



Engaging Youth in Research:

Lessons from Community-Engaged

Research with Urban Youth

“For the youth research interns, access to caring adult relationships in the context of a research-oriented community of practice had the effect of reframing the way they thought about their futures and what was possible” (p. 17).

1. What is the research about?

This chapter examines the role of community-engaged research (CER) to address equity and access for youth from vulnerable communities. According to critical youth and community-engaged scholars, marginalized youth are “rendered invisible” and denied opportunities to participate in academic spaces (p. 4). Through the integration of a positive youth development framework, CER can be transformative for youth, their communities, and traditional research relationships between universities and communities. A CER approach moves away from valuing youth solely as “objects of knowledge” or “sources of data” (p. 4) by recognizing youth as *producers* of knowledge.

The authors draw from their experiences as researchers with a six-year CER project – Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth – that brought together a multi-sectoral alliance of community stakeholders and an interdisciplinary network of academics to deliver applied research programs, capacity building, and knowledge transfer with, about, and for youth in marginalized urban communities.

Questions explored in this chapter include: What is it like for youth with diverse identities to participate in research? What do youth see as positive outcomes of engaging in research? What tensions arise in involving youth in research? What can we learn from youth to inform knowledge production processes that are more equitable and meaningful?

2. Where did the research take place?

The ACT for Youth project took place between 2009 and 2014 in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood of Toronto, a community characterized by a large youth population, many of whom are from low-income and racialized backgrounds. ACT for Youth was committed to “extensively recruit, hire, and train youth as peer interviewers and involve them in knowledge mobilization and communication activities” (p. 10).

3. Who is this research about?

The research is about youth in vulnerable communities. This CER project engaged youth as research interns. The selection criteria included age (not younger than 15 and not older than 27 by the first day of the project) and current residence in the Jane-Finch community. Many of the youth in the project came from low-income, immigrant, refugee, and racialized backgrounds.

4. How was the research done?

This chapter draws from **a review of the literature** on youth engagement/engaging youth in research, as well as **reflections** from the six-year ACT for Youth project.

Researchers recruited young people from the Jane-Finch community through the creation of a Youth Research Internship Program, providing economic incentive for youth to gain experience in community-based research. The multi-faceted outreach strategy included word of mouth, website announcements, and a series of recruitment

presentations at neighbourhood high-schools and community centres.

Youth interns would each receive up to \$2,500 as a stipend for 200 hours of participation – attending research training seminars, designing methodology, recruiting participants, collecting data, and sharing findings, including through public speaking and advocacy. The internship also included workshops on research, the theory and practice of community-based research, program evaluation, research ethics, and qualitative as well as quantitative research methods.

Researchers interviewed youth interns to reflect on the project and evaluate youth engagement strategies. Interviews were then analyzed using the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique to understand what youth determined was most significant about their time with ACT for Youth. Four case study interviews were then recorded, transcribed, and member-checked by youth interns.

5. What are the key findings?

Drawing on examples from the literature, the authors identified a number of **benefits and outcomes** of CER projects that engage youth:

- a) **Providing a platform** for youth and communities to speak to the issues that matter.
- b) **Promoting skill acquisition** among youth researchers.
- c) **Expanding young people’s social capital** through diverse leadership and civic engagement opportunities.
- d) **Validating youth knowledge and lived experience.**

Challenges to youth-engaged CER include deficit-based discourses, which can inform how youth-engaged research is received. Routine research processes (e.g., obtaining consent from parents/guardians), funding requirements, and timelines may also undermine or limit youth engagement. Often, CER projects lack the capacity to develop long-term, meaningful relationships with youth and their communities.

The dominant theme in all four case studies from the ACT for Youth project was the **impact of having access to new social**

relationships, particularly with academics and graduate students. The study found that youth welcome adult participation through **coaching guidance, modelling of behaviours, and sharing tasks**, and that they also value **thoughtful youth-adult partnerships**, as opposed to solely youth-led initiatives that reinforce “age segregation” (p. 17). Adult-youth pairings in the research process were seen to successfully create youth-friendly environments for peers, mentors, and adult allies.

Researchers found that adults who engaged with youth in collaborative research have to provide them with **adequate support, flexibility, and freedom to learn**. Since CER is a relatively new practice in the youth sector, it is important for adults to be as invested as youth in order to further their learning as it moves towards public scholarship.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Traditionally, youth voices have been framed, managed or coded by professionals and academics. The CER framework is especially important for marginalized youth, who face discrimination and inequitable access to resources. Engagement in research benefits youth who face systemic barriers and who may otherwise have limited access to these types of developmental opportunities.

Youth research internships and programs amplify youth voices.

As part of the ACT for Youth project, Jane-Finch youth were provided with newfound access to previously invisible privileged spaces and social networks, and were able to engage in higher learning in ways that did not frame their participation as “data” (p. 18).

CER not only highlights the importance of **collaboration, participation, and action** in youth work, but also **empowers youth** in research in their own communities by supporting them with mentors and investing in their future learning.



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