



Data Walks: Community-Engaged Advocacy

Research Brief

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Introduction

Policy research and advocacy groups increasingly recognize the value of authentic engagement and relationship building with the communities for which they advocate. This paper provides an example of a tool that facilitates engagement between a research organization and the communities that the research describes. The discussion below also explains how Connecticut Voices for Children (Connecticut Voices) used the engagement process and the lessons we learned from this experience.

In the past year, Connecticut Voices expanded our community engagement work to include teachers, parents, and community organizations mobilizing to improve education in the state. Connecticut Voices began this process with a series of interviews with 30 education advocates. Once we had identified the top issues from our interviews, we reviewed the scholarly literature and Connecticut-specific data about these issues. To communicate our findings and solicit feedback, we used a tool called a “Data Walk.” Data Walks are community-oriented events where data and research are presented accessibly to interested parties, followed by a discussion.¹ After holding nine Data Walks, we evaluated their importance in our efforts to become an organization that reflects and includes the people whose lives and experiences we use in our work. To that end, this paper addresses two topics: first, the research on the value of community engagement in policy research and advocacy and second, a discussion of the Data Walk process and the related outcomes for Connecticut Voices. We find that community engagement improves the rigor, relevance, and reach of our research.^{2 3}

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Engaging Community Members in Policy Research and Advocacy

Historical models of policy research and advocacy have been “top-down,”⁴ where research and policy priorities are set by actors external to the impacted community: governments, non-profits, or universities.⁵ Successful mobilization on issues that require systemic change requires community engagement. Systemic change depends on a full understanding of the dynamics within target communities and the creation of structures that are developed with input from the community and are adapted to their specific needs.⁶ A review of the literature concerning community engagement suggests that while non-profits and advocacy groups often act as an intermediary between those whose interests they represent and governments, they do not always do so in a way that prioritizes engaging the people they represent.⁷ Organizations that commit to true community engagement with their constituent populations meet these criteria: organizations must have democratic features that allow impacted people to communicate with the organization about their priorities, the organization must be roughly representative of its constituents, and its leaders must be able to reasonably speak for the constituent group.⁸

Much of the scholarly research regarding the impact of community engagement in policy development comes from the use of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in the fields of environmental justice and public health. There are many ways to have community members engaged in the research process: developing research questions and methodology, recruiting participants, and putting the researcher findings into the context of their communities.⁹ Community members have an essential role at all stages of the research process. They can improve the degree to

which the research design and interpretations are sound, by questioning assumptions that researchers may make, and providing community-specific knowledge to resolve methodological concerns. For example, in a community study of water contaminants in California, initial problems with sample size were resolved by community members who proposed the widening of the study’s target area due to their knowledge of the region.¹⁰ Community members can also improve the relevance of research both in the questions that are asked to drive research but also to ensure that the findings are relevant. In doing so, community members can bridge the gap for researchers between a research perspective and the actual experiences of their community partners. Finally, community engagement has a significant impact on the “reach” of the research and what impact it has on supporting efforts for community change. Deliberately involving community members and community-based organizations can often expand the number of people interested in the findings and can inform change.¹¹ A meta-analysis of the outcomes of 21 different examples of CBPR, where community members were involved in several different stages of the research shows that of the studies reviewed, 14 led to some type of community change including several public policy changes.¹²

While the engagement of directly impacted people has often been limited by research and advocacy organizations that speak on their behalf, communities have an essential role to play in the research and advocacy that is done about them. Employing the use of new tools and practices to bridge the gap between research and advocacy organizations and the communities that are mobilizing around the same issues should become the norm.



What are Data Walks and how can they be used as a tool for community engagement?

Data Walks

Data Walks are a community engagement tool for data and information sharing. This system has been used by several other organizations including the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Urban Institute to simultaneously engage community members in discussions about specific issues and build relationships between community organizations and members. Data Walks consist of three major parts: an introduction, an observation period, and a discussion. The introduction prepares attendees with a frame of what is being discussed. The observation period is where most of the attendees time is spent. A series of graphs and charts are placed around a room related to a specific subject or set of subjects. Then attendees are divided into small

(3 to 5 person) groups and asked to walk around the room, look at the graphs and charts, and glean their own meaning. Usually, groups are given ten minutes to assess each set of graphs and charts. The facilitators are there to clarify any confusion and explain how certain graphs or charts should be read to those who need support. After the Data Walk, attendees participate in a 30 to 45-minute discussion regarding key themes and observations. The main purpose of a Data Walk is to determine what other people see in the data and information that advocates and researchers use frequently. Is it accessible? Does it represent people's lived experiences? If not, what are the missing pieces of the puzzle?

How can Data Walks be used?

Because Data Walks can cover any topic, their uses are far-reaching. Broadly speaking, Data Walks have two overall uses: information sharing and consensus building. To effectively mobilize, community members and advocates need a clear and common understanding of both the problem and the best practices to resolve that problem.¹³ Data Walks can support this effort by providing participants with the knowledge of key data points and the research behind them in a way that does not require that they sort through dense scholarly research or have a background in statistics. Community participants can then use this data in their own communications, whether they be with other community members or with community stakeholders like school board members. For example, the Data Walks completed by Connecticut Voices in 2017 were about sharing our research concerning the racial equity challenges in Connecticut schools. The Data Walks provided school staff, parents, and education advocates with a discussion of what the data said about these issues and what kinds of changes and reforms the participants would like to see to improve the negative statistics. It should be noted that the information sharing is bi-directional. While we at Connecticut Voices were able to provide statistics and consolidated research, participants also provided us with

invaluable insights into how their children, students, and constituents experienced the disparities we were discussing and how policies have and could impact their lived experiences.

The second use of Data Walks is consensus building around priority issues. For example, Data Walks used by the City of Austin during a community forum presented participants with a series of maps of their communities to engage them in a discussion of neighborhood growth and land use in the community.¹⁴ Starting conversations with data and research ensures that conversations about priorities are grounded in that research.



Connecticut Voices for Children Data Walks

In the summer of 2017, Connecticut Voices interviewed 30 education and racial justice advocates and organizers regarding what they believed were the most pressing problems faced by children of color in Connecticut's schools. We took the information gathered during interviews and provided those advocates and their constituents with information regarding the issues that they had identified. The Data Walks explored several issues that emerged during the interviews including:

1. Racial and Economic Segregation
2. Trends in Education Funding
3. Teachers of Color
4. Chronic Absenteeism
5. Exclusionary Discipline

Connecticut Voices held a total of nine Data Walks on two subjects. Seven of the Data Walks concerned education equity in the state. Three were hosted by Connecticut Voices and open to members of the community and four were held with community organizations and their constituents: Educators 4 Excellence, Leadership for Educational Equity, Elm City Montessori School, and The Alliance for Bloomfield's Children. A total of forty individuals attended all seven Data Walks. A PDF of the Alliance for Bloomfield's Children Data Walk posters is available [here](#). Thirty people, representing our organization's partners and funders, attended the other two Data Walks. We presented data regarding the quality and accessibility of early childhood care to the latter groups.

Some of the major themes and findings from the Data Walks and following discussions are as follows:

1. There is a clear and persistent relationship between economic and racial isolation and the educational outcomes for young people in Connecticut.
2. There is need to push back on the narrative that Black and Brown people do not pay their "fair share" of taxes and therefore are not deserving of the benefits that other communities receive. There was considerable discussion at every data walk surrounding the differences in mill rates paid by families broken out by race which shows that Black and Latino people pay a greater proportion of their income in property taxes on average than their White counterparts.
3. There is negative implicit bias in the treatment of youth of color in educational settings. For example, parents and community members at one of the data walks reflected on how they saw negative stereotypes about Black boys contributing to some of the higher rates of discipline for Black youth.
4. Statistics can shed light on where improvements are occurring. Participants were optimistic about the increase in graduation rates and the decrease in suspension rates.

After the 2017 Education Equity Data Walks, each participant was asked to fill out an evaluation inquiring about the accessibility and usefulness of the data and about what other questions arose from the Data Walk and following discussion. Regarding the “Usefulness” of the research we provided, more than 93 percent of attendees found the process to be useful or very useful. While the participants identified all topics as useful, more than 93 percent of the attendees rated the data charts about Teachers of Color, Exclusionary Discipline, and Chronic Absenteeism as useful or very useful.

We were less successful at displaying our data in an accessible way. In each of the subject areas, less than 40 percent of the attendees ranked the data as clear and accessible. By far the worst rated section was “Trends in School Funding,” which several people rated as difficult to read or understand at all. Connecticut Voices facilitators reported experiencing some frustration during the Data Walks as they spent most of their time explaining to people what the visualizations were meant to represent as we had used scatterplots, which can be confusing to decipher and visually overwhelming.



Lessons Learned:

Data Accessibility is Essential:

While many participants in a Data Walk may be data literate, it should not be assumed that every attendee will be familiar with reading all types of charts and graphs. When using mainly graphs and other visualizations of research it can be easy to default to the visualizations that are common in reports and scholarly research; however, these may not be the best ways to communicate data during a Data Walk. To ensure that the information conveyed is described in the simplest way possible, sometimes it will mean foregoing visualizations and instead using descriptive statistics like “Black children are four times more likely to be suspended than White children in Connecticut public schools.” If participants cannot understand the main point of the visualizations in a Data Walk, then they are unable to use that information in conversations between facilitators and participants.

Be Careful About What Data You Select:

Research on a broad topic, such as educational equity, can produce a lot of information. It is very important to choose data that is relevant to the group. Ensuring that the Data Walk “tells a story” enhances the usability of the data for participants and enriches the conversation.

Conclusion:



By using Data Walks as a tool, Connecticut Voices has strengthened our relationships with teachers, parents, and advocates working to achieve change within their communities. We have learned a significant amount about what community engagement looks like when everyone in the room is treated as an expert. This is a project we plan to continue. In 2018, we will use the Data Walks to help answer some of the questions posed to us during the 2017 cycle.

An essential step in changing the power relationships that too often exist within policy spaces is to bridge the gap between research and advocacy organizations and the work being done in communities. Connecticut Voices is committed to ensuring that the people who are most impacted by a policy have an ample voice in helping us set our research and policy goals. Community engagement improves not only the quality of the relationships that exist between organizations and community actors, but it also improves the quality of the research and communications on key issues. Data Walks are certainly a tool to this end. They allow community members to have input on the findings of research and develop consensus about potential solutions to identified problems. Data Walks also provide researchers with valuable information regarding the relevance of their data and how an issue is being experienced or addressed outside of their organization. When advocacy organizations do not engage in true community relationship building, they miss the important viewpoints, experiences, and skills that community members offer. This is especially true in the sphere of policy and social action research where there is significant evidence that community engagement improves both an organization's research and the advocacy that flows from that research.



Endnotes



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