

Contact information

Roxanne Turuba  
672-515-5337  
rturuba@foundrybc.ca  
915-1045 Howe Street,  
Vancouver, BC, V6Z 2A9

a place of mind



# Practical considerations for engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance use as youth advisors and co-researchers

Roxanne Turuba, Anurada Amarasekera, Amanda Madeleine Howard, Sarah Irving, Haley Turnbull, Corinne Tallon, Skye Barbic

Foundry, Providence Health Care | University of British Columbia

## Introduction

Youth have traditionally been excluded from research and, when included, have often been limited to being sources of data (1). Although youth participatory action research (YPAR) has been gaining popularity over the last decade (2-4), few studies report on how best to apply these methods effectively with youth. To address this gap, we describe how we engaged youth as advisors and research assistants in a qualitative research study and our key learnings for engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance use.

## Methods in Phase 1

### Youth Engagement & Evaluation

We applied YPAR methods and formed a **Project Youth Advisory Committee** called Youth4Youth (Y4Y) to inform all phases of the project. It is comprised of youth (n=14) with lived/living experience of substance use from across BC. From Y4Y we hired:

- **Youth Research Assistants (YRAs)** to facilitate interviews and support the thematic analysis and knowledge translation of the research findings.
- **Youth Peer Evaluators (YPEs)** to co-develop the evaluation plan and conduct evaluation activities.
- **Curriculum Working Group Members** to co-create youth-informed substance use training for peer support workers and other service providers.

Mid- and end-point surveys were distributed to evaluate and improve our engagement methods. Evaluation surveys were co-designed by the YPEs and an evaluation specialist using Likert scales and open-ended questions. Study participants who took part in a focus group or interview were also asked to complete a follow-up survey about their experience.

## Results

The positive impact of engaging youth with lived experience was reflected by study participant responses to the quality and relevance of the interview questions and positive experiences with the youth facilitators. Youth partners described developing new skills in research, group facilitation, leadership, communication and professionalism. Lessons learned also led to organizational changes to foster more equitable relationships with youth and practical considerations for engaging youth with lived experience, as outlined below:

### Equitable hiring process

- Diverse recruitment methods
- Representation from diverse voices and experiences, unless studying a specific population
- Multiple hiring points based on phases of work

- Pay youth adequately for their time and expertise
- Offer youth the same compensation, unless a leadership position is offered
- Transparency about the compensation process (e.g., paperwork, processing time, tax info)
- Transparency about existing structural barriers to compensation

### Proper compensation

**“Using your lived experience for this kind of work can sometimes be triggering and emotionally exhaustive....so compensation helps not only pay people for the time they have taken out of their day, but it also helps affirm the message that their contributions are valuable.” – Y4Y member**

### Safe spaces

- Create a community agreement
- Ask youth how they would like to be engaged
- Ensure youths' confidentiality and privacy
- Check-in with youth before talking about certain topics
- Have sufficient project staff trained in youth engagement methods

- Meet youth where they are at and engage them in a way that reflects their interest, capacity and skills
- Acknowledge other commitments and personal factors youth may be dealing with
- Allow advisory members to take breaks from the opportunity if needed

### Flexibility

### Communication, transparency, accountability

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Point person for each engagement opportunity
- Break up project into phases of work
- Multiple forms of communications
- Discuss youths' interests and capacity

Transparency about:

- Shifts in timelines
- How feedback is implemented
- Role and decision-making power

### Youth capacity building

- Ask youth what they are hoping to gain from the experience
- Empower youth to develop their strengths
- Offer youth relevant professional development opportunities
- Offer youth additional opportunities during slower project phases if possible

**“I really appreciated creating a community agreement that the group followed and used regularly throughout meetings to provide a safer space for everyone involved.” – Y4Y member**

## Conclusion

Even though shared decision-making across all phases of research is considered the gold standard for YPAR (5), these methods require sufficient resources, capacity among the project team and youth partners, and flexible project timelines to execute competently and effectively. Assessing capacity for engagement is imperative to avoid potentially harmful practices and embrace the fluid nature of the engagement process.

