1. Turning a topic you care about into a research question

**Result:** The group has identified a topic that resonates with all members and written a research question to explore this topic.

**Question to chew on:** Think of a time when you knew something to be true, but then at some point you found out that it wasn’t true. What is something you have been wrong about, where did you learn it, why did you think it was true, and what was it like letting go of that “fact”?

**Activity:** Group is broken into two groups. The first group—the subjects—are given slips of paper giving them a trait, behavior, or identity (i.e. “you are a professional cat groomer”). Without using words, the subjects begin to act out what is written on their papers. The second group are researchers. The researchers’ goal is to understand the subjects. After observing the subjects for several minutes, the researchers may huddle briefly to come to a consensus before presenting their assessment of the first group.

**Debrief:** What was it like for the subjects to be observed or assessed without being able to say who they were or what they were about? What was it like for the researchers trying to figure out their subjects? Did the researchers understand the subjects?

**Pair and share:**

- What comes to mind when you think of research?
- Who do you picture in your mind when you hear the word “researcher”?
- Think about an aspect of yourself that you feel often gets misrepresented, and the misrepresentation somehow gets taken as truth or science or fact. What would you want to tell the people who put those “facts” out there?

**Why do participatory action research?**

Participatory action research (PAR) means exploring social issues or phenomena from the vantage point of lived experience. PAR is considered emancipatory research, meaning it is research that liberates. But what does that look like in practice?

PAR involves participant researchers—meaning they have lived experience of the thing they are researching—identifying an issue that matters to them or an experience that they identify with, asking questions about that issue or experience, producing data about it and telling its story. Knowledge that is created through participatory methods, and stories that get told by participant researchers, could not be known or told without the intimate expertise of lived experience.

Participatory methods challenge traditional ways of knowing, and results in findings that challenge dominant narratives and solutions that question existing structures or disrupt the status quo.

**Resources to watch:**

"Knowing" Inequality and Social Justice Research with Michelle Fine and Elena Torre

Youth Participatory Action Research with Michelle Fine

**Examples to read:**

A Participatory Action Research project by youth in Red Hook, Brooklyn

A Participatory Action Research paper by justice-involved women and girls
Identifying an issue
- What are we curious about?
- What issues do we care about?

Activity: The Story of Us
Using a flipchart, have the group generate a list of responses to each of the questions below. The responses to each question do not have to be shared by all group members, but the lists that start to take shape will be a collective story of the group as a whole.

1. Who are we?
2. What are the challenges we are facing?
3. What are the supports we have? (internal / external resources)
4. What are we already doing about these challenges / what is already being done?
5. What support do we need to take action on these challenges?
6. What happens when these actions are successful? What does it look like when we’ve won? What does it feel like when we’ve succeeded?

Example of the first two questions:

![Who are we?](image1)

![What are the challenges we face?](image2)
Turning our curiosity + care into a research question
Revisit the lists that the group generated while writing the Story of Us. What topics hold particular interest to the group?

- Is some aspect of identity that emerged under “who are we?” particularly intriguing?
- Is there a challenge that the group named that doesn’t get the attention it should be getting, or where the story around that challenge isn’t being told in a way that feels true to the group’s experiences?
- Is there some surprising resilience that emerged under “what are we doing about these challenges?” that is especially intriguing given all the challenges the group is up against?

As the group revisits that Story of Us looking for topics they want to carry forward into a research project, it may be hard to narrow down the topics and pick one. This may be easier if the group first looks for topics that are similar in concept and could be combined. And if it’s still impossible to pick one topic, put some of the topics into a “parking lot” for the group to come back to once they’ve explored one topic and gained some skills in PAR.

Writing a participatory action research question
Usually PAR is concerned with understanding experiences from the perspective of having personally lived them. People who have had the experiences that they are now researching are sometimes called “directly impacted” or “people with lived experience.”

A good research question is specific enough to make the project feasible, yet spacious enough that it can create new knowledge. Being specific about what you want to research helps you scope your project, and leaving room for multiple (and sometimes contradictory) stories can yield rich and resonant results. This means that a good research question isn’t a Yes or No question.

It is also important to think about what the group wants to accomplish with their research. Consider the following:

- Do we want to correct a misunderstanding, or create a more inclusive, fuller understanding where there has previously been only partial understanding of an issue/identity/phenomenon?
- Do we want to complicate a dominant narrative?
- Do we want to explore solutions to a problem? Do we want our research to lead to policy or program changes that will facilitate different experiences for people who are impacted by a certain issue?

In sum, the topic that the group settles on should be:
1) something that resonates personally with the group of researchers,
2) something that we cannot simply look up online and find a simple answer to,
3) something that directly impacted researchers can ask better questions about and get richer results about because of their connection to other directly impacted people, and
4) something that directly impacted researchers are uniquely qualified to understand/interpret results through the lens of their personal experiences.
The following are some possible question structures, but the group can also create its own question. The following empty question structures can be used like Mad Libs—try dropping the group’s identities and chosen topics into the blanks and see what questions you create.

How do [people with some shared identity] experience [pick something]?

*Example*: How do multi-lingual students experience the ESOL program at their school?

What is it like to be [some aspect of identity] in [some context]?

*Example*: What is it like for students to seek support for their mental health at this school’s school-based health center?

How do [people] make meaning of [some current reality of a specific social context]?

*Example*: What meaning do students at this school make of their school’s response to sexual assault allegations?

“Why” questions, or explanatory research, can shed light on what motivates certain beliefs or behaviors. But try to pose “why” questions in a way that breaks down the belief or value system or behavior that you are researching. This way you will avoid leading people to give you certain answers based on what they think your position is, and end up with more information about why an experience is what it is, or why people believe what they believe.

*Example*: What are the factors that contribute to students not accessing mental health services in this school or community?

Keep in mind that your research question is the topic you want to research, this isn’t necessarily the exact question that you ask people in your interviews/focus groups/photovoice/surveys or whatever method you choose to carry out the research. Future sections of this handbook will go into more in detail about how to research your topic, including what to ask people and how to ask it.

**Try it as a group!**

Going back to the short list of Story of Us topics that held the most interest in the group, try Questionstorming with the group to write as many questions as everyone can think of about things that emerged in the Story of Us, and then practice re-writing those curiosities into research questions.

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**Adult partnership in supporting youth-led research**

When the group has identified a topic that they want to dig deeper into, adult partners should do some background research on their own to learn more about the identified topic. This is also a good opportunity for adult partners to think about their proximity to possible stakeholders that could be consulted, included, or leveraged as resources.
**Topic Possibilities**

MYAN’s goal is for youth-driven research projects is to identify community needs not currently being met and which might be addressed through either improving existing structures or developing new strategies. For the purposes of expanding youth-driven research, MYAN defines “policy” and “change” broadly, and hopes that a variety of topics – and recommendations that result from research on those topics – will be featured across Maine’s Public Health Districts. Whether your group is considering a topic that focuses on the local school district, or a town, or the entire public health district, MYAN recommends supporting youth in balancing the individual and collective impacts of “policy” in whichever form it may take.

MYAN encourages Districts to think about the themes identified within the left column as starting points for developing an area of focus, or topic, relating to the categories contained within the right column. These lists are merely possibilities, and MYAN welcomes alternative ideas as well. Please stay in communication with the MYAN statewide team to discuss topic selection, scope the project appropriately, and access additional support as needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREAS OF FOCUS</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth substance use</strong></td>
<td><strong>Equity.</strong> How can your school or community ensure that policies in your school or community are implemented fairly, regardless of who students are?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(including commercial tobacco, marijuana, alcohol, opiates, addiction more generally)</em></td>
<td><strong>Disparities.</strong> Why are young people from certain communities (LGBTQ, low-income students, students of color) impacted by substance use, bullying, mental health struggles more than other groups of youth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bullying prevention</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access.</strong> How can you make sure that every young person who needs services/support in these areas of focus gets what they need?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(including bias-based harassment, exclusion, name-calling, threats/violence, school discipline policies)</em></td>
<td><strong>Impact.</strong> How do the practices or protocols used with a particular policy function in reality? What is the actual impact of a policy on the community, including sub-groups within the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adolescent mental health</strong></td>
<td><strong>Prevention.</strong> Is there work being done around prevention or is the focus primarily on responding to existing needs? How are the organizations and government officials in your area ensuring an effective prevention-focused approach exists, particularly for young people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(including access to services, treatment, informal supports)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Matching methods with research questions

**Result:** The group identifies research method(s) that will help them explore the topic that interests them.

**Question to chew on:** How do you usually like to learn? How do you best process information about the world? Are you a visual learner? Do you learn best through stories? Do you need to do something in order to learn about it?

**Returning to the Story of Us.** Using the flip charted story that the group created to draw out the challenges they face and the strengths and resources they have, revisit the topic that the group was most interested in, and the research question(s) that the group brainstormed.

**Refresher on participatory action research.** Have a group discussion about what makes the group interested in this topic and what makes them uniquely qualified to research it.

- **Who is the expert** on this experience/phenomenon/problem?
- Does this experience sometimes (or often) get misunderstood or **misconstrued by “experts”** who haven’t experienced it?
- Are there things about this experience that we have **unique understanding** of that someone wouldn’t find out if they just looked it up online?
- Do we think that different people experience this differently? Will it be OK if we find out there are **multiple/conflicting experiences**, and can they all be valid?

**Qualitative Research**

Usually (but not always) doing participatory research means our methods will be **qualitative**, meaning that we are eliciting stories about people’s experiences, perspectives, beliefs, or values. Qualitative research methods can help us inquire about the nature of some particular experience, how something is experienced, what meaning something has to people, or why people feel/act a certain way in a given context.

Commonly, qualitative methods of story gathering will include forms of narrative inquiry, and this can happen in many creative ways.

- When you are curious about someone’s experiences, what do you usually do?

Every day we ask people questions. Asking questions is also a common tool in qualitative research. This can happen in **individual interviews** where we ask the same open-ended questions to multiple people. Other times this happens in **focus groups** where we ask open-ended questions to a small group of people.

- What do you do when you want to know about what people are already saying about an experience or what they think about something?

Without even having to talk to people, we are always hearing what they think or how they feel just by reading what people write. Researchers also analyze **text** to see what people are saying about things as well as how they are talking about those things. Using text in qualitative research could involve music lyrics, tweets, social media posts, online comments, documents like...
newspaper articles or student handbooks, or transcripts from meetings like the school board or city council.

- What are other ways that we communicate experiences or ideas without using words?

*Stories aren’t always verbal.* Art, theater, photographs, or memes are commonly used to communicate experiences. Researchers can also use arts-based methods to invite people to share their views, experiences, or ideas through photographs, memes, drawings, or other creative arts.

**Quantitative Research**

Quantitative research methods are used to quantify how prevalent an experience is, evaluate what impact some type of intervention is having, or determine whether there is a relationship between certain things. Quantitative research is undoubtedly useful to demonstrate the scope of a problem or measure the impact of an intervention—and quantitative methods can be a powerful tool in participatory action research to challenge what gets measured and how.

If the group is interested in quantifying how prevalent the issue you are research is, you probably want to think about conducting a survey, but before you survey anyone, start by finding out what data are already gathered about this issue. Most systems and organization are required to collect data that demonstrate the impact of whatever they are doing because they are receiving funding (whether taxpayer dollars or grant money) and need to be accountable to the outcomes they were funded to achieve. More often than not, these data sets are publicly available and free to access, although sometimes there are several steps involved in requesting access to the data.

However, the data that already exist may not exactly get at what the group has defined as the real issue. In all existing data sets, someone else has already determined what is important to gather data on, how to measure the things that have been deemed important, and who should report the data. It is important to ask “who determined what things are important to collect data on and how are those things measured in this data set?” As the group examines the existing data related to their research topic, these critical questions about the existing data will help inform any further quantitative or qualitative research the group sets out to do on the topic.

**Choosing Your Methods**

As a group, discuss how you will best be able to research your chosen topic.

- As directly impacted researchers, how might we draw out other directly impacted people’s experiences with the topic that we are researching?
- What methods play to our strengths as emerging researchers? Consider the learning styles of everyone in the group (how each person likes to process information about the world) because you do not want to collect data that no one will want to analyze later!

**Examples of Research Methods in Practice**

Until you’ve put them into practice, research methods can seem abstract. If the group is having a hard time imagining how to go about researching their topic, several examples might be helpful.
Individual Interviews

What are individual interviews?

Interviews are usually done one-on-one with participants, using several open-ended questions, and repeating this with multiple people. During interviews, researchers listen to responses and sometimes record them if they have the participant’s permission to do so. When it comes time to analyze the data, researchers will look for themes that emerge from people’s responses.

How do we put this method into action?

Write questions. Good questions are open-ended and non-judgmental. Sometimes interviewers will need to ask follow-up questions if the participant gives cryptic responses.

Recruit. If the group wants to talk to people one-on-one, this will mean getting the word out so that people will volunteer to be interviewed. Identify who is responsible for getting people to volunteer, scheduling interviews, and communicating logistics with participants (usually you will want to reserve a quiet space to have the interviews). Aim to interview ten people to ensure you hear multiple perspectives.

Consider whether the research topic prompts you to interview young people or peers of the research team, or whether it would benefit the project to interview specific adult stakeholders. For example, if the group is researching how a school policy impacts students, it would make sense to primarily interview students. However it may also be useful to interview school administrators about how the policy came to be, who supported it, whether there are protocols to ensure the policy is applied equitably. If the group wants to interview adult stakeholders, consider the role the facilitator holds and whether the facilitator has contacts or access that would aid in recruiting participation from the specific adults the group wants to interview.

Consent. Before each interview, have a conversation about consent with the participant: let them know what will happen with the information they share, and that they can stop the interview at any time if they no longer want to participate.

Take notes. Unless the group has permission to audio record interviews, it is best to have two people conduct each interview: one to ask questions and listen, and one to listen and write notes. Be sure that interview notes do not have identifying information (like the person’s name) in case the notes get lost it would not compromise confidentiality. Write out the interview questions that will be used in each interview.

Example: A group’s research question is “what factors contribute to students not seeking mental health services from their school-based health center?” They decided individual interviews would be the best way to gather data because participants may not want to share about their mental health struggles in a group setting. The researchers informed the school that they were interested in researching the barriers that students face to getting their mental health needs met.
through the school-based health center, as well as presented their plan for talking to students about this topic. They then invited participation by posting notices on school bulletin boards, sending out a message on the school’s intranet about the study, and spreading the word on social media.

Ten students reached out in response, so the researchers interviewed these students individually. They held interviews in a study room at the school’s library because it was convenient to the participants. During interviews they asked several open-ended questions like “when you are struggling with your mental health, what do you do to get the help you need?” or “tell me about a time where you did use (or would have used) the mental health services offered at your school health center...” or “what are some things that make it difficult for you to get the help you need when you are struggling with your mental health?”

The group did not have permission to audio record interviews, so instead they wrote notes during the interviews to capture what participants said, but they made sure no names were written down with any of the notes to protect confidentiality. They then analyzed the interview data by reading all their notes and pulling out what students said about the barriers to getting the help they needed from the school-based health center. They found that several participants talked about seeking and receiving help for their depression from the health center. They also found that numerous students talked about wanting help with their mental health but they were afraid that if they sought help at the health center it would get back to their parents. Students sometimes talked about not seeking mental health help from the school-based health center because they didn’t think the providers there would “get it” or might “blow it out of proportion” or else might minimize it, saying things like “they don’t take it seriously.”

The group then discussed their findings and did some research online as well as crowd-sourcing ideas on social media or talking to other people about what can help address these barriers to seeking help for mental health struggles. Between the group’s internal brainstorm and what they heard from others about ways to address these barriers, they identified several recommendations that could make a difference in mental health help-seeking on campus.

**Asking open-ended questions**
means asking questions that cannot be answered with Yes or No. For instance, asking “Do you get good mental health help at the school health center?” would get a Yes or No answer, and does not lead to more information unless you ask follow-up questions. An open-ended question might be something like “What is it like seeking mental health help at our school’s health center?” Open-ended questions can also look like simple prompts: “Tell me about the how you experience our school’s health center.”
Focus Groups

What is a focus group?
Focus groups are like interviews, but rather than interviewing one person at a time, researchers will invite a small group of participants (roughly 5-8 people makes a good focus group). Researchers ask open-ended questions to the group and listen to the responses. One benefit of conducting a focus group rather than individual interviews is time saving. Additionally, participants in a focus group will often spur each other to think about experiences they have had or opinions they have that might not have occurred to them in an individual interview. However, one drawback to a focus group is that, depending on how sensitive the topic is and how comfortable people feel with one another, participants may be reluctant to share their experiences if they might be judged by others in the group. Similar to analyzing interview data, researchers will review notes from focus group(s) and identify themes that emerged.

How do we put this method into action?

Write Questions. Draft several open-ended non-judgmental questions that you will ask the entire group.

Recruit. If the group wants to hold a focus group, they will need to put out the word so that people will volunteer. Keep the focus group to about 5-8 people so that all participants will have enough time to share. If you have more than 8 volunteers, consider holding a second focus group.

Schedule it. Scheduling the group can be tricky; try to set a time and reserve a quiet space that works for as many people as possible.

Consent. Talk through consent before the focus group begins—make sure the group understands that confidentiality is not guaranteed in a group setting, but inform them how the researchers will take care of the data for the project.

Facilitation and note-taking. At least two people are needed to facilitate a focus group, one to ask questions, another to take notes. Ensure that notes from the focus group do not include identifying information like people’s names.

Example: A group’s research question is “what are the resources in [our community] for youth struggling with substance use?” They decide focus groups will be the best way to gather data because participants will generate more ideas about resources in a group setting than they would individually. Also, while the research topic might bring up participants’ experiences with substance use, the researchers are looking for community resources so they will not be asking anyone to tell personal stories of struggling with substance use.
The group wants to send out a message on the school’s intranet in addition to messages on social media, so they inform their school administration about what they are researching and their plan to hold focus groups. They publicize the study through their social networks as well as using social media and the school’s platforms to recruit anyone interested in participating. As soon as they have at least 5 participants, they schedule a focus group after school in a study room at the library. They ask the group open-ended questions like “what kinds of resources or supports are available in your community for someone to get help when they are struggling with substance use?”

There was enough interest in the topic that the researchers had to hold three focus groups to accommodate everyone. After the last focus group, the researchers pulled together all their notes from the three focus group sessions. They listed out all the supports and resources that people had identified and discussed the resources, as well as what participants had said about the resources (some had great things to say about various community resources, while other times participants said things like “well there’s this thing, but they have so many rules there that no one actually completes the program and it doesn’t end up helping them.”

The group compiled all these resources with their notes about each one and their recommendations about improving the number and quality of options for people struggling with substance use. They presented these findings and recommendations at the next town council meeting as well as the public health district coordinating council meeting. Additionally, they presented a request to the school board to fund a full-time substance use counselor at the high school. Several of the researchers along with several focus group participants also started a mutual aid group at the high school for anyone struggling.
Arts-based

What are arts-based methods?

Arts-based methods are an alternative to using words and narrative to elicit people’s stories or perspectives. This could look like a focus group in which participants are asked to respond to a question or a concept by drawing, painting, collaging, or doing another form of creative art. Rather than analyzing what participants say in words, researchers would analyze the images participants create.

Arts-based methods can also offer a way of overcoming barriers to meeting with participants in person. Researchers might invite people to email/text/post, or otherwise submit photographs or images that represent their experience or perspective on a given topic. If people are submitting photographs that they have taken, researchers need to be careful to communicate guidelines about getting consent from any other people pictured in the photos. Alternatively, researchers could ask participants to share memes or other images that illustrate their thoughts on a given topic.

How do we put this method into action?

Arts-based methods can vary widely, but usually they will happen within similar settings as interviews or focus groups.

Recruit. Put out the word about the study and schedule any in-person components if necessary.

Schedule it / create online forum. If you will be creating art in-person, you will need to schedule a time for participants to do come individually or for a group session. If you will be asking for images electronically, decide what platform you want to receive images and whether it will be public or individual submissions.

Consent. If in-person, talk through consent with participants. If a participant decides they want to keep their artwork, ask if you can take a photo of it. If requesting electronic submissions, ensure participants have guidelines about what to submit, whether it will be public or private, and what will be done with it.

Create. If in-person, researchers provide time, space, and supplies for participants to create something artistic that represents their thoughts or experiences with the research question. If online, researchers curate the space where participants’ creations or images will land.

Example: A group’s research question is “What does ‘community’ mean to youth in rural Maine?” The group decided to use arts-based methods in part because they felt like narratives about rural Maine often failed to capture the essence of their experiences. They also knew that all the participants would be living in rural Maine and it would be difficult to get to everyone in-person (let alone get them all together in-person for an arts-based focus group), so they decided to invite participants to send in photos that represented their experience of “community.”
The group talked about creating a Facebook page where people could post these photos, but decided against it to ensure that participants could share photos without worrying that someone might judge the photo that represented “community” to them. They also talked about getting a GoogleVoice phone number so that people could text in their photos, but they worried that people wouldn’t participate because it wasn’t obvious where their photos were going. Ultimately the group decided to go back to social media and create a Facebook page and Instagram account called Community in Rural Maine and #ruralmainecommunity. Going this route, they were thoughtful in writing the page descriptions to inform people who the researchers were, what they were doing, what their hopes for the project were, and what to think about before posting a picture (not posting any pictures that you don’t have consent to post, and not criticizing anyone else’s photos).

The group started sharing this within their networks and inviting people to tag other youth in rural Maine to participate. People started sharing photographs, and while not everyone fit the participants that the group was looking to hear from (some people who shared photos were deemed to not be youth, and others didn’t appear from their profiles to be living in rural Maine). Most people who shared photos did seem to be rural Maine youth though, so the group began analyzing these images. They found that many photos did contain other people, some photos were of a person helping another person, some photos were of libraries, some photos of schools, some photos of what appeared to be a church social or bean supper. There were a number of photos that seemed to have a stark tone, no people in them, or evoke a sense of loneliness. The group had gathered a rich and varied collage of rural Maine community life.

The next step for the group was to make an actual digital collage of what they had found. They sorted the photos into groups that were similar, those groups tended to reflect several things: helping, social hubs, loneliness, and sharing food. The collage was arranged with these groupings, and the group of researchers were able to share their findings with the Maine Children’s Cabinet to help them understand what a rural community’s continuum of care should reflect and uphold.

**Arts-based methods**
can include a wide array of creative arts as alternative ways for participants to illustrate their experience or perspective on a topic:
- Drawing
- Painting
- Collage
- Photography
- Memes

*Add your ideas for creative arts to this list!*
**Text-based**

**What are text-based methods?**

Existing text can be a rich source of qualitative data to analyze:

**Written policies** (such as student handbooks or disciplinary policies) are reflections of our attitudes towards certain people or behaviors, and they also often reveal what resources are or aren’t available in a community. Researchers sometimes look at policies to assess how they impact certain groups of people or whether they impact the issues they intend to address.

**Newspapers** are another source for text-based research. The way that news media covers certain issues can reveal society’s attitudes about those issues.

**Transcripts** from public meetings (such as city council or school board) can reveal what people are saying about certain topics and how they are talking about those issues.

**Music lyrics** can be used in research to see how issues are dealt with in popular culture.

**How do we put this method into action?**

**Identify your data source.** Text-based research comes in a variety of forms. It is recommended that you choose a source that is publicly available and will not compromise anyone’s expectation of privacy (i.e. using a written policy, public meeting transcript, selected newspaper articles, music lyrics, etc.).

**Gather/request text.** Most policies or handbooks that a group might want to analyze are publicly available, but may need to be requested, such as a transcript from a public meeting.

**Read.** Once you have all the text you want to analyze, read it thoroughly and analyze it.

**Example:** A group’s research question is “How do substance use policies differ in the various schools in Southern Maine?” Group members are students at several different high schools in Southern Maine and they have experienced/witnessed very different approaches that their schools take towards students who use substances.

The group decided to compare student handbooks from 10 selected schools in Southern Maine to see how similar or different their policies on substances were. The student handbooks were available on each school’s website, so they downloaded them and found the sections where substances were discussed, including school-based supports offered to students and consequences for possession, use, or sale of substances. The group brought these documents to a session where they could read them together. They found they needed to make a table where they could chart out what each school policy had outlined for supports and consequences.

To examine how these policies were playing out for students, the group decided they would also look at the disciplinary data reported to the Department of Education (DOE) by each of the selected 10 schools. They were able to find this on the DOE website, but they needed to fill out a webform saying what data they wanted and who to email it to. They wanted to see how many drug-related incidents and alcohol-related incidences these 10 schools had reported, as well as
how many in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and how many expulsions the schools had reported. A data analyst at DOE emailed an Excel spreadsheet including these data for the entire state but the group could sort for the schools they wanted and collapse the rest of the rows of data.

Once they had isolated the behavioral data for their chosen 10 schools, they realized that the schools had very different student body sizes, so they would not be able to compare the raw numbers of behavioral incidents or disciplinary events. However, the spreadsheet also included a column with the rate of each incident per 1,000 students. The group looked closely at this column because they were able to see that some schools had higher rates of drug- and alcohol-related incidents, but not all of them had correspondingly high rates of suspensions or expulsions. They also noticed that some schools had very low rates of drug- and alcohol-related incidents, and low rates of disciplinary events.

The group added 5 columns to their table of substance policies so that they could add for each school: the rate of drug-related incidents, the rate of alcohol-related incidents, the rate of in-school suspensions, the rate of out of school suspensions, and the rate of expulsions.

In their background research, the group had found a template for analyzing social policies. Using this framework, the group walked through an analysis of two of the schools’ policies (opting for school with the lowest rate of total suspensions and the school with the highest rate of total suspensions). These two analyses included the values underlying the two different policies, the cost to the school for enforcing the policy (i.e. the salary of a drug and alcohol counselor on campus, the salary of the school resource officer, etc.), and the impacts of these policies on students as measured by exclusionary discipline. While the group acknowledged that the disciplinary data obtained from DOE had its limits in terms of being able to measure true impacts of these policies on students, the group was still able to see that the schools with substance policies citing the most supports for students had lower suspension rates, and the schools with the harshest substance policies had the highest suspension rates.

The researchers then discussed these findings as a group, including how they compared to the individual group members’ personal experiences and observations. They then started looking to see if they could find model policies for schools to respond to students using substances. They crafted their table of findings into an infographic to enable them to share it with a wider audience including students, parents, and school administrators. They also took what they had found about model policies to boil down their commentary on the current policies into three recommendations related to improving student supports and increasing equity for students to receive fair treatment from one school to the next.

The group knew that the policy recommendations were something that they would need school administrators and school boards to buy into, so they crafted how they wanted to communicate their recommendations to this audience. But the group did have the ability to raise student awareness about the different substance policies that schools in Southern Maine were enforcing by turning the infographic of their findings into an online messaging campaign.
Community Asset Mapping

What is community asset mapping?
The physical and social environment tells a story about the community. By mapping out the physical and/or social features that are present in a community, we can shed light on root causes and conditions of people’s experiences or social problems present in that community. There are a number of ways that asset mapping can illuminate a community’s structure from different angles:

Mapping physical assets: The physical environment both reflects and prescribes what experiences and opportunities people in that community have access to. This kind of project involves physically mapping things like hospitals, banks, grocery stores with fresh foods, convenience stores, schools, libraries, parks and greenspaces, police stations, coffee shops, faith communities, and other things present in the built environment. This can be a springboard to deeper inquiry into why things are arranged the way they are, what’s present and what’s absent, what residents want in their community and how the community’s social structures and governance structures can make those things possible.

Mapping ownership: Who owns property and operates business also tells a story about access and inclusion in a community. For example, mapping where there are Black-owned, POC-owned, or immigrant-owned businesses can lead to further inquiry into the experiences of non-White business owners, why their businesses are located where they are, what resources are available (or what resources are needed) to expand access to ownership and deepen inclusion in the community’s economy.

Mapping social assets: Social assets may not be brick-and-mortar places in the community, but this type of mapping looks at resources, opportunities, and social and cultural features of a community that contribute to people’s experiences there. Social asset maps might include job readiness programs, monthly community dinners, youth advisory boards for various systems or organizations, restorative justice programs embedded in systems, or restorative philosophies threaded through the community.

Mapping experiences: Mapping people’s experiences or feelings in various places in their community is sometimes called “psychogeography.” This method can shed light on how different places in the built environment are experienced differently by different people. For example, mapping how different people feel in a community’s parks and greenspaces can shed light on inequitable access—who is “allowed” or made to feel welcome (or unwelcome) in certain public spaces. Mapping how different people feel in certain spaces can be a springboard to further inquiry about why some people feel welcome while others feel distinctly unwelcome in a certain space – Is it because of how other citizens treat them in that space? Is it because certain people’s presence is policed in that space while other people’s presence is not policed? Is it because there are different narratives about that type of space in various communities within the larger community?
3. Producing data

**Result:** The group develops a plan for finding out what they already know about the topic, what other sources say about the topic, and how they are going to collect their own data on this topic.

**Question to chew on:** When was the last time you crowd-sourced information? What did you ask your networks? Were the responses you got helpful?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“I Am From” Poem (past)</th>
<th>“I Am” Poem (present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I Am From” poems are a tool for seeing what has shaped our identities in a fresh light and sharing those often unseen/unshared backgrounds that are fundamental to who we have become so far. A Mad Lib style template for writing “I Am From” poems can be found <a href="#">here</a>. Examples of others’ “I Am From” poems are included following the template.</td>
<td>“I Am” poems are a tool for seeing ourselves, learning to name qualities/themes/concepts as they relate to how we experience ourselves (practice for what’s to come in analyzing data that other people have shared). A template for writing “I Am” poems can be found <a href="#">here</a>, or a template for another variation called a “Bio Poem” can be found <a href="#">here</a>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Producing data through participatory methods**

Often times we hear about “gathering data” or “collecting data.” So why are we talking about “producing data” in this section? In participatory action research, there is an important awareness that objective truth is not simply “out there” waiting to be discovered, gathered, or collected. Participatory action research emerged precisely because people’s lived experiences were not always accurately represented by researchers and experts, and consequently, systems are often not responsive to or supportive of people’s actual experiences and needs.

When researchers do research, there is an interaction that happens between the researcher and the thing they are researching. The researcher asks a question, determines what they are going to measure and how they are going to measure it, and then goes out to find answers using the means they’ve determined. Participatory action research has made a point of calling out that the researcher’s perspective is not neutral—the researcher is a participant in their own study, not just because they are directly impacted by the issue they are researching, but also because their point of view influences every aspect of the study from the questions they ask to the people they include and the way they interpret the data. It is important to remember that the knowledge created in any research project is influenced by the researcher’s point of view, or their “positionality.” Owning that positionality is a core strength of participatory action research.

**Reviewing the existing knowledge and research on this topic**

Before you start collecting your own data, it is a good practice to do some background work and define the problem you are researching. As a team, the group can make quick work of this by chunking out the overall topic into smaller sub-topics and having individuals or pairs read up on those sub-topics. Use the group as a resource to cull as much knowledge about the topic as they can and share it with each other.

- What do we already know about this topic? How do we know what we know?
- What are others saying they know about this issue? How do they know what they know?
• What are considered reliable sources on this topic? What makes them reliable? Who generated information contained in the sources and how did they determine what was important or what was true?
• Who is affected by this issue? Who gains and who loses from the way things are currently with this issue?
• Do we know what has caused this issue?
• Have our personal experiences with this issue given us knowledge, or pointed us toward more information about it?
• Does our experience with this issue seem to be different than what we’ve read or heard from other sources about this issue?

**Ethical Considerations.**
While it is everyone’s right to do research, it is important to be thoughtful and ethical with research projects so that we don’t cause harm to others or get our projects shut down for breaking policies. We should be aware that research can do harm to individuals when researchers fail to consider power dynamics, participants’ trauma histories, or people’s right to privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, research can do harm to communities when researchers have an agenda for what they expect or want to find, rather than keeping an open mind for whatever they find through their research. Before you start collecting data, consider the following:

- Do we have all the permission we need to proceed with this research? If we are doing any recruitment through a school or organization, are they aware of it and do we have their approval? If our research topic concerns a school or organization, have we made them aware that we are doing this research?
- If anyone disagrees with our research or takes issue with what we are asking, do we have the support of our school or organization?
- Have we asked someone to read through any materials we want to distribute in order to recruit participation?
- Have we asked for other perspectives on what we are asking people? Is it a sensitive topic? Do we need to check with anyone before we start asking people about this topic?
- Do we have a plan for talking with participants about consent so they know they don’t have to participate, they can stop participating at any time, and they know what will happen with any information they share?

**Vetting your sources**
Doing background research can seem overwhelming at first if we don’t break it into manageable chunks or split up the work. While the first stop may be Google, make sure that isn’t the only stop. Consider checking out these open data sources:

- Census
- Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS)
- Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF) data reports
- Department of Education (DOE) data warehouse
- Opportunity Atlas
- Maine Center for Disease Control (CDC) Social Determinants reports
- Maine Public Safety Crime in Maine data warehouse
- Maine Rural Health Research Center
- Maine CDC Rural Health data reports
- Find more open data sources with the Data Scan
• Do we have a plan to protect the privacy and confidentiality of people who participate? Can we ensure that the data cannot be traced back to individuals or identify who said/wrote/drew what? If participants will not remain anonymous (as might be the case if social media is used to collect data), how will we communicate guidelines to participants about what they say/write/post since it will be public?
• Do we have an open mind about what we might find? Will we be OK with findings that are different from own experiences?

**Before you go out into the field, get your research plan reviewed and test run your methods!**

Research has the potential to do harm, and there have been numerous studies that were unethical and caused harm to individual participants as well as entire communities.

One way to make sure that your research won’t do harm is to ask someone to review your plan for recruitment, how you plan to gather data, what data you are asking for, and what you will do with the data once you have it. Often research goes to an Internal Review Board (IRB) before the researchers can go out and do it. The IRB reviews the ethics of the project and either approves it or gives feedback to the researchers about what else they should consider before doing the research. In this case, MYAN will serve as the IRB to be a second pair of eyes on every YPAR project.

Once you have created your research question, planned out your methods, and created any materials you will use in recruitment or data collection, check in with the MYAN Statewide Team to review your research before you go out to collect data.

Finally, before the group takes their research plan and puts it into action out in the field, it’s a good idea to try out the data collection methods with each other first. This is one last way to check that your materials don’t have errors in them, your questions make sense when you ask them out loud, and nothing feels too invasive for the person on the receiving end.

**Recruiting diverse participation.**

As directly impacted researchers, the group already knows some things about the topic based on their lived experience. But research is about building onto what we already know. Oftentimes research questions will contain a clue about who the researchers will want to reach in the study or recruit for participation. Have the group discuss whether they have considered who might have experience with their topic, and how best to reach them.

• Are we being mindful to include people who have experience with the topic even if they are not in our network of friends?
• Are we hearing from adults and system stakeholders on this topic? Are we engaging with perspectives that currently hold power or represent the dominant narrative?
• If we are putting the word out via social media, email, flyers, or posters, have we included information about who we are, what we’re researching, who we hope will participate, why their perspective matters, and what participation entails?
• Do we have a plan for responding to anyone who wants to participate, if a response is necessary? Who will respond to people interested in participating?
4. Analyzing data

**Result:** The group has a plan to analyze the data they have collected.

Dealing with overwhelm, loss of motivation, and attrition

Once the group has produced as much data as was feasible, it can feel overwhelming to figure out what to do with it. If the group is feeling weary at this point, or you are seeing some attrition or disengagement, this can be a good moment to celebrate what the group has already accomplished by producing data. Take a step back from the process to celebrate, recharge the group’s momentum and sense of connection with each other. When you come back to the data, it can also be useful to talk about different learning styles among members to make sure that each person has a role in the data analysis stage that they are excited and comfortable doing.

Looking for meaning in the data

How you analyze data depends on the kind of data you have and what kind of research question you are asking of the data. Most likely you will end up with some amount of text—whether from interview notes, focus group notes, social media posts, online comments, news articles, documents, etc. But you may also have images—photographs, drawings, collages, memes, etc. Whether the group is analyzing text or images, going back to the research question is a good starting place.

- What was the question we set out to understand more deeply?

**Analyzing text.**

Whether the text you have comes in small bits like comments or larger pieces like interview notes or an entire written policy, analysis usually looks like breaking it down into smaller chunks. Oftentimes the easiest way to do this is to take one sentence or one line of text at a time. Using the research question that you set out to answer, try looking at each line or sentence for what concept—or theme—is contained in it. Going line by line through your text, try using one word or a short phrase to describe the concepts that participants were communicating that answer your research question. Write down these short descriptions in the margins next to the piece of text you are describing.

After a little while, you will see these themes and concepts repeated. Notice when you see a concept recurring throughout what one person or many people said. These themes emerging from the text you are analyzing will become your findings. As you see more similar themes, you may also find some outliers or odd-ball concepts that only appear once or twice. These are important too, even if they make for more complicated results.

Once you have a list of themes that came up over and over in the data (and some that maybe came up once or twice but felt notable), it can be helpful to write them all on a flip chart, or a GoogleDoc, or create a gallery walk of the themes so that you can discuss them as a group:

- How do these findings fit with our own lived experiences?
- Do any of the findings surprise us?
- Do these findings raise more questions for us?
Analyzing images.
Analyzing images is not so different from analyzing words. However, instead of going line by line through a written document looking for concepts or themes, you look at images for the concepts and themes they communicate.

Looking at photographs…
- What is the mood of the photo?
- Does the photo contain people?
- What is the setting? Local? Maine? Somewhere else?
- What is pictured in the photo?

Looking at drawings…
- What did the person draw?
- Are there symbols? Words?
- Is it colorful? What is the mood?
- Does the drawing tell a story?
- Is there a flow or a sequence?

As you see similar themes across the images you are analyzing, try to put a word or a short phrase to each concept or theme. Look for the themes that are similar and illustrated in multiple participants’ art, as well as themes that stick out as different.

Once you have a list of themes that came up over and over in the data (and some that maybe came up once or twice but felt notable), discuss them as a group:

- How do these findings fit with our own lived experiences?
- Do any of the findings surprise us?
- Do these findings raise more questions for us?

Ethical Considerations
Analyzing data offers several opportunities to make sure we are being thoughtful of everyone who participated to produce the data, and to make sure we are checking our own biases as we interpret the data.

- Have we made sure our data doesn’t include anything that might identify our participants?
- Are we using each other to check our biases as we go back through what we heard from our participants, especially if we disagreed with something someone said or if an experience they had that is different from our own experiences?
5. Telling the story and presenting the findings

Result: The group has distilled the important take-aways from their findings and created a plan for sharing it with others.

Question to chew on: Think of a time when someone sold you on a new idea. How did they get you on board?

So you did some cool research! Now what?
After boiling down the research findings into themes that shed new light on your research question, it’s not unusual to feel both triumphant and unsure. Have the group revisit their findings and brainstorm a list of people, organizations, or systems that could be part of the reason for the findings, and perhaps part of the solutions that the group comes up with:

- What did you find from your research?
- Who should know about this?
- What should be done with this knowledge?
- How can we share our findings with everyone who participated to produce the data?

Brainstorm
Sometimes it’s obvious what actions and solutions the research findings should initiate. Other times researchers might feel stumped as to what should be done with what they found. If you need help getting unstuck and getting creative, try playing Desert Island where the groupbrainstorms as many possible uses for a rubber glove as they can (quantity over quality, there are no bad ideas here). Then try the same activity again, but this time generate as many ideas as the group can come up with about “what do we want to see happen with our research results?”

At this stage, there are no bad ideas, the group has free reign to be creative, idealistic, brainstorm with all the power of an Executive Director and all the resource discretion of a Chief Financial Officer.

Critical self-reflection
Once the group has brainstormed about what should be done with what your research revealed, pause to reflect and take stock of where the group’s own beliefs or biases might be present in the list. We generally come up with recommendations that align with our own preconceived beliefs and agendas, so it is important to step back from the recommendations we want to make and check whether those recommendations are actually supported by the research findings. Make it a frequent practice in the group to ask why we think a certain recommendation will be an effective, ethical, and equitable solution to the problem we are seeking to address. Remember it’s not just the research process that is participatory, the solution crafting process can also be participatory.

What’s possible? Only after brainstorming as many ideas as the group can think of, from the magical to the mundane, should you start winnowing down the list. To do this, the group might start by chunking the ideas into categories based on how similar the ideas are. Maybe some ideas can be combined. This is also a time to start distinguishing between ideas that are achievable with actions in the short-term, to ideas that will only be possible once some other things change.
Who has the power? With the spectrum of possible ideas becoming more concrete, start attributing who would need to be on board in order to make each action possible. Some ideas might be possible for the group to implement by themselves. The group could create something that addresses some of the research findings or which fills a gap that the research identified. Other solution strategies might be recommendations for others to implement. The group could determine that their school’s vaping policies are unclear and counterproductive, so they could recommend the school’s administration or school board consider a change to the policy.

Telling the story.
Once the group has identified several achievable solutions and who would need to be on board to implement them, the group can start talking about how they want to craft their message.

- When someone is pitching an idea to you, what makes you receptive to whatever they are pitching?
- When someone tells you about major problems we are facing and that we need to fix immediately, how do you react?
- What are some problems that you can think of that you feel empowered to act on and where you want to be part of a solution?

Framing
When we want to communicate a problem and our recommendations for solutions, framing science tells us that we reach people better when we appeal to shared values, identify the consequences of the current challenge, and focus on what we can do to change things.

- Why does this issue matter? (Start with an appeal to shared values)
- What is the problem/challenge?
- What are the consequences?
- How can we solve it?

When presenting research findings and recommendations, often our audience will have similar responses to communication that only focuses on the problem without offering practical solutions. When we only hear about the seriousness of the problem, we can feel hopeless and helpless. Framing science tells us that if we want our messages to be effective, we can focus on shared values between the messenger and the audience, the impact of the problem, and how we can solve it. Sandwich the problem between your shared values and the solutions you are recommending.

Remember that this entire research process began with the group collaboratively authoring The Story of Us. The research process has deepened and expanded and complicated that story, so now how would you re-author the Story of Us from your perspectives as accomplished researchers?

Try it out!
Have the group practice turning the research findings + recommendations into a message geared toward the people/organizations they identified as partners for implementing solutions.
6. How do we make change?

**Result:** The group has a plan to make recommendations for what they want to happen close to home in a reasonable timeframe, and a vision for what they hope for the long run.

**Question to chew on:** Who is a change-maker you admire and why?

**Coming full circle.** This is a good time to reflect on what the group has done so far, where they started, what they learned, and what they wanted to accomplish. With the group, bring back the Story of Us flip charts where the group identified their common cares and concerns and interests. Coming back to these themes can be a good reminder of what the group holds in common, as well as a re-energizer if the momentum is waning after doing the research and not knowing if it will make the difference they wanted it to make.

The group has done the research, identified who needs to hear about it, and worked on framing the findings for various audiences. During the Story of Us, the group brainstormed all of the internal and external supports they have, and this list becomes important now that the group wants to translate their researched recommendations into action.

**Army building.** Revisiting the charted supports, the group can begin to match their recommendations from Module 5 with the supports/resources they listed during the Story of Us. The following questions may help to think about…

- Are these still the supports we would have come up with today? Do we need to add any?
- Do any of the supports we’ve listed show up in our recommendations?
- Are any of the supports we’ve listed bridges/gatekeepers/access points to the audiences we identified as needing to hear about our research and recommendations?
- Who do we want to bring into our effort as allies or sponsors of policy changes or program pilots?
- What are the steps we would take to involve each of these supports in our efforts?

**Immediate goals and ultimate goals.** Recall what the group worked on when they were framing their recommendations for different audiences in Module 5, they teased apart what was manageable in the short-term and what changes were longer-term. If all the goals are long-term large-scale changes that require buy-in from more people/systems, the group is going to feel defeated and powerless. Make sure that as the group is matching their supports to their recommendations, they have at least one recommendation that is within their reach to start implementing right away. Consider making a chart like this one…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUR RECOMMENDATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doable by us right now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what is the change we want?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what action do we need to take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have we identified needs or questions for future research to address?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YPAR Hub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory action research and co-researching as a tool for situating youth knowledge at the centre of research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m Empowered by a Better Connection”: Youth Participatory Action Research and Critical Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging Youth in Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical PAR in &quot;Revolting&quot; Times: A discussion with Michelle Fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Knowing&quot; Inequality and Social Justice Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Is How I Learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student voice in well-being: a case study of participatory action research in positive education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Participatory Action Research: A Feminist Project for Validity and Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Justice: A Fragile, Fraught, and Essential Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolla Dolla Bill Y’all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RE)Search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilizing Youth: Engaging Young People in Making Community Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Rites Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s Your Issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Radical Model for Decriminalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory Action Research, Mental Health Service User Research, and the Hearing (our) Voices Projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>