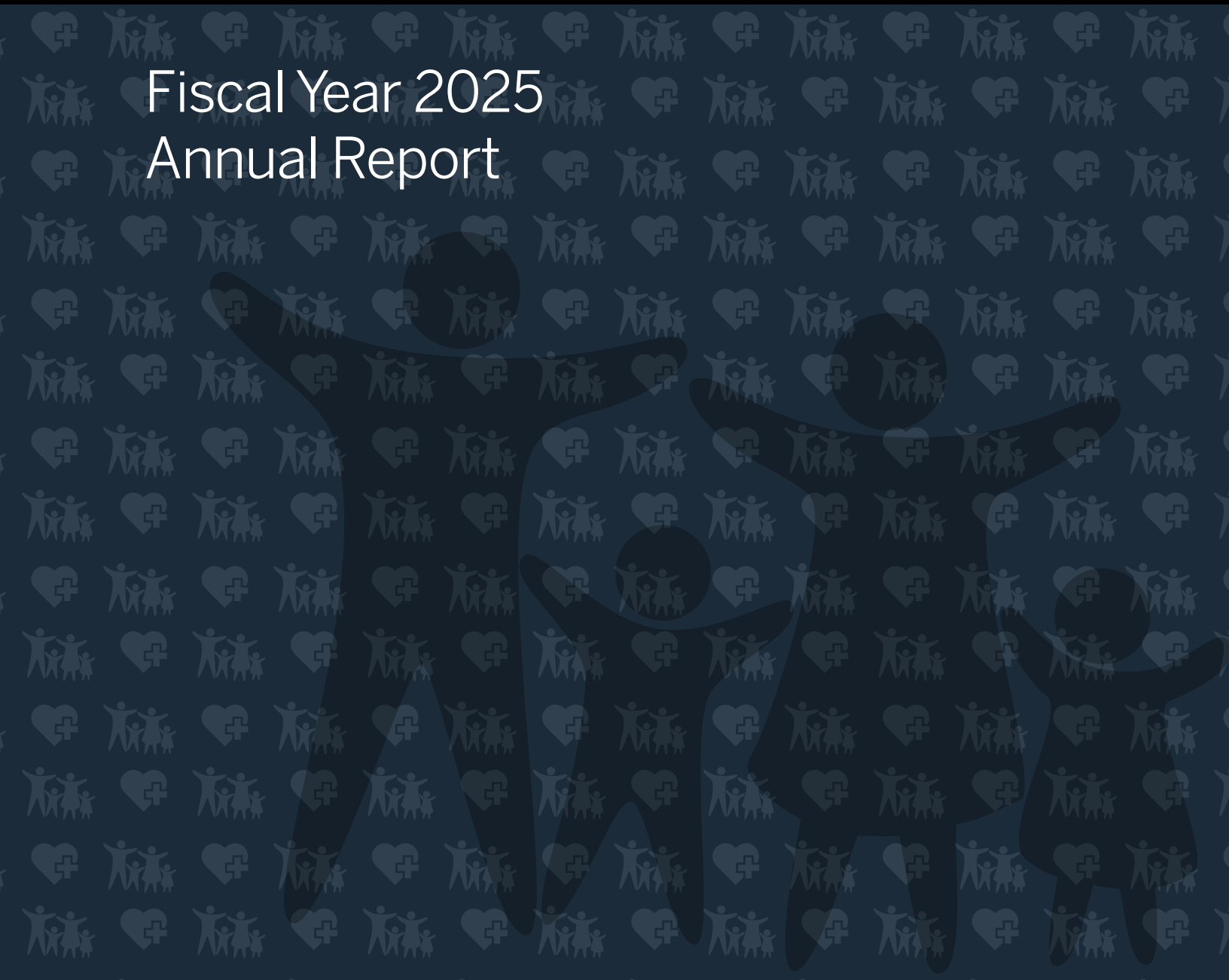
WHOLE COMMUNITIES WHOLE HEALTH

Fiscal Year 2025 Annual Report



The University of Texas at Austin
Research Development
Vice President for Research, Scholarship and Creative Endeavors

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Transforming health through community-driven research is our grand challenge.

Whole Communities–Whole Health is reimagining how science serves society. This UT Austin Grand Challenge is rooted in a groundbreaking, five-year community-centered cohort study, now in its fourth year and based in the Del Valle area while expanding into neighboring communities. By partnering directly with families and local organizations, the initiative explores how physical and emotional experiences, biological factors, relationships and the environment interact to shape the health of children and families.

A defining feature of this project is its deep commitment to community engagement and returning results to participants. Participants are provided access to much of their own environmental and health results — such as air and water quality, sleep and physical activity — through a custom smartphone app. Researchers, meanwhile, examine variables at both individual and community-wide levels to form a holistic picture of individual and community health.

Beyond its local impact, Whole Communities–Whole Health is setting a national precedent for how cohort studies can be more community-centered, trustworthy, flexible and attuned to real-world needs. With scalable infrastructure, it's modeling a future where communities are respected collaborators in research that advances health and well-being.

Whole Communities–Whole Health Highlights in Numbers

EXPANDING NETWORKS

88 active researchers

21 UT departments & disciplines

10 schools, colleges, & units

16 external partners

14 hosted events in the past year

ENGAGING STUDENTS

31 undergraduate & graduate student researchers

SCHOLARLY OUTPUT & PUBLICITY

8 scholarly works published in the past year

14 news articles in the past year

BUILDING CAPACITY

$32.5M awarded in external funding to date

* acknowledging Whole Communities–Whole Health support

Program Achievements

Research

The Whole Communities–Whole Health cohort study continues to grow — and with it, our ability to better understand how environment, behavior and lived experience shape health outcomes over time.

As of early 2025, the study includes 160 families — nearly 500 individual participants — in eastern Travis County and neighboring communities. Retention remains high: 90% of families continue after one year, and 79% after two, underscoring the strength of the community partnerships and the value participants see in the work.

In 2024 alone, field researchers logged over 13,000 miles to meet families where they are — literally — gathering data that reflect the realities of everyday life. Adult participants provided more than 93,000 survey responses in English or Spanish through the study's mobile app, contributing over 250,000 responses to date. Optional surveys provide even more insight into sleep, stress and other factors, offering a rich picture of health as it unfolds over time. Researchers also collected hundreds of environmental samples, further enriching the dataset.

Together, this work represents a comprehensive, community-based approach to health research, one that centers on families and values participants' expertise in their own experiences.

Daily Movement Linked to Better Sleep and Mood, Whole Communities–Whole Health Research Finds

New research from Whole Communities–Whole Health suggests that frequent, even minimal, daily exercise may be the key to getting better, more restorative sleep, especially the deep non-REM sleep essential for mental and physical recovery. The study, led by research assistant professor **Benjamin Baird** (Psychology, College of Liberal Arts) and recent graduate Chris Corral (Kinesiology and Health Education, College of Education), tracked students' sleep and activity over several months using wearable technology. The **findings**, published in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health, offer a more detailed look at how daily routines affect sleep quality and mood over time.

As little as 10 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity, like brisk walking, was linked to better sleep.

"We wanted to know whether it matters if someone spreads out their exercise over the week, versus doing it all at once, like a 'weekend warrior,'" Baird said. "And for sleep health, frequency does seem to matter." Participants who moved more consistently throughout the week experienced more deep sleep, better next-day mood and higher energy levels. Even just 10 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity, like brisk walking, was linked to these improvements.

Part of the Whole Communities–Whole Health research initiative, the study underscores the value of community-engaged, long-term health research. Corral noted the potential for broader impact: "Our results suggest that daily movement may be better for sleep than doing it all on the weekend." If confirmed in broader populations that include people of varying ages and activity levels, the findings could help refine public health guidelines to emphasize not just how much we move — but how often.

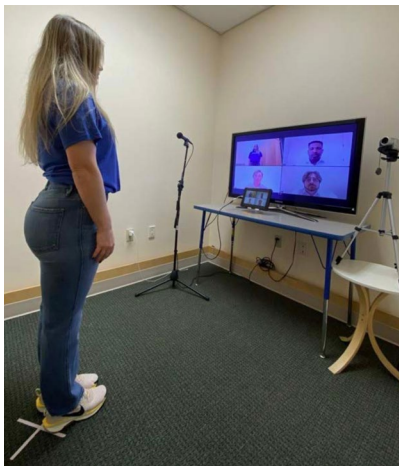
READ MORE

A Modern Approach to Measuring Stress

How do you study stress in a way that's both scientifically rigorous and practical in today's world? That question led Whole Communities–Whole Health researchers to help develop a new, semi-virtual version of a well-known lab test, and it's already opening new doors in stress research.

The **study**, led by **Frances Champagne** (Psychology, College of Liberal Arts), former chair of Whole Communities–Whole Health, reimagined the classic Trier Social Stress Test to make it more adaptable and accessible. Instead of a fully in-person setup, the new protocol uses a hybrid model: Participants are guided by a researcher in person while completing the test tasks — public speaking and mental math — before live "judges" on a video call.

The streamlined setup offers a number of advantages. The tests are easier to schedule because the judges can join from multiple locations, and the tests can be conducted more safely and consistently across settings. Even with the changes, the test still triggered a clear stress response, both hormonal and psychological, in the 55 young adult participants who took part. "The strongest predictor of biological changes wasn't actually the cortisol," Champagne said. "It was how stressed people said they felt."



In a semi-virtual stress test, the study subject participates in person and talks to the "judges" remotely.

That finding underscores the importance of people's subjective experience of stress, something that Whole Communities–Whole Health is tracking in real-world settings, not just labs. The research team is also exploring new ways of detecting stress, like analyzing airborne particles released through breath and sweat. If successful, that technique could someday offer a completely non-invasive method for monitoring emotional health in homes, schools and clinics.

The semi-virtual stress test reflects the broader goals of Whole Communities–Whole Health: to study health in context, using innovative methods that are both scientifically sound and scalable. By better understanding how people respond to stress, and recover from it, researchers aim to help families live healthier, more resilient lives and inform strategies that support well-being at the community level.

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Integrating New Expertise for Whole Health, Building on Momentum

Whole Communities–Whole Health continues to drive fresh inquiry and integrate new expertise to broaden understanding of how social, environmental and biological factors shape health outcomes. This year's flash-funding competition, held during the annual symposium in February, awarded support to two interdisciplinary research teams tackling health and environmental challenges in Central Texas.

A team led by **Akram Al-Turk** and **Elisa Borah**, both from the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, was chosen to investigate how housing conditions and neighborhood amenities in Austin's Eastern Crescent affect both physical and mental health, aiming to deliver evidence that could guide local housing and land-use policy.

Benjamin Baird and Jasdeep Kaur brainstorm during the annual research showcase, an opportunity to design new, interdisciplinary study measures.

To help expand access to safe drinking water, a cornerstone of public health, **Sanchita Bhadra** (Molecular Biosciences, College of Natural Sciences) received support to design and implement an affordable, user-friendly water testing system. Working alongside community partners, her team will pilot the tool in real-world settings to assess its usability and impact. Both projects will integrate into Whole Communities–Whole Health's existing infrastructure and collaborate closely with local communities, ensuring their work delivers timely, actionable insights.

Additionally, the Whole Communities–Whole Health study began incorporating 24-hour blood pressure measurement in January 2025, a new component driven by researchers **Jasdeep Kaur** (Kinesiology and Health Education, College of Education) and **Benjamin Baird** (Psychology, College of Liberal Arts). By adding blood pressure to existing measures of sleep and physical activity, this study offers a more comprehensive view of health and new insights into how stress and daily experiences influence cardiovascular function.

READ MORE

Air Quality Research in Action: Mobile Detection for Community Health

Researchers **Pawel Misztal** and **Kerry Kinney**, both from Maseeh Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering in the Cockrell School of Engineering, are contributing to a multi-institutional study investigating the air and water pollution impacting Imperial Beach, California, a coastal town near the U.S.–Mexico border. Local residents have long reported health issues linked to pollution from the Tijuana River, which carries a complex mix of contaminants.

Recent findings show that wastewater from the river, which includes illicit drugs, drug metabolites and chemicals from tires and personal care products, can become aerosolized through sea spray, making it detectable in the air. This revelation has broadened the concern from a water pollution crisis to a significant airborne public health threat, with long-term effects still under investigation.

Pawel Misztal readies the "Sniffer Van," a tool that supports a wide range of efforts in Texas and around the U.S., for air sampling.

To better understand the extent of this hazard, Misztal and Kinney are collaborating with scientists from UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography and San Diego State University, using UT Austin's mobile air quality testing vehicle, known as the "Sniffer Van." Developed by Misztal and his team, the vehicle is equipped with a Vocus proton transfer reaction time-of-flight mass spectrometer, enabling the collection of real-time, GPS-linked VOC measurements onsite. These detailed readings are later analyzed in the lab to better characterize airborne contaminants.

Misztal continues to adapt and expand the sniffer van platform, supporting a wide range of environmental research efforts across Texas and beyond, bringing cutting-edge air quality science directly to the communities it aims to protect.

READ MORE

Understanding Childhood Anxiety for Better Interventions

New research could shed light on ways to improve the mental health of young Latinx children.

A National Institutes of Health study on anxiety risk in young children was integrated into the Whole Communities–Whole Health cohort, aiming to shape health trajectories early in life.

Laura Quiñones Camacho (Educational Psychology, College of Education) is integrating measures from her National Institutes of Health (NIH) **K01 award study** on anxiety risk in young Latinx children in the Whole Communities–Whole Health longitudinal cohort study.

This research is vital because while anxiety is a prevalent issue for children in general, Latinx children experience unusually high rates of it, and there is little understanding of what causes or protects them from these symptoms. By identifying these factors, this investigation can lead to improved prevention and treatment for this population by generating culturally tailored interventions. Additionally, patterns of dysregulation early in life are still highly malleable, meaning findings could offer the opportunity to shape a child's trajectory earlier in life to avoid reaching clinical levels of anxiety.

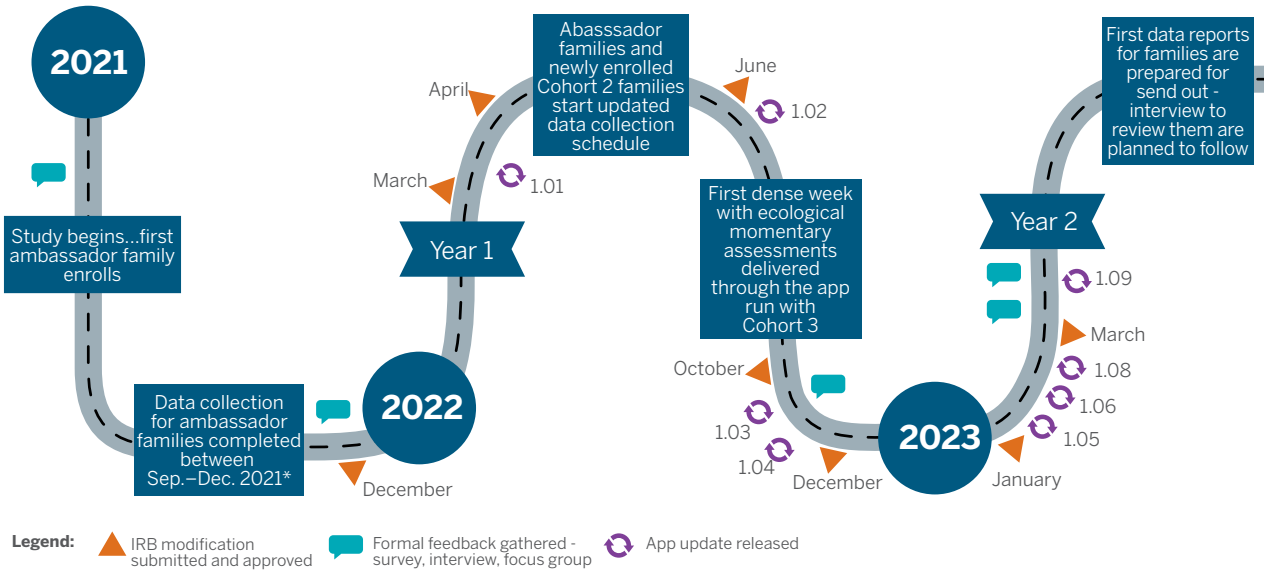
Quiñones Camacho, an assistant professor who was recruited to the University through the UT Provost's Cluster and Interdisciplinary Hiring Initiative, was awarded the highly competitive NIH K01 award in FY2024 to develop her growing expertise in how family and environmental contexts shape children's brain and physiological development.

Documenting the Journey: Mapping Research in Motion

Designing a complex research study while it's already in motion isn't easy, but that's exactly what the Whole Communities–Whole Health team set out to do. From the earliest days of the cohort study in and around Del Valle, the team committed not just to conducting meaningful, community-centered research, but to documenting the

entire process as it unfolded, so others could learn from their experiences and apply those lessons in their own work.

That effort culminated in a published process paper that outlines how the study was built and refined phase by phase, offering a behind-the-scenes look at what it really takes to launch a longitudinal, community-based project. Co-authored by **Lindsay Bouchacourt** (Stan Richards School of Advertising & Public Relations, Moody College of Communication) and Research Coordinator



*The plan: Complete data collection activities in 1 month for all families The reality: 4 months

Adapted from Figure 1 of Lindsay Bouchacourt et al.'s paper in JMIR Formative Research: "Timeline of implemented changes and formal instances of feedback from families."

Sarah Smith, the article details the team's strategies for staying responsive to both scientific rigor and community needs. "If you want to build a model," Smith said, "then documenting and measuring and evaluating everything that you're doing has to be a part of each phase, no matter how fast things are moving."

The paper shares the challenges, adaptations and insights that emerged along the way. It's part guide, part invitation — an open-source contribution to researchers aiming to build trust-based, community-driven studies in real-world settings.

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Fostering Connections: Campus and Community Partner Engagement

Trust Is the Foundation for Better Health

In Del Valle, Whole Communities–Whole Health is demonstrating what it means to build research around relationships. Now in its fourth year, the cohort study has grown from 15 families to 160 families — growth driven by trust, not just recruitment. From the beginning, the team has approached participants not as subjects, but as partners, investing time and care into building authentic, lasting connections.

Whole Communities–Whole Health Research Coordinator Sarah Smith (in hat) with children at Del Valle Day, June 2024.

That work is led by Research Coordinator **Sarah Smith** and Community Engagement Manager **Shirene Garcia** (Steve Hicks School of Social Work), who, along with a team of colleagues, meet families where they are — at community events, in follow-up calls and during home visits. By listening first, they ensure the study reflects participants' needs and lives, not just research goals. In return, Whole Communities–Whole Health provides families with personalized, easy-to-understand results about their own environment and health — from air and water quality to sleep and activity levels — turning research participation into something practical.

This model of mutual trust is working. "I think one of the things that they've done so well is fostering trust within the community by prioritizing these meaningful relationships with community-based organizations, who are already engaging and doing the work with these families," said Maggie Jaime, the executive director of AVANCE, a nonprofit that has served East Austin families for 25 years. "I think it's ensured that (the participants) don't see themselves as research subjects."

Whole Communities–Whole Health is showing that long-term, community-centered research can create value for families now while laying the groundwork for a healthier future.

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Honoring the Partnerships that Strengthen Research and Trust

Whole Communities–Whole Health celebrated the deep relationships it has built with local organizations by honoring seven key community partners at its annual symposium. These groups have been instrumental in shaping the cohort study through their trusted roles in the community and ongoing collaboration.

UT's Michael Mackert (Moody College of Communication and Dell Medical School), right, congratulates Community Coalition for Health's CEO Charle Moody, Jr. and COO Mia Greer, long-term community partners.

Community Coalition for Health (C2H), led by Dr. Charles Moody, Jr. and Mia Greer, received a Guiding Light Award for their bridge-building work between researchers and East Austin families. AVANCE–Austin, represented by Zobeida Guerrero, was recognized for its early and sustained role in recruitment. Additional honorees, including Carol Lilly, the Children's Wellness Center, Del Valle ISD, the Del Valle WIC Clinic and Travis County Fire Station #1104, were acknowledged for expanding access, trust and logistical support for families participating in the study.

Members of the Whole Communities–Whole Health Community Strategy Team gather with staff members and student volunteers at Community Resource Day this past year.

These awards underscore Whole Communities–Whole Health's commitment to co-creating research centered around community needs and insights. Each partner has helped ensure the project is grounded in lived experience, from improving outreach and retention to shaping how data is shared. Their engagement strengthens the relevance and reach of the program's findings and reflects a long-term investment in research that delivers tangible benefits to Central Texas families and public health studies.

In addition to honoring organizational partners, the program spotlighted the vital role of its Community Strategy Team (CST), whose members guide every aspect of the study by elevating the voices and priorities of Southeast Austin residents. A CST social media campaign highlighted the motivations and leadership of individual members, celebrating their impact on their neighborhoods and the research process.

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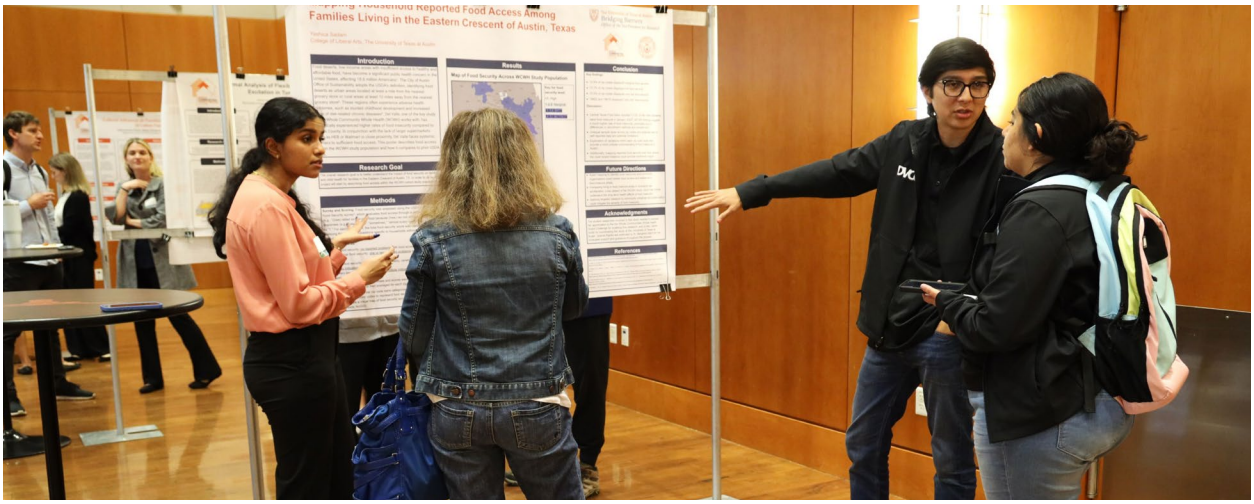
Sparking and Celebrating Collaboration at the 2025 Whole Communities–Whole Health Symposium

The Whole Communities–Whole Health **Research Symposium**, held on February 7, 2025, brought together researchers, community leaders and university partners for a day of meaningful dialogue, new connections and a shared commitment to community-engaged research. With this year's theme focused on collaboration and impact, the event highlighted the power of partnerships in advancing research that is both rigorous and rooted in real-world needs.



At the 2025 Whole Communities–Whole Health Symposium, student research assistant Yashica Sadam, left, presents her poster to Juan Rodriguez Mora (pointing) and Sarah Rodriguez from the Del Valle Community Coalition.

The symposium featured a keynote address by Pamela Cole, professor of psychology and human development and family studies at Penn State University. In her talk, "Development of Emotion Regulation: Then and Now," Cole explored how the fields of clinical and developmental psychology have evolved in their understanding of emotion regulation, emphasizing individual processes and the importance of studying emotional development across multiple timescales and contexts.

In addition to a dynamic poster session, recognition of outstanding community partners and the flash funding competition (highlighted in the Research section), UT faculty shared interdisciplinary, community-engaged projects focused on real-world collaboration and solutions to improve health and well-being. Faculty and graduate students presented their research on heat exposure, school gardening programs, sleep patterns, indoor air quality, food insecurity, water quality and more.

Whole Communities–Whole Health Headlines

UT Austin News Coverage

7/14/2025 **Daily Exercise May Be Key to Better Sleep, New Study Finds**

External Features and Mentions

9/26/2024 **Some in this California beach town insist the Tijuana River is poisoning them. Officials disagree** LA Times

7/14/2025 **Daily exercise may be key to better sleep, new study finds** Medical Express

7/16/2025 **Move a little every day: Daily exercise may be the secret to better sleep** Knowridge

7/18/2025 **This One Habit Will Transform The Quality of Your Sleep, Says New Study** Women's Health

7/25/2025 **Daily Movement Improves Sleep and Mood, Says New UT Study** The CP Diary

7/28/2025 **To Sleep Better, You May Want To Exercise Every Day** Futurity

7/29/2025 **Want Better Sleep Tracking Scores? Just Do This 10-Minute Habit Daily** nextpit

UT OVPR Communications

3/18/2025 **Trust or Bust: How Whole Communities–Whole Health Nurtures Connections with Study Participants**

4/15/2025 **Rapid Pitches, Real World Impact**

4/21/2025 **Cornerstones and Guiding Lights**

5/1/2025 **How to Lay Down Tracks When the Train is Moving**

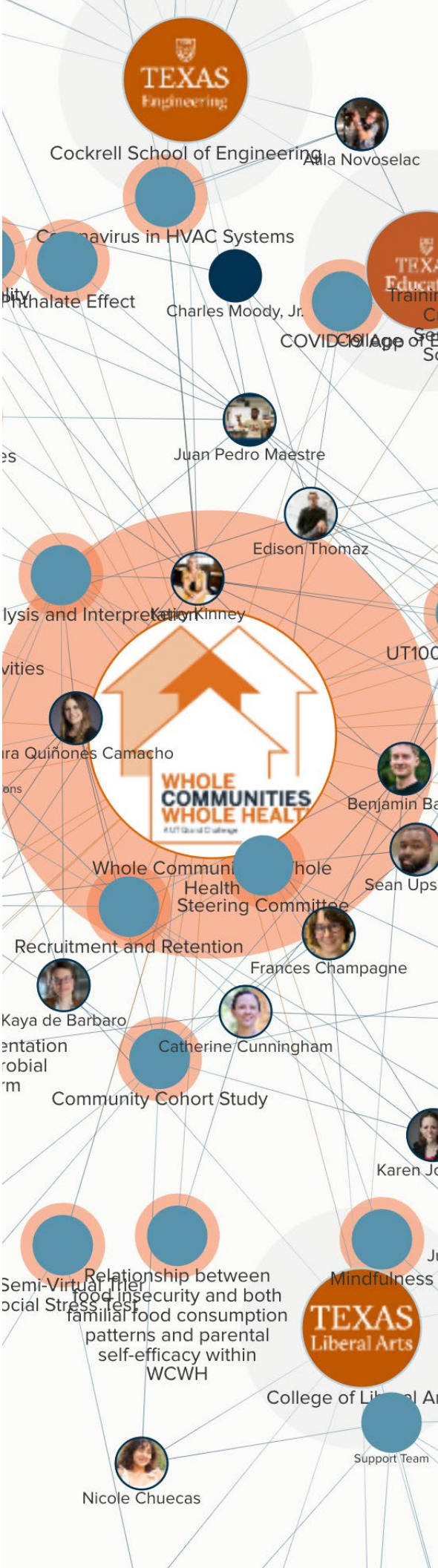
7/21/2025 **A Modern Stress Test with a Molecular Twist**

Creating Connections

Solving complex societal challenges requires more than siloed thinking — it demands collaboration across disciplines and perspectives. Whole Communities–Whole Health brings together researchers from diverse colleges, schools and departments at UT Austin to work toward holistic, community-informed solutions.

This year, the initiative expanded its collaborative reach by bringing in five new faculty members to the Whole Communities–Whole Health team.

Curious how these connections take shape? Explore our **interactive network map** to see the growing web of people, projects, and units involved. You can search by name, college or project — or simply click a node to discover how it's linked within the broader Whole Communities–Whole Health ecosystem.



Whole Communities–Whole Health Partners

A to Z Translators

AVANCE Austin

Central Health

Children's Wellness Center

CommUnityCare

Community Advancement Network

Community Coalition for Health

Del Valle Community Coalition

Linda Billela-Riojas, Del Valle Community Member

Del Valle Independent School District

Dell Children's Health Plan

Dove Springs Proud

Farmshare

Project Guru LLC.

Travis County EMS, Fire Station #1104

Publications and Presentations

Whole Communities–Whole Health research continues to generate new insights, with findings shared in leading peer-reviewed journals and presented at national and international conferences. The following list highlights publications and presentations from the past fiscal year, many of which are available online for broader access and engagement.

Publications

Bouchacourt, L., Smith, S., Mackert, M., Almalki, S., Awad, G., Barczyk, A., Bearman, S. K., Castelli, D., Champagne, F., Barbaro, K. de, Garcia, S., Johnson, K., Kinney, K., Lawson, K., Nagy, Z., Camacho, L. Q., Rodríguez, L., Schnyer, D., Thomaz, E., Upshaw, S., Zhang, Y. (2024). Strategies to Implement a Community-Based, Longitudinal Cohort Study: The Whole Communities-Whole Health Case Study. *JMIR Formative Research,* 8(1).

Corral, C. J., Miller, M., Champagne, F. A., Schnyer, D. M., & Baird, B. (2025). Physical Activity Frequency Patterns Influence Sleep Architecture in Young Adults. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*.

Huang, Y.-C., Zapien, V., Chen, Y., Le, S., Cumberbatch, A., & Valdez, C. (2025). Urban Spillover, Health Disparities, and Community Strengths in Small Towns in Central Texas. Healthcare*, 13*(5), 501.

Jarma, D., Novoselac, A., Maestre, JP., & Kinney, KA. (2025). Viral surveillance in building zones via air handling unit filter forensics: A multi-story residential case study. *Building and Environment, 283,* 113414.

Miller, M., Divine, M., McAfee, C., Brown, R., Sears, S., Krautkramer, C., Gogia, R., Josephs, R. A., & Champagne, F. A. (2025). A Semi-Virtual Trier Social Stress Test (SV-TSST). *Psychoneuroendocrinology,* 172, 107267.

Miller, M., McAfee, C., Brown, R. D., Sears, S., Krautkramer, C., Gogia, R., Wylie, D., Josephs, R. A., & Champagne, F. A. (2025). Impact of acute stress exposure on genome-wide DNA methylation. *Scientific Reports, 15*(1), 23931.

Valdez, C. R., Petruzzi, L., Schnarrs, P. W., Banks, T., Coombe, C. M., & Israel, B. A. (2025). Forging partnerships for health equity research: Transformative capacity-building for community-academic teams. *Frontiers in Public Health, 13*.

Wei, R. (2024). Participants' information needs for water quality data return in a community-based research project [Master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin].

Presentations

Early, A., Huglo, E., Nealon, S., Haley, A., Castelli, D., Ramos-Santiago, T., Novoselac, A., & Kinney, K. A. (2025, June 10). *Data Driven Estimates of Home Thermal Control Parameters* [Oral presentation]. Healthy Buildings 2025 Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Early, A., Novoselac, A., & Kinney, K. A. (2025, May 21). *Damage extent and remediation implications of a common type of water damage to indoor drywall* [Oral presentation]. Association of Environmental Engineering and Science Professors, Durham, NC.

Khante, P., Madden-Rusnak, A., & de Barbaro, K. (2025, May 3). *Real-world Classification of Caregiver Sensitivity to Infant Distress* [Poster presentation]. Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN.

Kinney, K. A., Jarma, D., Maestre, J. P., Misztal, P., Lin, S., & Neville, A. (2025, June 10). *Exploring Relationships Between Chemical and Microbial Contaminants in Residential Dust* [Oral presentation]. Healthy Buildings 2025 Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Nascimento-Ferreira, M. V., Cardoso, A. G. A., Baird, B., Gomes, E. R. S., Silva, M. L., Souza, H. F. B., & Moraes, A. C. F. (2025, June 11). *Replacing sedentary behavior with physical activity: A 15-minute strategy to alleviate psychological distress in college students from economically disadvantaged regions* [Poster presentation]. 2025 Society for Epidemiologic Research Conference, Boston, MA.

Pinedo, K. D. L. T., Jiang, X., Khante, P., Baird, B., & de Barbaro, K. (2025, May 2). *Is "Good" Chaos bad for you? Chaos Subtypes and their links to mother-child mental health* [Poster presentation]. Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN.

Wilds, T., & de Barbaro, K. (2025, May 3). *Behavioral mechanisms linking maternal mental health to infant RSA reactivity in real-world settings* [Poster presentation]. Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN.

Williams, E., Otegui, M., Maestre, J. P., Early, A., Smith, S., Katz, L., & Kinney, K. (2024, November 17). *Effect of Premise Plumbing and Water Utility on Drinking Water Quality in Marginalized Communities* [Oral presentation]. American Water Works Association Water Quality Technology Conference, Schaumburg, IL.

Williams, E., Otegui, M., Maestre, J. P., Early, A., Smith, S., Katz, L. E., & Kinney, K. A. (2025, May 21). *Effect of Water Utility and Premise Plumbing on Drinking Water Microbiome in Marginalized Communities* [Oral presentation]. Association of Environmental Engineering and Science Professors, Durham, NC.

Whole Communities–Whole Health Team

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