



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

RESEARCH BRIEF | December 2020

## Compensating Community Partners and Ethical Research Key to Supporting Community-Engaged Research

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

The Third Ward and Sunnyside neighborhoods in Houston, TX both have high levels of poverty and a high proportion of African-American residents. But the neighborhoods have different physical and social infrastructures. Socially, Third Ward has a very organized, committed group of residents who shape neighborhood strategies and decisions, while Sunnyside has a more dispersed set of leaders who each focus on different aspects of neighborhood life. Our project tried to understand why two neighborhoods who seemed so similar on paper are so different in person. A needs assessment in Third Ward was previously conducted before we began the work in Sunnyside. Our research findings can be accessed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this brief, we describe some practical suggestions for a successful community-engaged approach to research.

### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

Community based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to conducting research that embodies sharing power, resources, credit, results, and knowledge between communities and researchers.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we incorporated CBPR principles throughout our entire research project by 1) building a cohesive, engaged Community Advisory Board (CAB) with Sunnyside leaders who were respected by the community; 2) hiring and training community researchers in research ethics and survey administration ; 3) investing research dollars in the community; 4) disseminating and archiving the data in accessible and equitable ways, and 5) seeding working groups to carry the work forward. This brief provides practical suggestions for future community-engaged research projects.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Carefully cultivate a Community Advisory Board
- Invest research dollars directly into the community by hiring community researchers and local vendors
- Create multiple forms of research dissemination
- Thoughtfully archive data
- Seed working groups around core issues to maintain organizing momentum

## Sunnyside Community Meeting



In close collaboration with our CAB, we designed a needs assessment survey for Sunnyside, and hired and trained five community researchers to collect data door-to-door. The research training was overseen by two experienced researchers who previously collected data in the Third Ward. We first sent letters to all sampled households notifying them that a community researcher would come by their home within the week. Based on a clustered random sample design, our community researchers ultimately reached 417 heads of household, representing 1,312 total residents. In all, 24% of sampled residents agreed to participate and completed the 40-minute-long survey. Survey participants were compensated \$50 for their time. Our sample was slightly older and more female than the neighborhood as a whole, but overall was reasonably representative of the Sunnyside area. Once the data was cleaned and coded, we held meetings with our CAB to discuss findings and next steps. The CAB was instrumental in our dissemination decisions, both in terms of the content of the materials and in their delivery. In addition to smaller presentations for community groups, our CAB organized a large community meeting (pictured) attended by over 100 Sunnyside residents where we presented the results of the survey. Additionally, working groups were formed during the meeting that continued to convene around core issues of interest.

### WHAT WE FOUND

While complete findings can be accessed [here](#), we want to highlight just a few that were impactful for our CAB. First, while worries about crime were pervasive, neighborhood satisfaction (60%) and voter participation (79%) were very high. In addition, more than 60% of residents believed their neighbors would offer to help in certain situations. The data we gathered was leveraged by our CAB to effectuate change. We believe our approach to this project increased the capacity of our CAB to work together to advance common and community interests. In this section, we focus on lessons learned and practical suggestions for researchers interested in community-engaged projects.

#### *Build A Cohesive Advisory Board*

While many researchers may engage community members in their work, we learned that it's critical to select leaders that authentically represented community members and would hold us accountable to ensure that our research goals and objectives were community-led. Because leadership in Sunnyside was more diffuse than other neighborhoods, such as Third Ward, we needed to recruit people who represented different constituencies (e.g., elders, parents, religious

communities) and bring them together regularly. The first several CAB meetings were devoted to getting to know each other, team building, and to understanding where each CAB member was coming from. This process of CAB formation was critical to the success of them working together to oversee our project and agree upon common goals. The early work in building the CAB laid the ground work for the rest of the project, as we worked collaboratively to build our survey instrument.

#### *Invest Directly in the Community*

We also learned the importance of publicly and intentionally committing to invest research dollars back into the community. We did this in several ways. First, we paid our community researchers a living wage, and we paid our CAB members a small stipend. Second, we hired a local graphic artist to design our Sunnyside Strong logo. Next, we made sure that our community partner organization, the Houston Area Urban League, was compensated for the use of their space, materials, and other administrative costs. Next, we ensured that we compensated our survey participants fairly for their time. And finally, we hired local companies to print materials and t-shirts. All of these decisions showed our commitment to the neighborhood and increased the investment of the CAB and their networks into our study, which was vital for its success.

#### *Create Multiple Methods of Dissemination*

Next, we learned that multiple forms of dissemination of findings are necessary; and that equitable access to the data is essential. While we wrote a 15-page white paper on our survey findings in standard academic fashion, we also created a series of simple infographics, which highlighted key strengths and challenges in Sunnyside. We hosted a well-attended community meeting to disseminate findings via a presentation as well the infographics; and we presented findings at many other smaller community gatherings.

#### *Archive Data Thoughtfully*

A related matter is who “owns” the data. We were very clear with our CAB throughout the process that this was *their* data. We wanted to ensure they would

have access to it in perpetuity, therefore we partnered with the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University to archive the data and its documentation as part of their Urban Data Platform. This ensures access to researchers and to community members. In addition, the Kinder Institute provides data services to any community members who need help accessing or analyzing the data, and held a data workshop with residents on how to access their data.

#### *Seed Working Groups for Momentum*

And finally, we learned that seeding small groups within a community around specific issues can keep the community-engaged momentum going. For example, two of our CAB members founded the Sunnyside Community Redevelopment Organization, which used findings from our study to obtain a significant grant for neighborhood improvement from an environmental justice organization.

## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Our experience has implications for other researchers or activists who want to conduct a community-engaged project. There is plenty of excellent scholarship on community-engaged research that outlines general principles, but our hope is that these specific and practical suggestions will be useful to researchers as they begin new projects.

## References

1. *Sunnyside and South Park Comprehensive Needs Assessment Data Report*. November 2019. Center for Health and Biosciences, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy. Available [here](#).
2. Wallerstein N, Duran B. The conceptual, historical and practical roots of community based participatory research and related participatory traditions. In: Minkler M, Wallerstein N, eds. *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass; 2003:27-52.)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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