

# WHY AM I ALWAYS BEING RESEARCHED?

A GUIDEBOOK FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, RESEARCHERS,  
AND FUNDERS TO HELP US GET FROM INSUFFICIENT  
UNDERSTANDING TO MORE AUTHENTIC TRUTH



**CHICAGO  
BEYOND→**

EQUITY SERIES, VOLUME ONE

# WHY AM I ALWAYS BEING RESEARCHED?

CHICAGO BEYOND EQUITY SERIES, VOLUME ONE









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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## If evidence matters, we must care how it gets made.

As an impact investor that backs the fight for youth equity, Chicago Beyond has partnered with and invested in community organizations working towards providing more equitable access and opportunity to young people across Chicago. In many cases, we have also invested in sizable research projects to help our community partners grow the impact of their work. Our hope is that the research will generate learnings to impact more youth in our city and nationwide, and arm our partners with “evidence” they need to go after more funding for what is working.

Through the course of our investing, another sort of evidence emerged: evidence that the power dynamic between community organizations, researchers, and funders blocks information that could drive better decision-making and fuel more investment in communities most in need. This power dynamic creates an uneven field on which research is designed and allows unintended bias to seep into how knowledge is generated.

There are many voices in the social impact space who have begun to call out the power dynamic. “Grantmaking is not trusting of the community, and the community is not trusting of funders,” Edgar Villanueva, author of *Decolonizing Wealth*, has said. In annual letters, the President of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker, pushes funders to reckon with privilege, acknowledging that communities closest to the problems possess unique insight into the solutions. The power dynamic in the social impact space is impeding our collective efforts to create a better world.

Right or wrong, research can drive decisions. If we do not address the power dynamic in the creation of research, at best, we are driving decision-making from partial truths. At worst, we are generating inaccurate information that ultimately does more harm than good in our communities. This is why we must care about how research is created.

In this publication, we offer “how” we can begin to level the playing field and reckon with unintended bias when it comes to research. Chicago Beyond created this guidebook to help shift the power dynamic and the way community organizations, researchers, and funders uncover knowledge together. It is an equity-based approach to research that offers one way in which we can restore communities as authors and owners. It is based on the steps and missteps of Chicago Beyond’s own experience funding community organizations and research, and the courageous and patient efforts of our partners, the youth they serve, and others with whom we have learned.

### This guide is intended to:

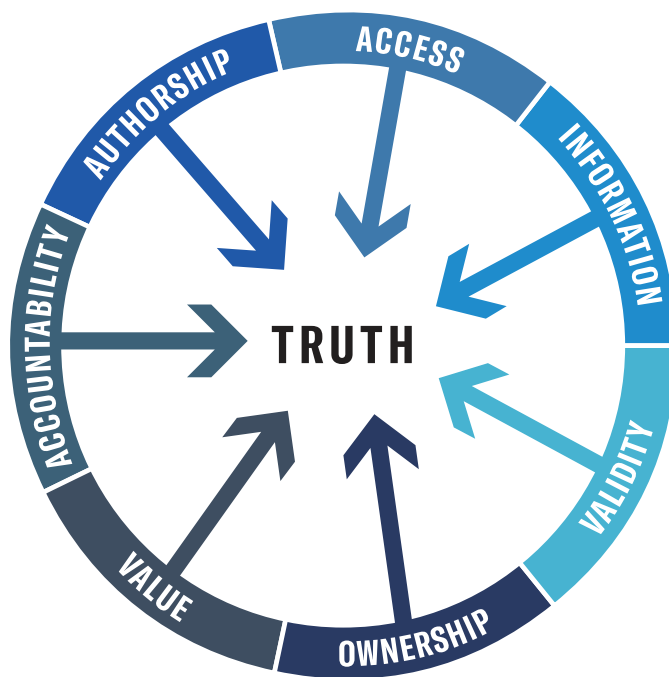
- ① Fuel **community organizations** to not only participate in research on their own terms, but to lead it.
- ② Support **researchers** in recognizing their immense influence and unintended bias in shaping the questions asked, and the inputs used to answer them.
- ③ Inspire **funders** to ask hard questions about their agendas, unlock more meaningful knowledge, and therefore achieve greater impact.

### The guide begins by naming seven inequities standing in the way of impact, each held in place by power dynamics.

1. **Access:** Could we be missing out on community wisdom because conversations about research are happening without community meaningfully present at the table?
2. **Information:** Can we effectively partner to get to the full truth if information about research options, methods, inputs, costs, benefits, and risks are not shared?
3. **Validity:** Could we be accepting partial truths as the full picture, because we are not valuing community organizations and community members as valid experts?
4. **Ownership:** Are we getting incomplete answers by valuing research processes that take from, rather than build up, community ownership?
5. **Value:** What value is generated, for whom, and at what cost?
6. **Accountability:** Are we holding funders and researchers accountable if research designs create harm or do not work?
7. **Authorship:** Whose voice is shaping the narrative and is the community fully represented?

We at Chicago Beyond see this publication as a start—it is by no means the answer. We wrestle regularly with operating in this world while envisioning an equitable one.

We ask you to join us in questioning, wrestling with bias, and pushing against “how it has always been done.” We need to collectively move from insufficient understanding to more authentic truth. The stakes are too high for us to do otherwise. ■



Seven inequities held in place by power, seven opportunities for change.



## VOICES OF SUPPORT



“We are not asking the right questions. To reverse the cycle of oppression, we must understand the intersectional complexity of personal responsibility, programmatic acts of charity, and the interplay of systems and policies that are designed to deny opportunity. To evaluate an afterschool program absent of intersectional context is misleading and provides answers that are insufficient, and often useless to transforming the lives of people living in the community. This guide pushes the conversation, which is exactly what the field needs.”

**MICHAEL MCAFFEE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, POLICYLINK**

“When Dr. King was assassinated, in the 60s, we were doing studies in North Lawndale and Garfield, and here it is almost sixty years later. We have been studied for years and years and years—what is the positive outcome we are going to see for these studies we are always doing? Will it be in these young men’s lifetimes? While they are still in their twenties?”

**KAREN JACKSON, DIRECTOR OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, LAWDALE CHRISTIAN LEGAL CENTER**



Chicago Beyond has just handed us an incredible tool for funders, researchers and organization leaders. This pushes the reset button and allows us to rethink evaluation. And let’s face it, the problems we aim to alleviate are too complicated for us to approach solutions without examining how we are entering the work. This tool gives us questions to use in our everyday work. Questions like: What if building trust is the variant that indelibly strengthens our outcomes? How can funders come to the table recognizing our own power to influence, shape and therefore limit the results? And what if funders had to use the same evaluation approaches and metrics on ourselves that we force others to submit to? So, let’s rethink. Let’s come to the table recognizing the power source is the ORGANIZATION. They aren’t the subject, they are the research designer.”

**ANGELIQUE POWER, PRESIDENT, THE FIELD FOUNDATION OF ILLINOIS**

“For our own kids, we understand the context of their lives, their trajectory over time, and what ‘safe’ and ‘happy’ and ‘realizing potential’ look like in the long term. But for kids in social services, we typically create some limited data set of how they interacted with one specific service at some specific point in time or a series of isolated services, and then claim we are ‘evidence-based.’ It is time to support these kids as we support our own kids and these families as we support our family. Our goal should be to help them realize their potential. It is time to change what we do, and don’t, accept as evidence. Is the evidence we are working from the truth of the people studied, or did it get imposed on them? Is it teaching us about how we support full life and well-being?”

**PAULA WOLFF, DIRECTOR, ILLINOIS JUSTICE PROJECT**



“As board members or decision-makers at the table, we ask for ‘hard evidence’ and ‘gold-standard methods’ thinking we are stewarding resources well, but if we don’t take a hard look at the inequities built into how evidence is getting made, we could be doing the opposite. I appreciate the thoughtfulness behind ‘Why Am I Always Being Researched?’ and its push for us all to do better when it comes to equity and access.”

**ARNE DUNCAN, MANAGING PARTNER, EMERSON COLLECTIVE**



This guide offers thoughtful advice to practitioners, researchers, and funders on how to combine resources to conduct high-quality research. Importantly, the guide advances the idea that rigorous research methods, when applied appropriately, can help us *all* learn whether interventions are producing the hoped-for benefits.”

**KIM CASSEL, DIRECTOR OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY, ARNOLD VENTURES**



“The questions we are asked, where do they come from? Whose lab are we in? When I was doing my masters I had to do research too. The starting question was never ‘how is this going to benefit the people being researched?’”

**ASIAHA BUTLER, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT,  
RESIDENT ASSOCIATION OF GREATER ENGLEWOOD**

Photo credit: WTTW



“There is without a doubt a valuable role for outside evaluation. But—outside evaluation can be problematic for communities and for community programs when there are agendas at work beyond their own. We need to remember the first priority is to produce something that is not just accessible to, but actually valuable to, the community. This guide is such an important project for this reason.”

**UNMI SONG, PRESIDENT, LLOYD A. FRY FOUNDATION**

# INTRODUCTION

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A guidebook for community organizations, researchers and funders to help us get from insufficient understanding to more authentic truth.

In the hometown of urban research, Jonte asks aloud “why am I always being researched?” His peers are in three studies at once. A grandmother on his block, neighbors, and staff at nonprofits serving him, remember being in studies, too.

Jonte is one of thousands in Chicago who, over decades, have participated in research studies with price tags in the millions, all in the name of societal change. And yet, the fruits of those studies have infrequently nourished the neighborhoods where their seeds were planted. Instead, there remains “not enough evidence” about what works, and a deep distrust between community, funder, and researcher, driven by systemic injustices: racism, segregation and disinvestment.

And then, there are questions behind how evidence gets made. What if the structures we use to find what works to improve communities is negatively impacted by the same power dynamics that have propped up those systemic injustices?

At its core, this is an interaction of individuals, human beings, each with their own biases. What if our research questions are unintentionally rooted in bias? Have we stopped to consider if our inputs are unfairly affecting our intended outcomes? ■







How does it feel to be black in America?  
They don't even know you but they hate  
You or they Scared of Ya.  
At the age of 10 they label you  
a Super Predator.  
Mama's baby, Daddy's? Maybe, if  
he wasn't locked up Doing half of  
80 years for trying to feed his kid  
the best way he could. Because he's  
Broke and he's black and he's  
Stuck in the hood. It's just  
Studies to You but to me it's  
Real. No matter how much I  
tell You! You will never know  
how it feels.

Jonte

# PRIVILEGE SHAPES KNOWLEDGE

As an impact investor that backs the fight for youth equity, Chicago Beyond has partnered with and invested in community organizations working towards providing more equitable access and opportunity to young people across Chicago. In many cases, we have also invested in sizable research projects to help our partners “validate” what is working, as that evidence may support further investment, reaching more youth, and spreading what our partners have learned.

In the course of our work, we have seen community organizations with deep expertise contribute to how research gets produced, researchers with a desire to work with community organizations to define outcomes, and funders committed to advocating for a central role at the research table for community organizations.

On the flip side, we have heard program staff struggle with what the proposed research design means for their relationships in their communities and with their families. We have heard social workers wonder why validating their work to those with power starts with inputs that have structural racism built in to them. We have seen funders, researchers and community organizations jump to action when research protocols or timelines are at risk, but silent when research does not produce a high quality outcome for the community. We have heard community organizations wonder why researchers who are disconnected from their communities have the privilege of telling them what works and what does not. And in listening to those we serve, Jonte, a young man in a program we invest in unforgettably asked, “why am I always being researched?”

We recognize our privilege at Chicago Beyond as funders of both community organizations and researchers, and with that the power to shape research and the resulting knowledge produced. Therefore, we recognize the need for us to check our privilege, our power. At Chicago Beyond, we devote considerable focus to identifying and counteracting our own personal biases through anti-racist trainings, calling out inequities, and being in communities. We are a funder whose leadership is majority people of color. Today, our relationships with community partners are intensely human. We dedicate a team of individuals to our partners to provide thought-partnership, strategic support, a sounding board, and more. Our partnerships are multi-year, and are not contingent on research outcomes or compliance checklists. When the research conducted does not match the intent of the research, we look for our accountability even though the power dynamic might have suggested that a funder like Chicago Beyond does not have any.



# SO WHAT?

Right or wrong, research can drive decision-making. If we do not address the power dynamic in the creation of research, at best, we are generating partial truths to inform decision-making in the social impact space. At worst, we are generating inaccurate information that ultimately does more harm than good in our communities. This is why we care about how research is created.

This guide was designed to help us level the playing field and reckon with unintended bias when it comes to the research. It is about shifting the way community organizations, researchers, and funders ask for, produce, and use knowledge. It is about restoring communities as experts. It calls on us all to stop, recognize, and question bias. It is an equity-based approach to research. It is based on the steps and missteps of Chicago Beyond's own experience funding community organizations and research, and the courageous and patient efforts of our partners, the youth they serve, and others with whom we have learned.

Chicago Beyond created this guide because we see the opportunity for a new path. Shifting the existing power dynamic offers a way forward: From not enough evidence on what works, to more meaningful knowledge that supports more meaningful action.



## Color of Chicago Beyond's Experience:

In the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, decades of hosting research studies have been punctuated by disinvestment. Researchers are not popular, and are rarely seen as separate from their institution and its racial history. When the leadership of one of Chicago Beyond's community partners determined that a rigorous research study was the best way to make the case for change within the juvenile justice system, it brought up fierce distrust among their staff. To reach a more authentic truth in service of change, we addressed the power dynamic in these ways:

### **1. Engaged with our community partner at a human level and built trust.**

- › Broke bread and spent time sitting on the stoop, as human beings, sharing our hopes and fears.
- › Participated in a Peace Circle, and asked that the research team participate in a Peace Circle separately. This opened the door for the community organization to build trust with us and the researchers (for definition of Peace Circle, see glossary on page 110).
- › Continued to nurture the relationships we built and hold today.

### **2. Supported access to information on the community organization's own terms, and helped inform the organization and community members.**

- › Funded access to research based on the community organization's learning goals.
- › Sat with the community organization's Executive Director and the research partner to help the community organization get informed about options for research and the related risks. Still, it was not until later, as our relationship developed, that we were trusted enough by enough of the community organization for them to truly recognize what the risks and costs were, and it was not until later that the research felt "real" to the Executive Director.
- › Understanding that it takes time and multiple engagements to address the information imbalance, we connected the community organization with another nonprofit going through a similar type of research to share their perspective.

continued on page 14 >



### 3. Followed our partner's lead on research design and supported their ownership of the research study.

- Before setting study design and outcomes, together we determined the primary audiences for the final output of the evaluation, to use the needs of those audiences to inform the study, and to cultivate a network of support. The intention was to ensure the final outcomes would be helpful to our community partner, and lead to the systemic change they hope for.
- Built upon the community organization's vision for an "Evaluation Committee" comprised of staff members from all parts of the community organization, as well as researchers, and Chicago Beyond. The group incorporated the community organization's goals and questions into the study, made critical decisions about the study's design and is shaping study outcomes.
- With guidance from the Evaluation Committee, we designed a consent process to inform participants about the research in accessible language before asking if they would participate.

### 4. Supported our partner's study rollout and helped address intangible costs.

- Worked with the Executive Director to map stakeholders and support communication within the organization and with critical organizational partners.
- Worked with the community organization to develop internal tools to help the organization grow and best leverage its team and their skills.

### 5. Embraced messiness, interruption and being uncomfortable. Put accountability, not comfort first.

- Changed the funding timeline substantially to allow time to understand and prepare, emotionally and organizationally, for the execution of a rigorous evaluation.

## WHAT WE MEAN BY EQUITY-BASED APPROACH TO RESEARCH

At Chicago Beyond, we believe that research can drive decision-making. For that reason, we also believe that the creation of research should begin from a place of mutual understanding between community organizations, researchers, and funders. Those involved in the research design must recognize unintended bias to arrive at an authentic truth that does the most good for those being researched. ■



"Researchers have to understand the reality and the culture of the participating population. For example, asking a question as simple as, '*Do you put your kids to bed?*' will mean different things to different people. And, may mean something totally different to you now than when you were younger. Growing up, my mom told me to 'put my butt in bed,' and that's what I did. If she were asked that question back then, she might say, no, but the reality is, she did put me to bed because she was home caring for her family, making sure we were fed, bathed, and in the bed. She would probably answer 'no' because the generalized version is putting your kids to bed, reading to them until they fall asleep, and turning off the light. Researchers have to understand these many nuances to truly assess the population."

→ **SHELDON SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER, THE DOVETAIL PROJECT**





“When was the last time you were at a gathering and the ‘subjects’ of a study talked about it in glowing terms, because the research helped the practical work?”

**RAMI NASHASHIBI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
INNER-CITY MUSLIM ACTION NETWORK (IMAN)**



## **Chicago and Beyond: The History of Urban Research**

Chicago changed how urban studies are done.

What is the history of research, in Chicago, nationally, and beyond? Rather than a partnership of equals, there is a legacy of researcher “brains” and community “brawn.” In many communities, the remembered history is that when the community and research institution interact, the institution benefits. Countless research surveys mine communities for the raw material of lived experiences, without yielding much for the community—or worse. Yet, there remains a lack of evidence about the value of interventions for those from whom the most has been taken. That “lack of evidence” justifies investing less still. Community organizations often cannot afford access either to large datasets or to the kinds of researchers that institutions attract, and their own data and stories have limited influence on decision-making until those institutions authenticate them. Like most people outside of universities, community organizations may not be aware of the options in research, or what they may risk for scientific rigor. Some may not dare to assert themselves, internalizing biases about who the experts are.

Today, in Chicago, we see new opportunity to shape urban research, for greater equity, and greater impact.



## PEOPLE SAY ‘IF YOU’RE NOT AT THE TABLE, YOU’RE ON THE MENU.’

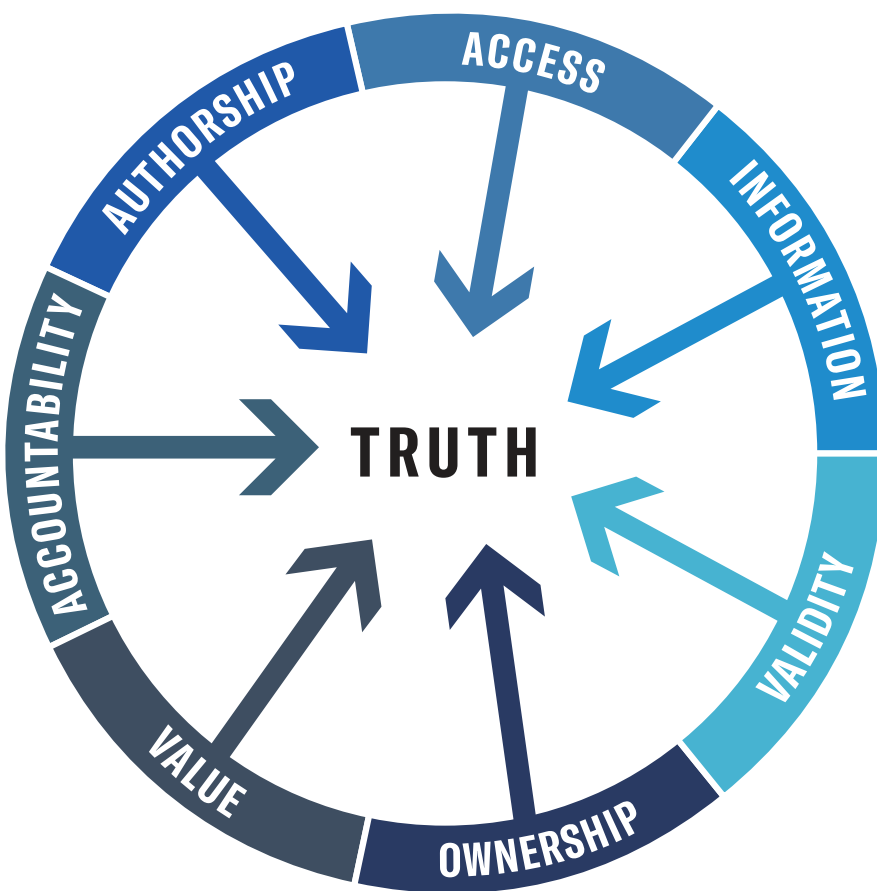
*It's more than that. It is how you are at the table. If you don't decide what's on the menu, if you are invited after the menu is set, you are still a guest. We as researchers get funded to be hosts. But in truth, the community should be the hosts, we are guests."*

ANGELA ODOMS-YOUNG, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,  
UIC INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH RESEARCH AND POLICY

## HOW THIS GUIDEBOOK IS ORGANIZED

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This guide begins by naming seven inequities held in place by power, and calls out how they get in the way of truth and impact.



With each inequity, there are suggestions for potential ways forward for community organizations, funders, and researchers.

This is followed by specific questions in the guide to help community organizations, researchers, and funders relate to one another differently, for greater impact. The guide organizes these questions from start to finish of a research study, so users can add questions to their individual, or collective, agendas at the appropriate time.

**This guide is a start—it is by no means the answer. We wrestle regularly with operating in this world, while envisioning an equitable one. ■**



**SEVEN INEQUITIES  
HELD IN PLACE  
BY POWER,**

**SEVEN  
OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR CHANGE**

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## Starting commitment

### **The challenge we face...**

The work of changing “how it’s always been done” is hard. The most important thing for all of us is human engagement and a continuous effort to check our biases. Making technical changes without this commitment to openness will not work.

### **Community organizations, researchers, and funders can...**

- Bring awareness to your own biases and assumptions.
- Start with this commitment and find new ways to relate to each other.

**This guide can help.**





# ACCESS.

## THE CHALLENGE

Access to creating knowledge about communities and the programs that serve them is controlled by people outside those communities, who also often control the questions asked.

Conversations about research often happen without community organizations or community at the table, or on an “invitation only” basis on others’ terms.

## THE IMPLICATION

When a voice is missing from the table, the answers we get are insufficient. We may perpetuate bias, and fail to find out.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

### Community organizations can...

- Recognize that the power dynamic makes it tempting to compromise what matters for the chance to produce research evidence.
- Where possible, speak up to participate—or not participate—in research on your own terms, and shape research to help your community.

### Researchers can...

- Design research to serve community purpose.
- Not participate in research that perpetuates the researcher as “brains” and community as “brawn” stereotype.
- Insist that conversations about community happen with community.

### Funders can...

- Fund research that community organizations want, need, and are able to lead. Fund research that informs action on root causes.
- Not fund research where the questions asked and the approach hold power dynamics in place.
- Insist that conversations about community happen with community.





Pictured: North Lawndale

## ➔ 02

# INFORMATION.

## THE CHALLENGE

Information about research options, methods, inputs, costs, benefits and risks often reside with researchers and funders, but less often with community. Often, the community does not have enough information to contribute their wisdom to which questions are asked and why, what outcomes are the focus, and what data sources are used—or to give informed consent to participate in the first place.

## THE IMPLICATION

When one party does not have full information, it is difficult to partner effectively or to get to the full truth.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

### Community organizations can...

- Get informed. Know your options, know your rights, know the risks.
- Seek and use information to ask questions about methods and inputs.

### Researchers can...

- Share information, recognizing that without it, the community organization cannot actually consent to the research.
- Have reciprocal exchange about methods and inputs.

### Funders can...

- Ensure accountability for the community organization to understand the options and the risks.



## ➔ 03

# VALIDITY.

### THE CHALLENGE

Community organizations and members are often viewed as credible sources when talking about the community, but they are not viewed as voices with authority to sway those with power. The institutions, frameworks, methods and data sources seen as most authoritative and valid are often far from community reality.

### THE IMPLICATION

When outside experts hold the authority to produce and interpret knowledge, we diminish the value of community voice. Without that community wisdom, we accept partial truths as the full picture.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

#### Community organizations can...

- Value the validity of your own voices at the table, especially on the questions, the inputs to answer the questions, and how participants experience the research.
- Build relationship with the researcher. Check partial truths.

#### Researchers can...

- Recognize how the research frameworks, process and inputs reinforce power dynamics, and bring your creativity to making change.
- Build relationship with the community organization.
- Check partial truths.

#### Funders can...

- Be accountable for what questions the research you fund asks, and what processes and inputs it is (and is not) validating.
- Create accountability for authentic engagement between community and researchers. This will check partial truths.





## ➔ 04

# OWNERSHIP.

### THE CHALLENGE

Community organizations often cede critical decisions about how the study operates, what to measure, how study tools are developed, and what participants experience, because they do not feel they have equal ownership in the research. This is solidified in legal agreements and permissions, which may say that the community organization cannot access the data itself, does not own data produced by the study, or must seek permission to speak about the research.

### THE IMPLICATION

Without shared ownership, the process of research can take from, rather than build up, the community, and the inputs and answers are incomplete.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

#### Community organizations can...

- Recognize that the power dynamic makes it tempting to cede ownership.
- Build your ownership of your study, which starts with knowing what you want to learn, and why. It is likely that your organization has the most at stake.

#### Researchers can...

- Invite co-ownership of research, in your processes and legal agreements.

#### Funders can...

- Set expectations for co-ownership of research, in processes and legal agreements.





## VALUE.

### THE CHALLENGE

Research often fails to teach us what is working or produce value for the community.

At the same time, research often comes at a high tangible and intangible cost. Community organizations and communities shoulder financial and relational costs that are not explicit, visible, or compensated.

### THE IMPLICATION

Uneven accounting allows investment to be high while impact is low.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

#### Community organizations can...

- Get aware of the potential costs—including intangible costs to your participants, organization and community—and advocate for a full accounting.
- Get clear and speak up on how research can produce value for your community.

#### Researchers can...

- Recognize the full cost of the research—including intangible costs to participants, community organization, and community—and find ways to support it.
- Shape research so producing value for the community is central.

#### Funders can...

- Account for the full cost of the research—including costs to recruit additional participants, intangible costs borne by participants, staffing at the community organization—and support these costs.
- Insist on clarity: How will the research benefit the community? According to whom?



## ➔ 06

# ACCOUNTABILITY.

## THE CHALLENGE

Often, funders and researchers choose whether or not to take responsibility and make changes when the way research is designed unintentionally creates harm or does not work, while the community organization and community bear the greatest risk.

Community organizations have to prove their effectiveness and fidelity, while funders and researchers are exempt from the same scrutiny and vulnerability.

## THE IMPLICATION

Without accountability, trust is limited, and the work cannot be as bold. Worse, communities can be harmed.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

#### Community organizations can...

- Build trust-based relationships with the other entities. Hold researchers with whom you have built trust accountable.
- Identify and mitigate risks to you and to your stakeholders.

#### Researchers can...

- Build trust-based relationships with the other entities. Be accountable to understand the context.
- Own your role in missteps.
- Help identify and mitigate risks.

#### Funders can...

- Build trust-based relationships with the other entities. Be flexible in timelines so trust can develop. Be accountable to understand the context.
- Own your role in missteps.
- Help identify and mitigate risks.

## ➔ 07

# AUTHORSHIP.

### THE CHALLENGE

Often, the power dynamic lifts up the voices of researchers and funders to shape the narrative and pushes down the voices of the community. Racial dynamics between white researchers and funders, and communities of color, contribute to the imbalance. Funders are often cast as “outside of the work,” and researchers as objectively neutral and merely “observing the work.” This does not account for the biases and perspectives every person brings to the work.

When data is analyzed and meaning is derived from the research, the power dynamic often mutes voices of those who are marginalized.

### THE IMPLICATION

When we restrict authorship and ignore bias, it allows incorrect meanings to be drawn.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

#### Community organizations can...

- Recognize that the power dynamic makes it tempting to cede interpretation and presentation of the results.
- Participate in how results are made into meaning, and shared. Is it contextualized? Can you hear your participants?

#### Researchers can...

- Invite co-ownership in contextualizing and sharing results. Analyze and frame data with an equity lens for greater impact.

#### Funders can...

- Set expectations for co-ownership of contextualizing and sharing results. Create accountability for an equity lens for greater impact.



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## A NOTE ON SOURCES

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The content here draws on Chicago Beyond's role in the power dynamic, experiences with our community and research partners, and experiences others have shared.

We credit any wisdom here to the patience and courage of those we have worked with and learned from.

While there does not yet seem to be a consistent practice or set of protocols for an equity-based approach to research, we have learned from several sources of wisdom in addition to experience: ancient and indigenous approaches to knowledge; systems thinking; community-based participatory research; design thinking; racial equity and cultural awareness; epistemology (for definitions see Glossary on page 110).

This guide can inform research and its close cousin, evaluation, but uses the word "research" throughout. ■



A close-up portrait of John Rich, MD, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair and a mustache, wearing black-rimmed glasses. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a plaid shirt. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with some greenery and a building.

“We have to try to see from participants’ perspectives, to understand the impact of what we are doing.”

JOHN RICH, MD, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR  
NONVIOLENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, SCHOOL  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH, DREXEL UNIVERSITY,  
CO-FOUNDER OF HEALING HURT PEOPLE



# FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

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## **Before you start:** Should we do research?

Research can be empowering, overwhelming, motivating, exhausting, and more. For a community organization, giving a second thought to why your organization should take on a research evaluation—beyond the notion that data drive funding—can enable your organization to not only participate in a study, but to guide it on your own terms. This makes it more likely to produce knowledge that helps, rather than harms, your mission.

Consider some of the benefits community organizations have gotten from research:

### **New knowledge.**

- Access to data about program participants they might not otherwise have, building motivation for staff who can better see their direct impact through this information.
- Better understanding of how the program is working, what parts of the program are working best, or which participants are best served. Sometimes called an “implementation evaluation,” this research can help organizations figure out what is core to the program and if it is being delivered as intended. These types of learnings have helped community organizations improve how they recruit instructors or teachers, how they recruit participants, what parts of the program to focus on more, or how they measure program quality so that what matters most, happens most.

### **“Validating” the model.**

- Perceived validation from an external person or organization of whether the program is doing what they believe it is doing, with those they intended to serve. Sometimes called an “outcomes evaluation,” this research can provide an evidence base from an independent source.
- Ability to communicate to philanthropy the value of the program.
- Data to drive their ability to apply for government funding.

### **Preparing for growth.**

- If the organization wanted to try growing the program, standardizing it, or building program infrastructure, committing to research and the pressure of a research timeline can force the organization to make these activities a priority.

Along with the benefits, there have also been costs, such as:

**Hidden costs of implementing the research study.**

- Research can change the day-to-day processes within a community organization. For example, organizations have had to close the door on providing services to some young people for an extended period, or have had to move from a first-come-first-served model to over-recruiting and then selecting and rejecting participants by lottery, to build up a big enough group of people in the research study (some types of research require a big group of study participants in order to attribute impact to a program).
- Research took much more work and time from program staff than the community organization expected.
- The experience of the research reinforced a sense of powerlessness because the researchers were perceived as “the experts,” or triggered memories of previous exploitative interactions with institutions.

**Lost energy and time due to gaps in understanding.**

- For example, researchers did not understand the community organization’s recruitment process, and the community organization did not understand the assumptions in the researchers’ math, when setting the recruitment target for the research.

**Unmet expectations.**

- The research study did not show effectiveness. Only a fraction of randomized controlled trials of interventions—across business, medicine, education, and employment—show a positive impact compared to usual services without the intervention. (You can find more detail on this in the piece from Arnold Ventures, formerly The Laura and John Arnold Foundation, listed in the Bibliography on page 111. “Randomized controlled trials” are defined on page 37).

- The research study did not show effectiveness because of a problem with the research design. Many studies are not designed well enough to draw a conclusion of whether the program “worked.” For example, a research study could fail to capture the impact of a program because that impact shows up over a much longer timeframe, or across a broader ecosystem, than was feasible to study, or because there were not enough study participants for the research to attribute impact to the program.
- The community organization expected the research would explain how (not just whether) the program worked to help them scale up.
- The research measured an outdated program model because the program evolved while the study design was fixed.
- Easy-to-measure metrics did not capture what mattered to the program, or captured injustices beyond the control of the program or its participants. For example, research comparing arrest rates could capture increases in neighborhood policing, outside of the control of a neighborhood program.
- Even after a very successful study, there continued to be a lot of work and a large gap in time to get funded. ■

This guide, and understanding how other community organizations are using research to serve their justice mission, can help you navigate the risks and make your decision about whether to do research now, or not.

Organizations have said “no” to doing research even where the funding for it was available, for example, because their partners or participants were tired of being researched.

If you do decide to participate in research, there are a range of ways to begin. Your research can draw on multiple approaches, depending on where you see benefit in an external perspective or voice, and where your wisdom and capabilities lie. Like all people, individual researchers may be biased towards approaches they are familiar with, and their emphasis on first building trust with your organization will vary.

It is important you get informed. Where you feel you can, engage with funders and researchers and speak up. When you do this, you further relationships and mutual accountability. **This guide can travel the journey with you. ■**





## 1.

# KNOW YOUR ROLE, KNOW THE RISKS

## EQUITY IN HOW YOU START

### a. You are in charge of what you want to learn

Owning your research starts with knowing what you want to learn, and why. It is likely that your organization has the most at stake. Your learning agenda can be an asset, and it is yours. Before jumping in, conduct an exercise that has you asking, “what if?” research can change the day-to-day processes within a community organization. For example, organizations have had to close the door on providing services to some young people for an extended period, or have had to move from a first-come-first-served model to over-recruiting and then selecting and rejecting participants by lottery, to build up a big enough group of people in the research study (some types of research require a big group of study participants in order to attribute impact to a program).

- 🕒 **Your goals for the research.** Start with fill-in-the-blank statements. On a blank sheet of paper, write down a few outcomes that you would like to see at the end of your research project. Consider: What are the questions you want to answer? What is your purpose of “filling in the blanks” and answering these questions? How do the answers support your goals as an organization? Should the sentences focus not only on individual change but on interpersonal change, change to families, or community change, to honor the work you do? You can share these statements with researchers when you start working together.

➔ For example... “First, we want to write strong applications for state government funding for violence prevention, so we want to say our program reduces participants’ violent behavior outside of the program by [percentage/measure], citing a rigorous outside evaluation. Second, we want to show that it is not just about the participants, but also the families of participants that grow stronger through our program and become advocates of change. Third, we would like to identify early indicators that affect whether a participant will complete the program or not.”

*Organizations have found research useful in day-to-day work when it identifies early indicators of the overall goal, if staff or participants can affect those indicators. Organizations have also found it useful to ask staff: What 3-4 pieces of information would help you to do your job better?*

- 🕒 **Your target audience for the research.** The type of data you need to “fill in the blanks,” whether small scale self-collected data or data from a large scale randomized controlled trial, depends on your audience. Are you looking to improve the effectiveness of the work, and would this require making changes to services along the way? Are you looking to evaluate outcomes to make the case to funders—what type of funders? Are you looking to establish a case for change to a specific government entity?

Next, get to know the research partner and what they are bringing to the table:

- **Researchers' openness to building trust.** When you meet researchers, look for the foundations of a trusted relationship. For many community organizations, the instinct based on previous experience is 'never give data to someone I don't really know.' Some community members remember exploitative or unethical interactions with research institutions. Community organizations have shared how rushing for the sake of timelines, rather than taking the time to share history and build relationship with researchers, can be counterproductive.
- **Researchers' motivations.** What motivates their interests in this work? What interests them most about this collaboration? Have they spent time in the community where you work?
- **Researchers' agenda.** What are their intentions for the research in the context of their professional work—what is their agenda? The value of sharing agendas is in the trust built together. Is the work with you supporting papers they intend to publish? Is it enabling them to fundraise for their institution? Is it meeting the requirements of funding they have already received?

- **Researchers' relevant experiences.** What stories can they share of their work that illustrate how they would work with you? How has community participated in identifying the goals of the research in previous projects? In designing the study and in particular how participants experience the study? In developing and testing survey instruments? In collecting data? In interpreting what the data mean and sharing results?

Discuss with the research partner what is realistic:

- **Questions asked.** How do you prioritize the questions you want to answer through the research? Taking into account the effort and change required to tackle each question and who would need to make that effort (the researcher or the community organization), which questions will you focus on now and which will you defer?
- **Information generated.**
  - What types of information can the research give you, and on what timeline? When will initial data be available, and what actions or decisions will it make possible?
  - What answers to questions or new learning can you be certain of getting, even in the "worst case," and what is the potential "best case" of producing the research or evidence you are planning for? What will need to go right for the "best case" to happen?

## **b. Know your options**

One barrier to equal partnership between researchers and those researched is not understanding the options, and potential benefits and costs of each.

Few outside of research institutions have this understanding unless they have previously experienced research projects, but without it, it is difficult for a community organization to participate with full voice. One method of gathering data may be the 'gold standard' on paper, but may not fit your purpose, mission or organizational stage.





**What are the options for the research? Some terms that come up frequently:**

|                      |                                    |   |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| QUANTITATIVE STUDIES | <b>QUANTITATIVE STUDY</b>          | <p>A “quantitative” study focuses on numbers to assess implementation and/or the impact of your organization’s work.</p> <p>For example, a quantitative study might count how many people your organization serves, what services they receive, and whether they have stable housing after receiving services.</p> <p>A quantitative study often uses government data sets, for example from the public school system or the criminal justice system, census tract data, or surveys.</p> <p>A quantitative study can produce data on a large number of participants more cheaply than other approaches. It can show that stories-focused information can be generalized beyond the handful of participants telling the stories.</p>   |
|                      | <b>QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY</b>    | <p>A “quasi-experimental” study is a type of quantitative study that shows a numerical change occurred, but does not show your program caused the change to happen.</p> <p>It does not involve assigning participants to two different groups and studying both groups, and therefore asks less from your organization and your participants.</p> <p>This will reduce your flexibility to change program elements during the period of the research.</p> <p>Will this generate what you are trying to learn? Is this rigorous enough for the audience you want to reach?</p>  |
|                      | <b>RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL</b> | <p>An “RCT” or “random assignment evaluation” is a type of quantitative study used to show your program caused the change to happen. For example, it would allow a researcher to say “participants in this organization had stable housing more often as a result of their participation.”</p> <p>It involves assigning participants randomly to treatment and control groups which is effort-intensive (more detail in the sections called Know the risks and costs and Plan for study recruitment below).</p> <p>This will reduce your flexibility to change program elements during the period of the research.</p> <p>It is often favored by public policy-makers. Is it necessary for your goals?</p>  |
|                      | <b>QUALITATIVE STUDY</b>           | <p>A “qualitative” study focuses on systematically collecting stories and other non-quantitative information to convey the impact of your organization’s work.</p> <p>A qualitative study may use interviews, focus groups, or observational data, which means a researcher watching or listening to participants and staff members.</p> <p>For example, a qualitative study might summarize what participants are saying has changed in their lives while participating in your program.</p> <p>Particularly when you are trying something where not much is already known, rich qualitative information, even from a smaller number of participants, helps shed light on “why” and “how” your efforts are working, and why participants find it valuable.</p> <p>Case studies can offer rich insight—but are different than a systematic qualitative study that may guide program or policy changes.</p> <p>Community organizations have found this type of research helpful to scaling up their work because it helps you understand what pieces matter most. Qualitative data can guide improvements, for example: criteria in screening tools, characteristics of staff to hire for, service or curriculum improvements. Qualitative data can also suggest internal metrics the organization can use so that operations produce more of what matters.</p> <p>However, qualitative research can take time and be expensive.</p> |
|                      | <b>MIXED METHODS STUDY</b>         | <p>A “mixed methods” approach mixes numbers and stories, and can provide the best, and worst, of both worlds.</p>   |

## c. Know the risks and costs

Ask researchers, and reflect on:

➤ **Risks.** What is the risk of each possible approach “failing” (i.e., not generating anything of value to your organization)? For example, if a randomized controlled trial is not sufficiently “powered,” meaning there are not enough participants in the research, it might not be able to show effectiveness even if your program is actually effective. If a research study is not measuring the most relevant outcomes for your organization, the research study might not show the true impact of your organization.

➤ **Costs.** What will be the tangible and intangible costs of each possible approach?

- For example, what additional or different work will staff have to take on?
- What leadership and change management work will be needed to support your organization with the emotional realities of new constraints? What will need to be formalized, or made into a manual, for the research to be possible and will there be resistance to this that will draw on your organization’s energy or time, or strain relationships?
- What are the specific costs to how you do your work of recruiting participants for the research? There is more detail in the section called Plan for study recruitment on page 46, but at this stage, understanding the number of participants your organization will need to recruit for the study to work is important.

**To understand this, at the table, you need:**

- **(1) the voice of operations (for example, outreach, intake)** to explain the process from interacting with a potential participant for the first time all the way through program completion. Where does attrition happen and how much attrition happens? How do participants graduate from or complete the program, and what does this mean for how many new participants can be recruited per week or month? Will the study change the process such that your historical enrollment or attrition might change?
- **(2) the voice of your research partner** to explain their best estimation of what number of participants completing the program is likely to be needed for the research study to show an effect that researchers consider valid.
- **(3) to put these pieces together**, to understand the cost to your organization and to your participants of recruiting the numbers needed.

➤ **Restrictions.** What are the restrictions imposed by each possible approach on your organization?

- For example, community organizations are often innovators and adaptors, but many research methods require core elements of the work to remain the same for the duration of the research, which can be years. Are you willing to not make substantive changes to your program for the period of the study?
- For example, if you choose a research design with random assignment, while the number of participants you serve may not change, the number of participants you need to engage with, and your flexibility to decide who gets services and who does not, may. For programs that have kept an “open door” for young people who have participated to leave and come back, random assignment may mean closing the door to services for a group of young people for an extended period. It may mean many youth in the neighborhood where you live and work interact with your organization, and then get “randomized out” of receiving service. For programs with age limits, random assignment could close the door to the program for a young person altogether.
- *What do you compromise if you do not have discretion to decide who gets services?*

- **Learning from peers.** Is it possible to speak with another community organization participating in a study to ask about their experience and risks to be aware of? Is it possible for key staff from your organization to listen to how another organization addressed risks outlined here? Community organizations have commented that this dialogue helped them ask their research partners the right questions. Can the funder or researchers make connections for you, particularly to a community organization with a similar depth of relationship with their participants (e.g., a few hours once a week versus a deep ongoing relationship with a participant and their family)?

## **d. Research means change, so get ready to lead through change**

In deciding how extensive or rigorous of a research effort to start, the capacity of your organization—including the leadership’s mindset for learning and for change, the culture of your organization, the infrastructure in place—matter. These factors affect whether research may feel like some more work, or like a drastic change.

- **Existing data habits.** Does your organization have habits of looking at data, reflecting, and learning? Or do numbers usually come up only for funding proposals or report-outs to the board? Do you have data infrastructure you can build from, such as spreadsheets or other ways of collecting information, or habits of using qualitative and numeric data in day-to-day operations? Are staff already spending time building and maintaining this data infrastructure, or will you need to identify staff and free up capacity to participate in research?
- **Staff’s experiences with research.** What are staff members’ appetites for research? Who among your staff, volunteers, partners, and community members could help shape research?
- **Program readiness.** Is program infrastructure in place to enable research, for example consistently delivered key elements of a program? If the research will require new “standards” or “manualization,” which means writing down how you interact with program participants in a manual and doing it in a consistent way, will your organization embrace this, or resist it as too institutional? This does not mean every participant must receive the same services. For example, a study may allow for variation in what goals your participants set, but measure progress on goals consistently.





“We know it works. So what are the papers and numbers going to actually do for us?”

KAREN JACKSON, DIRECTOR OF  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, LAWNDALÉ  
CHRISTIAN LEGAL CENTER

**For the executive director/leader of a community organization preparing for the change that a research effort may bring:**

- **Listening.** Before committing to research, how can you listen to all the reasons for why research should not happen? Are staff concerned the numbers will not tell the whole story? That there will be copycats? That their voice will not be heard or valued? While from the researcher or funder’s perspective, the research study may be separate from the program, for your staff and participants, it is often all part of the work. Several organizations have shared with us that it was not until these conversations happened that the impact of the research became “real.” One-on-one conversations with naysayers, for example, staff, participants or community members, can be a valuable opportunity to understand reasons for reluctance and opposition. Listening in this way can inform whether and how you engage on the research, improvements to the research plan, and how you communicate about the research.
- **Communicating.**

  - How can you educate, support and influence your staff for a successful study? Does the entire team understand what is happening, why, and how it will impact their work? How, and how often, will you articulate the potential benefit of the research to your organization’s mission? How will you be open about the challenges and risks, and about how workloads will shift as a consequence of doing the research? For larger nonprofits, how will you motivate leaders within your organization to engage in these conversations deliberately with staff on their teams?
  - Who are other stakeholders you need to engage, for example, the community organization’s board, other funders, community partners, participants, participants’ parents? Will having the researchers speak with these stakeholders help you?
- **Champions.**

  - Who, within your organization, tells stories that people hear. Are they informed about and supportive of the research? How can you engage them?
  - As staff turnover is frequent in many community organizations, are there additional members of your organization who can be included in the discussions from the start, so understanding of how and why the research began does not sit solely with one or two people?

## e. Know your rights

Power dynamics and trust affect how a community organization participates in research, whether the process feels like justice work or the opposite, and whether the research succeeds.

Some community organizations may feel comfortable taking a direct approach on these issues. Others fear that being assertive may jeopardize the opportunity.

- **From history to present.** Name the local history. How have interactions between your community and researchers typically worked? Set against that context, how do you envision roles and accountabilities will work in this research?
- **Role of Principal Investigator.** What will the Principal Investigator take responsibility for? Is it appropriate for someone from your organization to act as a co-Principal Investigator? In some cases, this can make the co-leadership and co-ownership of the research clear and help with power dynamics; in some cases, you may be looking for the perceived validity that an external university researcher brings.

- **Property rights.** Discuss intellectual property rights and data rights. Who can access the data and when? When will data be processed and shared—at regular intervals, or not until the end of the project? Who can speak about the data and publish the data? Whose consent is required, when? Some community organizations have gotten legal advice and some have asked research institutions and funders to sign non-disclosure agreements.
- **Signed contract.** Sign a memorandum of understanding or similar written contract specifically covering the study, responsibilities, and rights to the data and communications about the data.
- **Cost distribution.** Discuss with researchers and funders how costs to your organization and community generated by the research can be shared. Can researchers share in this cost, in kind, or financially? In our experience, researchers have raised funds, for example to compensate participants for their time, or for stipends for partnering public schools. Can the funder support these costs? ■



## Color of Chicago Beyond's Experience:

At Chicago Beyond, experience continues to teach us about the substantial tangible and intangible costs of collaborations between community organizations and researchers, that we and other funders had not accounted for.

Our notes:

1. **Being more proximate enables us to learn.** Through deep relationships we have seen myriad financial and intangible costs of doing research from the nonprofit and community's perspectives. We have built a "growth team" who in turn builds trusted relationships with a broad array of people within our nonprofit partner organizations. This intimacy begins in our due diligence process before making the investment, where our team spends substantial time with, and writes or co-writes the investment proposal in collaboration with, the nonprofit.
2. **Funders have unique opportunities to support and reduce some of the costs.** Some examples from our work: collaboration on the purpose of the research; helping address strategic and operational challenges such as navigating new recruitment targets; developing communications about the research for the nonprofit's staff, board, and community partners; supporting executive directors in their change management efforts resulting from doing research.
3. **We acknowledge that this work is difficult and messy.** Timelines and timing of funding may need to shift, when the cost of not shifting them becomes clear.

## 2.

# COMMUNITY AND VOICE:

## SETTING UP THE STUDY

### a. Set up for voice; Consider a community evaluation committee

“Bringing implementors and researchers in close proximity is so important—so we can have conversations without fear. The power dynamic can hold up deeper collaboration.”

LINA FRITZ, MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
PROGRAM INNOVATION, ONEGOAL



Research is traditionally set up to keep researchers separate and “neutral.” Engaging and getting proximate is an orientation the community organization and researchers may need to cultivate together, and create new structures for.

One starting point is face-to-face engagement between researchers and community, participants, staff, and partners. Another is to start by outlining the potential benefits and harms of the research, and determining how to hear the voices of those potentially affected through the process.

➤ **Identification of voices needed.** What are potential benefits of the research, and who receives them?

What are the potential harms, and who carries them? For example, what processes of your organization may be changed or interrupted? How will staff relationships with participants be affected? These can be written out in a T-chart (a piece of paper with a large letter “T” creating two columns) with potential benefits in one column and potential harms in the other, following the practice of health impact assessments, environmental impact assessments and racial equity impact assessments. The individuals and groups named on the chart may suggest the starting list of whose voices are important to hear.

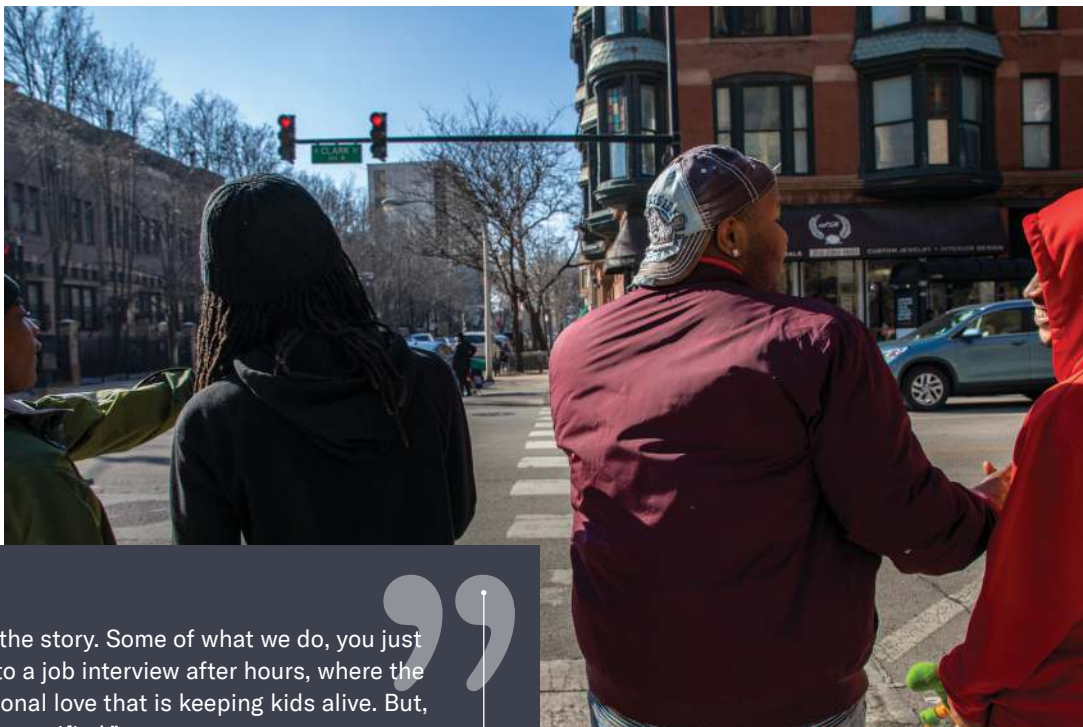
➤ **Reciprocal engagement.**

- How can the researchers and community organization staff, participants, partners, or community members engage face-to-face, and see each other as humans? Are Peace Circles an appropriate early engagement? Breakfast forums for partners? Evening forums for community? For researchers, having the opportunity to connect with the work on a human level can provide perspective and, in the words of one community organization, “a positive lens, not just focusing on statistics of demise.” For community organizations, engaging with the researchers formally and informally helps build a relationship of trust.
- In some cases, you may assemble a community evaluation committee representing those voices, which may make decisions about or give input into what is researched, the outcome measures used, and which engages regularly with the research team. The committee may include staff of your organization, researchers, program participants or community members. What is the mandate of your group? What powers does it truly have? How often will it engage with the research team to not burden participants or overwhelm the research team, but also to effectively contribute to the study design and execution? (In the Community-Based Participatory Research approach, this group is called a Community Action Board and steers both the research and the related action.)
- How will you engage with all staff who are affected by the research effort to seek input, while the study remains in its formative stages? How will you engage community members who may be affected by the research effort? Are community meetings appropriate? What is the mechanism to gather and incorporate input?

➤ **Engagement at the right times.** When during the process can you still shape study design? Have you discussed with the researchers the timing of when they will seek “IRB approval” or register the study’s “pre-analysis plan?” An “IRB” or Institutional Review Board is an administrative body that confirms that certain ethical considerations in research are met. A “pre-analysis plan” commits to what the most important outcomes and approaches will be in your research. Once these steps in the research process occur, you have limited ability to change the study design while safeguarding the validity of the study.



## b. Participate in deciding what to measure – check the “simple” measures



“Numbers only tell a piece of the story. Some of what we do, you just can’t quantify—driving a kid to a job interview after hours, where the bus doesn’t go. It’s unconditional love that is keeping kids alive. But, there are things that can be quantified.”

CHRISTOPHER SUTTON, DIRECTOR, YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAMS, INC.

Pictured: Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. group outing

### What you measure is what you incentivize.

The “simple” measures may not be the ones that represent real growth and benefit to participants facing the biggest barriers. As large administrative data sets were in many cases built to report on compliance, metrics of compliance such as arrest rates are, not surprisingly, easier and cheaper to collect.

Take the example of recidivism. On the one hand, it is a common metric, with existing data sets. This means it costs less money to track and allows comparison across programs. On the other hand, it does not capture a program participant’s directional progress, while capturing things outside of the program participant’s control, such as a concentration or increase of arrest efforts in a community. *A piece by Jeffrey Butts and Vincent Schiraldi on benefits and shortfalls of recidivism as a metric is listed in the Bibliography on page 111.*

What is measured can be a productive focus for a community evaluation committee and researchers, each contributing their expertise.

### ➤ Understanding the risks of possible metrics and data.

- What are the commonly used metrics for this type of work, and what inequities, historical or present, are built into them? What assumptions are built into how these metrics are used? Some examples:
  - Is measuring participant arrests in the current state of racialized policing an accurate metric?
  - In a culture that values nuclear families over independent individuals, is measuring “progress” on self-actualization the best metric?
  - Is it fair to measure housing “overcrowding” for participants from a culture that values living with extended family?
  - Is measuring wealth accumulation for families from a culture that values “sending money home” or supporting extended family members an appropriate metric?
- What are the benefits to your organization and to your participants of the commonly used metrics? What are the harms?
- What are the limitations of the data sets you are working with? How will the research team address these? For example, department of employment services data do not capture all types of employment, which may result in undercounting increases in employment among participants in a program.

### ➤ Selecting appropriate metrics.

- What does the work intend to create, in addition to what will be avoided? When do staff and participants perceive progress and what marks progress in their eyes? How can this be reflected in metrics that are feasible in this context? For example, are connections to caring adults built through the work important to capture? Expansion of the participant’s support network? Changes in the participant’s perception of their agency?

➔ One example is of a prison-based fatherhood program (you can find the article by Abigail Henson listed at the end), where dialogue between participants, community organization staff, and researchers changed what the study measured: the unit was changed from the father to the family; the short-term measures were changed, from depression and stress, to pride and reconstruction of masculinity (from provider to caregiver); the long-term measures were expanded, from recidivism, to whether the father-child bond remained active and positive.

- What effects of the community organization’s work important to capture in the research? Is the program affecting the system or the capacity of the community, for example supporting cultural revitalization, changing power relations, or increasing the capacity of the community to solve problems? Effects of the ecosystem on a participant, effects of change by the participant on their families or communities, or broader impacts of a program’s work, may be less simple to research. However, this may be critical to a community organization’s impact where easy-to-research approaches have not worked.
- Some community organizations have found that talking with trusted friends and peers has helped them to identify additional outcomes to measure. Sometimes those outside the day-to-day work can help you to see your impact.

### ➤ Communicating about metrics respectfully. How can you communicate about quantitative metrics within your organization in a way that is respectful, and that recognizes that numbers are an incomplete picture?

### c. Plan for study recruitment



“If I could start all over, I’d ask ‘What’s the power number?’”

AIMEE STAHLBERG, ARTISTIC MANAGER,  
STORYCATCHERS THEATRE

Several community organizations have noted that a lack of shared understanding between the researchers, those with program operations expertise, and those speaking for the community organization led to lost effort and time, and anxiety, in recruiting participants into the research. In addition, optimism for the research from the community organization’s leadership can contribute to blind spots when it comes to planning for recruitment and retention, which can then make the research less effective.

- **Voices with expertise.** Who needs to be at the table to be able to walk through the recruitment process in detail from start to finish to really understand what is necessary to put together the participant group, or “cohort,” for a research study? Who is closest to the work? Outreach? Social workers? Program directors? Former participants?
- **Recruitment process.** What is the detailed recruitment process based on these voices of expertise? Importantly, the research itself can affect both the recruitment process, and attrition. For example, the research could change how participants apply to the program, from interested young people applying, to schools generating lists of young people invited into the program; as a result of this shift, attrition will rise from what the program has seen in the past. Where does attrition happen in the process and by how much? What number of participants would need to start the recruitment process to end up with a certain number of participants completing the program? How frequently will participants move out of the program and what does this mean for how much time it takes for the target number of participants to complete the program? What does “completing the program” or “graduating” mean for your organization, operationally?

- **Recruitment target.** The higher the number of study participants, the easier it is to show a scientifically valid change, but the greater the effort to recruit participants. For the research study to show an effect that researchers consider valid, how many participants does your researcher estimate need to complete the program? Piecing this together with the program's process from the start of recruitment to program completion, what total number of participants must initially be recruited? Having the researchers and operational team together name different scenarios, then explore the challenges and the manpower related to each, can be a helpful approach.
- **Resources required.** What will your organization need to change to achieve the recruitment target? One community organization believed their social worker could continue to manage recruitment as the research study began, and later found they needed a dedicated person spending 30 hours per week to adequately support recruitment and build new referral partnerships.
- **Data required.** What other data about participants will researchers need to collect, and how will these be collected by researchers, or by staff and passed to researchers?
- **Communications.**
  - How will the recruitment target and recruitment process be communicated to recruitment partners, staff, community or participants?

➔ These types of meetings require planning through an equity lens. What is the best time of day for community members to attend? Evenings? Weekends? What about childcare? Food? Meeting format? Seating arrangement?

- Are breakfasts or evening community meeting appropriate? Should researchers be present to answer questions? What about a school-night kick-off? Are one-on-one conversations between researchers and recruitment partners/staff leading recruitment most appropriate? Will there be any resources or stipend for recruitment partners?
- Are the explanations of the research to participants, staff, partners, community in a form that is understood by these audiences?





“I knew my fathers in the control group needed to be compensated, and we made it happen. Their time is valuable, and they weren’t getting the benefit of being in the program.”

SHELDON SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND  
FOUNDER, THE DOVETAIL PROJECT

Pictured: The Dovetail Project graduation

## d. Participate in designing how study participants experience the research

When those closest to participants, and participants themselves, shape how the study occurs, the approach can become more equitable. Human connection makes impacts previously unseen to researchers and funders, visible.

**For the community organization, community members, or research participants planning with researchers for the study:**

### 🕒 Fit of research design and mission.

- › Throughout the study and as it ends, how is the research design consistent with the mission of the community organization and trust it has built in the community? For example, what will potential participants see after study enrollment ends, particularly if the program will not have additional capacity at that point? What is the impact of changes made because of the research study to the organization’s reputation in the community?
- › How is consent best approached? In this particular context, is it better for participants in the control group to meet program staff in person and give consent, or to be randomized on a list without ever interacting with staff? Will the control group, if there is one, be asked for consent? Is consent written in a way that is understood? Is consent presented in a context/at a time when the participant actually has agency to give consent?

- **Recruitment strategies.** What specific strategies can be used to bring participants into the study and retain them through the course of the study? There is a “tax” on producing knowledge about those most marginalized: it is harder for researchers to connect with those with instability in their lives; it is harder to obtain consent from those who have learned to distrust institutions; it is harder to retain in a research study those who experience greater barriers. How can social media be helpful? Will multiple redundant strategies be feasible, to increase success?

➔ The article “Study Retention as Bias Reduction in a Hard-to-Reach Population” by Columbia Professor Bruce Western and colleagues referenced at the end may aid brainstorming on study recruitment and retention, e.g., the timing of financial incentives at the start of a study (if applicable); frequency of contact; back-up contacts including mothers and supportive secondary contacts.

- **Experience of being in a research study.**

- How will study participants be contacted? How will they be engaged through the study? Who will engage them? How can the nonverbal cues create the desired experience for study participants? What have participants heard before about research in their community or by similar institutions? What is different here, and how is that explicitly communicated in ways most likely to be heard?
  - The assumption in research can be that “nothing is happening” to the control group. But, from the perspective of a young person going through an application process and being “randomized out” or from the perspective of referral sources referring many additional people to a community organization, only to have them not receive services, something has happened. If the study will include a randomized control group, who will communicate to the control group about the randomization and what will be communicated? How will this feel standing in the young person’s shoes? If members of the control group have been exposed to other research studies, as is often the case in Chicago, what narratives is it important to address, e.g., a sense that “randomization” is not actually random? If young people are randomized out early on in program enrollment, but are aware there is still room left in a sought-after program, what is staff’s response? If participants in the comparison and treatment groups will interact, for example, within a school, what communication will aid each group of people?

- **Responsive communications.** What is the best way to communicate about what matters to participants, for example:

- **What is the best way to communicate about privacy?** Concerns nonprofits have shared, from their participants, include: *Who all will know I am in the study? Will my name be published anywhere? How much will they be in my life? Do they watch from the cameras in the building? If I am involved in questionable activity, are they going to report me to the police?*
  - **What is the best way to communicate about benefits?** Participants have asked: *How does being part of a study help me?*
  - **What is the best way to communicate about expectations?** Participants have asked: *Am I allowed to participate in other programs/employment during the study? Can you still help me if I am not in the treatment group? Can I apply again? Who is going to help me if you can’t?*
  - **Be aware that there may be misunderstandings about research preceding your study.**

- **Trauma.** How do awareness of trauma and the research study’s potential to trigger memories and emotions shape the work? A study can be an emotional trigger for program participants, and for staff who were themselves researched or interrogated in other ways in their childhood. Trauma expertise can inform study outreach and study design to minimize that effect. For example, trauma awareness can shape how staff participate in the research (and change whether their stress is transmitting fear to participants). If this is not an area in which your team is experienced, seek out expertise so you are equipped to answer these questions.

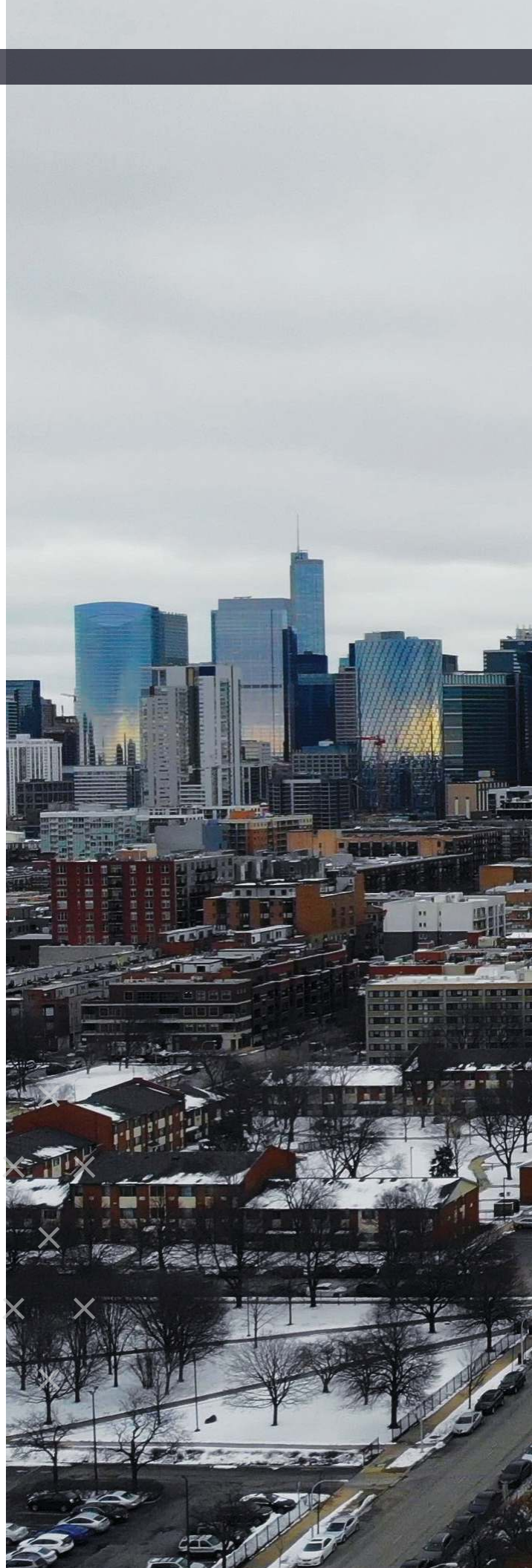
## e. Build in time for reflection, failure, change

Meaningful reflection and problem-solving during the initial steps of a community-research partnership take time. Build this into the plan.

🔗 **Cadence.** What is the cadence on which the team should reflect on the work and engage on challenges? Where and when will these conversations be held? Who will participate and who will lead?

### 🔗 Discussion topics.

- Feedback on the research effort so far, and what needs to be done to address it.
- How are inequitable approaches, methods, measures filtering into the study, and what are opportunities to do differently? For example, are you unintentionally taking advantage of what your privilege allows you to do, such as dictating meeting times and locations? How is your work creating a way of operating intentionally distinct from the legacy of “research brain” and “community brawn?”
- How are relationships of trust being formed, and how is the team interacting as equals? Note that while researchers’, staff, and community members’ roles in the research differ, the point here is that no one is treated as superior or inferior. ■









# 3.

## COMMUNITY AND VOICE:

### DURING THE STUDY

#### a. Engage during the study

While researchers may be primarily responsible for collecting the data, the research process can remain a topic of joint reflection and improvement. The community organization or community evaluation committee's specific understanding of context and people is critical.

##### 🕒 Feedback loop.

- > How are staff, participants' and community members' voices being heard during the course of the study? What feedback is being shared and what can be done to address the feedback and communicate back to those who shared it? Some organizations have found a biweekly conversation among researchers and those at the community organization involved in implementing the study tremendously valuable to ask and answer questions and to plan for each new step in the work in an organic and effective way.
- > Are you remembering to praise and reinforce the specific actions your research partner is taking in service of equity?

##### 🕒 Listening for clues.

- > How well are efforts to bring participants into the study and engagement with participants during the study working? What is not working and what can be done better?
- > How well is engagement with those in the control group, if there is one, working? What is not working and what can be done better?
- > How are inequitable approaches, methods, measures filtering into the research despite the best of intentions and what can be done to reorient? Where do you need to advocate for more resources or time to be allocated? Who is not appearing as robustly in early data (for example, young people experiencing housing instability or young people with Individualized Education Plans), and does this offer a clue to focus problem-solving? Who is not experiencing being heard?

## b. Vet study tools and problem-solving

In our experience, an important opportunity during the study is the collaboration between community organization and researchers on study tools such as surveys.

### 🔗 Contextual awareness.

- › How can the community organization's leaders and researchers best collaborate so study tools fit the specific context and also have the validity desired?
- › How will draft study tools be vetted by participants? Are surveys of an appropriate length?

### 🔗 Execution.

- › Will certain types of data, for example social security numbers, be a challenge to collect in the specific context, and what are alternatives?
- › If researchers are engaging with a representative group, for example a focus group, is it a meaningful "group?" How can you and researchers together create the conditions for voices to be heard?
- › Can community members be hired to help collect data or conduct surveys? ■

## 4.

# EQUITABLE NUMBERS FOR IMPACT

### a. Make it useful along the way

The history of distrust between community and researchers comes in part from community organizations entering research partnerships expecting the work will improve lives of participants, and later finding the research may not help them with day-to-day operations or bring resources to their community. How can the research improve lives of participants as much as possible?

🕒 **Early learnings.** What are early learnings from the research and how can these be shared with staff, participants, community, or partners to show what their hard work is yielding?

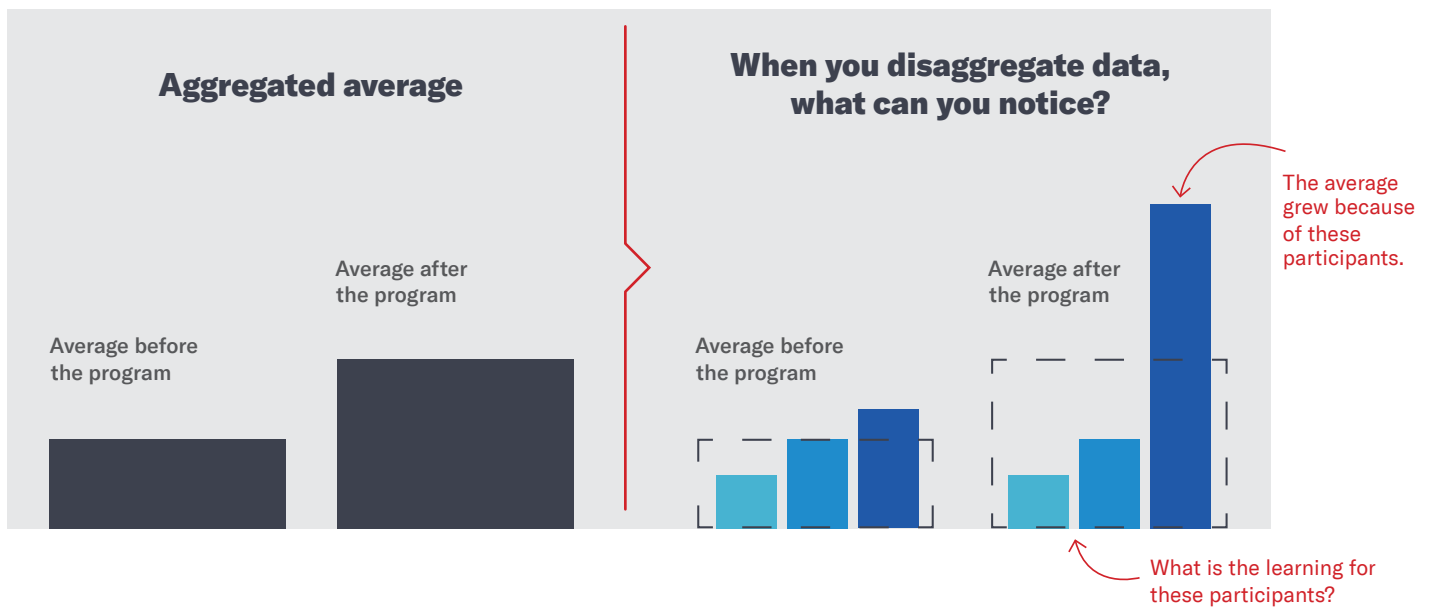
🕒 **Early action.**

- What improvements to the program are possible during the research, given the context of your organization and the research design, which may limit what changes can be made?
- How will those responsible for making the changes engage with the data early on so they can plan for action?

🕒 **Sense checking.** Is there a role for your organization's staff in sense-checking early data or preliminary results? For example, if a researcher is looking for themes in stories from participants, how is the researcher identifying and interpreting important themes ("coding" qualitative data)? Are preliminary results consistent with the experience of your organization, or do they look wrong?

## b. Bring attention to who is benefited the most? Least?

Many times, averages hide whether participants most forced to the margins are left further behind, unaffected, or helped by a program.



If your community organization's mission is to serve participants facing barriers, or if you are innovating and looking at whom you could serve, a key purpose of the data is to help you understand who you are succeeding in reaching (and who you are not reaching); who is benefiting most from participating in your program (and who is benefiting least); and what can be learned from the complex stories beneath these numbers to help you do your work better.



- **Disaggregated data.** Against whatever metric you have chosen to measure how your program helps your participants? Take for example, a grade point average. How much change does the program create for participants starting out furthest behind, versus participants in the middle, versus participants starting out furthest ahead? (This must be done in a way that continues to protect individuals' privacy.)
- **Learning from who is benefited least and most.**
  - > Who benefits the most by your organization's work and is this who your organization intended to serve? What are the characteristics— demographic, intersectional, and situational, for example, housing stability, adult relationships, connectedness—of the small group of participants who benefited most?
  - > Who is benefited least by your organization's work? What are the characteristics of this small group of participants and are these characteristics of participants you intended to serve?
  - > What can your organization learn from these stories? Do the greatest success stories, recognizing their complexity, spur ideas for innovation? Are there adjustments to the program your organization will try out, to better serve your target participants?
- **Counting inequity.**
  - > Is the correlation between race and outcomes, or class and outcomes, changed as a result of your organization's work? This is one way to look at impact for equity.
  - > How can your organization use these data and stories to communicate your impact for equity?

## c. Who is the comparison point?

Just as averages can obscure who, specifically, is and is not benefitting, comparison to an average can be misleading. For example, comparing to an “average” client load may not be relevant and may burn staff out if the work involves complex trauma. For example, if custodial sentence lengths get shorter because of a program and there is no change in recidivism, this can be an improvement in recidivism, if normally an increase in recidivism is expected whenever sentence lengths get shorter. For example, a young person dropping out of a program and re-engaging several times can be an indicator of an organization's persistence in building relationships, rather than an efficiency marker to improve.

- **Comparison points.**
  - > For a study comparing outcomes to a benchmark, or analyzing cost and benefit, who and what is proposed as the comparison? How can comparison points show different perspectives or the complexity of the work?
  - > Does the comparison point take into account the impacts of systemic and individual traumas, for example the implications of stress experienced by program staff as a factor in selecting what productivity comparison is relevant?
  - > *Does the comparison point ring true to those being measured?*
- **Cost-benefit analysis.** If you want to produce cost-benefit numbers, how do researchers propose to capture systemic effects? Accounting for “cost” of the way things are right now only in terms of tax dollars—which are often actually wages that benefit a different group of people—rather than the actual social cost, can unwittingly and incorrectly build a case against investment in your work.
- **Capturing growth.** How does the presentation of the data reveal growth journeys which may not be linear? Does the comparison point allow for—to use substance abuse terminology—relapse in the context of recovery? ■







## 5.

# SHARING RESULTS

### a. Is it historical? Is it contextualized?

Numbers, without context, take on the assumptions and biases of their audience. Data sources, without context, reinforce the structural bias built into them.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns, a story is fundamentally shaped by where you begin it. The origins of inequity are often left out of the story, allowing histories to be laundered, and reinforcing harmful silences in the narrative.

- **Context.** What history and explanation of structural and systemic factors is important to frame the challenges the organization is addressing? To explain fully why the problem exists in the first place and the complexity of root causes and pathways? How can this show up in the description of the organization's work and dissemination of the research?
- **Dominant narratives.** What narratives have previously described the organization's participants, its work in the community, or its type of work? How have these narratives served participants well? How have they harmed them, or reinforced inequities? With this understanding, how can this research be framed to take on unjust narratives? What cultural context is important to tell?
- **Limitations.** How are limitations of the data clearly communicated? For example, limitations of administrative data sets, limitations of summarized data, limitations of common metrics, systematic non-counting, or systematic undercounting? "Objective" data like special education designations, census data, crime that is measured by arrests, or domestic violence information, can incorporate racialized processes and lead to incorrect interpretations, without context.

### b. Can you hear your participants? Are you signaling that lived experience is valuable?

Valuing data to achieve an end—whether securing funding, improving programs, sharing learning with the field, changing narratives—is not the same as valuing a human story and experience intrinsically. Honoring a participant's voice requires intention, it may not just happen from documenting a participant's story, demographics or outcomes.

- **Participant voices.** Can you hear your participants in what you, the researchers, the funders, are disseminating about the research? How are images, stories, numbers resulting from the research effort putting participants at the center in how they are shared, versus treating them as objects of a study or as tokens to lend credibility?

➤ **Authorship.** Is there an opportunity for you or your participants to own elements of or co-author what is produced, or be editors? Or does it serve you to have an external author, because an external person is perceived as not biased?

➤ **Respecting experience.**

- > How does the presentation of results message to the audience that experience is valuable and valid, rather than reinforcing the bias that university expertise *produces* validity?
- > *Would participants find that what is being put out is true to their experience?*

## c. Is it accessible? Can those researched hear the research?

Often research results are shared through academic journals, many of which are accessible only to subscribers. Prose, data tables and charts may be written so they are inviting only to those with research and statistics backgrounds. These walls hold up traditional power dynamics of who owns the research, and who is dependent on others to share it and interpret it.

➤ **Language.**

- > Is the language used as easy to understand as possible? Do people from different cultures, with different lived experiences, with different technical backgrounds understand the results of the research and the “so what” of what it means, when you test an early draft?
- > Are all inputs, calculations, and methods clearly explained, so stakeholders with different technical backgrounds can understand what has been counted, how, and based on what judgments? Are data tables and charts readable to those without research and statistics backgrounds? Are any technical terms used defined in plain language?

➤ **Forums and formats.**

- > As the community organization owning the research, how will you collaborate with the researchers on identifying the format(s) that will make the results most accessible to those affected by the research? To those who have power to support the work? To your partners or those who are part of your coalition for change?
- > Where—in what forums—will the results of the research be most likely to reach each of these audiences? Does it make sense to host community discussions to share results? Post video on social media? Design a simple summary that articulates what was learned and to what end?
- > Revisit the chart you made to identify those potentially affected by the research. Are those people being reached? ■



# FOR RESEARCHERS

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## **Before you start:** What is the power dynamic?

Because evidence truly matters, we must care how it is made.

The existing power dynamic between community organizations, researchers, and funders is getting in the way of the scale of impact that we, collectively intend. The power dynamics between specific researchers, funders, and community organizations will vary. Some funding, including government grants, will impose restrictions. Some community organizations may feel comfortable asking questions and asserting their perspectives; others may fear that being assertive may jeopardize the opportunity and funding. In all cases, researchers wield substantial power in shaping the questions asked, and the inputs used to answer them.

“What are the inherent biases we hold? The quantitative paradigm says it is ‘controlling for these’. But what are the biases built in to how your “knowing” works?”

**THEODORE CORBIN, MD, CENTER FOR  
NONVIOLENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, SCHOOL OF  
PUBLIC HEALTH, DREXEL UNIVERSITY,  
CO-FOUNDER OF HEALING HURT PEOPLE**



“People ask: ‘How do I get started?’ How do I encourage voice? How do I use my voice? There is academic theory, but people have challenges doing it. That’s where this work comes in.



**ANGELA ODOMS-YOUNG, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UIC  
INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH RESEARCH AND POLICY**



Depending on the kinds of research you do, your research institution, and your own experience, the action you take will look different.

**For example, you may:**

- Reflect individually or engage with your colleagues and institution on biases and how these flow into your research
- Change how you engage with community to identify research questions and study outcomes
- Propose timelines for research differently, for example to support trust-building, or to develop survey instruments with community input and community testing
- Interrogate numbers and stories you lift up, and use different framing in what you publish
- Evaluate your own work differently, or engage your funder stakeholders differently

Making intentional change can feel messy and uncomfortable. It requires openness to new perspectives and unlearning old ones. It requires shifting power dynamics, departing from how “it has always been done.” Starting from relationship and accountability, researchers can unlock immense creativity, to achieve the promise of what knowledge can yield for communities. ■

# 1.

## KNOW YOUR ROLE, KNOW THE RISKS

### EQUITY IN HOW YOU START

#### a. Bring awareness

How research gets done—the approaches, methods, metrics—has a system of assumptions built in.

➔ Some sources of context include MIT historian Craig Wilder's *Ebony & Ivy* on the history of elite academic institutions in justifying inequities, and the Harlem Children's Zone's writings on their decades of experience “being researched” (you can find both in the Bibliography on page 111).

In seeking more equitable approaches, one place to start is understanding context and biases.

- **Systemic awareness.** What are the assumptions built into the research approaches you use most frequently? How do these approaches reinforce the privilege of those already powerful? Whose competence, capacity, or fidelity needs to be proven, and whose is taken on faith?
- **Institutional awareness.** What is the history of research in this community, and the particular history for this community organization and these participants? How have research institutions previously been experienced? How does your organization benefit from this dynamic? What experiences, e.g., being reported to child services, might a research effort bring to mind, even if not technically related to the research?
- **Personal awareness.** Everyone comes to their work with some personal knowledge and assumptions. What methods to create knowledge are you predisposed towards? What are your assumptions about the people and the context of your work? For example, if employment is a focus of the study, what are your assumptions about “valid” employment?
- **Awareness of what is at stake.** From the community organization's perspective, what benefits may participants in the research see and how certain are those benefits? What may be the cost to participants, to the community organization, to the community? What are the risks of producing the research or evidence you are planning for? From your own perspective, what benefits may the researchers and their research institution get from the work? How certain are those benefits and what risks do the researchers bear?



You have to build a relationship. There's a history. It takes time, it takes trust, it takes being vulnerable."

**MARQUELL JONES, MAC HOUSE CASE MANAGER,  
LAWDALE CHRISTIAN LEGAL CENTER**



"Evidence, without seeing humanity, is folly.

**MICHAEL MCAFEE, PRESIDENT  
AND CEO, POLICYLINK**

## b. Listen and relate, in order to fit research to purpose

Spending time with, and spending time listening to, the community organization and members of the community humanizes research and enables you to find the right fit between purpose and research design. This is the foundation for an equitable engagement.

First, invest in building relationships:

- **Building trust.** How will you begin to build relationships of trust? How can you spend time in the community? Could sharing what motivates your interest in the work be valuable? What interests you most about this collaboration? For many community organizations, the instinct based on previous experience is "never give data to someone I don't really know." Community organizations have shared that rushing for the sake of timelines, rather than taking the time to share history and build relationships with researchers, can be counterproductive.
- **Sharing your agenda.** Sharing agendas openly contributes to building trust. How does this work fit into your professional research agenda? What is your other current research? What are your intentions for the work and your research institution's priorities?
- **Sharing your relevant experiences.** What stories can you share of your work that illustrates how you would work with the community organization?

"Our study is working well because everybody is unveiling themselves, taking their degrees off the wall, rolling their sleeves up."

**CHRISTOPHER SUTTON, DIRECTOR, YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAMS, INC**



Next, listen in order to fit research to purpose:

➤ **Goals for the research.**

- What are the organization's specific intentions for the research? What are the few statements the organization would like to be able to "fill in the blanks" on at the end of the work, and the organization's intention in filling out those blanks? (You can find prompts for the community organization in the section called You are in charge of what you want to learn, page 34.)
- What other effects does an organization have on the ecosystem around an individual participant?
- How could the research capture the benefit of the program over the appropriate duration, given that benefits may show up over time, and not immediately?

➤ **Target audience.** Where does the organization intend for the research to land, and what type of data and what research design serve that purpose, with least burden on the organization or its participants? How can you shape the research design and approaches to serve the purpose intended?

➤ **Organizational context.** What are the organization's existing approaches to reflection and evaluation, that precede your collaboration?

➤ **Information generated.**

- When does the organization look to act on learnings? When will initial data be available, and what actions or decisions by the organization can it enable?
- What answers to questions or new learning can the organization be certain of getting, even in the "worst case," and what is the potential "best case" of producing the research or evidence you are planning for? What will need to go right for the "best case" to happen?

## c. Help create understanding of possible approaches and methods

One practical way researchers can help to address the information imbalance is by helping their community partners see the possibilities for evaluation, and the potential benefits and costs of each. Without this understanding, it is difficult for a community organization to participate with full voice. Translating expertise on what is possible and the implications to an organization's specific context can be a valuable service.

➤ **Options.**

- What type of study is sufficiently rigorous for the intended audience while minimizing burden on the organization? What type of study is valuable to future audiences, or enables systemic change if that is envisioned by the organization? How does understanding how the program is working fit into the picture? Would a qualitative or mixed methods study suit the organization's learning objectives? You might share a simple table such as the one that appears in the community organizations section under Know your options.
- What approach to research—from traditional, to community-engaged, to full partnership between community and researcher—is most suitable? (more on Community-Based Participatory Research appears in the glossary on page 110).

➤ **Pressures you face, experience you have.** Are there institutional pressures you as a researcher face to conduct certain types of studies, or are there types of studies where you lack experience, and have you made those explicit to the organization?

➤ **Benefits, risks, costs.** What are the implications—benefits, risks, costs—of each approach, from the organization's perspective?

- What are the benefits of each possible approach? What ongoing benefits could the community organization see after the research ends?
- What will the organization be asked to compromise? For example, would the organization not be able to change key program elements during the period of the research? What would this mean for the organization—recognizing community organizations are often innovative and adaptive by their nature—and for its participants? Would the organization's flexibility to select who receives services be affected? Would the organization need to close the door to services for a group of people for an extended period? For a program with age limits, could the research design close the door to the program altogether for a young person? What would the organization compromise if it no longer had discretion to decide who gets services?
- If the research will mean that the organization must manualize or standardize its work, will the organization's context and culture embrace this, or will there be significant resistance, which will cost energy and time, and strain relationships?
- What data sets will be used in each option for research you are considering, and how does access to those data work? Will the community organization be able to access the data after the research study finishes?
- What may be the costs to the organization and to participants of recruitment for the research? A common topic of miscommunication is the number of participants the organization will need to recruit for the study to work.

➢ **To understand this, you need:**

- **(1) the voice of operations** (i.e. outreach, intake) at the community organization to explain the process from interacting with a potential participant for the first time all the way through program completion. Where does attrition happen and how much attrition happens? How do participants graduate from or complete the program, and what does this mean for how many new participants can be recruited per week or month? Will the study change the process such that your historical enrollment or attrition might change? Are you asking questions in a context that is likely to yield realistic estimates, for example if a board member or a funder is in the room?
- **(2) your own best estimation** of what number of participants completing the program is likely to be needed for the research study to show an effect that researchers consider valid.
- **(3) to put these pieces together**, to understand the cost to the organization and to participants of recruiting the numbers needed. Developing a few different scenarios may help information flow more freely.

This is covered in more detail below in the section called **Plan for study recruitment** on page 70.

➤ **Learning from peers.** Can you connect the community organization to another organization that has gone through the type of research being considered? Is it possible for key staff from the community organization to listen to how another organization addressed risks?

## d. Rights, ownership and costs

The contractual agreement for the research and how costs are distributed can undermine the intention to shift power.

- **Role of Principal Investigator.** What will the Principal Investigator take responsibility for? Is it appropriate for someone from the community organization to act as a co-Principal Investigator? Or is research by an external third party important in this context?
- **Property rights.** Discuss intellectual property rights and data rights. Who can access the data and when? When will data be processed and shared—at regular intervals? Who can speak about the data and publish the data? Whose consent is required, when?
- **Signed contract.** In signing the memorandum of understanding or similar written contract, bring your attention to how you are formalizing the above.
- **Cost distribution.** How can you work with the community organization and community to identify costs generated by the research, and discuss how these costs can be shared? What will participants or partner organizations be asked to do differently for the research, and should this be compensated? Will the research generate new staff responsibilities? Will it generate communications, change management, or other costs to the organization? Can researchers share in this cost, in kind, or financially? In our experience, researchers have raised funds, for example to compensate participants for their time, or for stipends for partnering public schools. Can the funder support these costs?
- **From history to present.**
  - After naming the local history and how projects typically work at your institution, how do you envision roles and accountabilities will work in this research?
  - Beyond the contract, how will you choose to modify your approach and your workplan to balance power rather than reinforce a power imbalance? How can you ground your work in the experience of those affected to counteract inherent bias? How can you demonstrate in the words you choose to use, and how you spend your time, that you recognize that what may be one ‘project’ or a ‘study’ in a research institution’s portfolio may be a life calling for the staff of the community organization? ■









## 2.

# COMMUNITY AND VOICE

### SETTING UP THE STUDY

#### a. Get proximate; Set up for voice

As Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, writes, “getting proximate” changes our capacity to make a difference. Traditional research does not have norms for this.

One starting point is face-to-face engagement between researchers and community, participants, staff, and partners. While community-based research practices offer examples of how to structure this engagement, this is human-to-human work, not a check-the-box exercise to create a particular community hearing or steer committee structure. Spending time with the organization and breaking bread fosters relationships and understanding that matter at a human level, and equips researchers to recognize—and as a result address—ways the power dynamic gets in the way of impact.

#### ➤ Relational engagement.

- How can you spend time with the organization and the community in which the organization resides, and what questions can you ask, to begin to build relationships of trust? To signal your intent to listen and be a partner? To show, not talk about, your humility? To be able to put yourself in the organization's shoes?
- How will you, personally, listen for and hear the subjective experiences of those affected by the research? How can this be built into your research timeline? As one researcher notes, good intentions and interview guides are not by themselves enough to lead to interactions that promote equity.
- Are Peace Circles an appropriate early engagement? Breakfast forums for partners? Evening forums for community? What are the opportunities to engage without agenda, for example at graduation events, community meetings, performances, where you are not conducting observations?

Often, the framework into which researchers are thrust sets up stakeholders as a group to be “managed” in order to “reduce non-adherence.” Inclusion can seem “messy.” One opportunity is to start by outlining the potential benefits and harms of the research with the community organization or community members, and to determine how to hear the voices of those potentially affected through the process.

- **Identification of voices needed.** What are potential benefits of the research and to whom do they accrue? What are the potential harms and to whom do they accrue? For example, what processes of the organization may be changed or interrupted? How will staff relationships with participants be affected? These can be written out in a T-chart (a piece of paper with a large letter “T” creating two columns) with potential benefits in one column and potential harms in the other, following the practice of health impact assessments, environmental impact assessments and racial equity impact assessments. The individuals and groups named on the chart may suggest the starting list of whose voices are important to hear.

### 🔗 Forums for engagement.

- How will you create conditions so voices of those affected by the research are heard? In some cases, you might help the community organization assemble a community evaluation committee representing these voices. The committee may make decisions or give input into what is researched and the outcome measures used, and may engage regularly with you. The committee may include staff of the organization, researchers, program participants and/or community members. What is the mandate of the group? What powers does it have? How often will it engage with the research team to not burden participants or overwhelm you, but also to effectively contribute to the study design and execution? (For researchers familiar with Community-Based Participatory Research, a Community Action Board is often formed to steer both the research and the related action. Barbara Israel's piece, which is cited in the Bibliography on page 111, surveys several Community Action Boards and describes varying levels of power, participation, and effectiveness).
- What engagement with a broad group of staff or community members is appropriate while the study remains in its formative stages? Is it helpful for you as a researcher to participate in a community meeting? Is a mechanism to gather and incorporate input regularly appropriate?

🔗 **Engagement at the right times.** When is it particularly important for the community organization to provide its input, so that there is still flexibility to make changes while producing a valid research study? Have you explained when you intend to register your pre-analysis plan or seek Institutional Review Board approval, and what this means for the community organization's ability to modify the study design?

## b. Engage on what gets measured—check the “simple” measures

### What you measure is what you incentivize.

The “simple” measures may not be the ones that represent real growth and benefit to participants most on the margins. As large administrative data sets were in many cases built to report on compliance, metrics of compliance such as arrest rates are, not surprisingly, easier and cheaper to collect.

Researchers can contribute expertise not only on what the common measures are, but also on how inequity is built into those measures, and what adjuncts and alternatives are feasible, to enable an informed approach to metrics that furthers—not contradicts—the intent of the research.

### 🔗 Illuminating the risks of possible metrics and data.

- What can you learn and share with the community organization about the commonly used metrics for this type of work, and what inequities, historical or present, are built into them? Some examples: measuring arrests in the context of racialized policing; measuring “progress” on self-actualization for participants from a culture that prizes interdependent families over independent individuals; measuring housing “overcrowding” for participants from a culture that values extended family; measuring wealth accumulation for families from a culture that values “sending money home” or supporting extended family members. What are the benefits to the organization and to the participants it serves of the commonly used metrics? What are the harms? (A piece by Jeffrey Butts and Vincent Schiraldi on benefits and shortfalls of recidivism as a metric that might prompt discussion is listed in the Bibliography on page 111).
- What are the limitations of the data sets you are working with? How will the research team share these with the community organization, and what can be done to address these? For example, department of employment services data do not capture all types of employment, which may result in undercounting increased employment among participants in a program.

### ➤ **Selecting appropriate metrics.**

- What does the work intend to create, in addition to what will be avoided? When do staff and participants perceive progress and what marks progress in their eyes? How can this be reflected in metrics that are feasible in this context? For example, are connections to caring adults built through the work important to capture? Expansion of the participant's support network? The participant's perception of their agency?



One example you could share with the community organization is of a prison-based fatherhood program (you can find the article by Abigail Henson listed in the Bibliography on page 111), where dialogue between participants, community organization staff, and researchers changed what the study measured: the unit was changed from the father to the family; the short-term measures were changed, from depression and stress, to pride and reconstruction of masculinity (from provider to caregiver); the long-term measures were expanded, from recidivism, to whether the father-child bond remained active and positive.

- Is there an opportunity to capture the program's impact relating to systemic causes of inequity? Are ecosystem effects of the community organization's work important to capture in the research? Is the program affecting the system or the capacity of the community, for example supporting cultural revitalization, changing power relations, or increasing the capacity of the community to solve problems?

- **Communicating about metrics respectfully.** How can you communicate about quantitative metrics with the organization in a way that recognizes that numbers are an incomplete picture?

## c. Plan for study recruitment

Several community organizations have noted that a lack of shared understanding between the researchers, those with program operations expertise, and those speaking for the community organization led to lost effort, lost time, and anxiety in recruiting participants into the research. In addition, the optimism that characterizes most community organization leaders can contribute to blind spots when it comes to planning for recruitment and retention, which then impacts how effective the research is.

- **Voices with expertise.** Who needs to be at the table to be able to walk through the recruitment process in detail from start to finish to really understand what is necessary to put together a 'cohort' for a research study? Outreach? Social workers? Program directors? Former participants?
- **Recruitment process.** What is the detailed process based on these voices of expertise? Importantly, the research itself can affect both the process, and attrition. For example, the research could change how participants apply to the program, from interested young people applying, to schools generating lists of young people invited into the program; as a result of this shift, attrition will rise from what the program has seen historically. Where does attrition happen in the process and by how much? What number of participants would need to start the recruitment process to end up with a certain number of participants completing the program? How frequently will participants move out of the program and what does this mean for how much time it takes for the target number of participants to complete the program? What does "completing the program" or "graduating" mean for your organization, operationally?

- **Recruitment target and resources required.** Based on available information from the community organization, what is your best estimation of the number of participants necessary to appropriately power the study? Piecing this together with the program's process from the start of recruitment to program completion, what total number of participants must be recruited? Can you share example numbers to illustrate what a statistically significant change looks like, using the specific context of the nonprofit and a potential study outcome? Can you share experiences from other studies on what changes were required by the community organization to achieve this? Having the researchers and operational team together name different scenarios, then explore the challenges and the manpower related to each, can be a helpful approach.
- **Data required.** What other data about participants will you need to collect, and how will you collect these, or how will these be collected by staff and passed to you?
- **Communications.**
  - How will the recruitment target and process be communicated to recruitment partners, staff, community or participants?
  - Are breakfast or evening community meetings appropriate, with researchers present to answer questions? School night kick-offs? One-on-one conversations between researchers and recruitment partners/staff leading recruitment? Will there be any resources or stipend for recruitment partners?
  - Are the explanations of the research to participants, staff, partners, community in a form that is understood by these audiences?

➔ These types of meetings require planning through an equity lens. What is the best time of day for community members to attend? Evenings? Weekends? What about childcare? Food? Meeting format? Seating arrangement?

## d. Engage on how study participants experience the research

The lived experience of a study can change power dynamics or reinforce them. This can be true even with the best of intentions, and even though the total amount of services provided may not have changed or may even have increased.

While in researchers' minds the study may be "separate" from the program, for staff and participants, that distinction may not have any meaning—it is all part of the work.

The experience of participants in the study also affects study retention.



### ➤ **Fit of research design and mission.**

- Throughout the study and as it ends, how is the research design consistent with the mission of the community organization and trust it has built in the community? For example, what will potential participants see after study enrollment ends, particularly if the program will not have additional capacity at that point? What is the impact of changes made because of the research study to the organization's reputation in the community?
- How is consent best approached? In this particular context, is it better for participants in the control group to meet program staff in person and give consent, or to be randomized on a list without ever interacting with staff? Will the control group, if there is one, be asked for consent? Is consent written in a way that is understood? Is consent presented in a context/at a time when the participant actually has agency to give consent?

- **Recruitment strategies.** What specific strategies can be used to bring participants into the study and retain them through the course of the study? There is a “tax” on producing knowledge about those most marginalized: it is harder for researchers to connect with those with instability in their lives; it is harder to obtain consent from those who have learned to distrust institutions; it is harder to retain in a research study those who experience greater barriers. How can social media be helpful? Will multiple redundant strategies be feasible, to increase success?

➔ The article “Study Retention as Bias Reduction in a Hard-to-Reach Population” by Columbia Professor Bruce Western and colleagues referenced in the Bibliography on page 111 may aid brainstorming on study recruitment and retention, e.g., the timing of financial incentives at the start of a study (if applicable); frequency of contact; back-up contacts including mothers and supportive secondary contacts.

### ➤ **Experience of being in a research study.**

- How will study participants be contacted? How will they be engaged through the study? Who will engage them? How can the nonverbal cues create the desired experience for study participants? What have participants heard before about research in their community or by similar institutions? What is different here, and how is that explicitly communicated in ways most likely to be heard?
- The assumption in research can be that “nothing is happening” to the control group. But, from the perspective of a young person going through an application process and being “randomized out” or from the perspective of referral sources referring many additional people to a community organization, only to have them not receive services, something has happened. If the study will include a randomized control group, who will communicate to the control group about the randomization and what will be communicated? How will this feel standing in the young person's shoes? If members of the control group have been exposed to other research studies, as is often the case in Chicago, what narratives is it important to address, e.g., a sense that “randomization” is not actually random? If young people are randomized out early on in program enrollment, but are aware there is still room left in a sought-after program, what is staff's response? If participants in the comparison and treatment groups will interact, for example, within a school, what communication will aid each group of people?



“We are not really rats, but we are lab rats to them.  
How much are they following me?”

STORYCATCHERS THEATRE YOUTH

➤ **Responsive communications.** What is the best way to communicate about what matters to participants, for example:

- What is the best way to communicate about privacy? Concerns nonprofits have shared, from their participants, include: Who all will know I am in the study? Will my name be published anywhere? How much will they be in my life? Do they watch from the cameras in the building? If I am involved in questionable activity, are they going to report me to the police?
- What is the best way to communicate about benefits? Participants have asked: How does being part of a study help me?
- What is the best way to communicate about expectations? Participants have asked: Am I allowed to participate in other programs/employment during the study? Can you still help me if I am not in the treatment group? Can I apply again? Who is going to help me if you can't?
- Be aware that there may be misunderstandings about research preceding your study.

➤ **Trauma.** How do awareness of trauma and the research study's potential to trigger memories and emotions shape the work? A study can be an emotional trigger for program participants, and for staff who were themselves researched or interrogated in other ways in their childhood. Trauma expertise can inform study outreach and study design to minimize that effect. For example, trauma awareness can shape how staff participate in the research (and change whether their stress is transmitting fear to participants). If this is not an area in which your team is experienced, seek out expertise so you are equipped to answer these questions.

## e. Build in time for reflection, failure, change

Meaningful reflection and problem-solving during the initial steps of a community-research partnership take time. Build this into the plan.

➤ **Cadence.** What is the cadence on which the team should reflect on the work and engage on challenges? Where and when will these conversations be held? Who will participate and who will lead?

➤ **Discussion topics.**

- Feedback on the research effort so far, and what needs to be done to address it.
- How are inequitable approaches, methods, measures filtering into the study, and what are opportunities to do differently? For example, are you unintentionally taking advantage of what your privilege allows you to do, such as dictating meeting times and locations? How is your work creating a way of operating intentionally distinct from the legacy of “research brain” and “community brawn?”
- How are relationships of trust being formed, and how is the team interacting as equals? Note that while researchers', staff, and community members' roles in the research differ, the point here is that no one is treated as superior or inferior.

➤ **Closing the loop.** How are you communicating as clearly as possible to those providing input what you as researchers are doing with that input? How are you “closing the loop?” ■

# 3.

## COMMUNITY AND VOICE

### DURING THE STUDY

#### a. Engage during the study

Once the study launches, staying engaged with the community organization or community evaluation committee helps the research continue in a more equitable way.

##### 🕒 Feedback loop.

- How are staff, participants' and community members' voices being heard during the course of the study? What feedback is being shared and what can be done to address the feedback and communicate back to those who shared it? If no feedback is being shared, what else can be done to listen? Some organizations have found a biweekly conversation among researchers and those at the community organization involved in implementing the study tremendously valuable to ask and answer questions and plan for each new step in the work in an organic and effective way.
- How can you continue to spend time with the organization and build relationships? How can you give credit to the community organization or participants where your partnership is working well, and show—through actions—humility?

##### 🕒 Listening for clues.

- How are efforts to bring participants into the study and engagement with participants during the study working? What is not working and what can be done better?
- Are touchpoints with those in the control group, if there is one, working well? What is not working and what can be done better?
- How are inequitable approaches, methods, measures filtering into the research despite the best of intentions and what can be done to reorient? Who is not appearing as robustly in early data (for example, young people experiencing housing instability)? Who is not being heard?



## **b. Collaborate on study tools and problem-solving**

Collaboration between the community organization and researchers on study tools such as surveys can improve both the experience of being surveyed and the quantity and quality of information gathered.

### **➤ Contextual awareness.**

- How can the community organization and researchers best collaborate so study tools fit the specific context and also have the validity desired?
- How will draft study tools be vetted by participants? For example, are surveys of an appropriate length?

### **➤ Execution.**

- What types of data, for example, social security numbers, does the community organization view as likely to be a challenge to collect in this context, and what are alternatives?
- If a representative group is assembled, for example a focus group, is it a meaningful “group” in the eyes of the community organization? How can the community organization help you to create the conditions for voices to be heard?
- Can community members be hired to help collect data or conduct surveys? ■



## 4.

# EQUITABLE NUMBERS FOR IMPACT

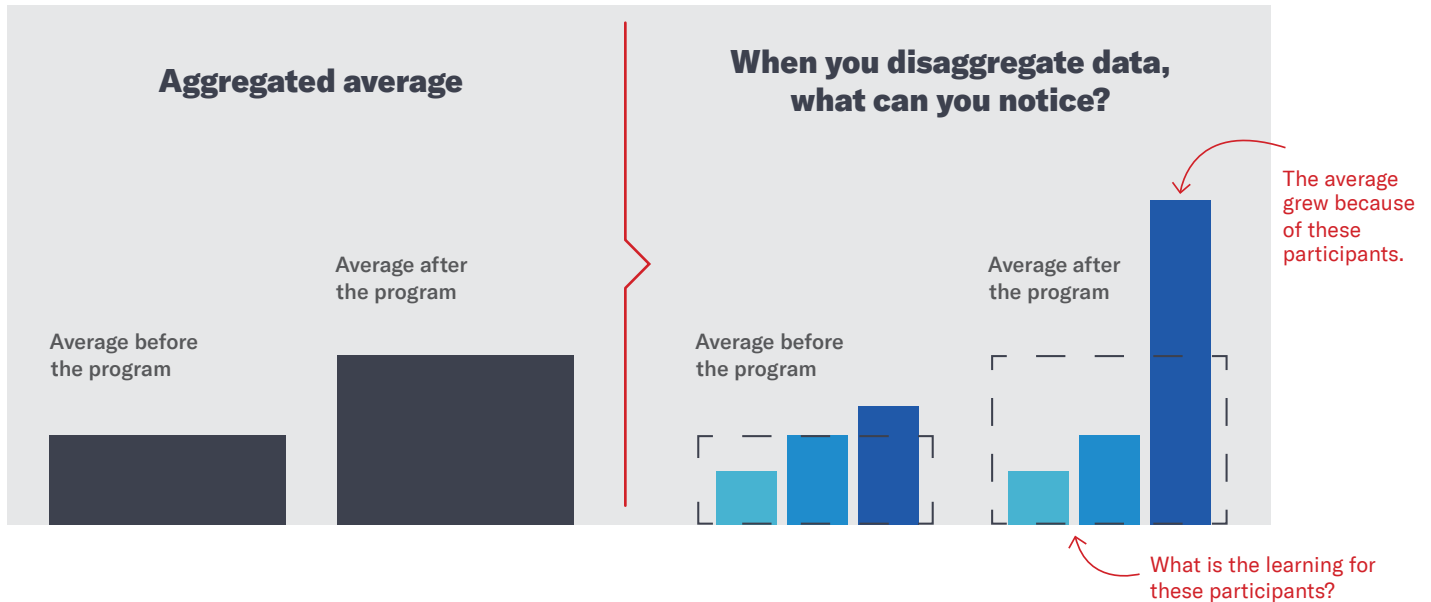
### a. Make it useful along the way.

The history of distrust between community and researchers comes in part from community organizations entering research partnerships expecting the work will improve lives of participants, and later finding the research may not help them with day-to-day operations or bring resources to their community. How can the research improve lives of participants as much as possible, as soon as possible?

- 🕒 **Early learnings.** What are early learnings from the research and how can these be shared with staff, participants, community, or partners to show what their hard work is yielding?
- 🕒 **Early action.**
  - What improvements to the program are possible during the research, given the context of the organization and the research design, which may limit what changes can be made?
  - How will those responsible for making the changes engage with the data early on so they can plan for action?
- 🕒 **Sense checking.** Is there a role for the organization's staff in sense-checking early data or preliminary results? In reviewing how qualitative data are coded? Are preliminary results consistent with the experience of the organization, or do they look wrong?



## b. Bring attention to who is being benefited the most? Least?



As researchers are taught, averages can obscure how impact is distributed. Incentives to support participants to reach a certain bar—less recidivism, more college enrollment, more employment—can make the case for the work supporting participants farther away from the threshold harder-to-make.

For greater impact, researchers can support a more nuanced understanding of who is being successfully reached and who is left farther behind, who is benefiting most and least, and what can be learned from the complex stories beneath the numbers.

🔍 **Disaggregated data.** Against whatever metric has been chosen, for example, GPA, how much change does the program create for participants starting out furthest behind, versus participants in the middle, versus participants starting out furthest ahead? (This must be done in a way that continues to protect individuals' privacy.)

### 🔍 **Learning from who is benefited least and most.**

- Who is benefited the most by the organization's work? What are the characteristics— demographic, intersectional, and situational, for example, housing stability, adult relationships, connectedness—of the small group of participants benefited most?
- Who is benefited least by the organization's work? What are the characteristics of these participants?
- What can the organization learn from these stories? What can the organization learn from the specific stories of those benefited most, recognizing the complexity of these success stories, to spur innovation? Are there adjustments to the program the organization will try out to better serve its target participants?

🔍 **Counting inequity.** Is the correlation between race and outcomes, or class and outcomes, changed as a result of the organization's work?

### c. Who is the comparison point?

Just as averages can obscure who, specifically, is and is not benefitting, comparison to the average can be misleading. For example, comparing to an “average” client load may not be relevant and may burn staff out if the work involves complex trauma. For example, if custodial sentence lengths get shorter because of a program and there is no change in recidivism, this can be an improvement in recidivism if normally an increase in recidivism is expected whenever sentence lengths get shorter. For example, a young person dropping out of a program and re-engaging several times can be an indicator of an organization’s persistence in building relationships, rather than an efficiency marker to improve.

#### ➤ **Comparison points.**

- For a study comparing outcomes to a benchmark, or analyzing cost and benefit, who and what is proposed as the comparison? How can comparison points show different perspectives or the complexity of the work?
- Does the comparison point take into account the impacts of systemic and individual traumas, for example the implications of stress experienced by program staff as a factor in selecting what productivity comparison is relevant?
- *Does the comparison point ring true to those being measured?*

➤ **Cost-benefit analysis.** How can analysis capture systemic effects, where cost-benefit numbers are an output of the work? Accounting for “cost” of the status quo only in terms of tax dollars—which are often actually wages that benefit a different group of people—rather than the actual social cost, can unwittingly and incorrectly build a case against investment in community work.

#### ➤ **Capturing growth.**

- How does the presentation of the data reveal growth journeys which may not be linear? Does the comparison point allow for—to use substance abuse terminology—relapse in the context of recovery? ■



WYNDALE CHRISTIAN  
LEGAL CENTER  
Loving God, Loving People.





## 5.

# SHARING RESULTS

### a. Is it historical? Is it contextualized?

Numbers, without context, take on the assumptions and biases of their audience. Data sources, without context, reinforce the structural bias built into them.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns, a story is fundamentally shaped by where you begin it. The origins of inequity are often left out of the story, allowing histories to be laundered, and reinforcing harmful silences in the narrative.

- **Context.** What history and explanation of structural and systemic factors is important to frame the challenges the organization is addressing? To explain fully why the problem exists in the first place and the complexity of root causes and pathways? How can this show up in the description of the organization's work and dissemination of the research?
- **Dominant narratives.** What narratives have previously described the organization's participants, its work in the community, or its type of work? How have these narratives served participants well? How have they harmed them, or reinforced inequities? With this understanding, how can this research be framed to take on unjust narratives? What cultural context is important to tell?
- **Limitations.** How are limitations of the data clearly communicated? For example, limitations of administrative data sets, limitations of summarized data, limitations of common metrics, systematic non-counting, or systematic undercounting? "Objective" data like special education designations, census data, crime that is measured by arrests, or domestic violence information, can incorporate racialized processes and lead to incorrect interpretations, without context.



## b. Can you hear the participants? Are you signaling that lived experience is valuable?

Valuing data to achieve an end—whether securing funding, improving programs, sharing learning with the field, changing narratives—is not the same as valuing a human story and experience intrinsically. Honoring a participant’s voice requires intention, it may not just happen from documenting a participant’s story, demographics or outcomes.

### ➤ Participant voices.

- Can you hear the participants in what you, the community organization, the funders, are disseminating about the research?
- How are images, stories, numbers resulting from the research effort putting participants at the center in how they are shared, versus treating them as objects of study or as tokens to lend credibility? How can you engage the community organization to further this?

➤ **Authorship.** Is there an opportunity for the participants or the community organization to own elements of or co-author what is produced, or does it serve the community organization to have an external author?

### ➤ Respecting experience.

- How does the presentation of results message to the audience that experience is valuable and valid, rather than reinforcing the bias that university expertise gives validity?
- *Would participants find that what is being put out is true to their experience?*

### c. Is it accessible? Can those researched hear the research?

Sharing research results in an accessible way—versus only in journals that require a subscription to access and a specific technical training to understand—brings the fruits of the research to those who participated in it and who are affected by it. It is accountable to relationships built, and necessary for the research to power broader change. Some considerations:

#### 🔗 Language.

- Is the language used as easy to understand as possible? Do people from different cultures, with different lived experiences, with different technical backgrounds understand the results of the research and the “so what” of what it means, when you test an early draft?
- Are all inputs, calculations, and methods clearly explained, so stakeholders with different technical backgrounds can understand what has been counted, how, and based on what judgments? Are data tables and charts legible to those without research and statistics backgrounds? Are any technical terms used defined in plain language?

#### 🔗 Forums and formats.

- How will you collaborate with the community organization to identify the format(s) that will make the results most accessible to those affected by the research? To those who have power to support the work? To partners or others in the community organization’s coalition for change?
- Where—in what forums—will the results of the research be most likely to reach each of these audiences? Does it make sense to host community discussions to share results? Post video on social media? Design a simple summary that articulates what was learned, and to what end?
- Revisit the chart you may have made early on to identify those potentially affected by the research. Are those people being reached?
- Revisit what you learned about local context and history, is the work being shared in a way that feels different than what came before?

### d. Learning for equity

Having applied creativity to conducting the research, take the opportunity to reflect:

- 🔗 **Process.** What were lessons from this research on the process of doing research with an equity orientation? Were objectivity, bias, or rigor affected? Were participation and community involvement affected? Were accountability or ethics affected? How can you capture this creativity and learning, and share it with your institution and with the research community? How can you support the community organization in sharing this creativity and learning?
- 🔗 **Endpoints.** How were the endpoints of the research different than a traditional approach? Did the level of insight derived change? Did the usefulness of the outputs to the community organization change? Was the capacity of the community organization affected? Did members of the community or community organization get interested in evidence and research? How were you and your capabilities changed?
- 🔗 **Learning and sharing.** What could have been done better, and what worked well? What is the feedback from the community organization and community stakeholders? What is their guidance for future projects? How will you share your lessons with the community organization? How will your institution internalize these lessons? ■







# FOR FUNDERS

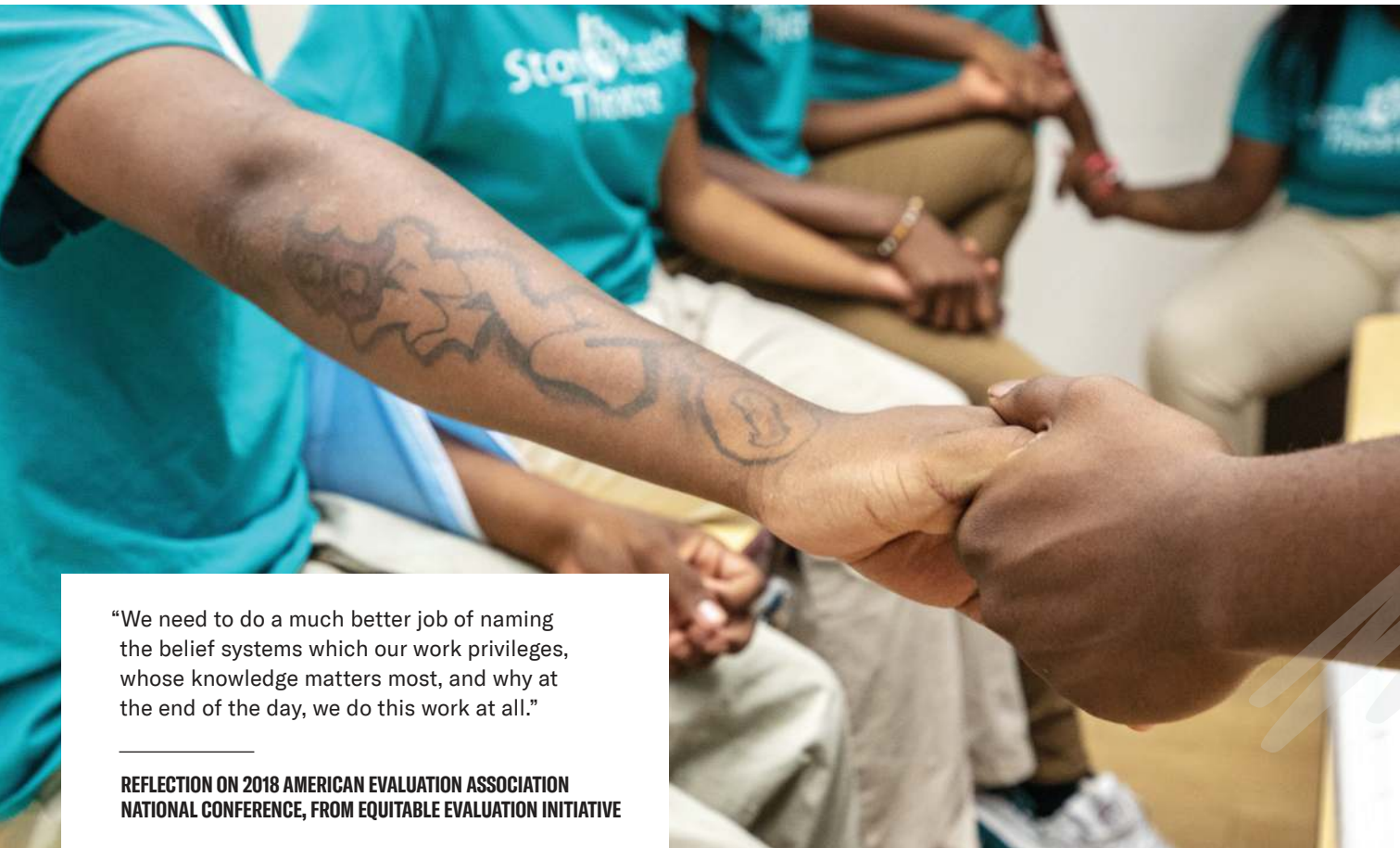
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## **Before you start:**

### What is your relationship with research?

Funders are a driver of the economy of research and evaluation: funding the production of research, incentivizing its creation, shaping its form, consuming its outputs. Government funding is influenced by the evidence that philanthropic investments produce.

Individual funders relate to research differently. Some may fund research to generate knowledge for policymakers and other funders on what works and what does not. Others may fund evaluation to assess the impact of their funding, for their or their boards' own consumption. Still others may fund research in service of a community organization's growth or to change narratives. Those that do not fund research at all may participate in the research economy by using data to direct their funding or to summarize the impact of their work.



"We need to do a much better job of naming the belief systems which our work privileges, whose knowledge matters most, and why at the end of the day, we do this work at all."

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**REFLECTION ON 2018 AMERICAN EVALUATION ASSOCIATION  
NATIONAL CONFERENCE, FROM EQUITABLE EVALUATION INITIATIVE**

Depending on your particular relationship with research, the action you take to unlock more meaningful knowledge, and therefore greater impact, will look different.

**For example, you may:**

- Change the research questions you are willing to fund
- Fund and set timelines for research differently
- Issue Requests For Proposals, or RFPs, for research differently or guide and evaluate your evaluators differently
- Engage with board and staff on internal processes and biases, especially relating to how you use data
- Interrogate numbers and stories you lift up, and use different framing in what you publish

In all cases, it will require challenging what has “always been done.” This may not be tidy, or comfortable. But starting from accountability and relationship, funders can help to achieve the promise of what knowledge can yield.

Each funder may, in asking the questions below, find answers appropriate to their own work. Chicago Beyond has shared some of our experience to illustrate. ■



## 1.

# KNOW YOUR ROLE, KNOW THE RISKS

## EQUITY IN HOW YOU START

### a. Bring awareness

How research gets done—the approaches, methods, metrics—has a system of assumptions built in.

In seeking more equitable approaches, one place to start is understanding context and biases.

- **Board dynamics and beyond.** Who is on your board? Who are the other stakeholders you engage? How do they create or interpret “authoritative” knowledge? Who does not show up in this? What changes does this awareness lead to in how you interact with your board, if you have one? For example, is it valuable to have a board discussion about how research, evaluation, and/or your use of evidence are related to your mission and to experiment with changes in pursuit of the authentic truth? How can you listen to community organizations from whom you have collected data, or where you have funded research, to understand their experience?
- **Value—to whom?** How can you ensure the research produces something of real value to the community? What is the value of the research being proposed to the “subjects” of the research? What are the benefits of producing the research or evidence to you as a funder, and to the research institution hired?
- **Biases in selecting researchers.** How do you select researchers? What assumptions are incorporated into your selection process? How could you include researchers from communities being researched?

➔ Some sources of context include MIT historian Craig Wilder’s *Ebony & Ivy* on the history of elite academic institutions in justifying inequities, and the Harlem Children’s Zone’s writings on their decades of experience “being researched” (you can find both in the Bibliography on page 111).



“You have to build a relationship. There’s a history. It takes time, it takes trust, it takes being vulnerable.”

**MARQUELL JONES, MAC HOUSE CASE MANAGER,  
LAWNDALE CHRISTIAN LEGAL CENTER**

## b. Understand context

The power dynamic between researchers, funders, and community may lead a community entity to participate in research that marginalizes the community entity or its participants. Some communities and community organizations may feel comfortable speaking up and engaging with funders and researchers about the purpose of the research and how it is conducted. Others may fear that being assertive may jeopardize their funding or support.

- **History.** What is the history of community-researcher-funder interaction in this community, and the particular history for this organization and these participants? How have they previously experienced research institutions? How have funders participated in this dynamic?
- **Reality of the community.** How can you ensure the work is grounded in the experience of those affected, to counteract bias? How can you get to know the community organization well enough to be trusted with the truthful context, or how can you learn from someone who is?





## c. Invite community ownership of the questions

Towards authentic truth, funders bear an important responsibility to listen to the community organization and the community's specific intent.

- **Clarity about purpose.** How will the research help the community? Where does the organization intend for the research to land, and what type of data and research design serve that purpose, with least burden on the organization or its participants? Is the community organization served well by research on the mechanisms, i.e., an implementation study, focused on the “how,” in addition to the outcomes research that is more frequently funded? Is the community organization served well by research to identify the early indicators of their overall goal that they can influence?
- **Research questions.** What are the questions the community organization or community wants to answer? For example, what are specific sentences the organization wants to “fill in the blanks” on at the end of the research, and why? Should the sentences focus not just on individual change but on interpersonal change, change to families, or community change? Are there research questions about root causes that, if evidence were generated by researchers, would lead to action on systemic inequities?

➔ For example... “First, we want to write strong applications for state government funding for violence prevention, so we want to say our program reduces participants' violent behavior outside of the program by [percentage/measure], citing a rigorous outside evaluation. Second, we want to show that it is not just about the participants, but also the families of participants that grow stronger through our program and become advocates of change. Third, we would like to identify early indicators that affect whether a participant will complete the program or not.”

*Organizations have found research useful in day-to-day work when it identifies early indicators of the overall goal, if staff or participants can affect those indicators. Organizations have also found it useful to ask staff: What 3-4 pieces of information would help you to do your job better?*

## d. Prompt discussion of possible approaches and methods

### ➤ Information about options.

- > What type of study is sufficiently rigorous for the intended audience while minimizing burden on the organization? What type of study is valuable to future audiences or enables systemic change if that is envisioned by the organization? How does understanding how the program is working fit into the picture? Would a qualitative or mixed methods study suit the organization's learning objectives? You might share a simple table, such as the one that appears on the next page.
- > What approach to research—from traditional, to community-engaged, to full partnership between community and researcher—is most suitable? (more on Community-Based Participatory Research appears in the glossary on page 110).
- > What ongoing benefits could the community organization see after the research ends?

### ➤ Information about risks, costs and tradeoffs.

- > How can you ensure the community organization understands the implications of possible research approaches, for the organization? What would the organization be asked to compromise? For example, would the organization not be able to change key program elements during the period of the research? What would this mean for the organization and for its participants, since many community organizations are constantly innovating and adapting for greater impact? Would the organization's flexibility to select who receives services be affected? Would the organization need to close the door to services for a group of people for an extended period? For a program with age limits, could the research design close the door to the program altogether for a young person? According to operations staff or participants, what may be the impact of the changes contemplated for the research?
- > Who else needs to have this information? Is it helpful for you to support the community organization in systematically thinking through which stakeholders, from front line staff to board members, it might be important to communicate with about benefits, risks, costs?
- > Can you connect the community organization to another organization that has gone through the type of research being considered, particularly a community organization with a similar depth of relationship with their participants (e.g., few hours once a week versus deep ongoing relationship with a participant and their family)? This may help get around competitive dynamics between nonprofits, to help the community organization better understand the options available.

**What are the options for the research? Here is a simple chart you can share:**

|                      |                                    |   |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| QUANTITATIVE STUDIES | <b>QUANTITATIVE STUDY</b>          | <p>A “quantitative” study focuses on numbers to assess implementation and/or the impact of your organization’s work.</p> <p>For example, a quantitative study might count how many people your organization serves, what services they receive, and whether they have stable housing after receiving services.</p> <p>A quantitative study often uses government data sets, for example from the public school system or the criminal justice system, census tract data, or surveys.</p> <p>A quantitative study can produce data on a large number of participants more cheaply than other approaches. It can show that stories-focused information can be generalized beyond the handful of participants telling the stories.</p>   |
|                      | <b>QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY</b>    | <p>A “quasi-experimental” study is a type of quantitative study that shows a numerical change occurred, but does not show your program caused the change to happen.</p> <p>It does not involve assigning participants to two different groups and studying both groups, and therefore asks less from your organization and your participants.</p> <p>This will reduce your flexibility to change program elements during the period of the research.</p> <p>Will this generate what you are trying to learn? Is this rigorous enough for the audience you want to reach?</p>  |
|                      | <b>RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL</b> | <p>An “RCT” or “random assignment evaluation” is a type of quantitative study used to show your program caused the change to happen. For example, it would allow a researcher to say “participants in this organization had stable housing more often as a result of their participation.”</p> <p>It involves assigning participants randomly to treatment and control groups which is effort-intensive (more detail in the sections called Know the risks and costs and Plan for study recruitment below).</p> <p>This will reduce your flexibility to change program elements during the period of the research.</p> <p>It is often favored by public policy-makers. Is it necessary for your goals?</p>  |
|                      | <b>QUALITATIVE STUDY</b>           | <p>A “qualitative” study focuses on systematically collecting stories and other non-quantitative information to convey the impact of your organization’s work.</p> <p>A qualitative study may use interviews, focus groups, or observational data, which means a researcher watching or listening to participants and staff members.</p> <p>For example, a qualitative study might summarize what participants are saying has changed in their lives while participating in your program.</p> <p>Particularly when you are trying something where not much is already known, rich qualitative information, even from a smaller number of participants, helps shed light on “why” and “how” your efforts are working, and why participants find it valuable.</p> <p>Case studies can offer rich insight—but are different than a systematic qualitative study that may guide program or policy changes.</p> <p>Community organizations have found this type of research helpful to scaling up their work because it helps you understand what pieces matter most. Qualitative data can guide improvements, for example: criteria in screening tools, characteristics of staff to hire for, service or curriculum improvements. Qualitative data can also suggest internal metrics the organization can use so that operations produce more of what matters.</p> <p>However, qualitative research can take time and be expensive.</p> |
|                      | <b>MIXED METHODS STUDY</b>         | <p>A “mixed methods” approach mixes numbers and stories, and can provide the best, and worst, of both worlds.</p>   |

## e. Plan for study recruitment

How can funders hold ourselves and researchers accountable for creating a shared understanding of what study recruitment will require? Several community organizations have noted that a lack of shared understanding between the researchers, those with program operations expertise, and those speaking for the community organization led to lost effort and time, and anxiety, in recruiting participants into the research. In addition, optimism for the research from the community organization's leadership can contribute to blind spots when it comes to planning for recruitment and retention, which can then make the research less effective.

➤ **Voices with expertise.** Who needs to be at the table to be able to walk through the recruitment process in detail from start to finish to really understand what is necessary to put together the participant group, or “cohort,” for a research study? Who is closest to the work? Outreach? Social workers? Program directors? Former participants?

➤ **Recruitment process.** What is the detailed recruitment process based on these voices of expertise? Importantly, the research itself can affect both the recruitment process, and attrition. For example, the research could change how participants apply to the program, from interested young people applying, to schools generating lists of young people invited into the program; as a result of this shift, attrition will rise from what the program has seen in the past. Where does attrition happen in the process and by how much? What number of participants would need to start the recruitment process to end up with a certain number of participants completing the program? How frequently will participants move out of the program and what does this mean for how much time it takes for the target number of participants to complete the program? What does “completing the program” or “graduating” mean for your organization, operationally?

“If I could start all over, I’d ask ‘What’s the power number?’”

AIMEE STAHLBERG, ARTISTIC MANAGER, STORYCATCHERS THEATRE





- **Recruitment target.** The higher the number of study participants, the easier it is to show a scientifically valid change, but the greater the effort to recruit participants. For the research study to show an effect that researchers consider valid, how many participants does your researcher estimate need to complete the program? Piecing this together with the program's process from the start of recruitment to program completion, what total number of participants must initially be recruited? Having the researchers and operational team together name different scenarios, then explore the challenges and the manpower related to each, can be a helpful approach.
- **Resources required.** What will your organization need to change to achieve the recruitment target? One community organization believed their social worker could continue to manage recruitment as the research study began, and later found they needed a dedicated person spending 30 hours per week to adequately support recruitment and build new referral partnerships.
- **Data required.** What other data about participants will researchers need to collect, and how will these be collected by researchers, or by staff and passed to researchers?
- **Communications.**
  - How will the recruitment target and recruitment process be communicated to recruitment partners, staff, community or participants?

➔ These types of meetings require planning through an equity lens. What is the best time of day for community members to attend? Evenings? Weekends? What about childcare? Food? Meeting format? Seating arrangement?

- Are breakfasts or evening community meeting appropriate? Should researchers be present to answer questions? What about a school-night kick-off? Are one-on-one conversations between researchers and recruitment partners/staff leading recruitment most appropriate? Will there be any resources or stipend for recruitment partners?
- Are the explanations of the research to participants, staff, partners, community in a form that is understood by these audiences?

## f. Match funding and researchers to the goals; account for all costs

With shared understanding of the purpose of the research, funders can be accountable for aligning support to these goals.

➤ **Selection of researchers.** In discussions with researchers you are considering hiring:

- What experience do they bring to the table about the specific community, program participants, or context?
- What creativity and experience do they bring to the table in doing research in community-led or participatory ways? What experience do they bring to the table of recognizing bias and applying that recognition in their work? What evidence can they offer of this?
- What are their priorities or the priorities of their institution? How do these match with the community organization's approach and priorities?
- What are a particular research partner's limitations in the kinds of research they can support, or are incentivized to produce? What institutional pressures do they face to conduct certain types of studies?

➤ **Expectations of researchers.** Is there an expectation that the research effort will build the capacity or infrastructure of the community organization? How is this translated into the expectations you set for researchers?

➤ **Full accounting of costs.** What costs to the organization and community will be generated by the research? As a funder, you can lead the conversation to account for all costs, both direct and indirect, and discuss how these costs can be shared. What will participants or partner organizations be asked to do differently for the research? Will the research generate new staff responsibilities? Will it generate communications, change management, or other costs to the organization?

➤ **Budget and timeline.** Overemphasis on budget and timeline can get in the way of equity and impact.

- When does research fit to best serve the community organization? How can the community organization drive the timetable? Is program infrastructure in place to enable research, for example, consistently delivered key elements of the program, or would the organization be better served by research timed after necessary infrastructure is built, or with some lead time for preparation?
- Do the budget and timeline support and create incentives for: Building relationships and trust? Developing data tools with community participation? Researchers and the community organization interpreting the data together? Collaboration on how data are shared?
- How can reflection, time for failure, and opportunity to change be built in to the research plan?
- How do the budget and timeline support the fully accounted costs articulated above, for example change management? When the focus is a more marginalized group, how do the budget and timeline take into account the additional efforts it will take to overcome the additional challenges—instead of setting expectations according to the norms of other groups and then treating these individuals as “non-compliant?”
- What are opportunities for residents of the community to be hired, for example to help collect data or conduct surveys, and how can you encourage this?



## Color of Chicago Beyond's Experience:

At Chicago Beyond, experience continues to teach us about the substantial tangible and intangible costs of collaborations between community organizations and researchers, that we and other funders had not accounted for.

Our notes:

1. **Being more proximate enables us to learn.** Through deep relationships we have seen myriad financial and intangible costs of doing research from the nonprofit and community's perspectives. We have built a "growth team" who in turn builds trusted relationships with a broad array of people within our nonprofit partner organizations. This intimacy begins in our due diligence process before making the investment, where our team spends substantial time with, and writes or co-writes the investment proposal in collaboration with, the nonprofit.
2. **Funders have unique opportunities to support and reduce some of the costs.** Some examples from our work: collaboration on the purpose of the research; helping address strategic and operational challenges such as navigating new recruitment targets; developing communications about the research for the nonprofit's staff, board, and community partners; supporting executive directors in their change management efforts resulting from doing research.
3. **We acknowledge that this work is difficult and messy.** Timelines and timing of funding may need to shift, when the cost of not shifting them becomes clear.

## g. Memorandum of understanding

The contractual agreement for the research can undermine the funder's intention to rebalance power.

- **From history to present.** Name the local history. How have interactions between this community and researchers typically worked? Set against that context, how do you envision roles and accountabilities will work in this research?
- **Role of Principal Investigator.** What will the Principal Investigator take responsibility for? Is it appropriate for someone from the community organization to act as a co-Principal Investigator? Or is research by an external third party important in this context?
- **Property rights.** Discuss intellectual property rights and data rights. Who can access the data and when? When will data be processed and shared? Who can speak about the data and publish the data? Whose consent is required, when?
- **Signed contract.** In signing the memorandum of understanding or similar written contract, ensure you are formalizing the above. ■







## 2.

# COMMUNITY AND VOICE

### a. Create accountability for voice

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, writes “getting proximate” changes our capacity to make a difference.

Funders can set the tone and expectation of relationships, and, depending on the context, advocate for the interests of the community organization.

#### 🕒 Reciprocal engagement.

- How will you as a funder participate in breaking bread and in building relationships?
- How can you encourage researchers and the community organization to spend time together face-to-face, to begin to build relationships of trust? To show, not talk about, humility? Are Peace Circles an appropriate early engagement? Evening forums for community? For researchers, having the opportunity to connect with the work on a human level can provide perspective, for example on the human cost of research approaches. For community organizations, engaging with the researchers formally and informally helps build a relationship of trust.

#### 🕒 Identification of voices needed. How can you support the researchers and community organization to identify those affected by the research, and to create structures and conditions so that their voices can be heard?

- In some cases, it can be helpful to assemble a committee, which engages regularly to make decisions or give input into what is researched and the outcome measures used. The committee may include staff of the organization, researchers, program participants or community members. (For funders familiar with Community-Based Participatory Research, a Community Action Board is often formed to steer both the research and the related action. Barbara Israel's piece, which is cited at the end, surveys several Community Action Boards and describes varying levels of power, participation, and effectiveness.) It is important to be clear about the mandate of the group: What powers does it really have?

#### 🕒 Voice at the right times, and over time.

- How can you support the community organization's engagement at the right times to have impact, for example before IRB approval or before the study's pre-analysis plan is registered? An “IRB” or Institutional Review Board is an administrative body that confirms that certain ethical considerations are met. A “pre-analysis plan” commits to what the most important outcomes and approaches will be in the research. Once these steps in the research process occur, the community organization has limited ability to change the study design while safeguarding the validity of the study.
- How can you check-in regularly during the course of the study, to ensure staff's, participants' and community members' voices are heard? What feedback is being shared—what is working well and what is not—and how can you help address that feedback? If no feedback is being shared, what else might be done to listen?



## Color of Chicago Beyond's Experience:

Chicago Beyond hosts quarterly meetings with our nonprofit partners, researchers and our own team. In our experience:

- 1. These quarterly meetings serve as opportunities for the three parties to step back together from the day to day of the work, reflect, and solve problems.** We facilitate the meetings so it is not one group unilaterally presenting. Comfort in these forums has built over time.
- 2. Staff at our nonprofit partners have found they learn from their own colleagues in this reflective space.**
- 3. Researchers have found new insights for their analyses.** For example, hearing from outreach staff that a shift to serve young people pushed further to the margins meant a large proportion of the participants were parents had implications for the study's framing.
- 4. In these forums, Chicago Beyond has been able to support discussions of what preliminary research findings mean practically, and push for more actionable information sooner.**

## b. Create accountability for what gets measured

What is measured is what is incentivized.

In doing justice work, the “simple” measures may not be the ones that represent real growth and benefit to participants most on the margins. As large administrative data sets were in many cases built to report on compliance, metrics of compliance such as arrest rates are, not surprisingly, easier and cheaper to collect.

Take the example of recidivism. On one hand it is a common metric, and one for which data sets exist. This means it costs less money to track and allows comparison across programs. On the other hand, it is binary. It fails to capture directional progress in desistance from crime. It succeeds in capturing things outside of the program participant’s control such as the intensity of enforcement efforts and prosecutor-judge-public defender dynamics contributing to how pleas are entered. *A piece by Jeffrey Butts and Vincent Schiraldi on benefits and shortfalls of recidivism as a metric that might prompt discussion is listed in the Bibliography on page 111.*

Funders can hold their research accountable for taking an approach to metrics that furthers—not contradicts—the mission of the work.

### 🕒 Understanding the risks of possible metrics and data.

- What are the commonly used metrics for this type of work, and what inequities, historical or present, are built into them? What assumptions are built into how these metrics are used? Some examples: measuring arrests in the context of racialized policing; measuring “progress” on self-actualization for participants from a culture that prizes interdependent families over independent individuals; measuring housing “overcrowding” for participants from a culture that values extended family; measuring wealth accumulation for families from a culture that values “sending money home” or supporting extended family members. What are the benefits to the organization and to the participants it serves of the commonly used metrics? What are the harms?
- What are the limitations of the data sets you are working with? How will the research team address these? For example, department of employment services data do not capture all types of employment, which may result in undercounting increases in employment among participants in a program.

### 🕒 Selecting appropriate metrics.

- What does the work intend to create, in addition to what will be avoided? When do staff and participants perceive progress and what marks progress in their eyes? How can this be reflected in metrics that are feasible in this context? For example, are connections to caring adults built through the work important to capture? Expansion of the participant’s support network? Changes to the participant’s perception of their agency?

➔ One example you could share with the community organization is of a prison-based fatherhood program (you can find the article by Abigail Henson listed in the Bibliography on page 111), where dialogue between participants, community organization staff, and researchers changed what the study measured: the unit was changed from the father to the family; the short-term measures were changed, from depression and stress, to pride and reconstruction of masculinity (from provider to caregiver); the long-term measures were expanded, from recidivism, to whether the father-child bond remained active and positive.

- › Effects of the ecosystem on a participant, network effects of change by the participant, or structural impacts of a program's work, may be less simple to research. However, this may be a critical piece of a community organization's impact where easy-to-research approaches have not worked. Are ecosystem effects of the community organization's work important to capture in the research? Is a program getting at the structural drivers of inequity? If so, how? Is the program affecting the system or the capacity of the community, for example supporting cultural revitalization, changing power relations, or increasing the capacity of the community to solve problems?

🔗 **Communicating about metrics respectfully.** How can you communicate about quantitative metrics in a way that is respectful, and that validates the intuition of the community organization that numbers are an incomplete picture?

## c. Create accountability to those “being researched”

The experience of a study can change power dynamics or reinforce them. This can be true even with the best of intentions, and even though the total amount of services provided may not have changed or may even have increased. While the research study may be “separate” from the program in your mind, for staff and participants that distinction may not have any meaning—it is all part of the work.

When those closest to participants, and participants themselves, shape how the study occurs, it can help community organizations and researchers arrive at more equitable and authentic learning. It can also strengthen study retention.

### 🔗 **Research design.**

- › How can you ensure that the research design throughout the study, and as it ends, is consistent with the mission of the community organization and the trust it has built in the community? How can you ensure that the impact to the organization's reputation in the community resulting from changes made because of the research study has been considered?
- › How is consent best approached? Is consent written in a way that is understood? Is consent presented in a context/ at a time when the participant actually has agency to give consent?





### ➤ **Experience of being in a research study.**

- How are researchers and the community organization proposing to engage so that the community organization's staff, the community, or participants have voice in what the research feels like?
- For example, how will study participants be contacted? How will they be engaged through the study, by whom? What have participants heard before about research in their community or by similar institutions? What is different here, and how is that explicitly communicated in ways most likely to be heard?
- The assumption in research can be that "nothing is happening" to the control group. But, from the perspective of a young person going through an application process and being "randomized out" or from the perspective of referral sources referring many additional people to a community organization, only to have them not receive services, something has happened. If the study will include a randomized control group, who will communicate to the control group about the randomization and what will be communicated? How will this feel standing in the young person's shoes? If members of the control group have been exposed to other research studies, as is often the case in Chicago, what narratives is it important to address, e.g., a sense that "randomization" is not actually random? If young people are randomized out early on in program enrollment, but are aware there is still room left in a sought-after program, what is staff's response? If participants in the randomized and treatment groups will interact, for example, within a school, what communication will aid each group of people?

➤ **Responsive communications.** What is the best way to communicate to participants about privacy, expectations, and benefits of the study? Concerns nonprofits have shared, from their participants, include: Who all will know I am in the study? Will my name be published anywhere? How much will they be in my life? Do they watch from the cameras in the building? If I am involved in questionable activity, are they going to report me to the police? How does being part of a study help me? For a fuller list of issues, please see page 49.

➤ **Study tools.** How can you encourage the community organization and researchers to collaborate so study tools fit the specific context and also have the validity desired? How will draft study tools be vetted by participants?

➤ **Awareness of researchers.** How can funders support the cultural awareness and humility of those conducting the research? For example, Chicago Beyond has supported researchers' participation in racial bias workshops and reflection.

➤ **Trauma.** How do awareness of trauma and the research study's potential to trigger memories and emotions shape the work? A study can be an emotional trigger for program participants, and for staff who were themselves researched or interrogated in other ways in their childhood. Trauma expertise can inform study outreach and study design to minimize that effect. For example, trauma awareness can shape how staff participate in the research (and change whether their stress is transmitting fear to participants). ■

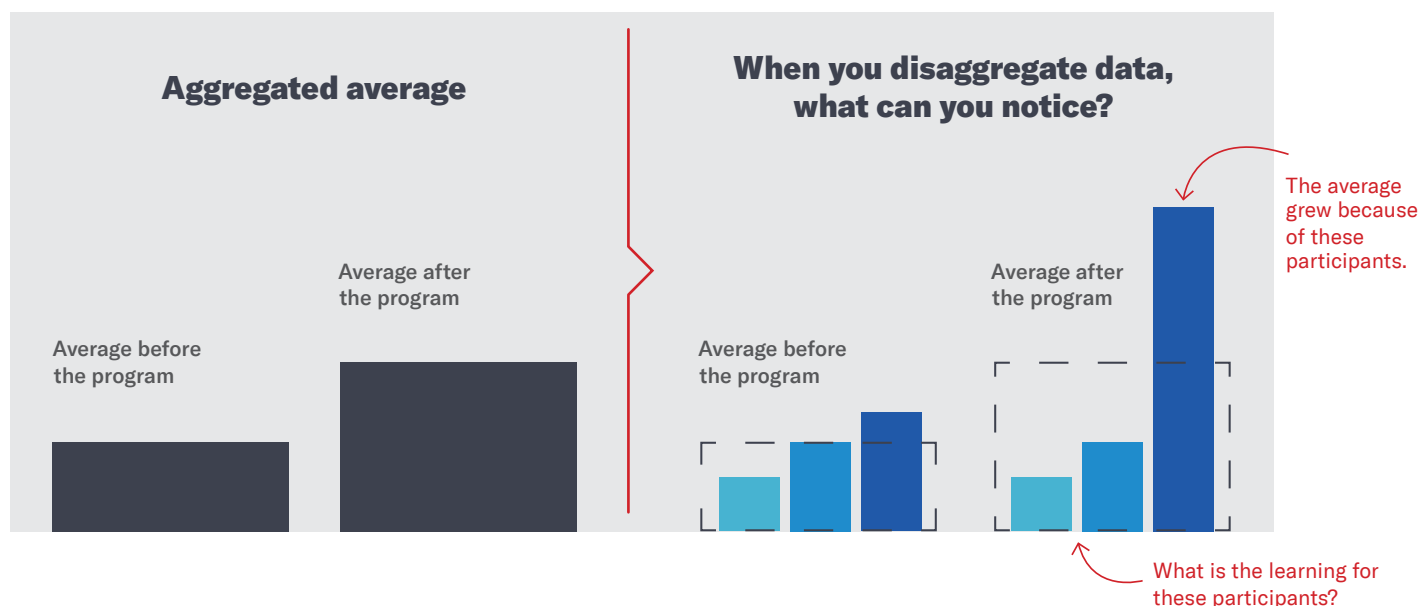




### 3.

## EQUITABLE NUMBERS FOR IMPACT

### a. Bring attention to who is being benefited the most? Least?



Averages can hide whether participants most forced to the margins are left further behind, unaffected, or helped by a program. When funders focus on aggregate data describing participants reaching a certain bar—less recidivism, more college enrollment, more employment—it can unwittingly create incentives to focus on participants starting closest to the threshold. For greater impact, research can support a more nuanced understanding of who is being successfully reached and who is left farther behind, who is benefiting most and least, and what can be learned from the complex stories beneath the numbers.

- Disaggregated data.** How can funders bring focus to who, specifically, is impacted and how, while still appropriately protecting individuals' privacy? For example, against whatever metric has been chosen, how can funders create accountability for looking at the change the program creates for participants starting out furthest behind, versus participants in the middle, versus participants starting out furthest ahead?

- **Learning from who is benefited least and most.** Who is benefited the most by the organization's work? What are the characteristics— demographic, intersectional, and situational, for example, housing stability, adult relationships, connectedness—of the small group benefited most? Who is benefited least by the organization's work? What are the characteristics of these participants? What can the organization, the researchers and the funder learn from these stories?
- **Counting inequity.** Is the correlation between race and outcomes, or class and outcomes, changed as a result of the organization's work?

## b. Who is the comparison point?

Just as averages can obscure who, specifically, is and is not benefitting, comparison to the average can be misleading. For example, comparing to an “average” client load may not be relevant and may burn staff out if the work involves complex trauma. For example, if custodial sentence lengths get shorter because of a program and there is no change in recidivism, this can be an improvement in recidivism if normally an increase in recidivism is expected whenever sentence lengths get shorter. For example, a young person dropping out of a program and re-engaging several times can be an indicator of an organization's persistence in building relationships, rather than an efficiency marker to improve.

### ➤ **Comparison points.**

- > For a study comparing outcomes to a benchmark, or analyzing cost and benefit, who and what is proposed as the comparison? How can comparison points show different perspectives or the complexity of the work? How can funders guard against unwittingly pushing community organizations to focus on “low-hanging fruit?”
- > Does the comparison point take into account the impacts of systemic and individual traumas, for example the implications of stress experienced by program staff as a factor in selecting what productivity comparison is relevant?
- > *Does the comparison point ring true to those being measured?*

- **Cost-benefit analysis.** How can funders create incentives for analysis to capture systemic effects, where cost-benefit numbers are an output of the work? Accounting for “cost” of the status quo only in terms of tax dollars—which are often actually wages that benefit a different group of people—rather than the actual social cost, can unwittingly and incorrectly build a case against investment in community work.
- **Capturing growth.** How does the presentation of the data reveal growth journeys which may not be linear? Does the comparison point allow for—to use substance abuse terminology—relapse in the context of recovery? ■



## 4.

# SHARING RESULTS

### a. Is it historical? Is it contextualized?

Numbers, without context, take on the assumptions and biases of their audience. Data sources, without context, reinforce the structural bias built into them.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns, a story is fundamentally shaped by where you begin it. The origins of inequity are often left out of the story, allowing histories to be laundered, and reinforcing harmful silences in the narrative.

- 🔗 **Context.** What history and explanation of structural and systemic factors is important to frame the challenges the organization is addressing? To explain fully why the problem exists in the first place and the complexity of root causes and pathways? How can this show up in the description of the organization's work and dissemination of the research?
- 🔗 **Dominant narratives.** What narratives have previously described the organization's participants, its work in the community, or its type of work? How have these narratives served participants well? How have they harmed them, or reinforced inequities? With this understanding, how can this research be framed to take on unjust narratives? What cultural context is important to tell?
- 🔗 **Limitations.** How are limitations of the data most clearly communicated? For example, limitations of administrative data sets, limitations of summarized data, limitations of common metrics, systematic non-counting, or systematic undercounting? "Objective" data like special education designations, census data, crime that is measured by arrests, or domestic violence information, can incorporate racialized processes and lead to incorrect interpretations, without context.

### b. Can you hear the participants? Are you signaling that lived experience is valuable?

Valuing data to achieve an end—whether future funding, improving programs, sharing learning with the field, changing narratives—is not the same as valuing a human story and experience intrinsically. Honoring a participant's voice requires intention, it may not just happen from documenting a participant's story, demographics or outcomes. Funders are influential in bringing this to life.

- 🔗 **Participant voices.** Can you hear your participants in what you, the community organization, and researchers, are disseminating about the research? How are images, stories, and numbers resulting from the research effort putting participants at the center in how they are shared, versus treating them as objects of study or as tokens to lend credibility?
- 🔗 **Authorship.** Is there an opportunity for the participants or the community organization to own elements of or co-author what is produced, or be editors? Or does it serve the community organization to have an external author?

### ➤ Respecting experience.

- How does the presentation of results message to the audience that the community's experience is valuable and valid (for example, in how the community's experience is referred to and credited in the presentation), rather than reinforcing the bias that only university expertise produces validity?
- *Would participants find that what is being put out is true to their experience, not just responsive to what the funder set out to do, or what the researchers came to ask?*

## c. Is it accessible? Can those researched hear the research?

Sharing research results so that those affected by the research can access them, versus sharing results in invitation-only forums and subscription-only journals, is part of taking an equity orientation, and necessary for the research to power broader change. Some considerations for funders:

### ➤ Language.

- How can you create an expectation that the language is as easy to understand as possible? Do people from different cultures, with different lived experiences, with different technical backgrounds understand the results of the research and the “so what” of what it means, when you test an early draft? How can you create the expectation that data and charts are readable to those without research and statistics backgrounds?
- Are all inputs, calculations, and methods clearly explained, so stakeholders with different technical backgrounds can understand what has been counted, how, and based on what judgments? Are data tables and charts legible to those without research and statistics backgrounds? Are any technical terms used defined in plain language?

### ➤ Forums and formats.

- How will you distribute what has been learned in formats that the community organization identifies as most accessible to those affected by the research? To those who have power to support the work? To partners or others in the community organization's coalition for change?
- How can you help those who were “subjects” of the research share what was learned in the ways they think best? How can you as a funder amplify these voices?
- Where, and in what forums, will the results of the research be most likely to reach each of the intended audiences? Does it make sense for you to support community discussions to share results? Help post video on social media? Design a simple summary that articulates what was learned, and to what end?
- Revisiting the list you may have encouraged researchers and the community organization to make early on identifying those potentially affected by the research, are those people being reached, to “close the loop?”

## d. Learning for equity

As research you have funded concludes, take the opportunity to reflect:

- **Process.** What were lessons on the process of funding research with an equity orientation? How was accountability different? Was the research started at the right time for the community organization to yield the desired results?
- **Endpoints.** How were the endpoints of the research different than a “traditional” approach? Did the level of insight derived change? Did the usefulness of the outputs to the community organization change? Was the capacity of the community organization affected? Did members of the community or community organization get interested in evidence and research? Was the capacity of the researcher affected?
- **Learning and sharing.** What could have been done better, and what worked well? What is the feedback from the community organization, its stakeholders, and the researchers? How will you as a funder internalize these lessons and share them with others? ■

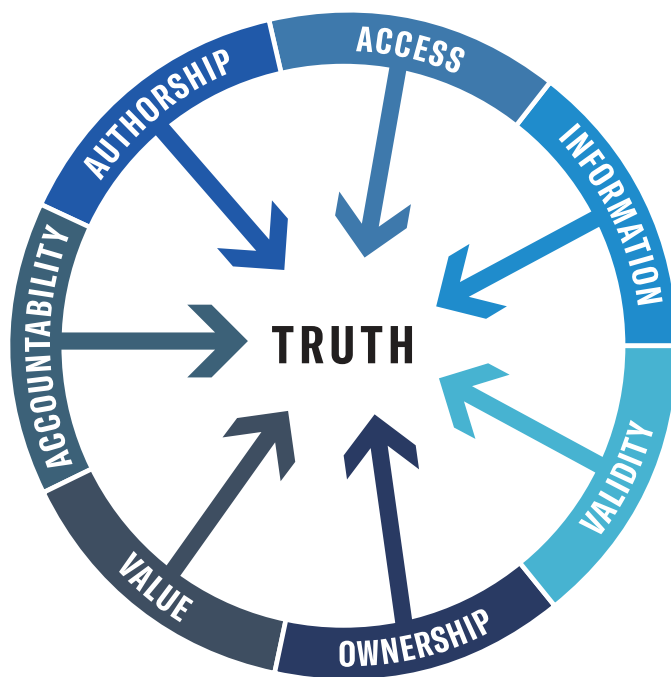
**LET US GO  
FORWARD,  
TOGETHER**

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## Let us go forward, together

Thank you for your time, consideration, and use of this guidebook. We see it not as a solution, but as a kindling to something greater, and a new path toward “how” we can all arrive at a more authentic truth in research. We ask that you share these questions and ideas with others in the social impact space, and host conversations to address unintended bias and leveling the playing field to do the most good for our communities.

- Share this with your team and encourage reflection and discussion.
- Share these principles on social media. You can pull from the social media suggestions at [ChicagoBeyond.org](https://chicagobeyond.org).
- Bring this to your network, in one-on-one conversation with your board members, staff, allies, challengers, and friends.
- Host an event. Visit [ChicagoBeyond.org](https://chicagobeyond.org) to partner with Chicago Beyond and bring this guidebook to your community.
- Engage in our community of practice. What successes have you had with equity-based research? What has made you uncomfortable, or frustrated you? Send us a note through [ChicagoBeyond.org](https://chicagobeyond.org) to join the dialogue about our ongoing learning. ■



**Seven inequities held in place by power,  
seven opportunities for change.**



# THANK YOU

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This publication was informed by the experiences, wisdom, and generosity of the following individuals, groups, and organizations. We are especially grateful to our investment partners for their patient and courageous efforts, the youth they serve, and others with whom we have learned.

**Aimee Stahlberg,**  
Storycatchers Theatre

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# GLOSSARY

**Ancient and indigenous approaches to knowledge:** Indigenous knowledge is passed through generations, focused on problem solving, and the basis for community decisions. We have learned from wisdom and approaches including ancient spiritual philosophy of India and approaches of Native peoples of the Americas, Canada, New Zealand.

**Community-Based Participatory Research:** This research approach prioritizes partnership between researcher and community (versus research that is merely community-placed) and commitment to action (versus leaving action to others after the research finishes). The Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research at the National Institutes of Health defines Community-Based Participatory Research as “an applied collaborative approach that enables community residents to more actively participate in the full spectrum of research (from conception to design to conduct to analysis to interpretation to conclusions to communication of results) with a goal of influencing change in community health, systems, programs or policies.” This research approach does not assume you can separate a program from the context for purposes of studying it. Even in Community-Based Participatory Research projects, in practice, the power of the community varies.

**Design thinking:** A creative problem-solving process that puts humans at the center and focuses on what real people actually do.

**Epistemology:** The theory of how we know what we know.

**Peace Circle:** A method rooted in Native American practice to address conflict holistically and solve problems. Peace Circles are a group process that repair harm, include offenders taking responsibility for their actions and, and lead to collective healing.

**Racial equity and cultural awareness:** Racial equity would be achieved if racial identity did not determine the odds of how one fares. Racial equity work includes dismantling narratives, attitudes, practices and policies that allow or reinforce different outcomes by race. Cultural awareness is awareness of the social systems of meaning and customs of a group, and includes reflection on your own values, beliefs, biases.

**Statistically significant:** In research, something is “statistically significant” if you can feel confident (up to a defined point) that the difference you are seeing is the result of what you are studying and you did not just get lucky or unlucky in who or what got counted. This is different than what “significant” or “important” mean in everyday English.

**Structural racism:** A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in mutually reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to, or choose not to, practice. Instead it is a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.

**Systems thinking:** A holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way parts of a system relate to each other and work over time.

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# CHICAGO BEYOND➔

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Pictured: Jonte



## Chicago Beyond, 2018

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