Engaging Communities in Culturally Responsive and Equitable Research and Evaluation



A Roadmap and Examples

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INTRODUCTION

This brief provides a roadmap for engaging communities in each step of the research and evaluation process. It highlights examples of community-based research presented at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) 2021 Methods Meeting on October 27–28, 2021. The examples illustrate how to embed community engagement in the research and evaluation process and make research more culturally responsive and equitable. Federal staff can refer to this brief when reviewing and overseeing research and program evaluations.

Researchers increasingly recognize that engaging communities in research and evaluation is critical; reciprocity between



KEY TERMS

- Culturally responsive evaluation is a framework that grounds evaluation in culture and recognizes that culturally defined values and beliefs are the core of an evaluation. Evaluations should be designed and conducted to respond to these values and beliefs (Newcomer et al., 2015).
- Equitable research starts with mutual understanding between community organizations, researchers, and funders. Those involved in the research design must acknowledge implicit and unintended bias. Conducting research equitably means applying approaches needed to recognize unequal power differentials and access to resources and opportunities between groups while considering historical and current lived realities (Chicago Beyond, 2019; Andrews et al., 2019).
- Community-engaged research is conducted collaboratively with a community—a group of people who share commonalities based on geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations that affect their well-being (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 1997, p. 9).

Corresponding Resources

Review OPRE's related resources:

- Engaging Community Representation in Program Evaluation
- Centering Equity in Program Evaluation
- The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation: Third Edition | The Administration for Children and Families (hhs.gov)

these groups is necessary for the research to be ethical (Andrews et al., 2019). Members of communities being researched want to have a say in improving programs and services intended to support them. Conventional research had often ignored or exploited their experiences. Although the term "community" has many definitions, research presented at the 2021 Methods Meeting focused on communities directly affected by the human services programs OPRE and its partners seek to evaluate.

Community-engaged research substantively incorporates input from community members being researched. While the level of community involvement varies across evaluations, individuals who represent and/or are members of the geographic, demographic, and/or cultural groups most affected help direct and guide research efforts. The level of engagement can range from serving on a community advisory board at key points in a project, to designing and implementing studies as a full partner.

Community-engaged research can also improve the relevance and accuracy of research by drawing on the experience and knowledge of community members; it can help researchers uncover and document structural and systems-level drivers of inequity that may shape research findings. Community-based research helps researchers bring an equitable focus to their work by:

- Valuing the knowledge and expertise of systemically marginalized and underrepresented groups
- Using culturally appropriate and valid methods

Shifting power dynamics that have historically prevailed between researchers and the people they research

The following sections showcase examples of community-engaged research approaches and tools presented at the 2021 OPRE Methods Meeting and offer actionable suggestions to bring a community engagement approach to federal research and evaluation.

ENGAGING WITH **COMMUNITIES TO REDRESS** HISTORICAL INEQUITIES IN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

At the start of the 2021 meeting, Amanda Coleman, deputy division director for the Division of Child and Family Development at OPRE, explained the motivation for focusing on the topic of community-engaged research. She cited examples of past federal actions and research conducted at the expense of members of communities of color and without their involvement in the research design or execution. This body of research, conducted without engaging those at the center of it, created and perpetuated stereotypes and historical inequities—particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color. She encouraged the audience to imagine an approach to research that would instead advance racial equity, taking into account the context of structural racism and inequality.

Dr. Coleman explained how engaging research participants in the research process moves us toward racial equity. For decades, research on communities of color has often provided no

value to the people being researched and caused harm. Research with people of color can repair that harm if they have the space to meaningfully engage in the research. The focus on the experiences of communities being researched eliminates reliance on stereotypes and guides researchers to ask the right questions and use the most appropriate methods to answer those questions.

Participant engagement in research ensures that researchers:

- Focus on the right questions
- Develop appropriate research designs
- Understand the context for studying a particular program
- Accurately interpret and contextualize the findings
- Effectively communicate the results so that they can be used

EQUITABLE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION: APPLICATIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Throughout the 2021 OPRE Methods Meeting, presenters emphasized an equity approach can and should be applied across all research and evaluation stages, including forming and training teams, designing the evaluation, gathering data, and analyzing data, and communicating findings. This section describes community-engaged approaches that research and evaluation teams can adopt to bring a culturally responsive and equitable focus to these stages of the research process.

Form and Train Equitable Research and Evaluation Teams

Create a diverse research or evaluation team. A diverse team includes people with a range of experiences and perspectives in all roles of the project, including planning, data collection, analysis, and communication. Diversity on the team can play a part in eliciting a variety of opinions, different ways of thinking, and, ideally, more meaningful evaluations. However, simply having a diverse team may not prompt diverse ideas unless the team's environment feels like a safe space for all members and is truly inclusive and open to different ways of thinking.

- Include community members¹ and people from organizations the program intends to benefit. They have valuable insights into historical and cultural contexts that could factor into program outcomes.
- Build in time to foster relationships and build trust to recruit community members to the evaluation team. Programs with longstanding relationships with community members may be able to recruit more quickly.
- Offer compensation to community evaluation team members. Their expertise is valuable—conventional research approaches have often failed to recognize their knowledge as equivalent to other forms of expertise.
- Identify and address power imbalances and decision-making processes. Are community members involved for advisory purposes only, or will their input carry the

¹ The term "community members" is used here in a broad sense to identify people a program could affect. Other suitable terms could be

[&]quot;past and potential program participants" and "potential evaluation respondents."

- same weight as other evaluation team members'?
- To facilitate community representation, start with established community leaders and approach other community organizations not typically represented on research teams. Find people from unrepresented groups. Become comfortable speaking to them and demonstrate a willingness to create opportunities for them. Partner with service providers that work with populations typically excluded to facilitate inclusion and participation.

Tool: Community Advisory Board

Elsa Falkenburger, principal research associate at Urban Institute, presented her organization's work with community advisory boards (CAB). She defined a CAB as a group of individuals from a community, including subgroups that may not be typically represented by existing leadership, that serves as a link between the research entity and the communities being researched (Falkenburger et al., 2021). CABs improve quality of research through:

- Promotion of community policies, services, and equity
- Prioritization of local priorities and concerns
- Community trust-building

There is a spectrum of types of CABs that have various amounts of authority and involvement in projects they are advising.

Ms. Falkenburger described the following best practices for collaborating with CABs:

- Involve the CAB in the first stages of project design.
- Create a sustainable relationship.
- Gather information continually.
- Be transparent about compensation, resources, and timelines.
- Create checkpoints for people to provide feedback on the CAB.



Applied Example: Children's Services Council of Broward County

As described by Sue Gallagher, chief innovation officer of the Children's Services Council of Broward County, the Council conducted a community participatory action research (CPAR) project in 2018-2019 to build a technology platform for an integrated data system for the children and families of Broward County, Florida (DuCille et al., 2021). The research team decided to include system professionals (e.g., social workers) and members of the community being researched as coresearchers. The goal was to invite people whose data were in the system to voluntarily share their experiences, treating them as equals rather than study subjects. All project coresearchers completed a 2-day antiracism training—along with a training on the local history of racism, resistance, and implicit bias—to create a common language and shared analysis. The researchers were prepared to provide healing responses such as breathing, body movement, and one-on-one discussions, to address traumas that surfaced during data collection.

Tiffany Csonka, a youth system organizing consultant with the Council, described the following effects of including a diverse research team for the CPAR project:

- Youth and parents developed leadership and research skills and had access to the social capital of system professionals and researchers.
- System professionals had the opportunity to work side-by-side with youth and parents, resulting in new understanding of and new energy for their work to support positive outcomes for youth.
- All coresearchers developed a sense of accountability, resulting in maximum participation, task completion, and creative research products.
- The CPAR project resulted in solutions implemented to address system gaps.

Build the research team's cultural competence capacity. Cultural competence in research and evaluation recognizes the role that values, views of the world, socialization, and culture play in perceiving, interpreting, and acting in the world. Culturally competent research approaches seek to help research team members be more self-conscious and self-aware of how their own values, socialization, and cultural perspectives shape their approach to research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Presenters suggest the following ways to make evaluation research more culturally responsive:

- Build in time to learn about and discuss past and potential research harms and benefits.
- Identify and use assessment tools available for evaluators to examine their identities, biases, and cultural competence (e.g., Cultural Competence of Program Evaluators Self-Report Scale, Program Evaluation Tip Sheet, the Project Implicit Bias Association Test).
- Create a step in the evaluation design process for evaluators to:
 - Question their own assumptions that influence their work.
 - Learn from the community to understand their strengths and assets.
- Discuss as a team the benefits of a culturally competent team (e.g., whether including cultural context in data collection and analysis could improve interpretations and findings).
- Plan for challenges and develop strategies to support cultural competence as the norm for evaluation teams (e.g., orientation of new staff includes professional development on cultural competence).



Applied Example: Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

The Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) is guided by more than 40 Tribal early childhood leaders. The center aims to inform culturally meaningful measurement that is reliable and valid for understanding Tribal children's development. Jessica Barnes-Najor and Deana Around Him—members of the TRC Leadership Team—and Ann Cameron, a member of the TRC Steering Committee, described the Center's approach to developing a culturally competent research and evaluation team:

- Build trust in communities harmed by research and acknowledge and discuss past and potential research harm. Balance those reflections with conversations about the potential benefits of research. Each community may have different levels of experience with research harms; it is important to understand the specific community you are working with.
- Anticipate potential concerns about data archiving, use, and management; data governance by the community at the center of data collection is an important consideration.
- Provide compensation or a token of appreciation to all participants.
- Hire local program staff and community members to collect data.
- Ensure sufficient funding to support community partners' time on projects.
- Be open to paradigm shifts in research methods and new understanding of issues; recognize cultural context may challenge previous "unquestionable truths" learned in past education or training.
- Consider how funding and academic structures can hinder community-engaged research.
- Think about the communication plan throughout the process to ensure reach of all contributors and produce products appropriate for audiences with varied levels of research experience.

Prepare for the Evaluation

Gather context. The evaluators are responsible for learning about the issues affecting the community being researched. A diverse evaluation team, ideally including community members, can promote understanding of the conditions that will affect a program and its evaluation. Avoid transferring this responsibility to community members; they should not carry the burden of educating evaluators.

- Consider whether a landscape assessment would be useful. Landscape assessments gather information to understand the historical and political context of the issue, clarify the issue or concern with members of the community, and identify root causes.
 - Beyond conducting an environmental scan of sources about the issue, engage members of the community at the center of the research topic with a variety of perspectives on the issue (Andrews et al., 2019). For example, engage a family enrolled in a program being studied and the program staff member who tracks and stores the program's data.
- Review publicly available data related to the topic of interest and use opportunities to learn from organizations and change agents in the community.
- Conduct key informant interviews, focus groups, or community dialogues to learn what factors could facilitate or inhibit the success of initiatives or programs.
- Develop a root cause analysis—a process to discover the systemic and societal root causes of the issue being

studied. Child Trends defines a root cause as "a factor that, when taken away, prevents an outcome from occurring" (Andrews et al., 2019).

- Consider using a diagram to develop a root cause analysis.
- Start with causal factors of an issue and connect them in a cause-andeffect sequence to determine the root of the issue.
- If root causes emerge outside a program's sphere of influence, consider sharing them with other organizations, policymakers, or community members who could carry out efforts to address them.



Corresponding Resource

Review Child Trends' How to Embed a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective in Research, which includes a template of a root cause tree diagram.





Applied Example: South Ward Promise Neighborhood

The South Ward Promise Neighborhood project is a mixed-methods study examining how Black mothers with young children who are experiencing housing hardship, housing instability, or homelessness are using housing supports and systems. The goal is to understand the effect of housing challenges on a local level to develop actionable recommendations.

Chrishana Lloyd, senior research associate at Child Trends, shared that the community of focus in this research is majority Black; most of the staff in the agencies that work in the neighborhood are also Black (Andrews et al., 2021). However, Dr. Lloyd is currently the only Black person on the evaluation team. The community being researched views the Child Trends team as a partner but also as an outsider; this view affects the data collection process.

Child Trends built time into the research process for relationship building (formally and informally) to set the stage for data collection. The premise was to create trust and have the flexibility needed to address complex issues. Trainings for the research team were held over a meal. Researchers and community members also engaged in questions about how it would feel to be in a community that is thriving and equitable. The human subjects training required by the institutional review board (IRB) can be challenging for community members to complete. The IRB Child Trends worked with allowed them to conduct an alternate, in-person PowerPoint training with a brief exam at the end instead of the online Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program.

Build an equity perspective into evaluation questions. Historically, funders define program success, which tends to drive the evaluation questions used to frame the evaluation. However, with diverse research and evaluation teams that include community members, evaluators could also ask meaningful research and evaluation

questions to participants and local organizations involved in the program.

Research or evaluation teams should discuss how framing questions can promote (or hinder) equity:

- Reflect on whether a program may affect some groups differently. If so, should research and evaluation questions be tailored for each group?
- Consider what external factors could influence program objectives to help understand outcomes. Information collected in the context-gathering stage will be helpful.
- Review research and evaluation questions to determine whose perspectives or biases are included in the questions.

Tool: Youth Engagement

Urban Institute defines youth engagement as building a relationship between young people and adults through interactions that are intentional, inclusive, and mutually beneficial (Falkenburger et al., 2021).

Eona Harrison, senior research associate at Urban Institute, described the following best practices for research with young people:

- Hold youth-only data walk sessions.
- Incorporate youth CABs or CABs with youth and trusted adults.
- Incorporate PhotoVoice, which gives young people the opportunity to document and explore various topics related to their community and pair the photos with their narrative.
- Reach young people via social media.

Urban Institute developed a toolkit to guide researchers, policymakers, direct service providers, and technical assistance providers interested in working with and engaging young people in a meaningful, mutually beneficial way.

Use an equity lens to plan for and conduct data collection. Consider research questions, community context, and eventual communication plans when selecting data collection methods. Community evaluation team members can offer their insight in this step. Continue to think beyond the mainstream definition of "expert" to include many voices in method decision-making.

- Expand your definition of "key informants" (e.g., nonparticipants in a program could share perspectives on barriers to participation).
- Understand how findings will be shared with the community and other audiences. The delivery format can influence the preferred data collection method. For example, communicating findings of salient quotations from program participants could point the research team to using qualitative methods of data collection.
- Consider using methods that can highlight participant experiences, such as PhotoVoice.
- Protect respondents. If the study uses participatory data collection methods and group discussions, all participants should commit to confidentiality and will need to trust one another to carry through.
- Understand data collection staff may not be knowledgeable about the historical, political, and cultural contexts of participants and may be considered outsiders. Include an overview of the context-gathering phase in data collection training.

- Review data collection tools (e.g., surveys, interview guides) for cultural fit with the intended respondent group.
 - Pilot-test measures to ensure tools are written in ways relevant to the audience and capable of collecting accurate information.

Tool: Community-Engaged Survey

Community-engaged surveys are research tools that incorporate community-engaged methods in survey research.

Eona Harrison of Urban Institute presented a continuum of community-engaged surveys (based on Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation) that includes the following levels of engagement (Falkenburger et al., 2021):

- Inform (e.g., community members inform research questions or methods to use).
- Consult (e.g., seek community input on survey questions or length).
- Involve (e.g., assist with administering the surveys, which can increase response rates).
- Collaborate (e.g., have various sites create their own survey unique to the needs of each site, with a common thread for comparative analysis).
- Empower (e.g., hold a research training to ensure the community can do this work on its own).

Considerations for using community-engaged surveys include the amount of time and resources available and the level of willingness to yield on question development to include community input.



Engage Diverse Perspectives in Data Analysis

Engaging community members in analysis and synthesis of findings ensures collected data are accurate and demonstrates program staff value equitable research.

Considerations for involving members of the community—the focus of research—in the data analysis follow:

- What unanticipated themes developed during collection of qualitative data?
- How was your research team trained to analyze data? Who trained them? Be aware of potential bias in how the research team analyzes the data.
- Have you recruited and trained community members to analyze data? As program participants, or individuals with shared experiences of participants, they might draw different conclusions or make different connections across data than other evaluation team members.
- How do you address inherent power differentials between community members and other members of the research team?



Tool: Data Walk

Elsa Falkenburger of Urban Institute explained that data walks focus on data sharing as a platform for collaboration (Falkenburger et al., 2021). During a data walk, the participants share ideas and responses to targeted questions in small groups as they view the material. Afterward, they synthesize the information through a facilitated discussion. In data walks in community settings, participants rotate through "stations," where data are displayed visually and textually to tell a story for participants to interpret, discuss, and reflect on in small groups.

Consider these key tips for conducting data walks:

- Include a representative group of stakeholders.
- Include a balance of strength and deficit data.
- Value various sources of expertise and avoid telling community members about their own community.
- Include various forms of data.
- End with a vision or next-steps station where participants can cocreate concrete solutions.

Data walks may best be conducted in person but can be held virtually or using social media.
Challenges associated with data walks follow:

- Ensure researchers are not leading entirely with negative data.
- Plan all the logistics in advance.
- Ensure the community is framed as a source of expertise.
- Have enough and appropriate facilitators (e.g., bilingual facilitators).

Use Equity Principles to Guide Communication of Findings

Communication plans should consider several audiences (e.g., funders, program partner organizations, community members). Identify what information to communicate to each audience and how to communicate during the evaluation design.

- Learn what information interests community members and their preferred communication channels.
- Identify opportunities for community members to cocreate products with evaluators.
- Consider the importance of words and images. Decisions on wording and photos can help establish new, equitable norms—or continue prevailing inequities.
 - Say what you mean using personcentered language. Be as specific as possible while avoiding stigmatizing language (e.g., "diverse children" versus "Black and Indigenous children," "parents with low incomes" versus "parents who earn less than \$22,000/year"). Speak to community members who hold those identities to determine preferred language.

- Consider inclusivity in access to findings. Several communication channels might be appropriate. Translation into several languages and compliance with Section 508 are other considerations.
- Include action items that address findings and recommendations.
- Think carefully about comparisons; do not center one type of person as the norm.
- Show data in context, and partner with communities to investigate systems-level explanations for differences.



Corresponding Resource

Review CDC's 2023 <u>Health Equity</u>
<u>Guiding Principles for Inclusive</u>
<u>Communication</u>, which includes ideas on how to develop inclusive communications and a list of preferred terms.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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2021 OPRE METHODS MEETING PRESENTERS

- Kristine Andrews, Senior Director, Ideas to Impact
- Deana Around Him, Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends
- Jessica V. Barnes-Najor, Director for Community Partnerships, Michigan State University and The Tribal Early Childhood Research Center
- Ann Cameron, Head Start Director, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan
- Amanda Coleman, Deputy Division Director, Division of Child and Family Development, OPRE
- Tiffany Csonka, Parent Co-Researcher and Youth System Organizing Consultant
- Adamma DuCille, Director of Equity and Organizational Development, Children's Services Council of Broward County

- Laura Erickson, Social Science Analyst, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation
- Elsa Falkenburger, Principal Research Associate, Urban Institute
- Sue Gallagher, Chief Innovation Officer, Children's Services Council of Broward County
- Esther Gross, Technical Assistance Specialist, Child Trends
- Eona Harrison, Senior Research Associate, Urban Institute
- Shruti Jayaraman, Chief Investments Officer, Chicago Beyond
- Chrishana Lloyd, Senior Research Associate, Child Trends
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- Jenita Parekh, Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends
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