

Elevating Insights Series

# YPAR: WHAT IS IT, AND WHAT CAN IT DO?



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FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT





If policies are not being co-created with the very people whose lives they change, then they're not as efficient, effective, and ultimately, as generationally liberating as they can be. It's as simple as that. So how do decision-makers and policy advocates engage in co-creating policy? This is where Youth Participatory Action Research comes into play.



## WHAT IS YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

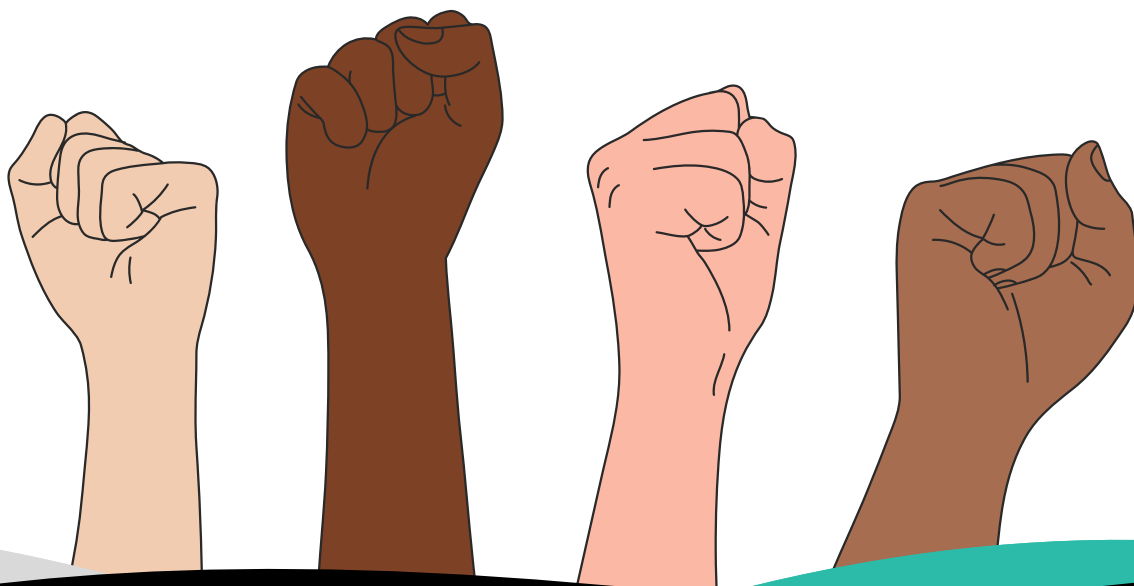
Let's start with the basics: what is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)? In short, it's a [critical approach](#) to equity-centric policy development where young people are trained to conduct peer-to-peer research on systemic issues that impact their daily lives. The process culminates with youth developing and presenting policy recommendations (an "action response") to decision-makers who maintain the power to implement these solutions across relevant institutions - for example, state or local legislators, mayors or governors, or heads of agencies. As a result, young people assume the powerful roles of framing critical questions, generating rigorous evidence, and determining appropriate policy responses to systemically racist and unjust issues - roles from which they are commonly excluded.

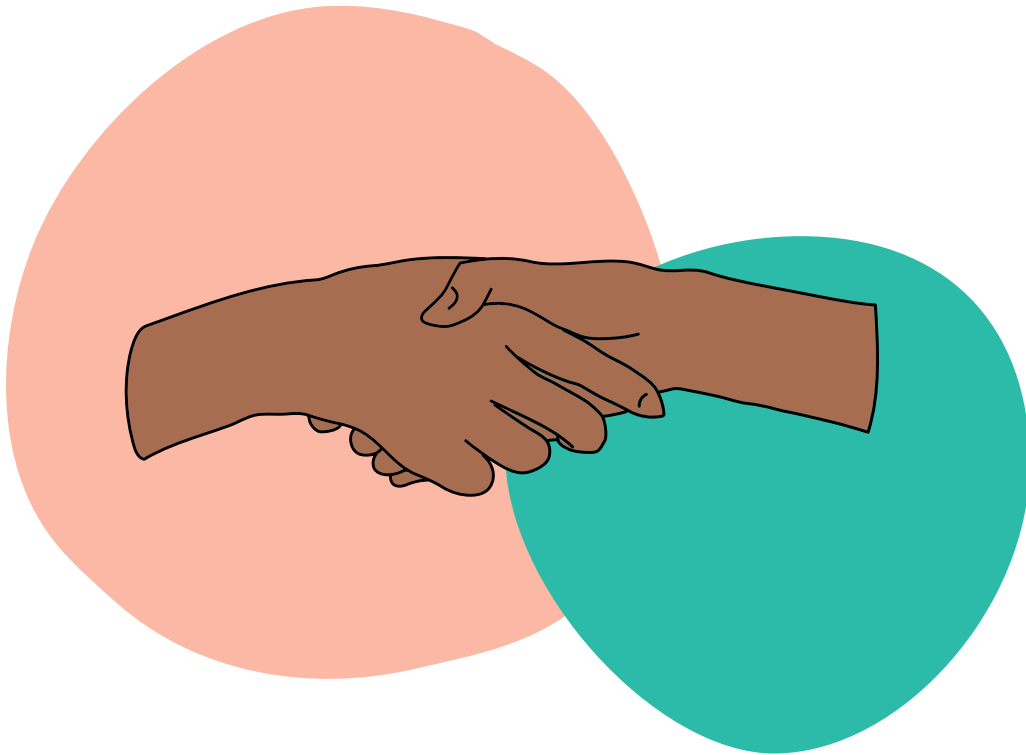
What makes YPAR uniquely "actionable" in the policy process is that it extends beyond standard youth engagement processes to include rigorous research, including quantitative and qualitative methods. With the support of independent research experts, young people might use a combination of regressions, ethnography, public opinion polls, life stories, testimonies, performance, or focus groups to collect and analyze their evidence. Adhering to rigorous research methodologies validates young people's lived expertise by imparting the unique credibility that research receives, making it a powerful currency in policy decisions.

Aside from its basis in evidence and data, what differentiates YPAR from other forms of youth and community engagement is that it's designed to promote the empowerment of marginalized individuals. Like all participatory action research, it is intended to be practiced by those it most directly affects, not on those most affected – which is why young people's recommendations often challenge racially oppressive and ageist structures and systems they deal with, including those not typically considered "youth systems."

For example, thanks to the YPAR work taking place through [Iowa's Youth Action Squads](#), we learn from young people like Danny Levy, who provided recommendations that will [extend the value of the dollar in Black communities](#) to stave off gentrification in Cedar Rapids; or Nevaeh Stover, who has detailed her solutions to eliminate food deserts in Muscatine; or Anyiel Akec, who requested Ethnic Studies courses at Dowling Catholic High School in Des Moines, to ensure a more representative history be taught.

YPAR not only highlights how in tune young people often are with their socio-political environments, but also how ready they are to exceed expectations and make right the wrongs marginalized young people experience every day. This is why YPAR can lead to such revelatory findings and policy recommendations from young people – especially young people of color: because rather than tinkering around the edges with changes that have little impact, young people who directly experience oppressive and ineffective systems can have the lived experience, knowledge, and incentive to identify [how equitable, effective systems should look](#). Ultimately, well-implemented Youth Participatory Action Research removes barriers that keep young people from leading in their communities and practicing their agency to promote positive change.





## HOW CAN YPAR INFLUENCE POLICY?

Implemented effectively and equitably, YPAR can achieve a lot. It advances power-sharing by shifting the overall balance of power away from adults and more equitably toward the young people most affected as they get to generate, interpret, and use credible evidence to change policies and therefore their lives. What does that look like in practice? For Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS), the largest system in the state of Iowa, it yielded a massive win for young people - [the removal of school resource officers \(SROs\) from public schools](#).

This win comes courtesy of the [Iowa Youth Action Squad](#), which is managed by the state children's cabinet, the [Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development Council](#) (ICYD)—a participant in the Forum's 2020 Realizing the Opportunity for All Youth Learning Cohort and 2021 YPAR Capacity Building Cohort. As for how this win was achieved: young people from diverse backgrounds were recruited and trained to conduct and execute peer-to-peer research on priority issues for young people, synthesize their findings into policy recommendations, and then advocate with decision-makers. One example confronted the unwanted presence of police officers on school campuses.

With the topic of school resource officers (SROs) taking center stage in communities across the country after the murder of George Floyd, youth leaders gathered data from white students and students of color, parents, and school staff to determine how they felt about SROs being on campus. The results were clear. The most common feeling was that students, specifically students of color, felt uneasy around SROs and saw them as major players responsible in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, the Youth Action Squad collaborated with the Iowa Department of Human Rights' Division of Criminal & Juvenile Justice Planning to compile a report that found a 200 percent increase in the number of juvenile charges originating at DMPS during the period that SROs were active—more than 60 percent of which were for misdemeanors and were not a concern to public safety. These arrests disproportionately involved Black youth, proving that the negative impact of SROs on non-white students was not just a national trend, but a local one too.

The data didn't lie and was too detailed to dismiss. When the Youth Action Squad presented an alternative to SROs in the form of a restorative justice plan, alongside a cost analysis, the school board adopted the recommendation. The result: no more armed police on school grounds. As for the efficacy of the decision: According to the ICYD, in two years DMPS has seen an 81.7 percent reduction in youth being referred to juvenile court services as a result of no longer having SROs over-policing non-criminal acts.

This YPAR win in Iowa is significant for many reasons. Not only is it a clear policy win for young people of color, it's also a win for all young people to be able to experience what it is like to share power with adults whose decisions dictate so many aspects of their lives. But perhaps most notable about the Youth Action Squad victory in Iowa is the removal of SROs during such a politically charged moment, one that came in the months following the murder of George Floyd.

YPAR lets youth identify what is broken and how to fix it. Therefore, YPAR's true efficacy comes from its basis in data. Data that is carefully gathered, cleaned, synthesized, and shared. When youth can generate and present strong data that can be trusted, their recommendations and input can take on a credibility that is often reserved for the highly credentialed adults who more often conduct research—not for the young people whose contributions are so often dismissed.



## WHAT MAKES IT YPAR?

Participatory research is relatively new, having become more common in [research circles during the early 2000s](#). Because of this, there are few playbooks available to inform young people and adult allies on how to do YPAR. It's important to clarify what is needed for this work to be considered YPAR as opposed to traditional youth engagement. YPAR typically checks the following boxes:

- **Engage Across the Spectrum:** Young people who design and conduct the research should reflect the racial, socio-economic, and other identities from across the spectrum to ensure all young people can engage in the process, not just those whose circumstances may better allow them to participate in traditional youth development programs.
- **Partner with Research Experts:** Young people should be trained by a research expert to collect and synthesize data. This research expert should participate in the synthesis process to ensure precision, transparency, and efficacy.
- **Respect Youth Interests:** Young people should not be given a subset of issues to investigate, they should be empowered to identify the issues and recommendations organically.
- **Adopt Anti-Adulthood:** The adults and leaders who work with young people should receive quality and rigorous Anti-Adulthood training.
- **Provide Soft-Skill Coaching:** In addition to research and data-oriented support, young people should receive training that promotes effective facilitation for presentations, focus groups, and interviews.
- **Compensate Researchers:** Young people should be treated as professionals, including by [compensating their time, work, and intellectual property](#).

This is not an exhaustive list; it's important to note that YPAR work includes doing all these things, and more. While other types of youth engagement no doubt add value, it's essential that communities that are striving build capacity to share power with young people are doing so intentionally, and in ways that do not tokenize, take advantage of, or manipulate the agency of young people.



## MAKING SPACE FOR YPAR IN THE FUTURE

Implementing YPAR equitably and effectively is easier said than done. It is essential that children's cabinets and youth agencies continue to work closely with stakeholders to define and lift up best practices to integrate YPAR into policy development.

As the youth in Iowa are showing us, the young people of today are eager and prepared to do this work. It's incumbent upon youth organizations, justice advocates, cabinets, community leaders, and electeds to build capacity for YPAR within their communities, and ensure young people have the opportunity to live out the mantra of "Nothing About Us, Without Us."



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