environment are particularly salient for inner-city neighborhoods (Clapp, 1995). Compared to other areas, these neighborhoods have higher densities of alcohol outlets (Berke et al., 2010; LaVeist & Wallace Jr, 2000; Romley, Cohen, Ringel, & Sturm, 2007) which contribute to problem drinking, alcohol-related violence as well as other health problems (Theall et al., 2011; Theall et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2012); a higher proportion of alcohol and tobacco billboards (Alaniz, 1998; Kwate & Lee, 2007); and are more likely to be targets of marketing for inexpensive high alcohol content malt liquor beverages (Deborah et al., 2008; Jones-Webb & Karriker-Jaffe, 2013; Jones-Webb et al., 2008; McKee, Jones-Webb, Hannan, & Pham, 2011). Ethnic minority communities are also particularly vulnerable to negative consequences related to alcohol consumption (Chartier & Caetano, 2010; Keyes, Liu, & Cerda, 2012).

Environmental strategies are effective in reducing alcohol-related problems (Campbell et al., 2009; Gruenewald, 2011; Holder, 2002; Wagenaar et al., 1999), and local community-based efforts may be particularly useful to responding to local priorities, mobilizing local assets, and creating sustainable change (Holder, 2002). For example, one of the larger studies to date, a 15-community randomized trial of the Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol (CMCA) project (Wagenaar et al., 1999; A.C. Wagenaar et al., 2000; Wagenaar, Murray, & Toomey, 2000), demonstrated success in policy changes and reduction in alcohol-related problems. However, few studies explicitly examine strategies adopted by grassroots activists across multiple inner-city contexts to address alcohol-related problems. Although case examples of mobilization efforts in specific cities (Clapp, 1995) or across cities in relation to specific problems, such as marketing of malt liquor marketing in inner-city communities (McKee et al., 2011) provide valuable insights about strategies, they do not capture the array of strategies that may be employed across different regional contexts and in response to the range of problems that serve as focal points for community mobilization in inner-cities.

This study begins to address this research gap by exploring the specific strategies employed by activists in seven U.S. major cities engaged in efforts to change policies and laws related to selling and promoting alcoholic beverages. Because alcohol policy is mediated at different legal and geographic levels, the campaigns in these seven regions ranged from those focused on civic and legislative bodies representing local community districts, to cities, and even states (Herd, 2011). Most campaigns had broad citizen participation and involved a diverse groups of social actors, including community residents, leaders of community based organizations, city and regional personnel, religious leaders, community organizers, and lawyers. All of the communities attained at least some of their goals: collectively, at least six state laws

were created or changed. In Los Angeles, many of the 270 alcohol outlets that surrendered their licenses did not reopen (Cohen et al., 2006), and hundreds of billboards were eliminated in some cities (Herd, 2011). In Los Angeles, one of the organizers now serves as a district Congresswoman.

### **Strategies for Creating Change**

Social movement theorists suggest that how problems are framed is inextricably linked to the strategies and tactics used to advance social movement goals (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cress & Snow, 2000; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). Collection action frames allow activists to create “a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributes regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movement strategies involve a claim (or demand), specific tactics, and a site or target (Meyer, 2007). Strategies employed by social movements may involve conventional means of persuasion such as lobbying, petitions, or press conferences as well as more confrontational or disruptive tactics such as demonstrations, marches, boycotts, or other direct action (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). Specific strategic choices generally emerge out of a broader strategic orientation of groups and activists, which involve ongoing consideration of “trade-offs” between the depth of the political challenge to authority (e.g., demands for incremental or fundamental social change) and breadth of appeal to potential activists or allies (Downey & Rohlinger, 2008).

Although some social movement theorists stress the government as the target for change (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), others point out that social movement activists often direct challenges toward a broader array of targets such as non-government institutions (e.g., mass media, corporations, religion, education) or in the cultural rather than civic realm (e.g., shaping

public opinion, or challenging stigmatized identities) (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Van Dyke, Soule, & Taylor, 2004; Walker, Martin, & McCarthy, 2008).

Viewing society as a multi-institutional system, where power resides in the state as well as other institutions, provides a more inclusive framework for understanding how groups influence institutions and how institutions influence one another (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). For example, activists may also draw on the power of some institutions to press for change in other institutions (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008), such as using news media to leverage change in corporate practices. Activists may also focus on strategies that facilitate member empowerment or build mobilization, even when there are not direct or immediate political benefits (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Baillie et al., 2004). This broader perspective emphasizes the importance of studying social movement strategies, rather than focusing solely on political opportunities in the environment, “in part because there is not presumed to be any obvious or inevitable relationship between environment and strategy” (Armstrong & Bernstein, p. 93).

The current study explored the specific strategies employed by activists in inner-cities for mobilizing communities and confronting alcohol-related problems. The study was based on in-depth interviews with inner-city activists across multiple cities, extending research that was conducted on the construction and framing of alcohol-related problems from the same sample of respondents (Herd, 2010, 2011).

## **Methods**

This study was based on data collected in interviews with 184 neighborhood leaders and activists in communities located in seven US cities, including Oakland and Los Angeles, California; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; San Antonio, Texas; Raleigh, North Carolina; Detroit, Michigan; and Baltimore, Maryland. These cities were recommended by key informants and

were selected because they were sites of substantial alcohol policy activity and provided diversity in terms of targeted policy issues and strategies.

Informants in each city were selected using snowball sampling techniques used by Luker (1984) in a study of pro and anti abortion activists. We identified potential respondents by consulting with community organizers and advocates involved with alcohol policy work, and by examining newspaper coverage of relevant activities. We invited individuals who were recommended by at least two people as leaders in local policy campaigns to participate in the study and followed up by informing them about the study and scheduling interviews.

The interviews and fieldwork took place from August 1996 through the end of 1999. About 40 interviews were conducted in both Oakland and Los Angeles, 28 in Milwaukee, and 17 to 21 each in Raleigh, San Antonio, Detroit, and Baltimore. About a third of the participants were regarded as community or neighborhood activists. Community activists usually donated their time, in contrast with those classified as professionals (41%), who were employed in public sector areas such as law enforcement, education, and city planning. A tenth of those interviewed were local or state politicians, 6% were religious leaders, and 7% were classified in other categories. The majority of interviewees were African American (67%), although a substantial number of Caucasians (16%) and Latinos (14%) participated in the study. Few Asian Americans (2%) and Native Americans (1%) were interviewed. Slightly more than half (52%) of the sample was male; and the average age of interviewees was approximately 50 years although the age range was 20 to 82 years.

The respondents were personally interviewed, either at their homes or in convenient public places (e.g., restaurants, offices, community agencies) using a semi-structured guide. Interviews ranged in length from 1.5 to 2.5 hours and were tape recorded. Interview transcripts



were coded using the QSR NUD\*IST program (Qualitative Solutions and Research, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing). After interview material was organized using QSR NUD\*IST, we conducted in-depth content analyses within specific themes. Data for the present analysis come from a question that respondents answered on what major strategies were being used in local community alcohol policy campaigns.

## **Results**

Respondents from inner-cities described a wide array of strategies for facilitating change to reduce alcohol-related problems in their communities. Table 1 depicts nine strategies that were commonly described by activists across regional contexts. Grassroots mobilization was central to the development and implementation of eight other strategies that were aimed at creating change in policy and broader community norms and conditions: creation or enforcement of laws, meeting with elected officials, media advocacy, working with police/law enforcement, education and training, direct action, changing community norms, and negotiating with store owners and community members. These strategies were employed by activists in varied combinations, to respond to local priorities and facilitate change the unique contexts of each city.

### **Grassroots Organizing and Mobilization.**

Although individual narratives elaborated on different strategies, respondents from all cities described an array of organizing and mobilization strategies that were primarily directed toward building grassroots community capacity, collaborative relationships, and shared vision for change. Several subthemes emerged in relation to strategies for organizing and sustaining advocacy efforts. First, critical to organizing efforts were grounded in *creating a sense of common purpose*. For example, one respondent from San Antonio commented:

It's very elementary...It doesn't take a, a person with a PhD to know how to go in and take

a neighborhood back. It's just a political dynamic and it's a fact of life and it's just human nature - You work with people on their self-interest and what they wanna' organize.

This observation was echoed by other respondents, including an interviewee from Los Angeles reflected on how individual interests transform into shared purpose:

In a personal visit, you would just, you know, call the person up and say, you know, I'd like to sit down with you and share with you some ways that we can clean up our community or whatever.... Basically, getting to know folks tryin' to build that relationship and find out what their interest is. If they're interested, bring them into a meeting to get them involved.

Respondents also described the importance of building *collaborative relationships* with different local organizations and institutions, such as schools, community based agencies, churches, and neighborhood organizations. One comment from a Los Angeles respondent exemplifies the importance of collaborative relationships, in this case working with other community advocacy groups:

Other communities would help us and we would help them. In other words, we got the work done or we gain more power by working together. Togetherness is where the power was, and that's the way we got the work done.

*Developing and solidifying relationships with a broad cross-section of activists and allies* was uniformly described as pivotal to efforts to create change. One respondent in Oakland described "community organizing, and then the rallies that we would have when we mobilize people" as "absolutely indispensable:" Specific actions associated with grassroots mobilization included holding community meetings and forums; passing out flyers; attending existing community meetings such as neighborhood association meetings; conducting surveys and

canvassing community members about “biggest problems in the community,” collecting signatures on petitions; and conducting organized outreach to different stakeholder organizations such as schools, churches, and addiction treatment programs.

Mobilizing large number of community members was a critical component of all specific change strategies, particularly in the context of local hearings and influencing statute legislators including, as one Baltimore respondent described:

Writing letters, coming in and meeting them, making sure that when we had hearings that we were able to draw large numbers of people... 'cause in most cases people respond when you have a bigger crowd than when you have a smaller crowd.”

Another respondent from Baltimore noted, “Our whole power was the numbers of people we had.” Similarly, a respondent from San Antonio explained, “You have to bring in more people that have a common cause with you... You see, the only thing that move officials, is voters.”

Activists often described the advantage of involving allies in broad mobilization efforts. For example, one respondent from Raleigh commented that, “Although we looked at it as an issue affecting the Black community, but what happened was during the public hearing we had people from all over the state of North Carolina talking about alcohol.”

*Building leadership capacity* among individuals and groups was also an integral part of on-going organizing. Leadership capacity was cultivated through mentoring of interested grassroots community members, provision of training, and recruiting existing community leaders (e.g., church leaders, leaders in neighborhood associations) into campaigns. An activist in Baltimore described specific activities that exemplify capacity building and leadership development:

We held an actual training workshop with and in the Hearing room of the Baltimore Liquor Board Commission. We did role-playing. We did a lot of trying to prepare

folks as to what the process is for going to the Hearings...so that folks could not feel so intimidated. Also, we took groups to meet their individual legislators. Have 'em set up meetings and learn the rapport, and give their issue one-on-one. We set up meetings where all the legislators came and we could have conversations...If nothing else, it was our goal to encourage activism, to get folks to understand if they participate in the process, then they had a good chance of justice, whatever the issue is. And one of the other things is that we were real clear that although we were addressing addictions, per se, or alcohol and tobacco...our goal was that they would take these kinds of things and take 'em back into their community, and utilize 'em on different issues.

### **Creation/Enforcement of Existing Laws**

A majority of respondents across all sites (over 64 percent) described details related to creation of local ordinances, enforcement of existing laws, and opposition to state laws that would undermine local control. Specific policy initiatives included development of ordinances to restrict over-concentration of alcohol outlets, restricting placement of alcohol and tobacco billboards or signs in public places (such as buses), limiting signage in convenience store windows, creating and using local ordinances to place conditions on problem outlets, and enforcement of prohibition against sales of alcohol or tobacco to underage youth. Some policy efforts centered on concerns about drug use, such as ordinances to prohibit sales of drug paraphernalia (e.g., “crack pipes, scales, little baggies to bag the stuff up”). One respondent from Baltimore described working with local stakeholders to effect change in state legislation:

There are certain things that legislation can do. It can get billboards removed. So once we realized that that would be a legislative decision, then we determined as you

do, how best to get a piece of legislation [passed]. You know, what to do you, who do you have to see.

Some activists described grassroots efforts to enforce existing laws, such as prohibition against sales of alcohol and tobacco to minors. This strategy was illustrated by one activist in Detroit, who described how community activists, with assistance from research experts at a local university, generated a random sample of alcohol outlets from a list of all licensed outlets, then ...trained young people to go and just check... and that became a very powerful tool in advocacy. To say, 'Look, this is the law, and this is what is happening...and when we start showing those who are given that [enforcement] responsibility, that moves it up on their priority list.

Similarly, an interviewee in Milwaukee described the importance of monitoring outlets in order to ensure that residents report complaints and concerns about problem outlets "when they come up for renewal" since the local policy-makers will "listen to the neighborhood."

Activists also described seeking guidance in the development and implementation of policy initiatives through consultation with local policy experts and activists from other regions. For example, one respondent in Milwaukee described how local activists obtained information about sample ordinances from other cities through a national organization, then "modeled our own proposals in part, from the ideas by those draft ordinances." The same respondent observed that drawing on policy examples from other regions in the country "helped legitimize it" by showing "we're just trying to get done what other people have already gotten done."

Developing, strengthening, and utilizing local ordinances designed to empower communities to have a voice in controlling the number of alcohol outlets, and imposing sanctions against problem outlets, were pivotal strategies across communities. Although many of the local

policies advocated by activists across sites were similar, there were also notable differences in the social and political contexts in which policies were formed. Oakland activists described passing a particularly strong local ordinance, which “charged a fee so that you could pay for the staff to monitor, inspect and educate the retailers.” Policy struggles in Oakland involved fighting to maintain the fee structure because, as one respondent explained, “If they got rid of the fees, that would have destroyed the whole point because you couldn't have staffed it.” In Los Angeles, policy advocates frequently referred to the 1992 civil unrest, when ongoing efforts to address problems related to alcohol outlets (overconcentration, drug sales, loitering, crime, sales to minors) were amplified considerably. “There were quite a few alcohol outlets that were destroyed or damaged during the civil unrest and the community was trying to develop a strategy to induce the city to regulate the rebuilding effort,” one respondent explained. Activist efforts were successful and “What finally ended up happening at the outset was that the city agreed that there would be a public hearing; it would be a limited process known as a Plan Approvable Process.” Activists worked with local policy makers and planning agencies to:

...try to come up with a series of mitigation measures, conditions that are designed to stop these problems. For example, the standard condition that there be lighting...a standard condition that there would be one, and sometimes two, security guards to try and patrol the premises. There were requirements that parking lots be maintained, free of trash and rubbish. That there not be old furniture outside, you know, the “lounge.” And parallel to that there was a process that I think is still going on in some cases to invoke the Conditional Use Permits for the most notorious of the uses.

### **Meeting with Elected Officials**

Respondents noted that impacting the policy environment first required “getting a clear understanding of the power structure and decision-makers” from “the city level up to the State level” (Los Angeles respondent). Activists described meeting with elected officials individually and in the context of public hearings as a key strategy for developing and using local ordinances or state laws to address local problems. Across inner-city contexts, speaking out at local hearings was a critical strategy. A quote from one Los Angeles respondent typified observations about how testimony from residents was critical to impacting policy and influencing elected officials and other public officials, such as members of planning commissions with authority over land use:

Individual people from the community including myself, we gave testimonies at City Hall, before the Planning Commission and the counselors. And I think, that’s where we could we got more attention from them because we were the individual people in the community and not just the hired help or the elected help... We as individuals in the in the community were saying what we saw and what we heard, and what we knew, because we had to live around it each day.

Respondents also often described public hearings with elected officials as an important arena in which contests with alcohol industry representatives were waged and won. For example, one respondent from Baltimore noted that the coalition, “as a grassroots organization, went up against the big giants” during hearings related to billboard policies. Representatives from the alcohol and tobacco industries spent “millions of dollars just against us.” The respondent noted that the “main hearing” continued from “five o'clock that night 'til 3 in the morning” and the ultimately the advocates succeeded. In this context, policy makers decided in favor of community members, responding to “the fact that we put our emphasis on protecting

youth, not about changing the habits of adults – that is the responsibility of the government and the community to protect the health and welfare of children.”

Many respondents described ongoing, productive relationships with policy makers, which paved the way for specific collaborative efforts such as helping to inform development of new ordinances or bills. For example, several respondents from Baltimore described how community members developed relationships and worked with key legislators to organize hearings about strengthening the regulations related to issuing alcohol licenses through the Alcohol Beverage Control, which was determined to be a major impediment to reducing local problems. Some respondents described how forging relationships with legislators and other policy makers required a different repertoire of skills and communication strategies than those required for protest strategies. This idea was captured by an observation from one Los Angeles respondent: “I learned I don’t have to be as loud; I have learned that, although the volume may have decreased, the passion hasn’t. You have to convey the same passion without (pause) the noise level.” In addition, several respondents commented about how relationships with policy-makers became reciprocal. For example, one respondent from Los Angeles described responding to a city council member request to help address a local problem, noting that “Access is a two-way street. And if I can call them, then they can call me....That’s what I mean by reciprocity.”

### **Media advocacy**

Respondents described the importance of leveraging media coverage to support policy change as well as to strengthen public support and active involvement in campaigns. One respondent in Oakland described how advocates were about to “use the media as a hammer” to “influence the policymakers.” Organizing the media event involved engaging grassroots



community stakeholders so that activists “achieved our goals of both the media and the coalition building or organization building.” One interviewee in Baltimore echoed the value of media in building membership: “Getting press coverage of whatever you're doing is another important strategy; to make people aware - people who don't normally come to your meetings or aren't a part of your group - and try to enlist some more help.” Activists frequently described developing relationships with media representatives, writing editorials, and holding press conferences to garner political and public support for specific policy initiatives. This theme was exemplified by remarks from one respondent from Oakland, where the focus was on the City Council since “they were the power brokers in this ordinance” to sustain fees from liquor stores to fund compliance with local and state law:

There were times when we would be waiting on a vote from the City Council. And we knew that this vote was coming up in two or three days. And so we would call a meeting in somebody's district. You know like a community meeting and show all the TV coverage that we had gotten so far on the issue or something and then we'd take that to the City Council office and show them that coverage.

Community activists were creative in finding frames to attract news media attention. In Baltimore, activists emphasized a “David and Goliath” frame to challenge the proliferation of alcohol and tobacco billboards in inner-city areas. Specific events were organized or announced to garner media attention. One Baltimore activist described, “Some of the billboards that was on people's property, they let us pull down - We did that, too, and the television picked that up.” Activists in Oakland described successfully inviting “exclusive” coverage of a visit from alcohol policy activists from another inner-city community, leveraging a meeting with a “drug czar” into a media event, and attracting news media that “came for the kids” who served as primary

spokespersons. Activists were also creative in working with non-news media outlets. For example, in Milwaukee, one interviewee described an effort to directly influence media in an “Erase and Replace” campaign: “We got the billboard companies, not the alcohol company, but the billboard companies to erase some of their billboards and replace it with the posters that children had submitted for a contest that spoke out against substance abuse.”

### **Working with Police**

Representatives across all regions described working with police and close to 30 percent of the individual respondents described specific strategies linked to collaboration with law enforcement. There were two sub-themes in this general area: enforcing laws and ordinances and addressing larger shared community concerns. Respondents typically described working with local police and with state level Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) representatives to enforce existing laws, such as prohibitions against sales to minors, or in using local ordinances to address problem outlets. For example, interviewees across sites typically described working in conjunction with police in efforts to identify and sanction alcohol outlets that were violating laws against sales to minors. Collaborative decoy operations were one of the most commonly described strategies. One respondent described how youth volunteers from the community, with permission of parents and in collaboration with police, would participate in “decoy” operations where “minors go in and buy liquor and cigarettes.” This strategy “helped to put some of these establishments on notice” and “got the local police department building a record against them that we, in turn, sent that information to the ABC.”

Testimony or use of data from local police and the Alcohol Beverage Control were also important in local hearings related to using local ordinances to sanction problem outlets. In

Baltimore, one advocate described the value of information from police to provide credible support during hearings about problem outlets:

Once you get down to the hearing...you need a little more power behind you, pictures or documentation of problems. Sometimes you can get the police department to bring the printout of the "911" calls that they've got into the area.

Representatives across communities described grassroots efforts to assess and document a compliance with laws. One respondent from Detroit commented:

We simply try to do a compliance check and then, of course, identify that to the planning commission as well as the police department to say 'Look, we have this law on the books and this is the compliance [issue] here.

However, collaborative relationships that were characterized by cooperation often developed over time. The evolving nature of this relationship was captured by another Detroit interviewee:

There were elements of blight in the neighborhood. Gangs could hang out at party stores. The party store owners, in some cases, were afraid of the gang members. But in any case, selling beer to kids was okay. It was approved, it was the way things went in this neighborhood... We did a march on - we did actions on - I guess, about 20 party stores on a Saturday morning. We brought the police into it to some extent and, since then, I've noticed that... the party stores are at least a little more, a little bolder in enforcing their own limits on kids. They've at least cleaned up their act. The way we do it now is rather than target the party store directly, we know that we've got relations with the police now who didn't respect us back then. But, now we've got the sheriff and the police who, when we say, "Here is a drug house or here is a party store. Here's a place that you need to investigate," they do it.

One important component of success in working with police or other law enforcement centered on finding ways to facilitate communication and consultation between community members and law enforcement. Different communities described developing relationships with specific law enforcement contacts, having law enforcement representatives (or in one case, a district attorney) attend meetings, or holding special meetings to “get on the same page” between communities, local police, and the state ABC.

Activists from inner-cities sometimes described working with police to address larger community concerns that were linked with, but extended beyond, enforcement of alcohol policies. Issues of inequity and of mobilizing resources for the long-term benefit of community members were most common. A respondent from Oakland described how activists called on police for enforcement, but were also cognizant of community mistrust of police:

For a while there, we had a large number of people that were being killed by the police, and we felt that we needed to stop that. Talking to other cities, [we] found out that the canine patrol had reduced the number of deaths from police officers shooting people...

We encouraged the city, and even and went and volunteered, to raise money for it.

Respondents from San Antonio described raising funds “to provide video cameras for police cars, for each law enforcement entity involved in DWI [driving while intoxicated] arrests, and we did that in everything from bake sales to, we had soft ball and volley ball tournaments.” The quote below described concurrent efforts to address issues of inequity associated with DWI enforcement.

The arrest rates were just proportionally Mexican American, that's related to geography too. Big bars, many of the big, hot bars are on the north side of town and Mexican Americans live on the west and south side of town and that means that if one goes to those

bars you drink across the city to get home. That means you have to drink further and you drive right through the dragnets where the upper class Anglos simply stay on the north side and don't have to drive that far and don't have to drive through the dragnets – so, amending that Policy putting pressure into being more equal opportunity to arrest on the enforcement agencies was important too.

### **Education and Training**

Education and training was described by activists across sites as a critical strategy for engaging community members in dialog about local concerns and about the impact of alcohol-related problems. Activists in different communities described an array of strategies for reaching different constituents, including talking with residents door-to-door; conducting outreach through community agencies, schools, and neighborhood associations; and holding community forums.

One activist in Oakland described the value of door-to-door conversations:

I took my staff knocking door-to-door in the evenings in drug-infested communities because that was my way of organizing and educating people, because our people don't respond to flyers, because a lot of them can't read. And if you don't make that contact you'll never make allies. And, to me, our biggest allies were the community.

Activists described training community members, including youth, in specific advocacy skills, such as how to testify at hearings, speak with policy-makers, and work with the media.

One activist in Oakland described success in garnering substantial news coverage from Spanish language media:

That was because our families that we organized, the youth, the kids that we organized and trained, and had many meetings with for months and months and months on this issue, from the organizer and myself focusing on them and focusing on the Spanish press.

Community members were also trained to conduct research that ultimately contributed to change efforts, such as monitoring problem practices at alcohol outlets and documenting disproportionate alcohol and tobacco billboard advertising in inner-city communities compared to neighboring affluent communities.

Community members engaged in research to investigate local conditions, such as the proliferation of alcohol outlets and billboards, then presented results to residents, members of local organizations and schools, and policy makers. For example, in Milwaukee activists described grassroots efforts to educate constituents through outreach at a shopping mall:

We had like all our information laid out, like the number of establishments in the inner-city and, and what were some of the problems associated with them. And, you know, showing some examples of really problem establishments that were still getting their licenses passed.

Milwaukee activists also “did a video on alcohol – we were able to have minors go into different alcohol stores in the Central City and actually purchase 40-ounces.” Another activist from Milwaukee emphasized how educational efforts were important to galvanizing response, noting that after “efforts made at highlighting and actually showing through charts the number of liquor establishments in the city...the concentration of those in the inner-city,” activists would ask, “Well, what can we do to legislate and change this?”

### **Direct Action**

Direct action strategies were employed concurrently with, or in some cases as a prelude to,

efforts to advance policy changes. Direct actions described by activists in several cities included whitewashing or removing billboards, boycotting businesses, holding protests in front of offensive billboards, and organizing protests directed at disrupting specific businesses that were identified as particularly egregious in contributing to community problems. Although activists in several regions were successful in changing laws pertaining to placement of billboards and other advertising in residential areas or near sensitive sites (schools or churches), activists in some cities (such as Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Oakland) also described direct actions designed to express community outrage and immediately change the environment. For example, in Los Angeles, one interviewee explained, “We had scouts that rode up and down streets and wrote down street corner addresses and who the manufacturer was, and contacted them and asked them to remove them. They didn’t, we painted ‘em out.” Similarly, one respondent in Baltimore described a local action to remove billboards:

Unbeknownst to many in the public, especially the media, we had done our homework. First of all, we sent registered letters to the proprietor of the billboard. We made arrangements through the proprietor of the property that if the proprietor of the billboard did not make arrangements with them within a certain period of time, that we had the property owner's permission to remove the property because it was there illegally. There was no law that we were violating. We didn't destroy property. We simply took the billboard down, placed it in a secure, safe area. Usually an alley and left it after calling the proprietor of the billboard...In two of the three they never tried to put 'em back up.

Direct actions were sometimes a prelude to changes in policy. One respondent in Baltimore commented:

We did a lot of going around talking to Bar owners and snatching down signs off of windows, and begging 'em, "Please take 'em down." You know, because windows used to be plastered with signs, I mean, if you passed a Bar or cut-rate store, you couldn't see in. The whole front was plastered with signs... We finally got those down. We got an ordinance passed that took those down.... They could only put three small signs.

Direct actions also targeted problem stores and alcohol outlets. One interviewee from Baltimore commented, "We didn't actually picket, but we went and stood in front of stores and had our bull-bullhorns out and things like that." Some communities organized boycotts of specific problem outlets. For example, one respondent from Los Angeles described the impact of a targeted boycott: "After the 113-day Selective Patronage Campaign, we completely closed the store down...most of the day there would be at least 20 people who would be picketing outside." In some cases, actions were directed at specific products. For example, Milwaukee activists organized a protest at a warehouse for distribution of a new alcohol product, the "Gripper," which was "easy for people to hold" and was perceived by community members as targeting youth and gang members "and they called right away and said that they would not sell anymore in Milwaukee."

### **Changing Community Norms**

Community activists envisioned, and worked to facilitate, changes beyond the civic arena into broader community norms. One Oakland respondent characterized environmental prevention efforts as including, but encompassing more than policy change, noting that activists were:



creating alcohol-free events on a lot of different levels for people, or they're trying to influence policy for public gatherings and for, um, public events, and so on; and then they're also working on the norms within families within communities, and so on, about alcohol.

Some activists described neighborhood watch organizations or block clubs, working collectively to reduce crime and improve community conditions. For example, one interviewee from San Antonio commented,

The dope people know that we are not going to put up with their foolishness, that we have groups organized - There are some groups who have had neighbors to get out and set up walking areas where they walk certain times o' night to see crime that's going on.

A number of activists across different cities commented about the importance of addressing broader social norms and economic conditions that were perceived as linked to or underlying alcohol-related problems. One comment from an Oakland activist exemplified this theme: “Unless the community gets some kind of domestic policy that brings jobs, rehabilitation, better schools, better, programs, better training, we're going to have this problem.” Similarly, respondents from Los Angeles described a wide range of efforts to facilitate community change including organizing to enhance support for treatment programs, strengthening faith community capacity to support families impacted by alcohol and drug abuse, and advocating for development of new businesses to replace alcohol outlets such as laundromats and stores.

### **Negotiating with Store Owners**

In addition to advocating for creating and enforcing local ordinances, activists described efforts to negotiate directly with store owners. In general, activists would identify and document

issues associated with a problem outlet, then communicate directly with owners about their concerns as well next steps that community members would take to increase accountability. Respondents from Los Angeles described how activists “would go to store owners and ask them to comply with the law, if they’re not doing that they would send their petitions to send to the ABC” or have “meetings with them; If that works, fine, then if that don’t work, maybe the next thing would be to go out and plan, um, a picket where they live.” In another instance where activists were responding to sales to minors, “We went around to the liquor stores in that area and asked them not to sell and they’re like, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah;’ I said, ‘Well, you know what? We’ll be there with our cameras’.”

Some store owners recognized the value in having relationships with and responding to the concerns of community members. One interviewee in Milwaukee who was a tavern owner talked about electing to publicly support a local initiative to stop tavern sales for alcohol carry-out after 9 p.m. because of growing problems including “a lot of shootings.” In spite of criticism from some other owners and experiencing reduction in profits, the owner noted, “If it was causing that big of a problem, it wouldn’t do me no good to still be a businessman if I didn’t have a community.” Another respondent described receiving a substantial donation in support of community activism from a tavern owner:

And he gave that money to us because he, in his words he said, “I know the value of the work that your organization does and maintaining a quality of life in this neighborhood, and if this neighborhood deteriorated I would be out of business myself”...So it's not like... we're not prohibitionist. I'll just say that. It really is about relationships...If there was a neighborhood problem associated with this bar, we have enough trust established with him that we can go in and talk to him about

it and, hopefully, come up with a solution.

Activists also described working directly with other community members or businesses to attempt to address grievances. For example, in Los Angeles, community activists communicated directly with billboard companies to reduce the disproportionate advertising of alcohol and tobacco products in inner-city neighborhoods compared to a nearby more affluent community. Some activists described attempting to negotiate directly with drug dealers or, more often, with landlords of buildings where drug sales or dealing occurred.

### **Discussion**

This study identified nine strategies aimed at creating change in local and state policy as well as broader community norms as described by activists across regional contexts. Grassroots mobilization was generally described as central to all other strategies, which included creation or enforcement of laws, meeting with elected officials, media advocacy, working with police/law enforcement, education and training, direct action, changing community norms, and negotiating with store owners and community members. The centrality of grassroots mobilization, including creating a shared sense of purpose, fostering collaboration, building relational capacity, and leadership development have been noted in other literature reviewing effective community coalitions (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). At the same time, the specific opportunities for building leadership skills, such as documenting and reporting on local billboard placement and content or training for testimony at a public hearing, were highly linked to local context.

An earlier paper exploring how alcohol problems were framed by grassroots activists and leaders engaged campaigns to mobilize constituents and change alcohol policies in inner-cities

(Herd, 2010), based on the same sample as the current study, found endorsement of a public health model for framing alcohol problems. The study also found endorsement of other frames such as a community model, which emphasized social structural problems related to alcohol use, and a disease model, which was reflected in concerns about the impact of addiction on individuals and family members. The array of strategies described by activists in the current study is congruent with the use of multiple frames. Many of the strategies articulated by respondents in this study included were consistent with a public health frame, such as developing state or local laws to restrict alcohol advertisements (e.g. billboards and signage in windows), working with local or state officials and law enforcement remedy or remove problem outlets, and using media advocacy to advance policy change. At the same time, strategies employed by activists extended beyond a focus on creating change in the civic arena into shifting community norms, such as whitewashing alcohol and tobacco billboards and strategies involving direct action against problem store owners. Efforts at changing community norms also encompassed, at least in some cities, support for treatment and prevention services at the individual level.

It was notable that discourse about strategies for addressing alcohol-related problems was often described and navigated in relationship to broader social contexts and concerns. For example, narratives about working with police on issues concerning alcohol policy expanded to address broader concerns such as mistrust of police or inequities in enforcement of laws prohibiting driving under the influence of alcohol. Other researchers have noted that alcohol-related problems intersect with larger community concerns about social and environmental justice, such as concerns about social control, discrimination, and structural inequality (Alaniz, 1998; Herd, 2010, 2011; Herd, 1993; Romley et al., 2007) as well as corporate practices that damage health (Freudenberg, Bradley, & Serrano, 2009). Consistent with the perspective of

interviewees, Themba (1999) points to the importance of viewing “issue-oriented work as part of a whole movement for community healing and recovery” (p. 144).

These results also show that community leaders and residents used a range of varied strategies working at multiple levels, both within and outside of normal political channels. For example, many of the approaches employed focused on increasing empowerment and civic participation to enhance engagement in local political processes. Residents collaborated with elected officials, law enforcement personnel, and government staff and were taught how to influence legislative policies aimed at improving conditions in their neighborhoods. In addition, they used typical strategies such as media advocacy and persuasion to gain public support for legislative and social change.

However, at times these activists employed direct action tactics such as whitewashing or removing billboards and protests and marches to draw attention to social problems and create change without going through regular political/legal channels. And members of at least one community capitalized on widespread social disruption which destroyed hundreds of alcohol outlets to create new policies and laws to reduce operating liquor stores.

As noted by one commentator, use of these kind of varied, multilayered strategies (e.g. using civil disobedience , grass roots organizing, voter registration and economic withdrawal) were the backbone of the success of the major Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s (Levinson, 2011). Despite the variety of tactics used, one constant feature underlying the strategies in all of the communities was the emphasis on building a movement through face to face interactions or local interpersonal connections with residents or professionals with a stake in the neighborhood. This local flavor created sensitivity to improving the climate of communities through changing

norms and local laws or policies and also helped encourage accountability to particular neighborhoods by retailers and merchants.

Having a varied repertoire of cross-cutting strategies using local resources and residents across a variety of social sectors appeared to help fuel and support significant changes regarding alcohol policy in the affected neighborhoods. These approaches may be useful for stimulating positive neighborhood change regarding other important health and social issues. Future research might examine more explicitly how this kind activism and related strategies may intersect with larger environmental, economic, or social justice movements.

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Table 1

*Strategies described in narratives of activists (N=184)*

Strategies (description)	Percentage (n)
<b>Grassroots organizing</b> (recruiting individuals, neighborhoods or communities toward a unified goal of social change)	69.6 (128)
Creating a shared sense of purpose	39.1 (72)
Collaboration between groups	53.8 (99)
Developing and solidifying relationships	30.4 (63)
Building leadership capacity (individuals or groups)	34.2 (63)
<b>Creation/Enforcement of Existing Laws</b> (developing and making sure that applicable laws, codes, and ordinances are enforced, such as zoning, licensing, prohibition against sales to minors)	64.1 (118)
<b>Meeting with Elected officials</b> (activities associated with putting pressure on city councils or other local/state officials)	66.3 (122)
<b>Media Advocacy</b> (utilizing the media as a tool to frame important issues, educate, increase awareness, and influence policy)	33.7 (62)
<b>Working with Police</b> (calling police to report illegal activities and working with specific law enforcement groups or individuals)	29.3 (54)
<b>Education and Training</b> (discussion of training individuals and/ or communities about alcohol-related issues)	52.7 (97)
<b>Direct Action</b> (actions such as whitewashing billboards, boycotts, or civil disobedience) NOTE: SOME PROTESTS WERE CLASSIFIED HERE	32.6 (60)
<b>Changing Community Norms</b> (mention of changing community norms regarding alcohol (e.g., having alcohol-free events, creating/working with block clubs or neighborhood associations to improve conditions and reduce crime).	26.6 (49)
<b>Negotiating with Store Owners</b> (and other direct negotiations) Talking directly with store owners; also, talking directly with drug dealers or landlords	22.3 (41)