



Snapshots

Research Highlights from the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund

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Community-Based Research Connecting Communities and Researchers

Community research can be a powerful tool for tackling a range of social, economic and health problems in communities, especially in lower-income areas. With support from The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, Loka Institute researchers studied 12 organizations around the country that conduct community research. According to Loka's Research Director Richard Sclove, community-based research empowers individuals, organizations, and communities by giving them the knowledge to address key issues and problems; pairs community residents and nonprofit practitioners with academic scholars to produce useful studies; and generates information to use immediately to effect change at the local, regional, and national levels.

Among the key findings:

- Community-based research produces **KNOWLEDGE THAT CONTRIBUTES TO CONSTRUCTIVE, SUSTAINABLE CHANGE** and often impacts local and national policies.
- **PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION ARE THE DRIVING FORCES** behind community-based research. Successful initiatives overcome tensions between professional researchers, practitioners, and concerned residents to respond to pressing community problems and needs.
- Community-based research often **PRODUCES POWERFUL, FAR-REACHING, AND SOMETIMES UNANTICIPATED RESULTS**, including heightened social trust and relationships.

In This Issue:
**How to Make a
Collaboration
Work**

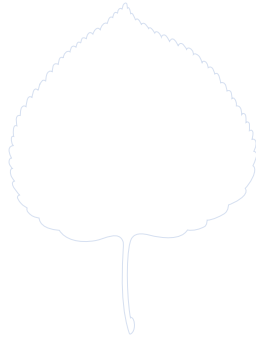
What is community research?

Community-based research is “research conducted by, with, or for communities,” the study states. It “starts with a need or problem identified by neighborhood residents themselves,” explains a *Christian Science Monitor* article on the study. “And then it involves people directly affected by the issue.” Community people may help identify the problem, define the research question, oversee or conduct the research, or use the results to create change. Whatever the community's role, the key is that the community not be seen “merely as a

place to do research, a source of data or a variable to be manipulated,” according to Chicago's Policy Research Action Group, one community research center profiled in the study.

Why community research?

Community-based research is not only *usable*, it is generally *used* and, more than that, *used to good effect*,” states the Loka report. Sclove generates a long list of persuasive reasons why it can be so valuable:



- **This research has impact.** Community-based research is often used immediately. It responds to problems that people are experiencing today. Community research is also frequently part of a process of change. When research responds to a community's needs, that community often cares enough to make sure the research leads to action.
- **The research process can pull people and groups together.** Not only does community research join community people and researchers, it can also pull together former adversaries. Research on new, less wasteful technologies for Chicago's metal-finishing industry found environmentalists, community groups, and industry people collaborating even though they had long been at odds.
- **Researchers can gain insights by working closely *with* community people.** This can be particularly true when researchers are studying low-income communities. By working with people rather than studying them from a distance, researchers can learn much from people's experiences. "Through their experiences with community participants, professional researchers confront an opportunity to become aware of their own assumptions and learn to really listen," says Sclove.
- **For grassroots organizations, community-based research can help resolve a dilemma and shape a campaign.** In St. Paul, MN, a community group wanted to know why a nearby industrial park with 5,000 jobs had not lowered unemployment in its neighborhood. The research identified several reasons and suggested possible strategies.
- **A study can also give community groups a useful tool and/or needed credibility.** A well-designed project using credentialed researchers can force outsiders to pay more attention to a community's problems. It can also get decision makers to recognize that the problems are real, not simply the complaints of a disgruntled few.
- **Conducting community research can be empowering.** Sclove documents countless examples of ordinary people using research—about housing code violations, inequitable lending policies, ground water pollution—to force big changes. According to the co-director of a university-based community research center, "It ensures that they have a real voice."
- **For researchers and their students, community-based work can be very exciting and illuminating.** Not only do they get to see their work being used, they also "meet new people and gain new insights about communities," says Sclove. Many gain a deeper understanding of the social impact of research and expand their professional goals beyond academia.

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How can a community group connect with a researcher?

The fundamental challenge facing community-based research in the United States is that there is no system for connecting community groups to researchers and centers. In response, Loka has created a “Community Research Network,” which uses the Internet as a key tool. Loka’s Web site (www.loka.org) lists about 100 organizations and centers that do research, and it provides a good place to start searching for a researcher who would be interested in a community project. Below are other methods for seeking research partners.

“The problem now is that it is such a haphazard, patchy system,” says Sclove. “What we aspire to create is a nationwide fully responsive system.”

- Local groups may contact national or regional organizations in a certain field to see if they know of a researcher who is interested in their issue. Even if this researcher is not local, he or she may be a gateway to others with similar interests who are closer.

- A Web or library search of academic articles on a topic may turn up names of researchers, some of whom may be in close proximity.

- If a group is near a university, contacting a professor in a relevant department may lead to students who would like to work on a community-based research project.

- **Community-based research can be extremely cost effective.** The Loka study found that the average cost of studies undertaken by two community research centers was about \$10,000. A university-based research study often ranges from \$50,000 up to several million dollars.

What it can accomplish

The study estimates that roughly \$10 million is spent each year on community research, supporting between 400 and 1,200 research studies. To place this figure in con-

text, of the \$170 billion spent every year in this country on research, less than one hundredth of 1 percent supports community-based research. Despite this modest investment, the payoff from community research can be substantial.

- *In Massachusetts*, a study done by a grassroots environmental group and a research center established that one town’s high rate of leukemia was caused by polluted well water.

The research led to an \$8 million settlement (and a Hollywood movie—“A Civil Action”).

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By documenting the importance of well water contamination, the research had national impact, influencing renewal of the Clean Water Act.

- *In Alaska*, a study of how to do logging in a sensitive forest brought together environmentalists, community groups, and industry people. Findings were used to structure a plan to maximize jobs for local residents while minimizing harm to the local environment.
- *In Chicago*, a study documenting the dramatic cost effectiveness of winterizing homes in low-income neighborhoods led to a program that has weatherized more than 10,000 homes.

Community groups themselves say the research is valuable, according to a survey done by Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization, a community research center in Minneapolis. It asked the 20 groups it had worked with whether the research had been useful—85 percent said yes. Five said the research was a catalyst for action, spurring neighborhood activity on an issue.

But community research is not a panacea, warns Sclove. "Having the ability to do research should be in a group's repertoire. But most low-

income communities need more power and money, not more knowledge. Our objective is simply to make research more available to these groups."

Need for more community research

The demand for community research is quite large and mostly unmet, the Loka study found. All 12 organizations studied by Loka said they get more requests for research help than they can meet. Two federal agencies that support community research must turn down the vast majority of proposals they receive.

Finding support for conducting community research in the United States is a hit-or-miss proposition, the study found. If a community group is near a research organization that focuses on its subject, it may get support. If it isn't, it probably won't. To meet the need, community research must have much more support, especially "core" support for research centers, Sclove believes.

To be useful, researchers must be able to respond to community problems and questions quickly; in a matter of months, not years. If they have to seek funding for each project, they cannot respond quickly. Core support is also crucial so that researchers and community leaders can build relationships and trust over time.

While Sclove calls for a dramatic increase in funding for community research, he argues that the money is there. He points to the still huge sums spent on military research and on a national system of science laboratories, whose core mission has shrunk in the post-Cold War era.

Readers may request copies of Sclove's working paper, "Community-Based Research in the United States," by using the contact information for the Fund that appears at the end of this article.

How to make a collaboration work

Collaborations between community groups and trained researchers can accomplish a lot because they bring together people and organizations with a broad range of talents. But this can also make collaborations extremely challenging. Those at the grassroots level know what their communities need and are leery of outside “experts” telling them how to solve their problems. On the other hand, trained researchers often think their formal education gives them knowledge that community people couldn’t possibly have, Sclove explains. Perceptions and assumptions like these can lead to powerful tensions that potentially undermine the research. How do research partners overcome these differences?

- Each partner needs to recognize and acknowledge what others are contributing. What counts is the knowledge that each party brings to the table. And knowledge can come in many ways, including reading about, researching, and experiencing a problem.

Community people need to accept that outsiders can bring knowledge that can deepen their experience-based understanding. They need to see that their communities are not alone in experiencing a problem, and that such problems can be very complex and intertwined with many issues, including race, class, power and education. Much can be learned from studying others who have had similar experiences.

One group included in the Loka study, Project South, “is involved constantly in aiding and retraining academics to develop more respectful relationships with non-academics.” The group explains how academics can make their knowledge and skills available “without dominating the discussion and the ideas.”

- Successful collaborations require time. The Childhood Cancer Research Institute believes that researchers need to learn as much as they can not only about a community’s physical environment, “but also about the community’s social, educational and historical circumstances.” “Many professional researchers not familiar with community-based research aren’t interested in investing the requisite time and effort,” the Loka study states.
- Expectations need to be made clear. The JSI Center, which connects researchers and community groups on environmental issues, spends much time helping “all participants to define their process, timeline and language, and to bring mutual expectations out into the open.” Some research centers do this by negotiating a formal contract or agreement.
- A research project or center must be rooted in the community. This is often accomplished by making sure that community people are on a center’s board or research committees. Forging this connection with the community can be a challenge for some academics, the study says. Some are “not used to working in democratic settings or under strict deadlines” and have “difficulty recognizing the importance of building relationships and of ongoing grassroots participation.”





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