

Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth

A Community-Based Participatory Development of a Survey Tool

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative evaluator’s narrative account of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) collaboration with two groups of youth and young adults receiving services from education and workforce training programs serving opportunity youth—young people aged 16 to 24 who are disconnected from education and employment opportunities. The collaboration developed a survey tool designed to inform a deeper understanding of the experiences of youth whose needs were not met by traditional education systems, to review the resources available that support opportunity youth in achieving their educational and career goals, and to develop recommendations regarding program practices that support the engagement of opportunity youth in education and training opportunities. The survey tool was distributed to youth and young adults receiving community-based education and workforce development services as part of a larger study, Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth (ESTOY) conducted in four Texas communities: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

Key Words: opportunity youth, education and workforce development training, community-based participatory research, survey development

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Introduction

Communities across the United States are challenged to provide equitable access to education and workforce development opportunities for youth and young adults ages 16 to 24. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2024) estimates that across the United States in 2022, disparities in opportunities impacted approximately 4,349,000 (11%) youth and young adults ages 16 to 24.¹ Within the literature, education, training, and service community, this group of young people are referred to as opportunity youth. Ages 16 to 24 represent a period of development that has the potential for individuals to gain education and/or training that would “...provide the foundation for their occupational trajectories during the rest of their adulthood” (Mendelson, Mmari, Blum *et al.*, 2018:54S). Lewis and Gluskin (2018) report that by the age of thirty, individuals who have been working or were enrolled in school as youth and young adults earn \$31,000 more per year and are 42% more likely to be employed than those who were not engaged in education and employment as young people.

Opportunity youth are a diverse group of individuals with unique experiences and needs that impact connection for youth, young adults, and the community. Communities have limitations in their capacity to provide education and training services and support. The diverse life circumstances, capacities, and challenges opportunity youth experience require different program implementation designs, supports, and community partnerships.

To gain a deeper understanding of the experience of opportunity youth the Ray Marshall Center (RMC), an organized research unit in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas is conducting a five-year, longitudinal research study on the impact of workforce and educational programming serving opportunity youth in the Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio metro areas. The Annie E. Cassey Foundation (2024) identified an estimated 112,000 (13.9%) opportunity youth residing in the four communities of concern to this evaluation. The results from this study will inform multi-year investment and partnership strategies in Texas and potentially across the broader field.

To address a broad range of research questions, the ESTOY evaluation uses a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative components. The objective of the qualitative analysis is to pursue a deeper understanding of the experience of youth whose needs were not met by the community's traditional education systems, to review the available opportunities for youth to achieve their educational and career goals, and to provide the rich information and insights that are essential to supporting evidence-based policy and practice recommendations.

This paper endeavors to describe the qualitative evaluator's experience of developing relationships with two community-based organizations providing education and workforce development services for opportunity youth, and from the evaluator's perspective, the development of collaborative relationships with two groups of youth and young adults receiving services through the two organizations. This paper shares an account of the development of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model to capture the lived experience of and support the civic involvement of opportunity youth currently participating in education and workforce training programs.

Background

Opportunity Youth

Within the population of opportunity youth there are distinct groups with unique experiences that impact connection for both the youth and young adults, and their communities. Thrive Chicago, a collaborative of programs serving opportunity youth addressing systemic barriers to achieving equity for young people and communities has identified opportunity youth within the Chicago community into two broadly defined groups: youth who are persistently disconnected from education and training opportunities and youth who are tenuously disconnected from education and training opportunities.

Persistent opportunity youth are youth experiencing a complex set of needs and have been, or are at risk of being, disconnected from work and school for prolonged periods of time. Reconnecting these youth requires case management support and coordinated services across agencies and service providers. Persistent opportunity youth may have experienced trauma, involvement in systems such as the juvenile justice and foster care

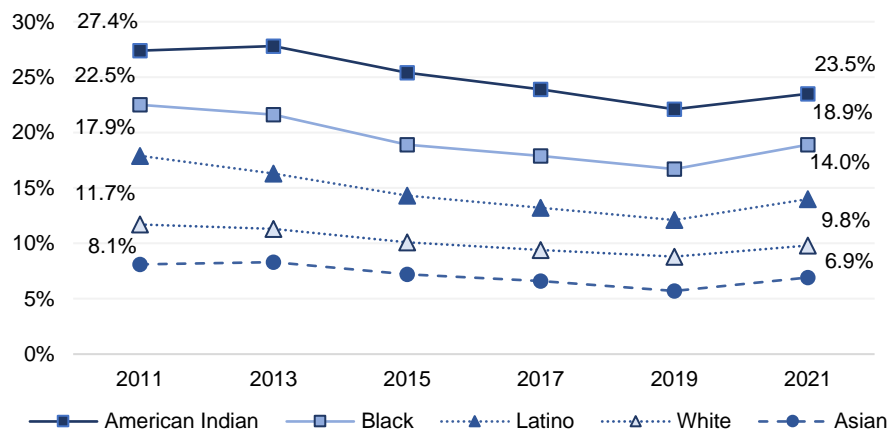
system, they may be struggling as young parents or coping with mental and physical health challenges.

Tenuously disconnected opportunity youth have a more focused set of needs and typically need help finding sustainable employment. They may have work experience, and they typically have a high school degree or some college with goals focused on gaining employment or obtaining training to enhance their employability (Krosin, 2022).

Within these two broadly defined groups of youth, persistently and tenuously disconnected from education, training, and employment, subgroups of opportunity youth have unique experiences within their communities driven by the following circumstances:

- The equitable access to opportunities.

Racial and ethnic groups have unequal rates of opportunity youth. Figure 1 presents opportunity youth by racial and ethnic subgroups from 2011 through 2021. In 2021 American Indians had the highest rate of opportunity youth, 23.5%; while the Asian communities experienced the lowest, 6.9% (Lewis, 2023).



Source: Measure of America using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2022

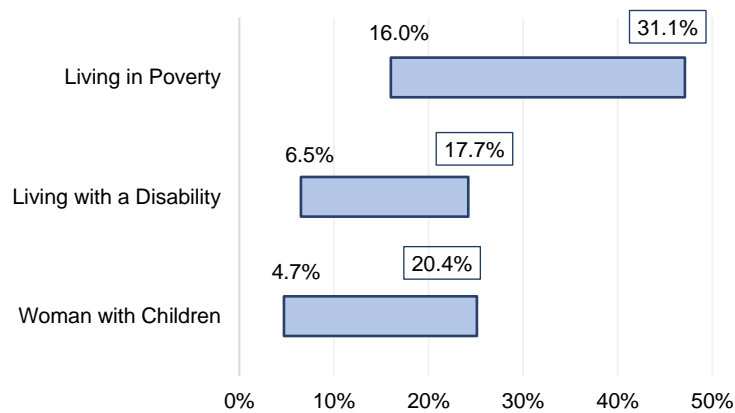
Figure 1

Opportunity Youth by Race and Ethnicity: 2011–2021

- The availability and access to opportunities vary for urban and rural communities.

- Youth legal status (citizens, immigrant, legal immigrant, etc.). An estimated 6.6% of opportunity youth in 2021 were not citizens of the US (Lewis, 2023).
- The availability of opportunities unique to the needs of different subgroups of age ranges within the 16–24 age group.
- The communities’ support and acceptance of youth sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- The supports available to assist with complex challenges facing opportunity youth who are parenting; homeless; coping with a disability, mental and physical health issues; involved with the justice or foster care systems; and challenges with addictions.
- Other factors that impact the experiences of opportunity youth include their level of connection to kin and kith safety networks and their sense of self-efficacy.

Figure 2 illustrates the gap between opportunity youth and their peers who are connected to education and/or employment by three characteristics. Opportunity youth are twice as likely to be living in poverty, three times more likely to be living with a disability, and young women are four times more likely to be parenting compared to their connected peers.



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2022
 Note: Opportunity Youth rates are identified with a border.

Figure 2

Gaps in Rates of Connected and Disconnected Youth by Poverty, Parenting, and Disability: 2022

The Annie E. Cassey Foundation (2024) estimated reported in 2022 an estimated 112,000 opportunity youth (13.9%) the four communities of concern to this project

Table 1

Opportunity Youth Estimates for 2022 by City: Austin, San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston

Texas City	Estimates of Opportunity Youth
Austin	12,000 (10%)
San Antonio	26,000 (13%)
Dallas	25,000 (14%)
Houston	49,000 (16%)
Total	112,000 (14%)

The area of interest for this evaluation covers approximately 4,000 square miles, with a combined population of nearly 6.5 million people, representing one of the fastest-growing, economically successful groupings of regions in the country. Prior to the pandemic and resulting severe economic contraction, unemployment rates across these four metro areas ranged between 2.3 percent and 3.9 percent, and in December of 2023 the unemployment rates for these areas ranged from 3 percent to 3.3 percent, mirroring the region's historically tight labor markets. In addition, Texas is projected to add 1.7 million new jobs between 2018 and 2028. Of these, 40.7% will require some form of postsecondary education and training. Source: Texas Workforce Commission <https://www.twc.texas.gov/>

Community-based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) allows for the integration of marginalized voices into research by including community members in the purpose, objectives, and actions undertaken in a research project. Wilson (2018) notes that CBPR includes features that blur the distinction between evaluator and research participation “...minimizing power imbalances and researching in partnership with communities towards positive community outcomes that are sustainable beyond the life of the research” (Wilson, 2018:1). Further,

Mocarski, Eyer, Hope *et al.*, (2022) assert that CBPR often features a social justice component, structuring studies designed to reduce societal disparities and improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.

The philosophical approach to qualitative community-based research presented by McMahon and McKnight (2021) provided a context for this evaluator's internal process in approaching this evaluation. While the ongoing work of learning and processing one's own biases often identifies differences in perspectives and life experiences, McMahon and McKnight (2021) explore the connectivity and overlap of communities between evaluators and research participants. They espouse that human beings live in communities that support multiple connections that overlap with other communities fostering connections with people of shared similarities, and differences. As members of overlapping communities, it is in the intersection of communities that we can identify connections and shared meaning. The qualitative researcher's practice is a process of continuous self-evaluation

This paper describes the CBPR approach used to co-create a survey tool with two groups of youth and young adults receiving education and workforce development services from two Austin, Texas, community-based organizations.

Collaborating Organizations

Each of the sub-regions included in this project host workforce development programs dedicated to serving opportunity youth.

Two Austin, Texas, organizations providing education and workforce development services targeted to meet the needs of persistently disconnected opportunity youth were approached to participate in the CBPR to co-create a survey tool: American YouthWorks (AYW) and LifeWorks (LW).

The AYW YouthBuild Program is a Department of Labor pre-apprenticeship program that combines education and job training. Participants range in age from 16–24 years old, have an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, and are typically disconnected from education and training opportunities, and experience. YouthBuild programs use a service-learning model that combines occupational skills training and high school and General Education

Diploma (GED) academic instruction with community service projects. Training tracks include construction, media/information technology, healthcare, and manufacturing.

LW is the Austin area foster youth transition center funded through the Texas Workforce Commission to provide a system of support for youth aging out of foster care. In addition, LifeWorks provides services to youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, or who are involved with the justice system, or who are young parents. LW provides housing, education, and workforce development support. Education and workforce program offerings include Adult Basic Education and GED test preparation classes, connections to other area workforce training opportunities, workforce placement, and workplace skill-building support.

Both organizations approach service delivery with a focused and intentional effort to include youth voices in the program evaluation and evolution and facilitate formal groups of program participants to ensure youth voices contribute to the shaping of the organizations.

Community-based Participatory Research Process

This research project used a CBPR approach to collaborate with youth and young adults receiving education and workforce development services to develop a survey tool for the Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth (ESTOY) research project. The purpose of the survey is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of opportunity youth who have enrolled in community-based education and workforce training programs in four Texas communities: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

The following four research questions were identified to guide the survey tool development in pursuing insight into the primary research question: 1) How do opportunity youth learn about education and workforce services? 2) What elements of the programs are most important in meeting participant needs? 3) What program elements contribute to their sense of well-being, and help you continue and complete the program? 4) What are youth and young adults enrolled in workforce/education programs striving for?

A formative research structure designed by Nitcher, Nitcher, Thompson *et al.*, (2002) provided the frame for describing the stages of inquiry for the ESTOY qualitative CBPR process

(Table 1). Additional information regarding each stage of the process follows the Table (details for stages 1 and 2 were presented in the previous paragraph).

Table 2

Stages in the process of developing an opportunity youth survey instrument utilizing qualitative research methods

Stage	Issue Addressed	Method	Contributors
1	Identify the broad primary question the survey tool will be designed to address.	Discussion	Project Team
2	Develop broad questions regarding what needs to be understood to address the primary question.	Discussion	Project Team & ESTOY Project Advisory Council
3	Identify potential survey questions to guide advisory group discussions.	Literature Review	CBPR Evaluator
4	Evaluator self-reflection and pursuit of information to identify biases and gaps in understanding and the interconnectivity of shared communities.	On-going	CBPR Evaluator
5	Identify organizations serving opportunity youth that maintain structures to support participant civic involvement and program advising.	Online search for potential partner organizations	CBPR Evaluator
6	Contact the organization to introduce the evaluation and seek a referral to the staff member coordinating the participant advisory group.	email	CBPR Evaluator & Organization Staff
7	Contact the referred staff member to describe the project and request assistance in learning how to receive permission to work with the advisory group.	email	CBPR Evaluator & Advisory Group Coord.
8	Submit to the organization all requested information and required documents for review. Respond to all questions with follow-up emails and conversations.	Email, conversations	CBPR Evaluator & Organization Staff
9	Upon receiving permission to meet with the advisory group, develop project information hand-outs.	Discussion	CBPR Evaluator & Participant Advisory Group Coord.
10	Initial meeting to address project issues, advisory group role, and request the participant advisory group vote regarding the group's participation in the project.	Discussion and vote	CBPR Evaluator. Participant Advisory Group Coord. & Advisory Group
11	Upon receiving approval from the advisory group, meet with the advisory group to collaborate on the survey development.	Workshops	CBPR Evaluator & Advisory Group

Stage 3: Identify potential survey questions to guide the advisory group's discussions.

A literature review of published opportunity youth research using survey instruments and focus groups was conducted. Potential questions for the ESTOY advisory group survey development discussion were selected from the following publications: Crockett, Perimeter and Doyle (2019); Deck (2017); Nemoy and Miles (2018); and Thrive Chicago (2019). The questions selected support the inquiry of the survey's primary research question and were determined to be relevant to different opportunity youth subcultures and gender expressions, free of value judgments and triggers that may cause distress for survey respondents.

Stage 4: Evaluator self-reflection and pursuit of information to identify biases and gaps in understanding and the interconnectivity of shared communities.

Researchers are trained to meet the needs of funders, university and institution systems, and organizations participating in evaluations. To fully consider the needs of the individuals who are the subjects of research requires a different approach to relationships and a broader self-reflection by the evaluator to develop a capacity to effectively collaborate with those receiving services.

Qualitative researchers bring to each study the inescapable story of their lives—culture, history, and experience that impact the interpretation of the life experiences of others. Self-awareness, allied with ongoing self-reflection and the pursuit of relevant information informs the subjective process of developing the relationships required to conduct CBPR. The ESTOY CBPR led the evaluator to increase their understanding of issues that may impact the experiences of persistent opportunity youth including the influence of trauma and the service provider practice of trauma-informed care; the experiences of opportunity youth subgroups; the impact of involvement with institutions such as the justice system, foster care, and children services; experiences with educational institutions; and information about available services and supports.

The evaluator's self-reflection included the pursuit of an awareness of how the evaluator's life and professional experience intersect with the experiences of the youth and young adults the evaluator will listen to and seek to understand while developing relationships and co-create the ESTOY survey instrument.

Stage 5: Identify organizations serving opportunity youth that maintain structures to support participant civic involvement and program advising.

Unique to the ESTOY evaluation were the existing relationships between the evaluator and tenured staff at community-based education and workforce development organizations serving opportunity youth in the Austin, Texas, area. AYW and LW both approach service delivery with a focused and intentional effort to include youth voices in the program's evaluation and evolution and facilitate formal groups of program participants to ensure youth voices contribute to the shaping of the organizations.

Without the advantage of established relationships, the evaluator could research online the area organizations providing education and workforce development services targeting opportunity youth. Websites typically provide the organization's mission and descriptions of the different programs offered, links to strategic plans, reports, and social media sites. A community collaborative of organizations serving opportunity youth can be an avenue to develop relationships with service providers. Begin by identifying the organization acting as the backbone for the collaborative and then contact the staff person responsible for coordinating the collaborative meetings and information flow. This individual, once informed of the project, may be willing to assist with introductions and/or add the evaluator to the agenda of a future collaborative meeting.

The online search and/or conversations with the members of the collaborative can lead to identifying specific organizations that align with the objectives of the evaluation.

Stage 6: Contact the organizations to introduce the evaluation and seek a referral to the staff member coordinating the participant advisory group.

The introduction to the ESTOY research project began with an email exchange between the qualitative evaluator and familiar tenured staff at each organization. Both organizations have participated in previous local evaluations conducted by Ray Marshall Center (RMC)ⁱⁱ and had previously worked with the ESTOY qualitative evaluator. The evaluator was aware that both organizations nurtured the civic involvement of program participants and facilitated participant advisory groups.

AYW was the first organization approached. The relationship between the evaluator and long-tenured program staff has been forged over the years through the organization's participation in local evaluations, and numerous encounters at community gatherings and meetings. The organization's main training facility serves as a Red Cross blood donation site where the evaluator is a donor.

The LW staff member initially approached had worked with the evaluator on one previous research project, however; the organization had participated in a six-year ongoing local evaluation conducted by RMC.

The staff persons selected to be initially approached were contacted via email, which

included an introduction to the scope of the ESTOY project, a description of the assistance the evaluator was seeking from the organization, and a request for an introduction to the staff member responsible for coordinating the participant voices group.

The evaluator was referred to the AYW's director of Restorative Justice Practices (Director) who coordinates the activities of the Restorative Justice Practice Leadership Crew (Crew), and LW referred the evaluator to the organization's chief program officer, creating divergent pathways to seeking permission to approach the participant advisory groups.

Stage 7: Contact the referred staff member to describe the project and request assistance in learning how to receive permission to work with the advisory group.

Both initial contacts referred the evaluator to staff members who were unacquainted with the evaluator. The subject line of the initial email sent to these individuals specified the name of the organization's staff member who referred the evaluator. The initial emails introduced the ESTOY project and provided the following details: a description of the research and the purpose of the research, the qualitative evaluator's role in the research process, the name of the foundation supporting the research, the purpose and role of the participant advisory group, issues of participant confidentiality, participant compensation (a \$25 gift card to a local grocery store), and the anticipated time commitment being requested of the participant advisory group. Both individuals were offered an opportunity to meet with the evaluator via Zoom to further discuss the project.

Stage 8: Submit to the organization all requested information and required documents for review. Respond to all questions with follow-up emails and conversations.

LW's chief program officer forwarded the email for review by the organization's chief research and evaluation officer. Two lengthy email exchanges with the chief research and evaluation officer responded to 14 questions that further explained the ESTOY research project and the role of the program participant advisory group. Three additional LW staff members were added to the email exchanges. This seven-week process resulted in a decision by the LW's staff that they were unable to accommodate the evaluator's request. However, when the survey tool is completed, LW will consider distributing the survey to program participants.

The AYW's RJP director agreed to a Zoom meeting to further discuss the project. The Zoom conversation began with the evaluator providing information about the ESTOY project, the intention of the participant survey, and the role of program participants in co-creating the final survey that will be used by the ESTOY evaluation.

The RJP director questioned the motivation of the J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation in supporting the ESTOY research project. The RJP director addressed how black and brown bodies have been and continue to be exploited and abused by society and expressed his concern regarding the ESTOY project being supported by a major corporation's foundation. The RJP director spoke of the AYW's environment as a healing space where young people learn about themselves in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance where they can feel safe and valued.

The evaluator listened and offered validation of the presented concerns while feeling the responses to the RJP director's concerns were inadequate.

As the conversation closed, the RJP director agreed to ask the RJP Leadership Crew if they were interested in meeting with me to learn more about the proposed project.

The evaluator was unprepared to respond to concerns regarding the project funder and systemic racism. Thus, the conversation caused the evaluator to reflect and develop a broader understanding of the dynamics of trust in the role of evaluator and a deeper understanding of the environment organizations create to promote the well-being of program participants. The concerns of the RJP director upheld a protective stance regarding outsiders coming into the AYW participant environment. The evaluator's reflection on the conversation with the RJP director led the evaluator to deliberate upon the intersections of racism and exploitation within social science research and specific to the ESTOY project.

The following is an excerpt of the follow-up email the evaluator sent to the RJP director.

"... As I continue to think about our conversation, I see the connection of current workforce development programs to this country's long history of systemic abuse of the labor of black and brown people to meet the economic needs of each era. The workforce training programs that are currently being funded ride on this same wave of

dehumanization: valuing people only when they are needed to plug holes in the economy, often in low-wage jobs.

So, what happens now? My work with the ESTOY project is to pursue a deeper understanding of the experience of youth who have been disenfranchised from opportunities and to develop recommendations regarding program practices that support youth in their process of recovery, and in their engagement in education and training opportunities. ..." (ESTOY Evaluator, personal communication, February 29, 2023)

The email also included information about the evaluator's previous work experience and an explanation of the personal motivation for engaging in this work. In short, "I believe in peace; therefore, I work for social justice as my life's mission." Sharing this information exposed the honest vulnerability of the evaluator's need to continue learning and to expand their understanding while exploring the connectivity and overlap of communities of meaning between the evaluator, the AYW staff, and program participants.

Within two weeks, the RJP director invited the evaluator to attend an RJP Leadership Crew meeting.

Stage 9: Upon receiving permission to meet with the advisory group, develop project information hand-outs.

The information included in the hand-out for the first meeting was organized in a meeting agenda format. The document used a third-grade literacy level and included the following elements.

- Introduction: who am I and where do I work
- Group introductions using your first name
- Anything you say will not be shared with your name attached to it
- Conversations will not be recorded
- With your permission I will take notes
- Each person will receive a \$25 gift card from HEB
- Research project purpose
- Research project funder

- How the RJP leadership crew can help
- Vote on the question of helping with the research project

Stage 10: Initial meeting to address project issues, advisory group role, and request the participant advisory group vote regarding the group's participation in the project.

The first meeting with the RJP Leadership Crew began with an introduction of the evaluator and first name introductions of Crew members followed by: how their confidence will be guarded, compensation for participation, the purpose of the ESTOY project, identification of the project funder, how the information gathered will be used, and how the RJP Leadership Crew can participate. Also, conversations would not be recorded, but with the Crew’s permission, the evaluator would take notes during the discussion. The Crew was informed that all members would receive a gift card in appreciation for attending the meeting regardless of how they voted on the issue at hand.

Confidentiality
<p>“All information shared during this discussion will be kept confidential. In my notes your name will not be linked with anything you say. Ask questions at any time about the research or about me personally. Being here is completely voluntary on your part and you can leave at any time.”</p> <p>ESTOY Evaluator</p>

The group asked additional questions regarding how the information gathered would be used and expressed a general curiosity about the motive of the research funder. The evaluator provided information about the grantor and answered questions regarding how the grantor may benefit through the funding of projects such as ESTOY. A vote was taken, and Crew members agreed to collaborate on the ESTOY survey development.ⁱⁱⁱ

A second meeting was scheduled to begin the co-creation of the ESTOY project survey tool. The Crew agreed to meet during a noon hour and the evaluator agreed to provide lunch. The evaluator asked about food and vendor preferences, and if there were any dietary restrictions the evaluator needed to be aware of. A follow-up conversation with the RJP director asked about the supply of plates, napkins, cups, and ice for drinks to determine if AYW had such supplies available or should the evaluator be responsible for these items.

The RJP Leadership Crew members were compensated for their time with a gift card to a local grocery store. They were asked to acknowledge receipt of the gift card by writing initials on a document used by the University to track project expenditures, the document did not record their names but rather assigned a number to each participant.

One of the RJP Leadership Crew members was accompanied during the meeting by her young daughter. While distributing the gift cards at the end of the meeting the child approached the evaluator asking if she too could have a gift card. The evaluator explained the gift cards were for the grown-ups, but the evaluator had something special the child could have. The evaluator happened to keep a small picture of a favorite cat in her billfold. The evaluator took out the picture, held it to her heart, and explained, “This is very special to me. It’s a picture of my favorite kitty. I want to give it to you.” The child’s face brightened with a smile, she accepted the gift and skipped across the room to show her mother the prize. The child’s mother and the evaluator shared a smile across the room, experiencing a connection of the shared value of children. At that moment, the evaluator acted as an Auntie, assuring the child in the room felt seen, heard, and valued.

Connection
<p>At the beginning of the second meeting following the passing of my brother, the RJP director entered the room and greeted me by putting his arm around my shoulder and saying how sorry he was for my loss. He had recently lost a family member and shared, “I know how important family is.”</p>

The next meeting was rescheduled upon the evaluator's request due to the death of a family member and the need for the evaluator to travel out of town to be with family. The RJP director shared this information with the Crew and a new meeting date was set. Stage 11: Upon receiving approval from the advisory group, meet with the advisory group to collaborate on the survey development.

At the beginning of this meeting, the RJP director offered his condolences while Crew members entered the room and served themselves food. Reflecting on this moment, the compassion and affection shown by the RJP director, a person trusted by the Crew, demonstrated a connection and trust between the RJP director and the evaluator. This moment revealed that the relationship between the RJP director and the evaluator was the pathway to building trusting

relationships with Crew members. Before meeting the evaluator, the Crew trusted the RJP director's decision to share information about the ESTOY project and ask if they were interested in meeting the evaluator and learning about the project. The sharing of affection and compassion between the RJP director and the evaluator revealed the interconnection of being a member of a family, the experience of loss, and the acceptance of care others offer during difficult periods in life.

As the evaluator facilitated the Crew discussion the flow of information was comfortable with no echoes of strain from concerns discussed during the first meeting.

A handout was distributed that included the four primary research questions and sample questions selected from the literature review. The Crew contributed the following to the survey development:

- The selection of questions perceived as being the best match to address the four areas of interest. They made adjustments to the language to clarify the meaning and intent of the questions.
- Questions that were likely to be perceived as asking for similar information were identified and the duplicates were eliminated.
- Four new questions were written and added.
- The Crew agreed that open-ended response options made more sense than providing a list of possible answers to choose from. The Crew expressed that a list of possible answers may direct and limit the thinking of survey respondents when answering a question.
- The Crew agreed the survey was to be translated into Spanish as some program participants may be more comfortable reading and writing in Spanish.
- The questions were ordered and clustered creating a sense of continuity.

The next step was for the evaluator to create a draft survey document and send it back to the Crew for review. The evaluator asked the Crew how they preferred to receive the draft. The Crew reported that they had just learned how to use Google Docs and decided to receive the draft survey in a Google Docs format where they could add comments and suggestions.

The draft was placed in Google Docs and sent to the RJP director to distribute to the Crew members for review. During a third meeting, the draft survey was reviewed and finalized with minor changes to the ordering of the questions.

LifeWorks Revisited

With the participant survey in draft form, the evaluator decided to reapproach the LW chief research and evaluation officer,

“The American YouthWorks Restorative Justice Crew helped me develop a survey to increase my understanding of the experiences of youth participating in education and workforce development training. I am seeking LW program participants to meet with me to learn about me and my project, and if you agree to help me, to review the survey to make suggestions for improving the survey . . .” (ESTOY Evaluator, personal communication, July 22, 2023).

Within two days the chief research and evaluation officer invited the evaluator to complete the LW research application and submit verification of the University Institutional Review Board approval of the research project. The application was approved, and the evaluator was introduced via email to the staff who manages the LW Impactful Voices Team to iron out meeting logistical details. The Team manager received ESTOY project information and met with the evaluator via Zoom to further discuss the project.

The process of meeting the LW Impactful Voices Team followed a slightly different process compared to AYW. At LW the organization administration vetted the project and granted permission, compared to AYW where the staff directly working with the RJP Leadership Crew was responsible for vetting the project and the evaluator. Upon receiving information about the ESTOY project both organizations responded with several questions, although the two organizations focused on securing different types of information, the perspective vantage point driving their decision for both organizations was the well-being of Crew and Team members.

The ESTOY project provided lunch and drinks for the meeting and the evaluator introduced the project similarly to the introduction the AYW Crew received, the Team had no

questions, a vote was taken, and the work of reviewing the draft survey was undertaken and completed during the meeting. The Team made the following recommendations:

- **The survey** introduction includes the following statement
“You can skip any question that you do not want to answer. You can also stop the survey at any time, for any reason.” The Team identified a second place in the survey where these instructions should be repeated. The Team placed the statement in the introduction to the section asking respondents to evaluate the services they received.
“The next four questions ask about the support services provided at LifeWorks. These responses will not be shared with program staff. If you have a need for additional support services, please talk with a *Program* staff person. Remember, you can skip any question for any reason.”
- The Team also inserted the sentence “
- For each question, it will be helpful if the words that drive the meaning of the question are highlighted. For example, Q1.1 How did you **first learn about** LifeWorks?

The suggestion to highlight the words that drive the meaning of the questions was the result of the following exchange. At the beginning of the survey review session, one of the participants initiated a discussion of a specific question when another Team member stated “...that’s not what that question means.” The original speaker read the question again and agreed that they had misread the meaning of the question, and the prior comments should be discarded. At this moment the evaluator interjected that the information about the original speaker’s interpretation of the question was important information to the process: if one person read and viewed the question in the manner originally suggested, others would also. The evaluator asked the Team to pause a moment while notes on the issue were reviewed for accuracy and the Team was informed that the ESTOY research team would be reviewing the question for clarification. This exchange presented the evaluator with the opportunity to assure participants that all ideas are valid and valuable and that researchers make mistakes and can miss important nuances that influence the research being conducted. This exchange was another opportunity to acknowledge the interconnection of a community of individuals working together to improve a project

knowing that as humans, mistakes can be made and that everyone's contribution to the discussion process is valuable.

Following the evaluator's validation of the contribution of the first speaker, the group conversation took on an ease and flow and the Team came to an agreement that the problem of question interpretation might be solved if the salient issue for each question was highlighted.

The Final Draft Survey

This survey has six sections and each section asks two to six questions. Each section begins with a brief introductory description of the section topic and the number of questions included. The section asking questions about support services prompted a discussion among the LW Team that the evaluator hadn't anticipated.

For this section LW Team members asked that the introduction repeat a phrase from the general overall survey introduction at the beginning of the survey ...” Remember, you can skip any questions for any reason.”

The section asked questions about support services received that were helpful to the achievement of their goals

The questions on support services accessed prompted a discussion regarding the possibility that a respondent may take the opportunity to disclose a need they have that is not being met by the program. The Team was concerned that respondents would anticipate a response and upon not receiving the response, would feel unheard and uncared for. The Team requested the following language be added to the section introduction.

“Your response will not be shared with program staff. If you have a need for additional support services, please talk with a LifeWorks staff person.”

Even though the questions do not ask about unmet needs, the LW Team was concerned respondents might provide the information and then be left feeling unheard and uncared for.

The final draft of the survey was sent to the AYW RJP director and the manager of the LW Team to share with the two groups. The director and manager were asked to ensure the Crew and Team members were aware of the final section of the survey instrument that acknowledges the contribution of the AYW and LW program participants with the following statement:

In Appreciation
“This survey was constructed in consultation with the American YouthWorks Restorative Justice Practice Leadership Crew, and the LifeWorks Impactful Voices Team of Austin, Texas.”

Discussion

To gain a deeper understanding of the experience of opportunity youth enrolled in community-based education and workforce training programs, two organizations serving distinct subgroups of opportunity youth were approached to facilitate a meeting between the evaluator and groups of youth and young adults receiving services. The CBPR approach endeavored to enlist the assistance of a group of program participants to co-create a program participant survey tool for youth and young adults receiving services from education and workforce development programs in four communities across Texas: Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio.

Two Austin, Texas, organizations providing education and workforce development services targeted to meet the needs of persistently disconnected opportunity youth were approached to participate in the CBPR project: American YouthWorks and LifeWorks. Both programs strive to create a healing community of relationships that support opportunity youth in their recovery while working to achieve their academic and career goals. This perspective, rightly so, creates a protective barrier designed to ensure that collaborators, community partners, and researchers align with this philosophical approach to relationships and service delivery.

Providing services to persistent opportunity youth requires a program service delivery model that supports the relational needs of youth and young adults. Trusting relationships that support the healing and development of persistent opportunity youth requires a commitment to the time required to build relationships.

Likewise, a CBPR approach requires significant amounts of the evaluator's time to initiate, grow, and maintain trusting relationships. The ESTOY evaluator invested months in developing relationships with program staff in the process of obtaining authorization to meet

“Indeed, if there is one resource that will continue to challenge people walking the path towards *CBPR*, it is time.”

Flexner, Rawlings and Riley (2021:5)

with the participant advisory groups. The first contact with the AYW RJP director occurred in February and the initial meeting with the RJP Leadership Crew occurred in March with the final meeting to approve the survey draft in June. The second LW inquiry was sent in July and the meeting with the LW Impactful Voices Team occurred in October.

Developing relationships with organization staff, the gatekeepers to participant access, laid the path for program participants to be open to meeting with the evaluator. Establishing relationships with program participants required the art and science of effective focus group moderation: careful listening skills, the flexibility to adapt to the flow of the conversation, the capacity to pick up on body language that appeared to indicate the participant had a question or concern to express and finding effective ways to invite individuals into the conversation while projecting an open and accepting persona. The evaluator's appearance and body language and the decision to share personal vulnerabilities that revealed the interconnection of shared communities of meaning and purpose while maintaining the focus on the process contributed to a richness of experience for both the evaluator and program participants.

Notes

- i The Annie E. Cassey Kids Count data center used the US Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data to describe the opportunity youth population.
- ii Ray Marshall Center is a research unit of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.
- iii One RJP Leadership Crew team member voted against participation in the ESTOY project stating he couldn't be a part of a project funded by the grantor.

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