Enhancing Rigor, Relevance, and Equity in Research and Evaluation Through Community Engagement

Summary of 2021 OPRE Methods Meeting

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Community leaders, community members, and researchers increasingly recognize that engaging communities in research and evaluation is critical for implementing effective programs and building trust. Researchers and communities also recognize the value of community-engaged research to improve the rigor and relevance of research and evaluation and better address historical and ongoing systemic inequities.

President Biden's [Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (EO 13985)](#) underscores the federal government's commitment to advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities. It includes a directive for agencies to "consult with members of communities that have been historically underrepresented in the Federal Government and underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, Federal policies and programs."[1] This directive presents an opportunity for those who conduct federally supported research to identify opportunities to increase engagement with underserved communities.

> Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our Government. Because advancing equity requires a systematic approach to embedding fairness in decision-making processes, executive departments and agencies (agencies) must recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity.
>
> — Excerpt from Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (EO 13985)

Community-engaged research is defined "not by the methods used, but the principles that guide the research and the relationships between researchers and the community."[2] Such research is best understood as a spectrum of varying degrees of community

[1] Executive Order No. 13985, 3 C.F.R. 7009–7013. (2021). *Advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government.* https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government

[2] McDonald, M. A. (2009). *Practicing community-engaged research. Duke Center for Community Research.* https://ccts.osu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Practicing%20Community-engaged%20Research_Training%20Module.pdf

involvement; some researchers consult community advisory boards at key points in a project, while others design studies using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach that centers community perspectives throughout the research and evaluation process. Community-engaged research requires intentionality. It is critical that researchers who engage communities work to prevent tokenizing groups and ignoring power dynamics between research entities and communities.

When implemented well, community-engaged approaches offer several advantages to research and evaluation. Engaging communities in research and evaluation—especially when identifying research questions, designing and implementing the study or intervention, recruiting study participants, and interpreting findings—may lead to more relevant research questions, greater recruitment success, increased external validity, greater retention of participants, and enhanced understanding of findings.[3] Community-engaged research also can benefit the individuals participating in the research. It can provide an opportunity to "establish and exercise trust [and] balance historically rooted racial, ethnic, gender, and other power differentials."[4] Community-engaged research is more than a project or study; it is a process that requires commitment from researchers and communities to sustain long-term relationships and collaboration.

On Oct. 27–28, 2021, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of

Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) hosted a virtual meeting for participants from federal agencies, research firms, academia, and other organizations to explore community-engaged research approaches. The convening addressed the following questions:

▸ What is the motivation behind community-engaged research?

▸ How is community-engaged research conducted?

▸ What are community members' experiences in community-engaged research?

▸ How can funders support community-engaged research?

▸ What tools and supports are available for implementing community-engaged research and evaluation approaches?

This summary describes key themes and presentations from the meeting. Each section of this document corresponds to a meeting session or collection of sessions. The full meeting agenda appears at the end of this document for reference.

WHAT IS THE MOTIVATION BEHIND COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH?

Speakers opened the meeting by situating community-engaged research within the federal research and evaluation space and introducing fundamental principles of the approach. Speakers shared several

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[3] Viswanathan, M., Ammerman, A., Eng, E., Garlehner, G., Lohr, K. N., Griffith, D., Rhodes, S., Samuel-Hodge, C., Maty, S., Lux, L., Webb, L., Sutton, S. F., Swinson, T., Jackman, A., & Whitener, L. (2004). *Community-based participatory research: Assessing the evidence, summary*. AHRQ Evidence Report Summaries.

[4] Isler, M. R., & Corbie-Smith, G. (2012). Practical steps to community engaged research: From inputs to outcomes. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics, 40*(4), 904–914.

examples of federal policies and practices that disadvantaged certain groups, specifically Black and Indigenous communities. The speakers urged attendees to reflect on how research behaviors—informed by researchers' own experiences—can create and sustain conditions of inequity.

Speakers presented two reports—Beyond the Melting Pot[5] and The Moynihan Report [6]—that used a deficit lens to examine inequality between Black and White Americans; ideas from these reports fundamentally influenced social safety net programs and continue to affect these programs and their evaluations. Community engagement in research and evaluation is a critical element of advancing racial equity; community-engaged approaches disrupt traditional power dynamics and elevate community members and their perspectives in the research process.

> **Participant engagement can help challenge some of our deeply rooted values about the research process and the populations we study—beliefs that we may not even be aware of that we hold.**
>
> — Amanda Coleman, OPRE

Community-engaged research aligns with ACF's evaluation policy. These approaches support transparent research and evaluation and promote the ACF evaluation principles of rigor and relevance.[7] Community-engaged approaches guide researchers to focus on questions relevant to community members, aid in the development of suitable research designs, ensure researchers use culturally

and linguistically sensitive measures and analytic approaches, support accurate interpretations of findings, and promote effective dissemination of results.

Speakers presented the following definition of community engagement, which was published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people."[8] Community engagement occurs across a continuum, meaning researchers can use community-engaged methods with varying degrees of community involvement. CBPR, a specific community engagement method, is rooted in considerations of power and social justice. Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) is a form of CBPR that empowers youth and is oriented toward equity. In YPAR projects, youth researchers lead research activities with support from adult researchers. Though many research designs involve youth (e.g., youth organizing, youth user-centered design), YPAR is the only approach that positions youth as research decision-makers (i.e., determining questions, methods, etc.) and evidence generators.

Speakers highlighted several other community-engaged research methods. Research practice partnerships (RPPs) often engage an institution (e.g., university, foundation) and a public entity (e.g., school district) in an investigation of an issue or topic. Typically, RPPs are tools used in K–12

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[5] Glazer, N., & Moynihan, D. P. (1963). *Beyond the melting pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
[6] Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor. (1965). *The Negro family: The case for national action.* U.S. Department of Labor.

[7] Administration for Children and Families. (2021). *ACF evaluation policy*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/acf-evaluation-policy
[8] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1997). *Principles of community engagement* (p. 9). CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement.

education research. RPPs promote institutional change by ensuring research is relevant and practitioners implement evidence-based processes and programs. Human-centered design (HCD) is an iterative process researchers use to gather participants' experiences and incorporate that feedback into program and process improvements. HCD emerged in the product design field and does not focus on power or systems change.

To close the session, speakers encouraged attendees to consider the spectrum of power and the roles at play in community-engaged research by posing several reflection questions:

- Who initiates the research or decides the research and evaluation questions?
- Who collects, analyzes, and interprets the data?
- Who communicates and decides how to act on the findings?
- Who implements those actions?
- Who benefits/is harmed by those actions?
- How does this affect roles of researchers, staff, students, family, and community?

HOW IS COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

Practitioners and researchers who implemented community-engaged research presented three case studies. The case studies represented work by community organizations and federally funded

researchers to demonstrate the broad application of community-engaged research approaches.

Community Participatory Action Research

The first case study highlighted the work of the Children's Services Council of Broward County to create an integrated data system (IDS). Speakers noted that traditional IDS platforms often replicate racial hierarchies and segregation; typically, White researchers and policy stakeholders examine the data of children and families of color with limited interaction between researchers and the individuals whose data are studied. Traditional IDS platforms often use a deficit-based language to describe individuals whose data are stored in the system (e.g., "at risk," "high need").

To create a more equitable IDS platform, the researchers used a community participatory action research (CPAR) approach to engage families whose data were in the system to participate in the research and development process as co-investigators. Parents and youth completed consulting agreements to formalize their roles in the project and received compensation. System professionals also joined the project as co-researchers. This approach created space for

families to share their experiences with researchers rather than be studied.

The full research team participated in a 2-day antiracism training program and a workshop that focused on racism in the community and implicit bias. Speakers noted these activities created a foundation for the research team's work by establishing a shared vocabulary and understanding of social forces. The researchers' CPAR approach generated a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of youth and families' experiences in the children's services system. For example, researchers learned parents did not feel valued in the system. Parent co-researchers created a video to show system staff how the existing system made parents feel dehumanized and illustrate opportunities for change. The Children's Services Council of Broward County's CPAR work created a narrative of partnership to frame future work among system staff, children, and families in the county.

Youth Participatory Action Research

The second case study built on the earlier introduction to YPAR and provided two examples of YPAR projects conducted with the RYSE Center, a community center for young people in Richmond, California. Speakers began by reviewing the YPAR literature base. They noted scholarly interest in YPAR increased over the past 10 years, and the method is used in the areas of education, social inequalities, health, and safety.

The RYSE Center conducted a listening campaign and found some young people served by the organization used marijuana as a coping strategy for stress. One speaker, a

RYSE participant at the time of the project, worked with other youth researchers to study the coping mechanisms available to youth. Using a mixed-methods approach, the youth researchers discovered young people found marijuana to be the easiest coping mechanism to access and thought talking to an adult could be a harmful coping strategy. Informed by these findings, the youth researchers created and facilitated a program called "Chat Lounge" for RYSE Center youth to learn about the dimensions of trauma.

The second YPAR project the speakers conducted with the RYSE Center informed the organization's establishment of a health clinic by assessing young people's health needs and gaps in services. The speakers worked alongside youth researchers throughout the YPAR process. The youth researchers found young people wanted access to mental health services from providers who represented the community and shared similar experiences.

Federally Sponsored Research

Researchers presented a third example of community-engaged research, which the speakers conducted with the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC). The speakers first introduced the concept of communities of learning (CoLs) as used within the TRC—groups of community members who lend their professional and lived experiences to research that promotes the health and well-being of American Indian and Alaska Native children. Program administrators, federal staff, and other researchers may also serve within CoLs. The TRC assembles CoLs on a project-by-project basis. CoLs inform a range of projects, such as those studying the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic on Tribal early childhood classrooms and the applicability of common early childhood measures in Tribal settings.

Speakers described their involvement with two separate advisory groups that offered guidance on translating research findings and tailoring research instruments to work with Native communities. First, the speakers explained the work of a specific CoL, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System CoL (CLASS CoL). Through qualitative research, the CLASS CoL identified a need for future research to determine how fundamental concepts about teacher and child interactions translate to Native communities. Next, speakers discussed the TRC's involvement with the American Indian and Alaska Native Family and Child Experiences Survey (AI/AN FACES) workgroup. TRC members advised federal staff to ensure the AI/AN FACES survey instrument, which the TRC consulted on as a workgroup member, was culturally sensitive in its creation and execution. While supporting the AI/AN FACES workgroup, TRC staff established the Native Language and Culture CoL, which consults on projects and serves as an opportunity for the TRC to partner with other researchers and communities.

At the end of the federally sponsored research presentation, the speakers shared several lessons learned from their work:

▶ Ensure a project has the necessary time and funding commitments before conducting community-engaged research.

▶ Consider relationships and relationship building as essential elements of research with Tribal communities.

▶ Consider research approaches beyond traditional research paradigms (e.g., community-based participatory research).

▶ Tailor research dissemination strategies to the unique needs and priorities of each audience.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH?

Community members who participated in the three case studies formed a panel to share their experiences as co-researchers in community-engaged projects. The importance of building trust emerged as a common theme across the community members' responses to questions about their research experiences. Several speakers shared suggestions for building trust between researchers and community members. These suggestions included incorporating relationship-building opportunities into project timelines and training community members to lead research activities among their peers.

> **We have to move at the pace of trust.**
> — Brian Villa, University of California, Berkeley, Innovations for Youth

Speakers shared strategies they used to co-create research questions with researchers and community members. In most of the examples speakers provided, the research process began by convening groups of individuals affected by an issue, program, or policy. Project teams often led moderated discussions or activities to identify specific

issues or concerns around which to craft research questions.

When asked about creating sustainable partnerships between researchers and communities, most speakers emphasized the importance of relationships in facilitating this process. Relationships have the power to create additional opportunities for community members to share their lived expertise with additional stakeholders and in other forums.

To conclude the session, speakers shared what they would like to change about working alongside researchers. Several speakers stated they would like to remove judgments and biases researchers often bring to community-focused work. Similarly, another speaker expressed interest in undoing past harms inflicted specifically on Native American communities through research.

HOW CAN FUNDERS SUPPORT COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH?

Federal and private funders made up a panel to discuss methods for supporting community-engaged research projects. Speakers began by considering how their personal and organizational experiences of privilege and power shape the research process. A speaker representing a federal agency noted their office began community-engaged projects by acknowledging past harms conducted through research. A private funder stressed the importance of funders using their roles to promote equity in research and evidence creation. Within the current funding structure, research

institutions are often best prepared to seek and receive funding, which is not advantageous to small funding applicants with limited resources.

> Funders are often gatekeepers, and that gatekeeping relates to who gets to produce evidence in the first place…It can distort what gets counted, can dictate what gets to count, and, therefore, what is even eligible for future funding downstream.
>
> — Shruti Jayaraman, Chicago Beyond

Speakers shared three considerations for other funders supporting community-engaged projects:

- **Value.** Funders should consider all possible benefits associated with a proposed project.

- **Access.** Funders should consider which applicants may not have the same degree of access or opportunity as others.

- **Accountability.** Funders should consider how connected applicants are to the community (e.g., involvement of community members, plans to share research findings with communities).

Federal funders discussed challenges and opportunities associated with using project funds to compensate community researchers. Speakers noted the structure of federal research and evaluation contracts can be an obstacle to community engagement. One speaker noted the project team supporting TRC's work, discussed in an earlier presentation, adjusted the project and funding structures to promote community

engagement. The project team shifted resources to create practice-based research networks that enabled community members and researchers to share power throughout the research process.

In their concluding remarks, speakers encouraged funders to examine their biases (e.g., personal, professional, organizational), approach community-engaged research with humility, and acknowledge the importance of small changes achieved through research.

WHAT TOOLS AND SUPPORTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH AND EVALUATION APPROACHES?

The meeting concluded with two sessions that focused on tangible tools and strategies researchers can use to conduct community-engaged research.

Community Engagement Tools

Federal contract researchers with experience implementing community-based research shared a suite of tools such as data walks to promote community engagement in research

and offered considerations for working with youth in community-engaged projects. Data walks present opportunities to share research findings in a community-based setting. Community members attend a data walk to review, discuss, and analyze data with the project team and other stakeholders. The speakers identified several challenges associated with data walks. For example, the speakers noted findings and other data walk materials may need to be translated for non-Native English speakers in the community to access the research results. Community Advisory Boards (CABs) are additional tools available to researchers seeking to incorporate community voices into their projects. CABs bring community members together to advise researchers on a host of community-engaged projects—rather than representing a specific community in a particular study—throughout the course of studies.

When engaging youth, speakers emphasized the importance of ensuring young people feel comfortable and valued throughout the research process. These conditions are necessary for youth to share their expertise with researchers. Speakers closed the session by sharing best practices for creating and sustaining partnerships with communities. One recommendation involved working with community leaders and other project partners to determine which community groups may not be represented in the project and conduct outreach accordingly.

Advancing Racial Equity Through Research

The final session focused specifically on promoting racial equity. Speakers shared two guiding principles for equity-based research:

examine researchers' backgrounds and biases and consider the impact of the research on communities. In the first portion of the session, the speakers shared an example of their community-engaged work with the South Ward Promise Neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. Community members viewed the research team as outsiders. The project team dedicated time to formal and informal relationship building prior to engaging community members in data collection. These relationship-building activities included discussions about neighborhood goals and meals shared between researchers and community members.

The second portion of the session focused on the equitable dissemination of research findings. Speakers stated the importance of using person-centered language free of stigma and contextualizing data to understand what system-level factors may influence research findings. Researchers should also avoid using a type of person as "the norm" when making comparisons among groups. Research often centers whiteness by regularly situating White participants' outcomes as the baseline for comparison with other racial groups.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To access the online meeting archive, including a detailed agenda, meeting materials, and presentation slides, please visit the OPRE Methods Meeting website at www.opremethodsmeeting.org. The site also includes materials from other innovative methods meetings OPRE has organized and will be updated to include future meetings.

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Worden, M., Wagner, H., Hyra, A., & Wright, D. (2022). Enhancing rigor, relevance, and equity in research and evaluation through community engagement (OPRE Report 2022-88). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

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ENHANCING RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND EQUITY IN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Virtual Meeting Agenda

Day 1: October 27, 2021

Welcome and Opening

Gabrielle Newell, Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Naomi Goldstein, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Research, and Evaluation, OPRE

Motivation and Level Setting

Reimagining Our Approach to Research to Advance Racial Equity

Amanda Coleman, Deputy Division Director, Division of Child and Family Development, OPRE

Integrating Participatory Approaches Into OPRE-Funded Evidence Generation to Support the Lives of Children and Families

Emily Ozer, Professor of Community Health Sciences, University of California, Berkeley

Case Study 1: Community Participatory Action Research

Community Participatory Action Research Case Study 1: Broward County, Florida

Sue Gallagher, Chief Innovation Officer, Children's Services Council of Broward County

Adamma Ducille, Director of Equity and Organizational Development

Tiffany Csonka, Parent Co-Researcher and Youth System Organizing Consultant

Q&A Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Case Study 2: YPAR in Action

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Brian Villa, Researcher, University of California, Berkeley, Innovations for Youth

Leili Lyman, Community Liaison, University of California, Berkeley

Q&A Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Case Study 3: Federally Sponsored Example

Community Engagement in a Federally Sponsored Center: The TRC

Jessica V. Barnes-Najor, Director for Community Partnerships, Michigan State University, and Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

Deana Around Him, Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends

Ann Cameron, Head Start Director, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan

Q&A Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Day 1 Closing Remarks

Gabrielle Newell, Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Day 2: October 28, 2021

Discussion: Reflections From Community Members

Tiffany Csonka, Parent Co-Researcher and Youth System Organizing Consultant

Brian Villa, Researcher, University of California, Berkeley, Innovations for Youth

Leili Lyman, Community Liaison, University of California, Berkeley

Ann Cameron, Head Start Director, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan

Moderator: Shariece Evans, Social Scientist, VPD Government Solutions

Discussion: How Can Funders Support Community-Engaged Research?

Aleta Lynn Meyer, Lead for Primary Prevention and Resilience, OPRE

Laura Erickson, Social Science Analyst, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

Nadra Tyus, Program Director/Health Scientist Administrator, National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities

Shruti Jayaraman, Chief Investments Officer, Chicago Beyond

Vivian Tseng, Senior Vice President of Programs, William T. Grant Foundation

Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Part 1 of 2: Tools and Supports for Implementing Community-Engaged Research and Evaluation Approaches

Community Engagement Methods

Elsa Falkenburger, Principal Research Associate, Urban Institute

Eona Harrison, Senior Research Associate, Urban Institute

Q&A Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Part 2 of 2: Tools and Supports for Implementing Community-Engaged Research and Evaluation Approaches

Advancing Racial Equity Through Research and Community Engaged Methods

Jenita Parekh, Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends

Chrishana Lloyd, Senior Research Associate, Child Trends

Esther Gross, Technical Assistance Specialist, Child Trends

Kristine Andrews, Senior Director, Ideas to Impact

Q&A Moderator: Kriti Jain, Senior Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE

Closing Remarks

Gabrielle Newell, Social Science Research Analyst, OPRE