Reviewer's report

Title: 'People pull the rug from under your feet': barriers to successful public health programmes

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Reviewer: diane J abatemarco

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The analysis does not lead to the conclusion that community programming is ineffective. This paper suggests that the program planning was not focused on community engagement. The actual failure of implementation appears to be a failure of management to invest in program planning.

Abstract

The methods in the abstract begin with the outcome evaluation. This paper, however, is not about the outcome evaluation. The first sentence of the methods should be omitted or replaced with â##The process data will be presented to understand or explain the negative findings of the outcome evaluation of Breathing Space.

Background

In the first paragraph rates are given for 1970â##s for the population at large. This data is then compared with age and SES specific data for 2003. The authors should either, compare at-large data at both time points or age and SES specific data at both time points.

On page 4 (4th paragraph) there is a sentence that states that â##Typically, process evaluations use qualitative methodsâ#¦â## Actually, process evaluations can also use quantitative methods or both.

The Programme

Explain the term â##Carstairs scoreâ## in the 5th paragraph. In second paragraph the term â##local agenciesâ## is use. It would be helpful to the reader if â##local agenciesâ## were defined or explained in the background.

In the 3rd paragraph the first sentence begins with â##The programme was deliveredâ#¦â## An explanation of the program would make the paper clearer.

Methods and analysis

The methods section also needs more clarification and should be explained plainly and in an organized fashion.

On page 5 the 1st sentence beginning with â##A comprehensive description of the intervention was undertakenâ#¦â## Why? It is unclear why or what the description was used for.
Findings
First paragraph remains unclear. What is meant by the phrase "Breathing Space far exceeded any contingency provision"?
Edits should be made to the length and organization of the findings section.

Discussion
It seems that one of the most important findings from the Process Evaluation is that it should have been used as a Formative Evaluation. The authors do not make this point and it is the strongest reason for the paper.

The first sentence of the discussion is unclear. Why would the fact that the programme took place in a disadvantaged area have anything to do with success or failure? This appears as though it is a bias the authors should reconsider the phrasing. Many good points are made in the discussion.

Overall, the paper is important the lack of specific programme objects and programme planning seems to be the reason for the failure of the programme. Typically we think of this a Type III error. Failure to implement the programme as planned. The process evaluation, in innovative community programming should be formative. A formative evaluation would allow programming changes to occur during the life of a program. Lastly, this does not appear to be a "community" intervention. Rather this appears to be a coalition of local agencies. Please clarify how this program was conceived as a community intervention. The programmed as described appears to have been very management or beaucratic and not built on the principles of community participation.