

Asthma in Chinatown

A Survey Report

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**Produced by the
Chinese Progressive Association**

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About the Chinese Progressive Association

Based in New York's Chinatown/Lower East Side, the Chinese Progressive Association works towards social and economic justice for Chinese Americans. We involve community residents in the decision making processes that affect our lives. We bring together people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life to work toward these goals. We work with other communities and support equality and justice for all. We provide educational, advocacy, service, and organizing programs that raise the community's living and working standards.

CPA's current programs include an environmental health project, English and Citizenship classes, immigrant rights education and advocacy, after school program for immigrant high school students, youth tobacco prevention program, and voter education.

Summary

Chinatown has been heavily impacted by air pollution. In 1996, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that Canal Street had one of the highest levels of diesel pollution in New York City. Substandard housing, on-going road and bridge work, and outdoor construction also contribute to poor air quality - indoors and outdoors. And in Fall 2001, the collapse of the World Trade Center sent toxins into the air, further exacerbating the air quality problem in Chinatown.

Poor air quality contributes to lung diseases such as asthma. CPA is concerned that currently available data underestimates the magnitude of the asthma problem in the Chinatown community. Publicly available data about asthma is based on hospitalization rates, which. This data only includes patients who have been to a hospital emergency room and had to stay overnight because of asthma.

CPA designed this survey to get a more complete picture of the asthma problem in the Chinatown area. This area is indicated by the zip codes 10002 (eastern and northeastern Chinatown), 10012 (northern Chinatown), 10013 (central and western Chinatown), and 10038 (southeastern Chinatown). In Spring 2002, CPA volunteers and staff surveyed residents from a total of 580 households, representing 2040 individuals.

Through this survey, CPA hopes to:

1. Determine the full extent of the asthma problem by considering cases that may not have required hospitalization.
2. Expand public knowledge about the problem by sharing the survey results with Chinatown residents and community groups so that together we can act to make changes for a cleaner and healthier environment.

Findings

Asthma is a widespread in the Chinatown area: 1 in 5 households in our survey said reported at least one person with asthma living there. More than half said they were diagnosed with asthma after moving into their current home in Chinatown.

Children are especially at risk: In our survey, school age children made up 51.1% of the people with asthma.

Asthma cases have been on the rise since September 11th: A disproportionately high number of new asthma cases were reported in our survey during 2001-2002. About half of the 2001-2002 cases were diagnosed on or after Fall 2001, when the World Trade Center collapsed, sending many toxins into the air.

Recommendations

Based on these results, CPA makes the following recommendations:

- 1. Determine the full scope and magnitude of the asthma problem in Chinatown.** When designing and implementing public health education campaigns, government and health agencies should have a more comprehensive knowledge of the asthma problem in Chinatown. This includes clearer data about the quality of care that asthma patients are getting.
- 2. Improve public health education is needed.** Education and prevention are important. Government and health agencies should work with community groups and local healthcare facilities to provide asthma education for residents.
- 3. Expand the zone of testing in Lower Manhattan.** Government environmental testing in the wake of the September 11 disaster should not be limited to the areas south of Canal Street and west of Pike Street. The data indicates that the asthma problem extends beyond these arbitrary boundaries.
- 4. Improve traffic flow on Canal Street. Improve public transportation to Chinatown.** Improved traffic flow decreases traffic jams. Better bus and subway access will encourage use of mass transit and reduce the use of cars.

Introduction and Background

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease. It may be caused by environmental conditions, genetics or some combination of the two. It is also an allergic disease. Environmental “triggers” might cause the asthma patient to have difficulty breathing. A few examples of triggers include pollution, mold, smoke, pollen, dust, roaches, exercise, colds, seasonal changes, animal fur, and humidity.

There is no cure for asthma, but a person with asthma can control it. Continuous asthma episodes, indicate that the disorder is not being well controlled well. This might result in hospitalization to stop an asthma attack or even death if proper care is not administered. A person could even die from an asthma episode if it is not taken care of. Preventative care lessens the need for hospital visits. Factors such as access to quality health care and living in an environment with a minimum of triggers eases the management of asthma.

Why was there a need for this survey?

Concentrations of diesel particulates are very high in Chinatown. Diesel particulates are a major cause of respiratory conditions. In 1996, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that Canal Street, Chinatown's main neighborhood thoroughfare, had one of the highest levels of diesel particulates in the city. The EPA found 74 micrograms per deciliter of particulate matter, well nearly fifty percent above the air quality standard of 50 micrograms per deciliter. This finding is no surprise since Canal Street is the major thoroughfare for vehicles - including diesel trucks and buses - traveling between the Manhattan Bridge and the Holland Tunnel.

Current Data is Inadequate. Publicly available asthma data for the Chinatown area is limited to hospitalization rates. However, hospitalization rates do not provide a complete representation of the asthma problem in Chinatown because many asthma sufferers may never be admitted to the hospital. There is a crucial need to know the full scope of the asthma problem in Chinatown, not just those who have required emergency care.

Planned Remediation Efforts are too Limited: The World Trade Center disaster has also had an environmental impact upon Chinatown. Currently, testing and clean-up is available only to those living south of Canal Street and west of Pike Street. However, the reality of air pollution and asthma is that it knows no borders.

How Was the Survey Done?

Who was surveyed?

A total of 580 surveys were completed. Each survey represents a household in Chinatown. In all of these households combined, there were 2040 people. Their age and gender are broken down as follows:

- 48% male.
- 52% female.
- 32.8% under 21 years old
- 11% between 22 and 30 years old
- 43% between 31 and 64 years old
- 13.2 % over 65 years old

Sixty-four percent lived in zip code 10002 (eastern/northeastern Chinatown), 24% lived in 10013 (western/central Chinatown), 9% lived in 10038 (southeastern Chinatown), and 3% lived in 10012 (northern Chinatown).

The participants hold a wide range of occupations. Almost a quarter (23.6%) were unemployed. The next largest groups were students (11%) and garment workers (10.2%).

Who conducted the survey?

CPA relied on many volunteers to conduct the survey. They included high school and college students, retirees, parents, and other interested community members. Our volunteers went through a two-part training. The training included an orientation on air pollution in Chinatown, information about asthma, and how to conduct a survey. Trainers included NYC Department of Health staff person and CPA volunteers with experience in marketing and community outreach.

How was the survey conducted?

Volunteers visited community centers, the library, neighborhood fairs, parks, hospitals, and churches to speak with residents who lived in the target area (zip codes 10002, 10038, 10013, 10012). These visits took place during the spring of 2002. Participants were interviewed in person in either English or Chinese. Participants were orally asked questions, and volunteers recorded their answers on paper.

What types of questions were asked in the survey?

We asked questions establishing the participant's address and the number of household members. We asked questions about previous respiratory ailments and their opinion of their home and work environments. We also asked if they or any household members had asthma, when they had it, and what they knew about asthma. The questionnaire was adapted from a similar one used by another group seeking asthma information. (See attachments section for a copy the questionnaire used)

What were the limitations of the survey?

Some participants were unwilling to answer particular questions in the survey; therefore, these questions were left blank by volunteers. The percentages, however, are still based on the total number of survey participants and not just those who answered a particular question. Additionally, some respondents were unwilling to provide their exact street address. In these cases, providing two cross streets was sufficient for CPA's purposes. When mapping this data, numbered street addresses were then substituted for these cross streets to approximate their location. Lastly, some of the questions were open-ended and therefore, the responses could not be used to calculate specific percentages. They were useful, however, in gaining general observations about the survey topic.

What Did We Find Out?

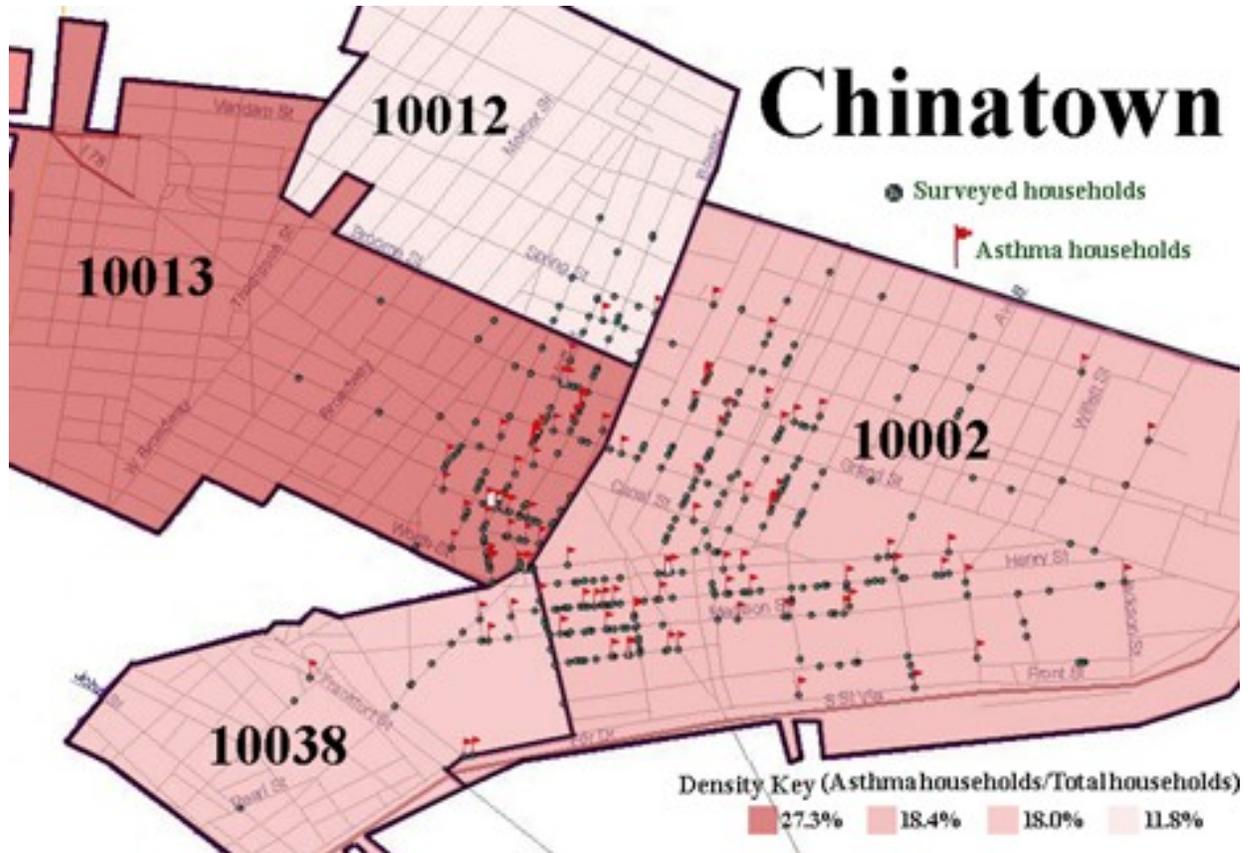
Chinatown Residents are Concerned about Poor Air Quality

More than half of the residents surveyed moved into their home in the last 10 years. Almost a quarter (24%) felt their respiratory health had changed since moving in. A smaller group (12%) felt that work affected their health. These changes include allergies, asthma, coughing, and sinus problems. Many residents felt that the dust and air pollution that has always been present in Chinatown made breathing more difficult. Almost a third (28%) said they were concerned about the affects of September 11 on the Chinatown environment.

Asthma is a Widespread Problem in Chinatown

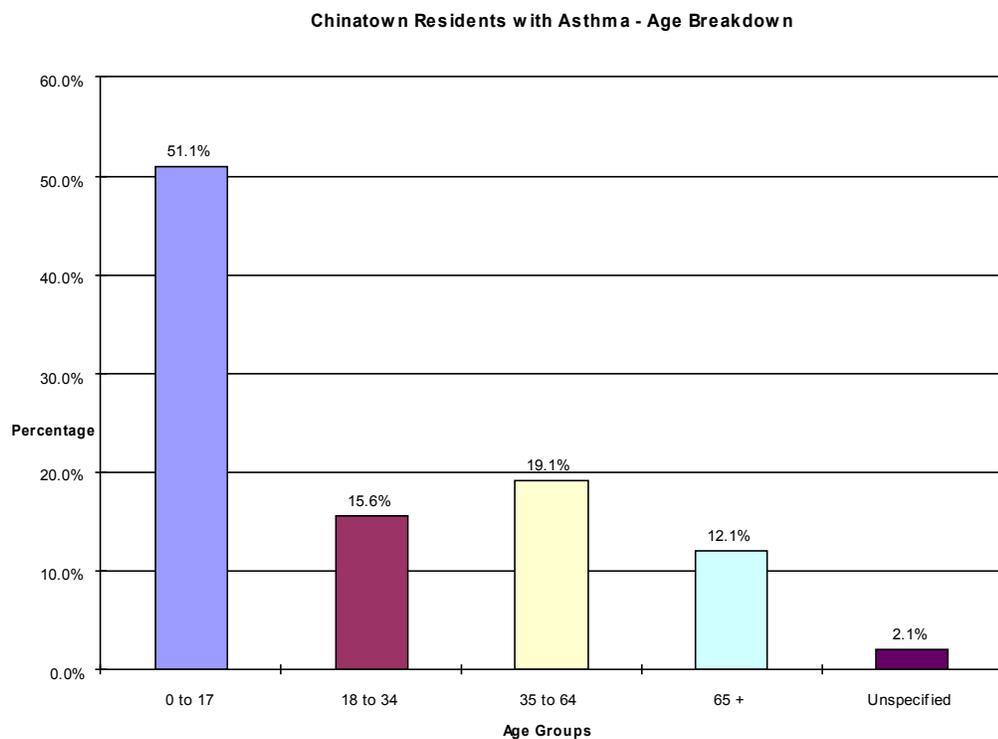
In our survey, **1 in 5 households has at least one person with asthma.** 62.8% of these households reported that the asthma was diagnosed after moving into the apartment. Eighty-one percent of the homes where a person with asthma lives are already smoke-free. Therefore, other environmental hazards are a problem to these residents.

In our survey, **the highest concentration of households with asthma are in central Chinatown (27%)**. Canal Street, which has one of the highest levels of diesel pollution in the city, runs through this part of our neighborhood. About 18.3% of households in eastern, and northeastern parts of Chinatown (10002, 10038) have a person with asthma. Almost twelve percent (11.8%) of households at the northern edge of Chinatown (10012) have a member with asthma.



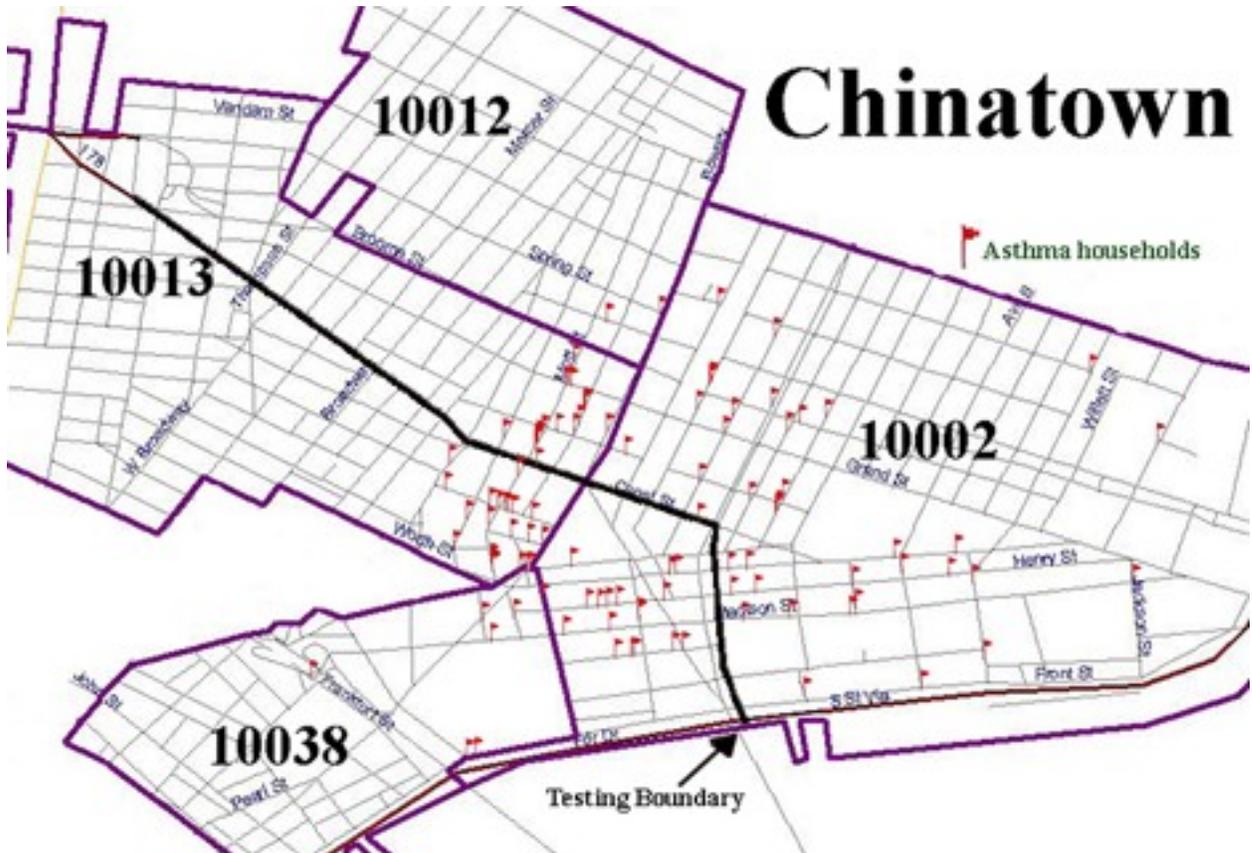
Asthma is most common among school age kids

In the survey, school children were the largest age group of people with asthma.



Asthma Knows No Boundaries

In response to the September 11 disaster, the federal government recently announced that anyone living south of Canal Street and west of Pike Streets can apply for free asbestos testing and clean-up. Part of our neighborhood is inside the eligible zone, part is outside. Also, in our survey, **54% of the households with an asthma patient live outside the designated area.**



In our survey, nearly a quarter (24.8%) of the people with asthma were diagnosed between 2001 and Spring 2002. A little more than half these cases (53.3%) were diagnosed on or after Fall 2001, when the nearby World Trade Center collapsed, sending many toxic particulates into the air.

Recommendations

The survey was intended as a first step in further understanding the asthma problem in Chinatown. While limited resources prevented a more substantial study, CPA hopes that the survey will be a stepping stone for the recommendations list below. CPA also hopes to work together with community residents and groups to make changes for a cleaner and healthier environment:

Determine the full scope and magnitude of the asthma problem in Chinatown. Government and health agencies should sponsor a more comprehensive survey to reach more residents in the target area. A larger understanding of how prevalent asthma is would be crucial to beginning a public awareness campaign. **Clearer data on respiratory healthcare is also required.** CPA recommends a further survey on how well asthma patients are being cared for, including regularity of medical care access, types of medication taken, and quality of treatment.

Improve Public Health Education. Although some local health care providers sponsor comprehensive asthma care and education programs, more could be done. Government and health agencies should work with community groups and local healthcare facilities to conduct community public education campaigns about asthma. This campaign should be comprehensive and include workshops and direct outreach for residents who have concerns about air quality and provide more information about how to diagnose or control asthma. Good management of asthma can significantly reduce the need to be admitted to the hospital for a serious attack.

Expand the zone of testing in Lower Manhattan. Government environmental testing because of the September 11 disaster should not be limited to the areas south of Canal and west of Pike Street. There is an equal concern about air quality above this limited area. Testing should be expanded beyond this area.

Improve public transportation to Chinatown. Improve vehicular traffic flow, especially on Canal Street. Better access by subway and bus will reduce the number of cars in Chinatown. Better traffic flow will reduce the need for cars to idle in traffic. The NY Metropolitan Transportation Council (sponsor of the Canal Area Transportation Study), should work closely with community groups to ensure this is accomplished.

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Attachments

CPA ASTHMA SURVEY 2002

1. Address _____ Apt./Floor # _____

City, _____ State _____ Zip code _____

2. a) Have you heard of CPA before? Yes No Don't know
 b) Has any member of your household participated in any CPA activity? Yes No Don't know

3. Starting with the youngest, what is the age and sex of each member of your household, including yourself?

| | Age | Sex |
|-------------|-----|-----|
| 1. Yourself | | |
| 2. | | |
| 3. | | |
| 4. | | |
| 5. | | |
| 6. | | |
| 7. | | |
| 8. | | |

4. a) Do you or any of your household members smoke now? Yes No Don't know
 b) Have any of your household members smoked before? Yes No Don't know

5. What month/year did you move into your apartment? _____

6. Since you have been living in this apartment, have you noticed any change in your health particularly breathing or any allergies? Yes No Don't know

[If yes], What kind of change was it? _____

7. a) What is your job? _____ b) How many hours a week do you work?

c) Where is your job located? _____

[If very far away], Do you commute? Yes No

8. Do you think your job or school has caused or increased any problems in your respiratory health? Yes No Don't know

[If yes, circle "job" or "school"] [If no or don't know, skip to 11.]

9. How has it been affected? _____

10. What (do you think) is it at work or school that may be causing it? _____

11. Have you ever had wheezing in the chest or other breathing problem at anytime in the past? Yes No

12. Do you have asthma? Yes No Don't know

13. Do any other members of your household have asthma? Yes No Don't know

[If no or don't know, go to the end.]

[If yes,] which ones? _____

[If the person with asthma is present try to ask the following questions of her/him. Indicate who is answering : e.g.: him/herself, parent, etc.]

14. Was asthma confirmed by a doctor? Yes No Don't know

[If yes], when? _____

By regular (western) doctor or Chinese traditional doctor _____?

[If no or don't know], have you visited a doctor? Yes No Don't know

[If visited doctor, continue to 15]

[If have not visited doctor], Why not? Don't have health insurance

more comfortable with Chinese traditional doctors

don't have time

don't know which doctor to go to

other _____

[Go to 16]

15. a) While at the doctor's office, did you get a satisfactory explanation about your condition?

Yes No Don't know

b) What was the explanation? _____

16. In the last 12 months, have you ever been taken to an emergency room because of asthma?

Yes No Don't know

[If yes], how many times? _____

[If no or don't know, go to 18.]

17. a) While in the emergency room, did you get a satisfactory explanation about your condition?

Yes No Don't know

b) What was the explanation? _____

18. Do you take asthma medication? Yes No

[If yes], how often do you take it? _____

19. Are you satisfied with the information you have received for dealing with your asthma or breathing problem? Yes No Don't know

[If yes], where did you receive it? _____

[If no or don't know], where do you think you should receive it from? _____

Thanks for your time and patience. Your identity will be kept confidential, but if you would be willing to take part in a group discussion about asthma, would like more information about the asthma project and the results of this survey, or would like more information about CPA, we would be happy to record your name and phone number separately from this survey