

A Project Development Checklist for Community-Based Research

This Community-Based Research Toolkit is intended for community organizations **trying to decide if they want to conduct research**, and **whether they should seek an academic partner** to work with to conduct this research. This toolkit is designed as a project development checklist that acts as a **guide for things to consider** for community organizations conducting a research project.

Community-academic partnerships can expand the capacity, reach, and impact of community-based research. This project development checklist is meant to help guide community-based organizations (CBOs) along the path of community-based research and collaboration by

- helping **identify the needs** of the CBO
- providing an **outline of things for CBOs to consider** when approaching community-based research, whether or not this research will be conducted within a partnership (in the form of a two-page checklist of guiding questions for each step of the project, pages 2-3)
- providing **detailed information on each component** of a community-based research project, including links to tools, templates, and other reference materials (contained in the Appendix, which forms the bulk of this document, pages 4-19)

This toolkit offers guiding information on where to start and what to expect within projects based on experiences in community-campus partnerships within a multi-year community-campus engagement project known as [Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement](#) (CFICE).

How to Use the Project Development Checklist

This project development checklist presents a list of questions for each step of the research process. **More information** can be obtained about each of the topics, including a resource list and sample tools to help develop answers to these questions, by **clicking the hyperlink** on any of the topics. The resource list in the appendix includes road maps, templates, frameworks, definitions, etc.

There is no ‘right’ number of questions to have answers to before seeking a research partnership or conducting research. Instead, this checklist can be used to help guide you to think about all the elements of a research project to determine if this is something you want to do and are able to pursue. Many of these questions are best answered in conjunction with the research team after the partnership has begun, but it’s a good idea to have them on the radar prior to initiating the process. To that end, if many of the topics and questions under the Research Design section sound foreign to you, it might be worthwhile to pursue a research partnership to help guide those aspects of the project.

There are also generic resources available online to further help you prepare for a research partnership and community-based research. Some helpful guides are the [Access Alliance Community-Based Research Toolkit](#) and the [Community Tool Box from the University of Kansas’ Centre for Community Health and Development](#). For a more extensive list of community-based research toolkits consult the CFICE [List of resources and process suggestions to help NGOs deal with data requests from researchers](#). The topics and resources provided in this checklist are not exhaustive, but they can serve to give you more information to get you started.

*Note: some of the links may be broken over time and are updated periodically.

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Topic	Project Development Checklist Questions	
Indigenous Research	Does our research involve indigenous partners or participants?	
Pre-conditions		
Establishing Partnership Goals	What do we want to accomplish and how does this fit with our overall mission and vision?	
Partnerships		
Engaging Partners Through a Research Broker	Do we want help to negotiate and engage with the university, and how will we know who can help link us to research partners?	
Identifying Partnerships	Who would be a good fit with our needs and interests? How will we work with them and how will we know that an academic partner is truly community-first?	
Approaching Partnerships	How will we contact a research partner, and what do we say in the initial contact? Do we know what to expect from our communications with academic partners?	
Maintaining Partnerships	How will we keep the partnership strong and sustainable? How will we evaluate a long-term partnership? Do we have an idea of what will happen when funding ends?	
Partnership Agreements	How will we create a research contract? Do we know how we will address legality and where to go for legal advice?	
Data Ownership	How will we decide who owns the data? How will the data be stored?	
Project Planning		
Participatory Approach	How will we involve those affected by the situation in the project planning and research process?	
Communications	How will we communicate our motivations, vision, capacity, timeline, etc. and work towards establishing a shared goal with common indicators?	
Strategy	Do we know how we will do high-level planning together? How will we run collaborative meetings?	
Structure	How will we decide who does what and who takes the lead?	
Logistics	How will we coordinate the research project?	
Objectives/Goals	How will we ensure the project is focused? Are the goals clear and measurable?	
Timeline	How will we ensure the project is well-organized? Do we know how we will match community organization and academic timelines?	
Budget	How will we ensure the project has the resources to accomplish its goals?	
Funding	Do we know how and where to apply for funding?	
Proposals	Do we know how to get resources? How do we write research and grant proposals?	
Capacity	How will we to determine what resources are necessary to conduct the research project? Are we confident we are able to accomplish the project?	

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Research Team	What are all the roles needed for the research project? How do we determine the scope of these roles and how they are going to be filled?	
Students	If students are involved, how will we make sure they are prepared to work with community organizations?	
Research Design		
Target Audience	How will we share the research in a way that's useful for who we're trying to reach? Will the project incorporate community stakeholders throughout the research process? Are the methods we're using appropriate for who the research seeks to engage?	
Needs Assessment	Does research project fill a gap? How will we identify the gap that the research fills?	
Literature Review	How will we get the background knowledge necessary to be well-prepared for the research project?	
Identifying the Issue	How will we narrow-in on one issue and set guiding principles that will help our work stay focused?	
Research Question	How will we get focused? Who will we consult?	
Research Methods	How do we get data? Who will be involved in collecting the data?	
Research Process	How do we plan and conduct the research?	
Logic Model/Theory of Change	Do we know how our activities, actions and outputs will lead to the change we want to see? How will we design the project to increase collective impact?	
Ethics	How will we ensure accountability, transparency and safety for all research participants? Do we know how to navigate the bureaucracy and who will help us do this?	
Data Organization	How will we organize data collection to ensure that the findings are logical and of high quality?	
Data Analysis	How do we ensure the findings are meaningful?	
Outputs	Do we know what we are going to produce? How will we ensure the research findings are accessible to our target audience?	
Outcomes	How will we know what we want to achieve?	
Evaluation	What does 'success' look like and how we'll know if we've achieved it? What indicators will we use and why?	
Post-Research		
Packaging Findings	How and where will we communicate our findings and who will put the communications together? Have we budgeted for developing communications on our findings at the end of the research process?	
Dissemination	How and when will we release our findings?	
Taking Action	How will we act on our findings? Who will we approach and how?	
Impact	What will signal to us that our project is having a positive impact? How can we help to sustain the value of our work over time?	

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Appendix: More Information (hyperlinks lead here)

Indigenous Research

Conducting research within indigenous communities requires a research model and process that is community directed and respects and protects indigenous culture and traditional knowledge. Historically research was conducted in indigenous communities by external researchers who often did not understand the culture, knowledge or experience of indigenous peoples. Therefore, when engaging in research with an Inuit, Métis or First Nations community it is essential to work in collaboration with formal leaders, elders and other knowledge holders in the community. Indigenous communities retain ownership over their knowledge and language, control over the research process and access to the research data and findings. The research process with indigenous communities may differ from the process outlined in this research guide.

Resources:

[Webinar on research practices with Inuit, Metis and First Nations communities](#)

[Ethical guide on conducting research in First Nations Communities](#)

[Guidelines for research with Aboriginal people](#)

[First Nations Ethical Guide on Research and Aboriginal Knowledge](#)

[Guidelines for Research Involving Inuit](#)

[Ethical Principles of Métis Research](#)

PRE-CONDITIONS

Establishing Partnership Goals

Conduct a needs assessment or an asset map to determine what gaps you want to fill before determining if a partnership is right for you. Meet with a consultant to brainstorm if your needs are well-suited to a research partnership.

Resources:

[Background on partnerships](#)

[Needs assessment templates](#)

[Participatory asset mapping](#)

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PARTNERSHIPS

Engaging Partners Through a Research Broker

If you don't have a working relationship with a university faculty member a broker can help you determine how and when to approach one. A broker can act like a translator to help you better understand where the university faculty and other research partners are coming from and to make sure you're on the same page. There are brokering agencies, individual brokers and brokering tools online. Brokers promote equity within the research partnership by helping partners to share resources and mediate conflict.

Some brokers are based in the community while others work out of a specific university. Brokering agencies that are intuition-based sometimes have community members who help to connect with resources outside the university. However, institution-based brokers tend to have a deeper understanding of the partnership opportunities of their particular institution while community-based brokers have a broad understanding of partnering across many institutions.

Resources:

[Report on brokering with list of broker agencies and tools including websites and contact information](#)

[Plain language podcast summary of brokering report](#)

Identifying Partnerships

Use your network, a broker, and/or internet searches to identify a community-first academic partner/institution. Academic partners to target could be ones who have published, presented, or taught courses in line with a community-first approach, are associated with community organizations, or have a history of working in the community or doing community-based research. Universities to target are ones that have research offices with a community focus or a community arm, a strong community service learning component, or host community-focused conferences.

Resources:

[Ensuring Community Comes First: Actions for Community Campus Engagement Practitioners](#)

[Involving Key Influentials in Your Initiative](#)

Approaching Partnerships

Depending on the academic partner, your prior relationship, and your network, contacting the university partner could use different approaches. For example, you might want to send an email, approach them at

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an event, message them on social media, or ask a mutual acquaintance to introduce you. Determining how to approach the partner will be based on the contexts of your relationship and the work you want to do, but effective ways of approaching them are also determined by understanding who *they* are and what might be a persuasive way to get their attention.

Resources:

[Top tips for approaching a community campus engagement relationship](#)

[Matrix – convening a multi-sectoral effort to realize a bold community vision](#)

[Facilitator’s guide to kitchen table conversations](#)

[What to do when researchers come knocking](#)

Maintaining Partnerships

Once a partnership is established, maintaining the partnership becomes important for an effective research project. Building a regular and frequent contact schedule is an important aspect of a partnership. Regular meetings can act as check-ins, and these check-ins help keep everyone on track and on task while also being a vehicle to discuss issues and ideas that arise. In communications, be clear on goals, motivations, timelines, capacity, and expectations. Furthermore, during a partnership, members of the research team sometimes change jobs or have other life events come up. Role transitions are hard and can happen in the university, community, with students, and with administrative support. Reduce the impact of transitions by establishing shared data systems, which include a shared file storage and guidelines, decisions that have been made, meeting minutes, on-board packages, etc.

Resources:

[How to initiate and maintain community-academic partnerships](#)

[The eco-cycle of a partnership](#)

[Why it’s important to build a culture of trust, including tips](#)

[Tool for building a culture of trust](#)

[Building and sustaining commitment](#)

[Planning for transitions and exits](#)

[Shared data systems](#)

[Reflecting on partnership progress](#)

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Partnership Agreements

Universities are large institutions that often have a lot more experience with research than community organizations, which means there are lots of benefits to working with universities but also that care should be taken to protect the community organization's particular interests. A formal agreement can help guard against formal disputes that may occur. For formal agreements, you may want to seek legal advice, depending on the nature of the agreement/partnership and the research, both to help with the content of the agreement but also with its structure. Partnership agreements can also ensure that partners are on the same page and help provide a formal structure to the partnership arrangement that can be sustained over time, even after the individuals in the partnership are no longer present. Partnership agreements help move towards sustained partnerships and away from person-centered partnerships that can crumble in periods of turnover. When partnerships are formalized, they are less susceptible to staff transitions and are more likely to have continued support.

Resources:

[How to create a formal agreement](#)

[Memorandum of Agreement Guide](#)

[Memorandum of Agreement Example](#)

Data Ownership

When partnering with university faculty and/or the institutions themselves, a formal agreement can solidify things like data ownership. Discuss early on who will take credit for the findings of the research and make decisions regarding the channels of dissemination. Decisions such as the archival and future use of data should also be reviewed and included in formal agreements. In a community-driven approach the needs of the organization should drive decisions surrounding data ownership, however academic partners may have publishing pressures and funding partners may impose data ownership conditions.

Resources:

[Data ownership resource](#)

PROJECT PLANNING

Participatory Approach

A participatory approach to research involves community organizations and community members in designing and conducting the research project. You and your research partners should discuss early on if there are certain community members, or other community organizations who are affected by this

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situation who can be invited to participate in the research design. Community members bring diverse viewpoints and different kinds of knowledge to help inform each step of project design and the research process. Community members may also be hired to work as researchers on the project.

Resources:

[Participatory Action Research Instructors](#)

[Participatory Action Research Handbook](#)

[Guide for Community Organizations Engaged in Participatory Research with Academic Partners](#)

[Compensating Peer Researchers](#)

Communications

Part of effectively communicating with your research partner is agreeing on key definitions, such as research, community, poverty, etc. Ensure that you and your research partner have a common understanding of important terms, especially when working with academic partners who may use unfamiliar terms and language. Regular communication (i.e., email updates) helps ensure partners remain on the same page while scheduling regular meetings for check-ins helps ensure a flow of communication. Communication is important to ensure the project has a united vision and that all partners agree on the indicators that will determine project success or problems. Clear and regular communication is also important to establish capacity for the project and realistic timelines based on this capacity. It is important to consider how often partners can get together in person to deepen the engagement with one another and to determine where in the community is an appropriate place to meet.

Resources:

[Establishing regular communication channels](#)

Strategy

The approach that you take in a research partnership has a huge bearing on the results and impacts of the project. An effective strategy takes careful planning through all stages of the research process. Designing a logic model or theory of change method can help to identify and clarify your strategy. Creating a meeting and communication structure that facilitates innovative and evidence-based strategic planning will make the process smoother. Methods of running effective meetings depend on contextual and personality factors, but in general everyone should have a chance to speak and feel comfortable voicing opinions, and the conversation should be semi-structured to help stay on topic while having enough flexibility to encourage creative thinking and problem-solving.

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Resources:

[Theory of change examples](#)

[Logic model examples](#)

[Theory of Change in development and planning](#)

[Theory of change and facilitating planning sessions](#)

Structure

After some of the high-level ideas have been established, roles should be clearly determined. Roles help determine tasks throughout the project. Roles can be decided based on the expertise, time, and interests of the research partners. Having someone responsible for each task will help ensure accountability. When determining roles, keep in mind underlying power dynamics that might lead to incongruities in workload, decision-making, etc.

Resources:

[Roles and responsibilities of the research team example](#)

[Determining and Managing Research Roles](#)

Logistics

Coordinating projects involves organizing people, institutions, and tasks. It also requires time management, effective planning, and understanding budgets. Consulting with people who have knowledge on each facet of the project can make logistical planning easier. Having someone responsible for bringing everyone together (i.e., a task-master or a minute-taker) can help make the process smoother. A long-term community-university partnership often takes more time and resources than originally planned. Proper investment for the return you seek is important. For example, backbone structures/institutions help keep partners connected, help make the case to the community and funders, and help guide the project towards its vision and mission.

Resources:

[Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations](#)

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Objectives/Goals

Goals should be determined in a collaborative process. When determining goals, the target audience should be kept in mind (i.e., if the goal is to conduct research aimed to support municipal policy-change, the audience for the research findings includes city councillors). Knowing the goals and target audience of the research will help zero in on methods.

Resources:

[Goal-setting example](#)

Timeline

The project timeline begins at engaging, planning, and developing the research and moves into implementing, evaluating, and refining the research. When constructing a timeline, consider important dates (i.e., elections, budget cycles) and capacity. The schedules for community organizations and academic institutions differ, so consider the implications of fiscal year and the academic year when planning the schedule for deliverables and even for planning regular meetings and communication. Keep in mind that ethics approval for projects with academic partners can take some time and plan accordingly.

Resources:

[Project timeline template](#)

[Project timeline template 2](#)

Budget

Determine what external and internal funding sources exist. Determine how much in-kind contributions can be made by the partner organizations. Determine how much the project will cost in terms of materials and person-hours, including student stipends. Leave wiggle room in the budget.

Resources:

[Backbone support](#)

[Things to consider when making a budget](#)

[Budget template](#)

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Funding

Calculate the certain funds, potential funds, and how much the project will cost. Determine what can be added/subtracted depending on successful and unsuccessful funding applications. Find lists of relevant grants. Determine which grants are appropriate to apply for (i.e., fit, deadline, intensity of applications) and research what makes a successful bid for them. Consider all the various parts of the project you could fund through different grants (i.e., student salaries).

Resources:

[SSHRC funding](#)

[CIHR funding](#)

[List of foundations in Canada](#)

[How to guide for a simple research budget](#)

Proposals

Effective proposal writing will make the odds of receiving funding much greater. Projects need funding, so putting the necessary time into funding proposals is essential. Proposals also help flush out the project's scope to narrow in on what it aims to accomplish and how.

Resources:

[Writing grant applications and making your case](#)

Capacity

Discussing realistic expectations and limitations can clarify the research process and help buffer against issues down the road (time crunches, disagreements, etc.). Undertaking an effective research project is a lot of work, so ensuring that the capacity exists for it to be accomplished is important to avoid any mid-term realizations that it's too much to do.

Resources:

[Mapping community assets](#)

[Tool for mapping community assets](#)

[Assessing local needs and resources](#)

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[Assessing organizational capacity](#)

Research Team

The players involved in the research project have obvious importance in carrying out the research. Identify what roles are needed for the project's success, and clearly define these roles. Determine how to fill these roles, including where to recruit from and what attributes and backgrounds you're looking for in these roles. Some things to consider include the supervision structure, pay rates, team size, if you want to hire university members (i.e., RAs) or community members, and if there are particular institutions to help with recruitment.

Resources:

[Importance of personalities](#)

[Building a research team](#)

[Roles](#)

Students

When students are involved in the research project, it is important to make sure they are introduced to the community. Being introduced to the community means that the students understand the purpose of the project, the community organization's role, the population they serve, and the differences in the community organization's structure/how it operates. Likewise, the community organization should be prepared to work with students who have a different schedule, competing interests (i.e., the project, career goals, homework, classes), and may be new to community work or research in general. A smooth transition into this work depends on ensuring understanding and comfort. Students are often seen as intermediaries between the community and university, so ensuring their active involvement and how to maximize their contributions can have a large impact on the entire research project, especially since students often do much of the ground-level work.

Resources:

[Work-integrated learning overview](#)

[A student guide to community-based research](#)

[Actions for students to ensure community comes first](#)

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RESEARCH DESIGN

Target Audience

Designing, carrying out, and distributing the research should consider who the research seeks to communicate with. To have a community perspective and to be respectful of the community, community consultations should also occur. Who the research seeks to impact will also factor into who the target audience is.

Resources:

[Knowledge mobilization guidelines](#)

[Knowledge mobilization for social science research](#)

Needs Assessment

There are many ways to carry out a needs assessment, depending on how exploratory or focused it is, how much time and capacity exist, and the population you're researching. Some ways to conduct a needs assessment are surveys with the community organization's clients, key informant interviews with staff and community members, a focus group, literature reviews about services or community needs, and talking with other community organizations about needs they perceive.

Resources:

[Needs assessment templates](#)

Literature Review

Gathering information about the research project almost always includes a literature review. A literature review provides information about what's already out there and what's missing. Literature reviews can include academic publications but also grey literature (social media, articles, annual reports, etc.). Literature reviews can help avoid duplicating efforts, generate ideas for further research, and identify points of contact for the research.

Resources:

[Guide to conducting a literature review](#)

[Guide to conducting a literature review 2](#)

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Identifying the Issue

Collecting and analyzing background information will help to zone in on the issue to be addressed. The values and goals of project partners will also help determine appropriate issues to address.

Resources:

[Root cause analysis](#)

[Analyzing issues in the community](#)

Research Question

The research question is what guides the entire research project. The research seeks to answer this question, so it should be specific enough to focus on and meaningful enough to warrant the research. Ensure that the question can actually be answered by the research.

Resources:

[Developing a good research question](#)

[Developing a good research question 2](#)

[Video on developing a good research question](#)

Research Methods

The strengths and limits of research methods should be considered. The possibilities of sampling should also be considered (i.e., how many people do you think you can recruit). The ability to promote the research and recruit should be considered as well as the researchers' strengths and backgrounds. Multiple or combined methods can also be used. The methods chosen will depend on the research question, resources available, and the desired impact. Some methods to consider are interviews, surveys, focus groups, ethnographic research, etc.

Resources:

[Qualitative vs quantitative research](#)

[Types of qualitative research](#)

[Types of qualitative research 2](#)

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[Types of qualitative research 3](#)

[Quantitative research methods](#)

[Quantitative research methods 2](#)

Research Process

Determining how to carry out the project requires much discussion, thinking, and re-thinking. Some ways to help layout the research process include taking notes, writing and sharing reflections, and determining the project's limits and personal limits.

Resources:

[Toolkit for research project management](#)

[Conducting primary research overview](#)

Logic Model/Theory of Change

The research project, from the research question to the impact you seek to create, should proceed logically. To help ensure the logic is sound, it can be mapped out in a step-by-step process. The logic model should be updated as project progresses, and lessons are learned, but it is also an important planning tool to make sure the steps followed stay aligned with the research goal and desired impact.

Resources:

[Example of research logic model/theory of change](#)

Ethics

Ethics planning should occur at the outset of the research design to make sure that the research itself is being conducted from an ethical standpoint and considers unintended consequences. Conducting community-based research raises particular ethical issues related to consent, privacy and confidentiality and compensation and support for community members. Although there are consistent ethical considerations across research projects, the particular needs and position of each community must be taken into consideration. For example, research projects with people with disabilities would include specific strategies of accommodating physical or communication needs.

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When working with a university, the research will have to be approved by an ethics review board, which can take awhile and involves filling out long forms and responding to inquiries. Community organizations can also have their own ethics review boards. Ethics submissions should be sent in early, since research cannot occur until approval is obtained. University ethics boards may not have much experience with community-based research, so take the time to explain the rationale for the decisions, especially ones that might go against traditional research designs.

Resources:

[Ethical guide for community-based participatory research](#)

[Ethics and community-based research](#)

[Research ethics guide for community organizations](#)

[Ethical guidance for research with people with disabilities](#)

[Guide to research ethics board submissions](#)

[Overview of human research ethics](#)

Data Organization

Although it can be tedious, ensuring the data is organized and collected in ways that are valid, well-documented, and logical is essential for the project. If the data are sloppy, the results won't be usable. Documenting decisions, changes to documents, how the data are collected and why, etc. are all pieces to this process.

Resources:

[How to organize qualitative data](#)

[Data management support for indigenous research](#)

Data Analysis

Following a data analysis method is essential to make sure the data are meaningful. Thematic coding is one method of qualitative data analysis, but the exact form it takes varies. In general, having multiple people review the data independently and building consensus helps ensure the findings are logical and buffers against biases.

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Resources:

[How to analyze qualitative data](#)

Outputs

The end-product of the research is helpful to consider at its outset to streamline producing these products. For example, the type of report made from the research will influence how the data are organized and analyzed. If the outputs are reports to members of the community, more focus could be put towards developing a narrative and images, whereas policy-makers whose attention you already have might be more interested in hard facts.

Resources:

[Examples of outputs and outcomes](#)

[Example of outputs](#)

Outcomes

The outcome that the research seeks to achieve is the entire reason for the research, so it should guide each step of the process. Try not to lose sight of the desired outcomes.

Resources:

[Outcome mapping](#)

Evaluation

Set goals, targets, and metrics that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). Determine how and when the targets will be evaluated.

Resources:

[Evaluation framework overview](#)

[Evaluation framework overview 2](#)

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POST-RESEARCH

Packaging Findings

Create publications, webinars, executive summaries, books, panels, power points, etc. to distribute the findings. Determine which partners will be responsible for communicating the findings. Keep in mind all the tasks that are involved in packaging findings (i.e., design, writing, promotion, etc.) and include all associated costs in the budget when applying for funding

Resources:

[Research presentation examples](#)

[Report structure example](#)

Dissemination

When communicating the research results, timing is important. Good times to disseminate can include the budget or election cycle, depending on the research and its goals. Dissemination of the research findings respects decisions made about data ownership in the project planning phase.

Resources:

[Advocacy strategies](#)

[Advocacy strategies 2](#)

Taking Action

With the investment of resources and time it is important that the research results in change, action and advocacy. Moving from research to implementation can be a crucial step to achieving the desired outcomes. Since the research conducted tends to fill a gap, normally there will be actionable items that come from it.

Resources:

[Tips for advocacy](#)

[A guide for policy work for community-based participatory research](#)

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Impact

When designing research, the potential impacts (and unintended impacts) are useful to suss out. If more work will be needed after the research and dissemination to ensure that outcomes are achieved, it should be considered at the outset for planning purposes. Maintenance may be necessary to hold government accountable, for example, or to follow-up with any individuals/organizations implementing change resulting from this research.

Resources:

[Analyzing policy impact](#)