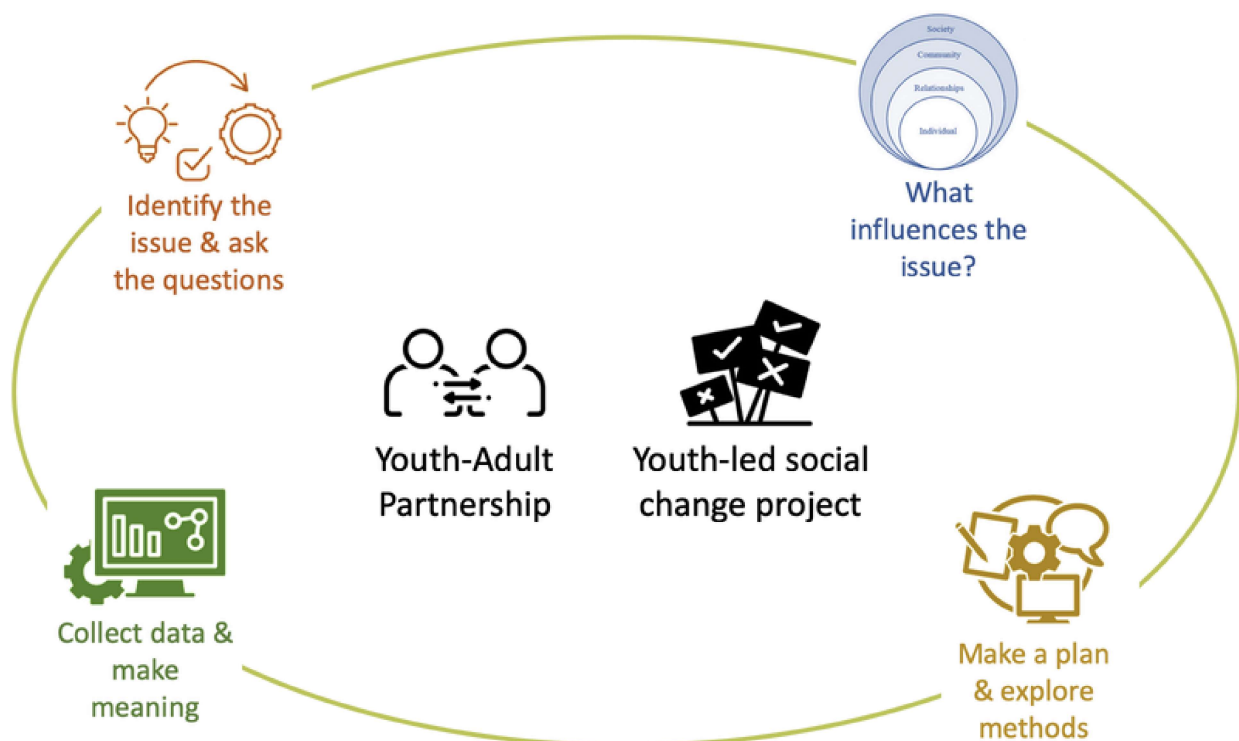


Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR): Overview

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) offers a system and structure for centering youth voice, exploring and taking action on issues that impact their lives. YPAR is a process of inquiry rooted in anti-oppression and liberatory practices that redefines and reframes who has the authority and expertise to produce knowledge and influence change. Youth work in partnership with adults to learn research practices and principles so they can work as a team to define and investigate an issue that impacts their lives, their peers and their communities.

YPAR is a dynamic and flexible approach that can be used in youth-serving organizations or in schools as a club or as a credit-based class. YPAR expands youth agency by shifting power and engaging young people as partners to transform systems and the institutions that serve them. Throughout the YPAR process, youth gather skills around asking questions, gathering data, and presenting findings to enact social change in their schools, systems and communities.

Below is a visual for how we continued to refine and define YPAR as a model for use in various settings. Two foundational components at the center of YPAR are Youth-Adult Partnerships and a youth-led project on social change. The other four components are the process of inquiry that youth-led teams move in and out of as they explore their issue. Each component of this model is discussed below.



At the Center: Youth Adult Partnerships

YPAR is built on a foundation of Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP). YPAR also provides a framework or “vehicle” for building Y-AP. Y-AP refers to a group of youth and adults who are working together for a common purpose. Y-AP reflects the core belief that if we seek to transform oppressive and limiting structures into affirmative and developmental practices, we must heed the voices of those most impacted by such structures.(1) Y-AP acknowledges that both adults and young people have experience, skills and interests that can be brought to bear. Ultimately, the key principle is that youth and adults are participating in a way that is consistent with their choices, interests and time and to ensure everyone’s strengths are fully realized.

Building Y-AP in practice involves...



Sharing power: Youth and adults are partners, both with wisdom, experience and skills to contribute. Young people and adults affirmatively address issues of role, identity and power to develop group processes, norms and roles for collective action and decision-making. Power sharing suspends typical hierarchies and offers a space for exploring issues of power, systems, and oppression experienced by young people in school, organizations and community, including gender and racialized power dynamics.



Building relationships: There is intentional time and energy paid to establishing trusting and authentic connections between youth and adults and peers. Balancing “doing” and “being” by playing games and other relationship building activities as well as integrating individual and collective reflection are key to foster trusting relationships and open communication.



Shared mission/purpose: Youth and adults work together as co-researchers and change agents toward a shared purpose focused on social change. It offers an opportunity for young people and adults to use their strengths and interests toward a collective mission and grow in skills and connection to each other and community.

"When I think of this class I remember how thankful I am for the people in it. I think I've really connected to my peers and the facilitator."

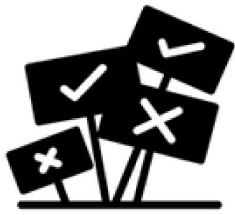
YPAR Student

"Let's push these boundaries and let's test this out and like, not not everyone is going to agree with this but let's see what we can do for this. I like that collective determination that we all sort of have."

YPAR Student

At the Center:

Youth-led project focused on social change



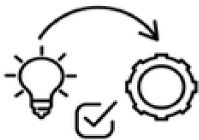
The youth-driven research projects explore a wide range of topics focused on social change and issues of oppression. The key ingredient is that youth are making the decisions, planning the work and initiating the actions. Youth may engage in advocacy and media training, expand public speaking skills or develop press kits using their research findings.

Team members cultivate skills based on their own interests. Youth-led group projects form the foundation for fostering diverse connections between youth, increasing empathy and building leadership skills.

YPAR is an adaptable framework that uses a systematic research process. Some groups start thinking about their YPAR projects at the social change and action step – they have an idea of what they want to do and then work backwards to create a research plan.

YPAR Core Components:

Process of Inquiry



Identify the issue & generate a research question

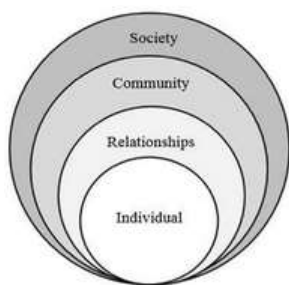
Youth collectively decide what specific issue they want to focus on based on their experiences, existing data sources and what has personal meaning to them. Then they brainstorm all the factors that influence their issue using the ecological model (see below).

As a group, youth work together to narrow the issue down to a specific research question that is feasible and realistic for them to explore. The research question may be refined over time as youth uncover more information and discover different perspectives about their issue of interest.

"The majority of them were really interested in the question around stigma and mental health. They were really interested in hearing from peers. So that active component of 'Yeah, we want to find out more information about an issue that matters to us.' I think that active role lit them up a bit."
YPAR Facilitator

The overall topic may already be defined (by grant funding or sponsoring organization) and youth will identify a specific area of focus within that topic. OHA has funded YPAR projects in a variety of settings and focused on many health-related topic areas youth wanted to explore further:

- Development of the Youth Sexual Health Plan
- In youth-serving community-based organizations
- Integrated into service learning and stand-alone elective courses in schools
- In alternative education settings
- In youth-led clubs associated with schools and school-based health centers



Ecological model framework

The ecological model is used as part of the process of identifying the issue and research question. YPAR is focused on identifying the root causes of issues and reflecting critically on how systems impact young people's lives. The ecological model expands the group's thinking about their topic by organizing all of the factors that influence the issue of interest.

Youth consider their issue of interest using four levels of the ecological model:

- Individual (our beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, behaviors),
- Relationships (family, friends, partners and peers),
- Community (neighborhood, school, places of worship, cultural identities and practices),
- Institutions and Society (rules, norms, laws, and policies).

"With the ecological model, sometimes we start with 'OK, you all got dressed this morning, what influenced the outfit you picked out?' That's like a whole class of discussion and it gets their wheels turning about 'Oh behavior is affected by other things and not just what's in my closet or what I have to do that day.' The lessons and course material are a platform to jump off of, but if you just flip through that [YPAR] notebook you're not gonna get anywhere. It's about the discussion and reflections that come from there."

YPAR Facilitator

Create a research plan and explore methods



Youth explore different research methods and learn about the pros and cons of methods such as interviews, surveys, focus groups and observations. Then as a group, youth decide how they want to answer their research question as they develop their research plan.

The youth-led research team consider how bias impacts their activities, materials and decisions as they develop their plan. These planning activities offer youth practical skills and foster critical thinking as teams identify which methods are the best fit for answering their questions.

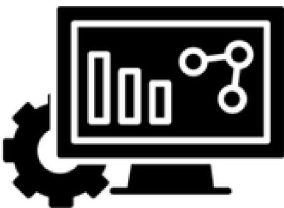
I've learned how to put a plan into action and what steps I should take to help create something I feel passionate about.
YPAR Student

"I think the most important thing I learned in [the class] was how to create, implement, and analyze the results of surveys. I also learned how to write an effective research question."

YPAR Student

"I think they are asking important questions. They will create survey questions and then ask each other, 'Is that biased? I want to know how else to reframe it because I feel like that is leading our classmates.' It has facilitated some conversations around critical thinking that we weren't necessarily having before."

YPAR Facilitator



Collect and analyze data

Youth work together to collect data using one or more methods to answer their research question. Youth often learn how to design a survey and minimize bias in survey questions. They may learn interviewing skills and how to plan for a focus group.

Teams frequently use creative data collection tools and activities to gather information, such as phone-based polling or Photolanguage or mapping. Once youth have gathered their data, the teams analyze the data they've collected. The youth-led teams can use straightforward, free tools or fairly technical, advanced software to analyze and report their data, depending on the interests and skills of the group. To present their findings, teams use a variety of reporting techniques, creating data visualizations, infographics, websites and slide decks.

Compared to your average class, [this] group is composed of a range of people with different beliefs, backgrounds and personalities. This led to very unique discussions. We got the opportunity to hear from people who don't usually feel comfortable speaking out. We got to hear from people who don't typically have a platform to share their voice.

YPAR Student

The most important thing I have learned in this class is how to tackle big projects and create change. I learned what steps to take, how to send professional emails, who to meet with to get a project started.

YPAR Student

I have found a voice within myself, and have become more confident in my abilities as a person. I now know that I'll be okay out in the world, and this class has helped me learn that.

YPAR Student

I've learned how to use my voice with power and confidence. I really have grown and have learned to step out of my comfort zone especially with everyone who is in this class. They really cheer you on and help you grow and I think that's what has made me have a lot more confidence in myself which leads me to using my voice with power.

YPAR Student

Notes

1. See Zeldin, Gurtner, Chapa. Preparing for Youth Engagement: Youth Voice, Youth Adult Partnership, Youth Organizing. 2018, ACT for Youth.
2. Quotes from YPAR students and facilitators were collected during the 2019-2021 school years as a part of an evaluation of YPAR in the SBHC State Program Office Mental Health Expansion Grants.