



Office of Research and Evaluation
Research Grantee Study Summary

University of Denver

Participatory Research to Build Civic Infrastructure through Peer Support Programming among Unhoused Young People

What is the background for this study?

This participatory action research (PAR) study is a collaboration with the university and a community-based organization to develop a PAR team that guides plans to integrate the lived expertise of unhoused young people at the partnering organization. The team members train one another to build skills of inquiry and action, engage in collaborative participatory research, and design and formalize processes for integrating lived expertise. Team members study their process to inform how civic infrastructure can be built through PAR.

What are the research questions?

The study aims to understand how to build civic infrastructure in a historically marginalized community and to understand how civic engagement through PAR and peer support programming strengthens networks. Research questions include:

1. What strategies are supportive in creating an anti-oppressive PAR team to serve as the backbone of a civic infrastructure in a community-based organization serving unhoused young people?
2. What impact does building a PAR team have on its members and on the organization in which it is embedded?
3. What is a process for integrating lived expertise considering Dry Bones' unique contextual realities?

Who are your community partners?

This study involves the Affirming Ground Project, a team connected to the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver, and Dry Bones, a nonprofit that supports unhoused young people in Denver.

How are community members engaged in the research to action process?

This PAR study team is composed of Dry Bones young people and staff, as well as Affirming Ground researchers. The community-driven PAR team aims to serve as the backbone of the civic infrastructure that develops through this study. The PAR team members first build relationships and set community norms and then train one another in participatory research and action skills. PAR team members are involved in all aspects of the research and action planning, including co-designing the research strategy, carrying out data collection

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title

Participatory Research to Build Civic Infrastructure through Peer Support Programming among Unhoused Young People

Researcher

Kimberly Bender, PhD

Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Denver, Colorado

Study Topic Area(s)

Community Development
Health & Social Wellbeing
Social Equity
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service
Youth Development

and collective analysis, and interpreting study findings. The team creates an action plan for extending the civic infrastructure of the PAR team through the development various processes to integrate lived expertise at the organization.

What data and methods are used in this study?

This research uses a case study design to study the development of a peer program/integration of lived expertise in which young people who have experienced homelessness are engaged at Dry Bones as experts and supports to other young people who share similar lived experiences. The PAR team conducts individual and group interviews with Dry Bones friends, staff, and administrators and organize PAR team meetings, community convenings, and learning circles to gather input on peer programming and support. These data are analyzed using participatory thematic data analysis. Throughout, the PAR team also takes detailed field notes at its weekly meetings to document how decisions are made and how PAR team members are supported to engage in the study. These field notes inform the study’s research on the impact of building a PAR team on its members and the organization.

How does this research translate to community action?

Findings from this research inform collective action planning as Dry Bones expands civic infrastructure by designing practices to integrate and elevate lived expertise in their organization. This research promotes the centering of lived expertise in the development of Dry Bones programming and facilitates capacity and relationship building among young people and advocates in Denver.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

This study contributes to research on models and best practices for using participatory research to build and sustain civic infrastructure and centering lived experiences within that infrastructure. The research team intends to build on this study by examining the impact of integrating lived expertise on the Dry Bones community in the long term.

For more information on the study:

Study Website	Affirming Ground Peer Support + Lived Expertise		
Study Contact	Kimberly Bender, PhD	Professor, Graduate School of Social Work	University of Denver Kimberly.bender@du.edu

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