# Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR): Talking Points

What is YPAR?

- YPAR offers a system and structure for centering youth to explore and take action on issues that impact their lives, their peers and their communities.
- A process of inquiry rooted in anti-oppression and liberatory practices.
- YPAR redefines and reframes who has the authority and expertise to produce knowledge and influence change.
- 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.
- Youth work in partnership with adults to create some change about a topic or issue they care about. They gather skills around asking questions, gathering data, and presenting findings to enact social change in their schools, systems and communities.

What are the components of YPAR?
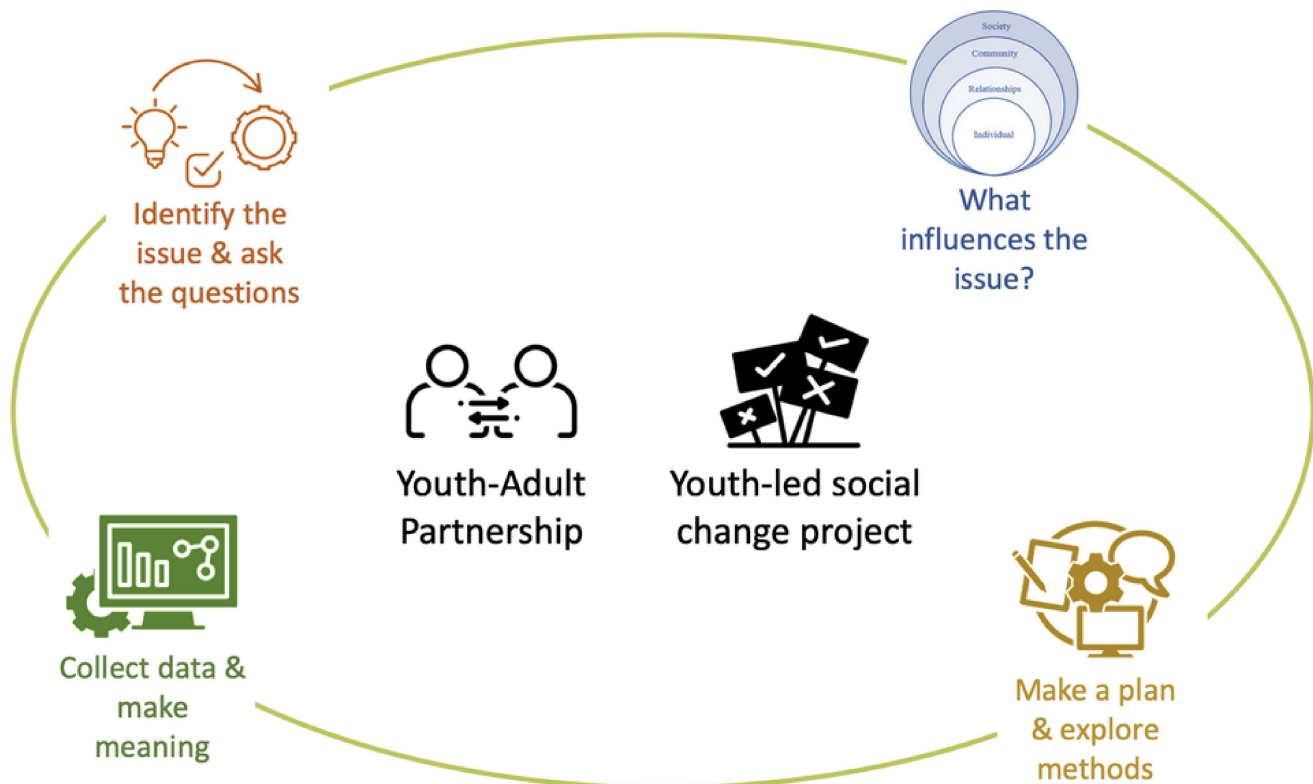
Youth Adult Partnerships and a youth-led project focused on social change are at the center of the YPAR process. These are foundational components of the YPAR Model.

Building Youth-Adult Partnerships in practice includes:
- Sharing power
- Relationship building
- Shared mission/purpose

The other four components of the model are the process of inquiry (research activities) that youth-led teams move in and out of as they explore their issue:
- Identify the issue and ask questions
- What influences the issue?
- Make a plan and explore methods
- Collect data and make meaning.

The model is flexible and adaptable and does not have to be delivered in a formal or linear way for it to "be YPAR". Instead, facilitators and youth move between these components, identifying and using activities to respond to their needs in the moment as they are moving through the inquiry process.

What are the benefits of YPAR?

The benefits of YPAR are multi-layered. As a process of inquiry grounded in youth-adult partnerships, YPAR can be transformational for youth and adults and the settings where they live, work and learn. YPAR can be a tool for organizing and transforming institutional power structures by recognizing youth as research partners and their knowledge, experience and wisdom as valid and credible.

For young people:
- Participating in the YPAR process offers opportunities for youth to expand "real world" skills that are relevant and applicable to their everyday lives. Our YPAR evaluations have explored the impact on social emotional skills and have found that young people involved in YPAR increase their skills in problem solving and cooperation, communication, empathy, emotional regulation. Working in genuine youth-adult partnerships also benefits young people by creating stronger connections to peers, trusted adults and their community.

For adult partners:
- Adult facilitators and other adult partners report receiving benefits from working in partnership with youth. Adults create sustained connections to youth through a shared sense of purpose as they support youth-led projects, sharing power and building meaningful relationships with youth. And adults are also gaining research-related skills that are meaningful to their everyday lives and grounded in research justice.

For organizations and communities:
- Policies, funding opportunities, initiatives or strategies for youth can be improved and strengthened if they are informed and driven by young people. The schools, programs and organizations where YPAR occurs can also benefit from youth-led projects focused on social change. School systems may benefit from the fruits of the student-led projects that focus on changing policies, practices and programming to build supportive equitable environments for youth and adults. YPAR can act as a pipeline or workforce development tool by building interest, increasing skills and expanding experience in public health, education, social work or other public service fields.

What is important to consider before launching a YPAR project?

With its flexibility, roots in anti-oppression and liberatory practices, and focus on relationships and skill building make YPAR a worthy strategy for any youth-serving system, organization or movement. Because it is a transformational process, there are several points to consider when determining if YPAR is the best strategy. Clarifying the non-exhaustive list of items below <u>before</u> launching into a YPAR process with young people may help to mitigate the potential challenges that could arise.

- **Define the purpose:** Clearly articulate why the program or initiative is using YPAR. Are the findings being used to determine a strategic policy, program shift or funding? Is there a specific issue or topic that the YPAR process will focus on? Is the aim to foster greater youth-adult partnerships with less emphasis on topic area or research projects? How much latitude or determination will the YPAR teams have in programmatic decisions? How willing is the program to follow the direction of the youth when it comes to issues, focus and social change strategies?

- **Clarify the fit:** There is no "one way" or "best fit" for utilizing YPAR, but being clear and transparent about how the youth will fit into the overall system and structures and their role on the project is paramount to avoid tokenizing young people. This is particularly true for initiatives that plan to use YPAR as a strategy to develop funding opportunities or policy/program priorities.

- **Ensure adequate staffing and support:** Identify staff who are ready to engage with youth as partners, are flexible in their approach and are given time and resources to consistently show up. Facilitating a YPAR process requires significant time and energy on "behind the scenes" work to ensure that time spent together with the youth team is meaningful.

- **Compensation:** Consider how young people will be compensated for their energy, time and expertise as partners. This compensation might be monetary or credit-based. Let youth partners know that their wisdom and experience is valued. Ask youth what they value and adapt systems to welcome youth as partners and co-researchers.

- **Timeline:** The YPAR model is flexible and can be adapted to many settings and timeframes, but the intentional focus on relationship-building and reflection does "slow down" the process. The pace of a YPAR projects depends on many factors, including how often the team meets, whether they are an already established group and how narrow the scope of the work is. YPAR projects supported by OHA funding have lasted anywhere from a few month semester to an entire school year. A few have even spanned multiple school years.