

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Key Details

KEY WORDS

Housing Instability, Youth Participatory Action Research, Resilience, Positive Youth Development, Social Justice

POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth
Youth Living in Poverty

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness
Coordinated & Youth-Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Social justice youth development requires that we understand and focus on the social conditions in which young people survive and thrive. It is imperative that we continue to advocate for policies and programming that mediate instability, serve as protective factors, and transform inequitable conditions that hinder, rather than nurture positive development and outcomes” (p. 236).

“Project Awareness:”

Fostering Social Justice Youth Development to Counter Youth Experiences of Housing Instability, Trauma, and Injustice

1. What is the research about?

The research is about how those working with youth experiencing housing instability can engage youth to shape programming and service delivery to best meet their needs. In order to ensure the expertise and resilience of youth was recognized in this study, the researchers used a social justice youth development model to help youth foster a critical analysis of the conditions that impact their lives. The researchers worked with youth in a drop-in centre to complete an exploratory youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. Their research questions were:

- In what ways do current youth programs and policies support and/or limit positive youth development among unaccompanied youth experiencing housing instability?
- How might a youth participatory action research approach support positive youth development of youth experiencing housing instability?
- How do factors of housing instability, trauma, and race shape the developmental trajectories of unaccompanied youth aged 18-24?

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in a drop-in centre located on the Southside of Chicago, Illinois. The drop-in centre serves youth aged 14-24 who are experiencing homelessness or are unstably housed.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about the youth participant experiences of the services offered by the drop-in centre, as well as the policies that impact how the centre operates. Fourteen youth from the centre signed up for and attended the YPAR workshops; six of these youth attended consistently, and actively engaged in and completed all workshops. Youth participants ranged from 18-24 years. Most youth identified as Black, one as Jamaican, and one as “mixed” race (Black and white); their education level ranged from some high school to obtaining a GED.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers held eight different workshops at the drop-in centre. Youth helped to develop the topics and format, which were designed from a social justice youth development model that focused on connecting critical consciousness to civic engagement and social action. Workshops were scheduled twice a week, for 60-90 minutes. Youth were compensated financially for their participation and were provided with snacks.

YPAR was used to introduce youth to academic research skills and to get them to think about systems and issues that shape their access to resources, services, and programs. Youth identified relevant social issues, researched these issues and gathered materials, and created presentations about their findings, including possible solutions. These presentations were made by youth for drop-in centre staff and other youth who use the space and services.

The observations from these workshops – about the logistical and interpersonal dynamics of participants (including youth and researchers) – formed an exploratory case study.

5. What are the key findings?

- **Funding:** A lack of consistent, reliable funding to the drop-in centre amplified barriers in youth's lives. A significant resource often missing due to this lack of funding was bus passes; this impacted young people's ability to get to job interviews and appointments, drop their children off at daycare/school, or attend the research workshops.
- **Limited Physical Capacity/Space:** The drop-in centre operated out of a small church basement; due to pervasive negative stereotypes about youth of colour, staff attempted to keep the centre as quiet, tidy, and regulated as possible to avoid losing the space. The centre often reached capacity, and some youth attempting to access services were turned away, while some were asked to leave in order to make space for other youth.
- **Safety:** The drop-in centre served as a safe (physical and emotional) space for many youth. There are guidelines to ensure that the space remains safe (e.g. no weapons, drugs, cursing, sexual harassment, etc.). However, outside of the centre, youth likely engage in some of the behaviours prohibited by these guidelines in order to stay safe and protect themselves in precarious contexts. As such, it was difficult for some youth to follow the guidelines, and some were removed from the centre for violations. The researchers suggest that while safety must be maintained in youth program spaces, it is also crucial to recognize that cognitive/emotional capacities are not usually fully developed until age 25, and this should be taken into account when setting expectations and consequences for youth accessing services, and when responding to youth's sometimes challenging choices.
- **Resilience/Strength:** Youth showed great strength and resilience, as a group and individually. Collectively, they showed care for each other by ensuring each person was fed, and by sharing child care responsibilities. Youth demonstrated a critical understanding of social issues, and, despite the great challenges they face, sustained a hopeful perspective and worked towards developing ways to improve their community. Youth engaged in research,

both within the workshops and beyond. Moreover, youth displayed resilience in how they coped with tense or ruptured relationships with biological family. Many youth had built strong, close relationships with drop-in centre staff and other youth, whom they considered family. Lastly, many youth disclosed that they had experienced multiple traumatic events, and displayed incredible resilience in how they coped, again on both an individual and collective level.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth are capable of developing a critical understanding of systemic injustices, and to connect their broader analysis to issues in their own lives. As such, people working with youth – and hoping to foster critical consciousness, civic engagement, and social action – may benefit from using a social justice youth development approach with youth participatory action research methods.

Many of the topics youth identified in the workshops as impacting their lives are reflective of racial inequality. The researchers urge people working with youth to contextualize struggles with poverty and employment within broader structures of oppression to avoid blaming individual youth. Taking a strengths-based approach and focusing on youth's resilience is important, yet it has to be accompanied by meaningful action to change the systems and conditions that create unjust conditions for youth.

It may be unfair to expect youth to turn off the 'fight or flight' reaction that helps them survive in their worlds outside of youth programs. As such, programs engaging youth with insecure housing should examine ways to keep youth connected to services (e.g. not banning/disciplining youth) while maintaining safety in youth spaces; one suggestion is to use a restorative justice approach. Flexibility is also key in working with youth who have unstable housing; changing schedules to better meet their needs, engaging youth, and providing supports rather than acting as leaders were all important aspects of the researchers' work, and can be applied to a variety of youth program settings.



Aviles, A.M., & Grigalunas, N. (2018). "Project Awareness:" Fostering social justice youth development to counter youth experiences of housing instability, trauma, and injustice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 84, 229-238.