

# Everyday life information-seeking by low-income African American households: Wynnewood Healthy Neighbourhood Project

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports findings from Phase I of the Wynnewood Study - a major project investigating the information-seeking and information needs of low-income African-American households in the Wynnewood Project in Dallas, Texas. The Parks at Wynnewood is a residential housing development at which the University of North Texas (UNT) is currently conducting the Healthy Neighbourhoods urban revitalization project. This study is also part of the second phase of a major UNT project that is investigating the community service needs of the Wynnewood residents. During this needs assessment all Wynnewood households were interviewed using an extensive twelve-page questionnaire, including a number of questions on their information needs and information-seeking behaviour. The results of the survey provide data bearing on the development of an information resource center and an information literacy programme for Wynnewood community residents. A model of resident's information environment is presented. The study of information-seeking and information needs, also known as nonwork information-seeking or citizen information-seeking, is an important and emerging area of interdisciplinary information science research. More specifically, this study is providing important data on the everyday life information needs and seeking behaviours of low-income African Americans households.

## INFORMATION-SEEKING AND INFORMATION NEEDS

Currently substantial national investment is funding the development of an information society, traditional and digital libraries, and the National Information Infrastructure (NII) to improve information access for ordinary citizens. The information seeking of ordinary citizens is an important area requiring further research (Savolainen, 1996). The development of effective information services for ordinary citizens, and the policies governing their implementation and use, depends on a good knowledge of citizen's needs and requirements. Little empirical data exists regarding the everyday life information needs and seeking behaviour of African-American residents and households. In particular few researchers have examined the information-seeking patterns and information needs of low-income African-American communities. Information-seeking is a complex information and communication activity requiring access to diverse sources of information to deal with personal, social and work related problems. The proliferation of personal computers, the growth of the Internet, and accompanying development of information and communication services, is beginning to provide citizens with access to many new services and sources of information. What types of information do low-income African-American households need and seek in everyday life? For what reasons, e.g., to resolve personal or family problems or to reduce the barriers of social isolation? Do the information-seeking patterns and needs of low income families vary with the age groups involved? Information behaviour studies with this focus are highly significant because they are crucial to the process of developing neighbourhood infrastructure and the empowerment of this socially isolated group.

### THE SETTING - THE PARKS AT WYNNEWOOD

The Healthy Neighbourhoods project at the Parks at Wynnewood is a major community development project that the Center for Public Service (CPS) at UNT's School of Community Service is currently conducting. This project consists of the physical and social re-development of a 400-unit residential complex in the Oak Cliff area in Dallas being developed by Dallas City Homes, Inc. The developer has provided 18,000 sq.ft. of space and funding for the programme's operations. The Center for Public Service is cooperating with the Dallas Urban League, Parkland Memorial Hospital and other area agencies to staff a network of services that support human and community well being.

The overall goals of the Wynnewood project are:

- to stimulate and guide self-help and self-improvement efforts on the part of the residents;
- to develop the residents' capacity to identify and address common

- concerns;
- to help organize resources and support from the surrounding community; and
- to strengthen the cooperative relationships between the health and human service providers in the area.

By bringing the community's, as well as UNT's, resources and capabilities to bear on the residents' current situation, CPS is initiating a community development process that in time will serve to prevent the re-occurrence of the urban deviance that was typical in the area.

### RELATED STUDIES

A small, but growing body of empirical studies has investigated the role of information in the resolution of human problems and the human process of information-seeking. Some recent research has begun to investigate the nature of everyday life information-seeking (ELIS) and information-seeking behaviour of ordinary citizens. Previous studies have investigated the information-seeking behaviour of cattle ranchers (Spink & Hicks, 1996), battered women (Harris, 1988/1989), students and library users (Kuhlthau, 1991), health workers (Lundeen, Tenopir & Wermager, 1994) and university researchers (Ellis, Cox & Hall, 1993). Researchers have proposed models of human information-seeking processes and the role of information in human problem solving (Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Ellis, 1993; Krikelas, 1983; Kuhlthau, 1993; Leckie, Pettigrew & Sylvian, 1996; Wilson, 1983). Many studies have also examined the role of public libraries in the provision of information services for communities.

A growing body of literature seeks to investigate everyday life information-seeking behaviour. Savolainen (1996) developed a framework for the study of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) by citizens. His study based on in-depth interviews with 22 Finnish citizens identified important dimensions of ELIS, including the seeking of orienting and practical information. Further studies have also begun to investigate the information world of the poor and impoverished. Chatman (1992, 1996) have identified important aspects and concepts related to the information seeking-behaviour of impoverished people and retired women, including lack of risk-taking, secrecy and deception in communicating information, and the importance of situational relevance to their information needs. These previous studies have provided important findings, frameworks and methodologies for further research. However, their small sample sizes have often limited their generalizability. These previous studies have provided a framework and methodology for the study of Wynnewood Project residents.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The findings from the Wynnewood Study Phase I were guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of information do low-income residents need to support their everyday life activities?
2. What types of information sources are currently being used by low-income households?
3. What are the information-seeking behaviours exhibited by such households?
4. What is the current stage of development of the information infrastructure in the Wynnewood neighbourhood?

These questions highlight several of the Wynnewood residents' real-life concerns: employment-related tasks; security risks; parenting and early childhood education; leisure pursuits; library use; and community participation. For each of these life concerns, the study seeks to determine:

- How low-income residents and households go about orienting themselves on the issue – whom or what sources they draw on.
- Kinds of information they draw on to structure and weigh the alternatives they consider in addressing a need and resolving the problem.

The findings from the study are being used to develop a Resource Information Center and an Information Literacy Programme for Wynnewood residents.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Data collection

Phase I of the Wynnewood Study included data collected during April-May 1996 by means of survey interviews, by volunteers and residents, with 300 heads of Wynnewood households (75% of the Wynnewood 400 households). Each head of household responded to 70 questions related to:

- demographics
- community activities and issues
- media usage
- information needs
- use and need for financial services
- need for continuing education
- use and need for community services
- employment

- children's activities and needs
- health care
- security concerns
- need for child care

The questions relating to information behaviour are listed in Appendix A.

## RESULTS

### Demographic data

Preliminary findings are reported from the information-related questions asked of 300 Wynnewood residents during survey interviews. To provide necessary background, Table 1 lists the basic demographic data for the 300 participants to the survey interviews.

Number of Wynnewood Households Surveyed	300 households (75% of 400 Wynnewood Households)
Mean Age: Head of Household	33 years
Mean Number of People Per Household	3.3 people
Mean Number of Children Per Household	2 children
Average Level of Education	11.4 years
Mean Household Income	\$12,156

Table 1. Basic demographic data for Wynnewood survey participants.

- Eighty (80%) percent of those surveyed were single female parents.
- Ninety (90%) percent were African-Americans.
- Approximately 61% of household heads were employed; 21% not employed and 12% in training.

Findings are reported for information-related questions to residents regarding *sources of information* and news events, security risks, health care, education, employment and library usage. Further results from the survey and interviews will be reported in future papers.

### News events

Respondents were asked to indicate which sources were important for information on news events: television, radio, newspapers, school, friends, family, neighbours and other. Table 2 provides the mean rankings for each

source of information on news events. Respondents indicated the importance of a source on a four-point scale (1 = Not Important and 4 = Very Important).

Source	Mean
Family	3.4
School	3.3
Television	3.0
Newspapers	2.7
Radio	2.5
Friends	2.5
Neighbours	2.3
Other	<2.0

Table 2. Mean rankings for sources important for information on news events.

Most respondents indicated they used all channels for news with family as the highest ranked source of news, followed by school, television and newspaper. This finding reflects the respondents' view of a news event - those events that directly related to family life and children's activities at school. The importance placed on family and school reflects a focus on real life concerns with news as a real life interaction channel. For middle class respondents, media outlets such television, radio and newspapers would be ranked more highly.

**Security risks**

Source	% of Respondents
Neighbours	37.7%
Wynnewood Security Services	34.5%
Housing Management	29.8%
Friends	18.5%
Family	15.3%
Dallas Police	14.5%

Table 3. Percentage of respondents you used each source of information on security risks.

Respondents were asked whether they used any of the following sources for information on security risks: family, neighbours, friends, Wynnewood security services, housing management and Dallas Police Department. Crime is a problem in the neighbourhoods surrounding Wynnewood associated with

juvenile delinquency, latent gang activity and property crime. Table 3 provides the percentage of respondents who used each source of information on security risks. The data was collected in the form of Yes/No responses.

Respondents indicated their use of at least two sources for information on security risks. The threat of crime dominates the physical and social space around Wynnewood and affects the family's space just beyond the household. In this context, the major source for information on security issues were local or immediate networks of neighbours followed by security services and housing management. As family is a major determinant is news events, the people just beyond the household physical space were important for assessing security risks. More removed sources, such as the Dallas Police Force were not major sources of information.

**Health care**

Respondents were asked whether they used any of the following sources for information on health care: family, neighbours, friends, minister/counselor, community services, school or public health nurse, or family physician. Table 4 provides the percentage of respondents who used each source of information on security risks. The data was collected in the form of Yes/No responses.

Source	% of Respondents
Family Physician	53.9%
Family	30.4%
Friends	12.1%
School or Public Health Nurse	7.1%
Minister/Counselor	3.9%
Community Services	3.6%
Neighbours	3.6%

Table 4. Percentage of respondents you used each source of information on health care.

Respondents indicated their use of at least one source for information on health care. Most respondents were covered for medical benefits, services by private health insurance, Medicare or Medicaid, and used their family physician as the primary source of information on health care. Unlike other information needs, such as news events, respondents generally had an established source of health care information outside their immediate environment.

**Education**

Respondents were asked whether they would be interested in any of the following educational programmes: vocational training, college course, GED or continuing education, adult basic skill courses. Table 5 provides the percentage of respondents who indicated an interest in a particular educational programme. The data was collected in the form of Yes/No responses.

Source	% of Respondents
Vocational Training	59.5%
College Courses	49.7%
Adult Basic Skills	44.1%
Continuing Education	41.0%
GED	39.9%

Table 5. Percentage of respondents you used each source of information on education.

Respondents indicated a strong interest in furthering their education beyond high school level. Most indicated they would be interested in pursuing at least one form of further training and selected computer or business oriented courses as their first preference for college or vocational courses. Most employed respondents worked in the lower end of the employment market in sales, office, laboring or trade positions. Both employed and unemployed respondents were aware of the need for more than a high school education to improve their position in the workforce. Overall, Wynnewood residents were interested in "getting ahead" (being a Wynnewood residents was a reflection of their desire improve their families lifestyle) and taking courses, such as computing and business, they perceived as the means to a better life for their families.

**Employment**

Respondents were asked whether they used any of the following sources for information on employment: television, newspapers, radio, family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, employment services or co-workers. Table 6 provides the percentage of respondents who used each source of information on employment. The data was collected in the form of Yes/No responses.

Source	% of Respondents
Newspapers	53.6%
Friends	31.4%
Family	22.5%
Co-workers	13.9%
Employment Services	6.8%
Radio	5.4%
Counselor	2.5%

Table 6. Percentage of respondents you used each source of information on employment.

Respondents indicated their use of at least one source for information on employment. Newspapers were the most popular source of employment information. Some 60% of respondents indicated their goal was to gain new employment, particularly in white-collar positions. This is also reflected in their preference for computing and business oriented education programmes. To gain residency at Wynnewood, applicants had to be either employed or in training. This was the official policy. But in practice some 27.4% of respondents were not employed or in training. Residents' responses to the education and employment questions shows an overall acknowledgment by residents that they were at Wynnewood because they wanted to "get ahead" and they knew education and training, particularly in computing and business, might be the way to do this - however they were not sure how to achieve this goal.

**Library usage**

At least one-third (33.2%) of respondents had used the public library in the past year and more than 60% of respondents knew the location of either a local public library or other library they had previously used in their neighbourhood. Overall, respondents rated a computer lab and literacy programme for Wynnewood residents as either important or most important.

**DISCUSSION**

An overview of the findings from Phase I of the Wynnewood Study reveals a picture of households with few resources and limited employment and educational opportunities and experiences. The primary focus for Wynnewood households was a need to know about what affects them directly, such as family events and local activities within Wynnewood. Their information needs relate primarily to issues of real life. Residents also wanted information on the world of higher education and white-collar employment - but were not sure how to

gain those resources. Issues of first concern related to family and the maintenance of the security of the household. Security risks were assessed with the assistance of the people sharing the immediate environment - neighbours. Health concerns were satisfied by the provision of medical resources outside the immediate environment. However, the resources necessary to evoke life changes through improved education and employment were seen as further away and more remote.

Information environment model

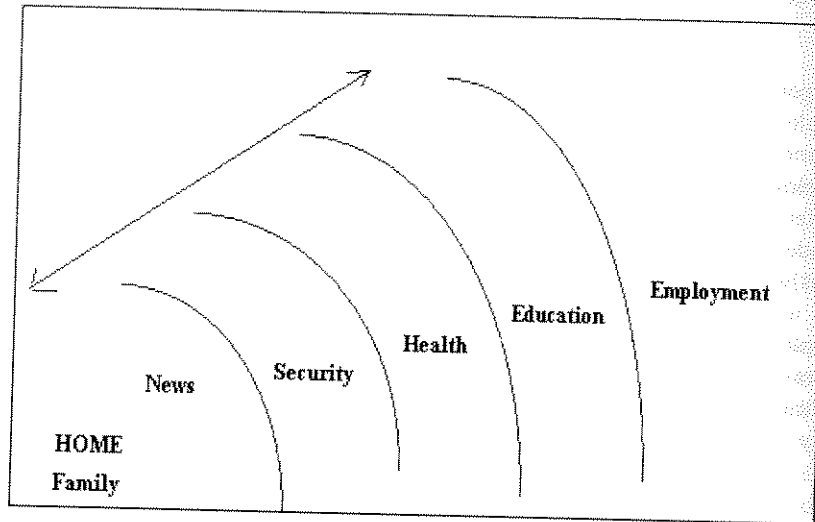


Figure 1: Information environment model

Results of the 300 survey interviews lead to the development of a theoretical model of the information environment of Wynnewood residents presented in Figure 1. Their information environment is represented as concentric circles radiating from the central point of the household and the family. The model represents the residents' perceptions of their information environment on territorial dimensions. Children and family were "the" major source of news as "family issues" and information about family activities. What was happening in down town Dallas or national or international realms was of little direct interest to residents. News and information was personal.

As the concentric circles of the model radiate, further we move to the next territorial area of information about security. Beyond the family, the next level of concern was for physical security and the major information source for

security were neighbours. As one resident put it "what you can reach, can reach you". As we move further out within the concentric circles the territory reaches outside the physical boundaries of the Wynnewood neighbourhood. The next level of information residents sought was related to their health and the health of their family. The prime source of information on health was a physician, usually funded through a government programme. Beyond the neighbourhood and further out in the territorial boundaries of most residents were employment and educational issues. For many residents, the world of education beyond high school and the world of work were unknown. How to reach those worlds and find information about those worlds was a challenge. This model reflects the information environment of households with few resources resulting from lack of employment and educational opportunities. The information environment of the Wynnewood focused on the need to know about what directly affects you - real life connections or the real life channel.

Further analysis of the data in conjunction with results from the interviews during Phase II of the Wynnewood Study will add greatly to this picture.

### CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

These preliminary findings begin to reflect the situational characteristics and information needs of low-income African American families living at the Parks at Wynnewood. The responses regarding information needs and information seeking behaviour were gathered as part of an overall survey of the residents' needs for health, child care, information, security, employment, educational and community services. The focus of the Wynnewood Project is to build the capacity of the residents in terms of their own personal skills and resources, and the capacity of the community as a whole to thrive and develop. The information needs and resources of the individuals and the community have an important role to play in this endeavor.

The initial study reported in this paper is being extended through 50 in-depth interviews with volunteer Wynnewood households. A sub-set of teenagers and households with males will be included in order to identify information-related behaviours of these sub-groups. The interviews will focus on eliciting further information from residents regarding their everyday activities and information-related behaviours regarding; employment, health care, education, security risks, news etc. Analysis of the interview data in conjunction with the survey results will focus on identifying the major themes in a particular life area (e.g., security risks); on reconstructing the structuration of the residents habitus and arguments (Bourdieu, 1984); and on the implications for engendering the use of community institutions and information facilities in the wider Wynnewood area. Findings

from the study will be guided by an approach to information literacy that identifies it as the ability to locate, gather and evaluate needed information, to make sense of one's environment (Dervin & Nilan, 1986) and to obtain a resolution of (common) concerns.

Findings from the study are important, as they constitute the largest study ever conducted on the information needs, gatekeeping roles, and information-seeking patterns of low-income African-American households. The study is providing a valuable data set on the lifestyle and information behaviours of low-income African-American households and guide the development of an information resource center and information literacy programme by Wynnewood Project residents. The overall findings will also be important for the development of theoretical models of information-seeking and use. On a practical level the study results, including the survey and interview data provides the Wynnewood Project with detailed data on: (1) Wynnewood residents situational information needs and information-seeking patterns and (2) provide the basis for the development of an information resource center and information literacy programme by Wynnewood residents. On a theoretical level the results provides the largest body of data ever collected to form the basis for the development of theoretical models of the information needs and information-seeking patterns of low income African American households. Limited large-scale empirical research has investigated these issues.

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