

3rd International Conference on **Epidemiology & Public Health**

August 04-06, 2015 Valencia, Spain

Sociodemographic and geographic variability in environmental exposures and health risks: Implications for community-based public health

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The research community has yet to fully characterize environmental health risk factors that are present in all communities and affect multiple health outcomes but cannot be described using national average statistics and risk estimates. In many cases, local data to inform risk prioritization is lacking. Although national databases and risk estimates are available for most environmental issues of concern, communities express concern that summary statistics are not enough to inform their local assessments. This raises a challenge for researchers: to synthesize information from national databases in a way that allows it to be disaggregated to elucidate patterns of high exposure and high risk in different populations and in different places. This paper provides examples from research conducted at Harvard University in collaboration with the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Implications are discussed for the role of non-governmental organizations such as community based organizations in gathering and assimilating data is likely to grow as community-based research develops in the future. Federal databases are limited to providing standardized data with often numerous restrictions. Local data collection is key, and while it is not always possible to synthesize local data at a national level due to differences in data collection measurements and techniques, it is recommended that organizations working on the ground with local communities to coordinate their efforts may have more opportunities to gather and coordinate local data at a large scale than federal agencies.

Biography

Teresa Chahine completed her Doctor of science degree at Harvard School of Public Health, Department of Environmental Health with an interdisciplinary concentration in gender and health. She is a Research Associate at the Center for Health and the Global Environment, Harvard University, where she serves as the social entrepreneurship program lead. She teaches Social Entrepreneurship in Health and the Environment at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Harvard University Extension School. Her new textbook "Introduction to Social Entrepreneurship" will be released by Taylor and Francis in 2016.

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