

Study explores challenges, opportunities of community participatory research

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Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach that connects academic researchers with community partners to inform project development. Where traditional research is often done "to"

people, treating them as subjects with no agency, CBPR is a cooperative process incorporating the knowledge and direction of community members.

A new study from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and collaborators explores CBPR implementation in a project on criminal justice reform in Cincinnati. In a [previous paper](#), the researchers discussed project results; in the current study they focus on the process, identifying challenges and providing suggestions for future research.

"A lot has been written on the benefits of CBPR, including shared power, shared responsibility, and incorporating the community into your research project. But there's less information about the challenges we might encounter with this approach, especially on hard topics of criminal justice, race, power, and privilege. We're trying to do a deeper dive into those constructs, and we advocate for the importance of acknowledging and discussing the challenges at the beginning and throughout the project," said Ebony Ruhland, associate professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University and lead author on the paper.

The framework for the study was Reclaiming Safety, a project established to advance social justice reform in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Cincinnati. The researchers teamed up with local community educators and organizers for the project, which was supported by the Ohio Transformation Fund.

"Initial discussions aimed to identify opportunities for [community members](#) to have better control over data on safety and safety-related reforms. The intent was to explore other ways to promote safety and mutual thriving than policing, prosecution, prisons, probation, and parole, instead focusing on building healthy people and communities as a more prevention-oriented approach," said Janet Moore, professor of law at the University of Cincinnati and co-author on the study.

The original plan was to recruit participants through town halls; however, virtually no one showed up to these events, so the researchers needed to change their strategy. Instead, they used radio announcements and email invitations to recruit participants for round table discussions and focus groups.

"I think some community members felt they had already talked about these issues so many times and nothing happened, so they didn't see the relevance of doing it again, even though we were approaching it differently," noted Jacinda K. Dariotis, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies and director of the Family Resiliency Center, housed in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the U. of I. Dariotis is co-principal investigator on the study.

Throughout the project, the researchers came to rely heavily on community organizers and their existing networks. Community leaders are important partners for CBPR because they can help build connections and gain the trust of community members. However, they can also gain outside influence over the process.

In the Reclaiming Safety project, one community organizer became very influential, and her priorities shaped the agenda. Because her primary activism focus was on the police and police–community relationships, the project shifted towards these topics.

"Community participatory research is iterative, and you're supposed to go where the community goes and where the leader goes, but at the same time, we're balancing academic obligations and fulfilling grant requirements. You have to be responsive while also guiding the project and keeping it moving forward," Ruhland stated. "We deferred to the community leader a lot, but I don't think that's unique for projects of this kind."

This underscores the importance of defining who represents the community and recruiting a diversified group of participants, Ruhland noted. The community is not monolithic and one community leader doesn't represent everyone, but some segments can be difficult to reach. For example, this project had few participants from younger generations. When one youth showed up to a roundtable discussion, their perspective was quickly disregarded by older, more seasoned activists.

Another complexity is the intersection of power, position, and identity that academics and [community partners](#) bring to the process. Constructs like race, class, gender, and privilege influence perceptions and interactions. The researchers conclude it's imperative to be aware of these constructs and address them throughout the project.

In spite of the challenges, CBPR provides the best approach to collaborative projects and it is well worth the effort, Dariotis noted.

"This work is so hard and takes so much time and it's not highly resourced from any funders," she said. "But we should try not just to rely on established networks and connections and build more diverse teams."

Ruhland added, "We're critical of CBPR in the paper, but it was the intention to have critical reflection. If projects can be participatory research, they should be. Despite all the challenges, it's one of the best methods and it has real benefits. Hopefully, by illuminating the issues, we can help other projects avoid some of the problems we experienced."

More information: Ebony L. Ruhland et al, Positionality, intersectionality, power dynamics in community participatory research to define public safety in Black communities, *Journal of Community Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jcop.23046](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.23046)

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