Chapter VI

Community Breast Cancer Mapping in Huntington, Long Island

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The Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition (HBCAC) recently completed a survey of town residents regarding breast cancer. This chapter reviews how this community group relied upon a network of volunteers and community goodwill to survey local breast cancer patterns and the issues HBCAC confronted in mapping those results. The chapter explains how community-mapping projects differ from mapping projects directed by scientists, private corporations and government agencies. Community organizations often approach maps with different perspectives and goals than these traditional mapping agencies. This chapter emphasizes the significance of the community perspective for understanding and addressing breast cancer. HBCAC is using ESRI’s ArcView software to map breast cancer patterns and to overlay various environmental themes, such as local toxic sites, to better understand local breast cancer patterns.
INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer now accounts for almost one out of every three cancer diagnoses among women. It is the most common form of cancer for women, excluding non-melanoma skin cancers (American Cancer Society, 2001). Breast cancer is also the leading cause of death for women between the ages of 35 and 54 (Breast Cancer Action, 2001). While many cancer rates have fallen in recent years, breast cancer rates continue to climb (Associated Press, 2001). Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition (HBCAC) was formed in 1993 to educate the residents of Huntington, New York about breast health. A similar coalition on Long Island, in neighboring West Islip, had formed in 1992. Two years later West Islip had developed a “first of its kind” door-to-door demographic mapping survey” (West Islip BCCLI, no date). HBCAC decided to launch a more detailed and comprehensive survey of Huntington women over the age of 25. Following West Islip’s experiences, HBCAC hoped to map its survey data. Maps were proving to be powerful tools for raising public awareness about the prevalence of breast cancer on Long Island. HBCAC’s mapping project offers important lessons for both the public health community and organizations involved in community mapping.

Community mapping projects have become an important tool for informing and empowering local citizens. As Common Ground has stated, “Through the process of creating and revising maps, communities are better equipped to proactively address their interests and concerns” (Common Ground, 2001a). Map overlays allow local groups to visualize a wide range of attributes associated with community life, including environmental, health, economic, social welfare, land use, demographic and natural hazards data. Using GIS overlays, community groups can also examine the linkages among these different geographic themes. For example, we can use GIS to look at the way breast cancer patterns correlate with demographic or environmental factors. Health professionals, academics, private corporations and others have already mapped many of these features. If that is true, then what makes community mapping innovative?

First, community maps raise community participation rates by engaging a broad cross-section of the community, most of whom have little or no prior background in mapping projects. In Huntington, HBCAC had no internal mapping resources. HBCAC knew, however, that it wanted to map breast cancer, so HBCAC sought out volunteers and paid interns who could help make that goal a reality. For technical skills, HBCAC sought assistance from Greenman-Pederson, an engineering firm, and researchers at local universities.

Second, community maps are important educational tools. Maps help residents understand local issues by making complex datasets visual. Although the
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