# A University-Community Partnership's Use of Qualitative Methods to Foster Community Engagement in Adolescent Research

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## Abstract

Within the context of a university-community partnership dedicated to addressing youth violence prevention and intervention, community and university partners collaborated to use qualitative methods to inform research and practice in relation to adolescent development. The article outlines a multistage model ranging from initial need identification to dissemination of project findings and ongoing engagement. The model, although applied to youth violence issues in this case, has broad applicability to other child, family, and community issues. Lessons derived from the partnership's use of qualitative methods are summarized, and suggestions for model improvement are provided.

## Introduction

**U**niversities across the nation, building on a rich base of assets—human, physical, and financial—have incredible potential to contribute to their communities. Even greater potential is unleashed when universities move beyond outreach and service to a model of engagement *(Boyer 1990; Holland 2001; Kellogg Commission 1999)* and thereby capitalize on community resources, knowledge, and wisdom. Engagement is characterized by reciprocity, bidirectional relationships, and mutual respect between institutions of higher learning and the communities they serve. Engaged, multistakeholder efforts that blend community and university expertise create an enriched, value-added context in which innovative strides can be made in theory, research, practice, and policy *(Lerner and Simon 1998)*.

The challenges, strategies, and successes of university-community partnerships have been documented across several domains: community outreach partnership centers *(Cox 2000; Fleming 1999; Schramm 2002),* school-university-community partnerships *(Benson and Harkavy 2000; Stevens 1999)*, and partnerships

that focus on basic, applied, and action research related to youth and family development *(Denner, Cooper, Lopez, and Dunbar 1999; Small 1996; Spanier 1999; Weinberg and Erickson 1996)*. This latter type of university-community partnership provided the framework within which the current project unfolded: a context of active engagement and influence of community members that contributed to research on adolescent development.

Specifically, this article describes how community members played an integral role in the qualitative component of a larger action-research project designed to (a) examine risk and protective factors among court-adjudicated youth; and (b) implement and evaluate a family-centered, strength-based, system of care intervention. Community members were tapped as a critical resource to develop, refine, and implement a semi-structured interview with court-involved youth and their primary caregivers. Although

**Figure 1. A Model of an Engaged University-Community Partnership**
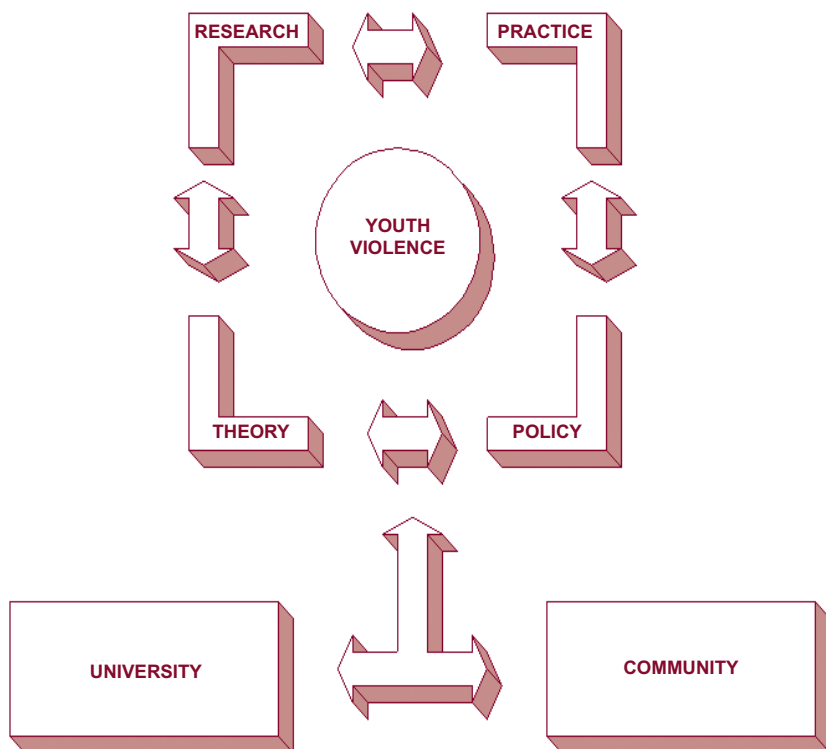
this article is centered on violence prevention among youth, the general model inherent in the process—a theory-based research approach used to inform practice and policy, and thereby lead to social action—is applicable to numerous other child, family, or community issues (see Figure 1; *Frabutt 2003*).

## Outlining the Process

*Identifying the Need:* High Point, North Carolina, a medium-sized city with a population of about eighty-five thousand, is one of three cities, along with Greensboro and Winston-Salem, constituting the Piedmont Triad region. During the late 1990s, violence in the local community was serious enough to warrant a community-wide prevention effort. Three separate needs assessments had identified crime and violence as major community concerns. Although the community had established initiatives focusing on adult crime reduction, there was still an outstanding need to address youth violence. Based on relationships and connections made during previous successful collaborative projects in the local community *(see MacKinnon-Lewis and Frabutt 2001a)* a focused community-university collaborative emerged. This group took a strategic direction that embraced a preventive approach with middle school and high school youth at risk of committing violent acts (see Figure 2 for a schematic overview of the entire process).

*Project Conceptualization:* A framework with three key principles guides the local youth violence prevention and intervention efforts: (a) a focus on youth development in context; (b) emphasis on building a community-based collaborative; and (c) a family-centered approach to intervention. Accordingly, the Youth Violence Initiative is a community-based, family-centered project serving court-involved youth and their families through a system of care approach to intervention *(MacKinnon-Lewis and Frabutt 2001b; Frabutt, Arbuckle, and Campbell 2002; MacKinnon-Lewis, Frabutt, Arbuckle, Weissman, and Smith 2003)*. Youth and families referred through the juvenile court work with a service coordinator to develop a collaborative plan designed to help youth better manage their behavioral challenges *(Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs 1989; Duchnowski and Friedman 1990; Friesen and Koroloff 1990)*. The overarching framework for the project provides a context for research, intervention, and evaluation components. Although the research component features both qualitative and quantitative

**Figure 2.  Fostering Community Involvement in Adolescent Research**
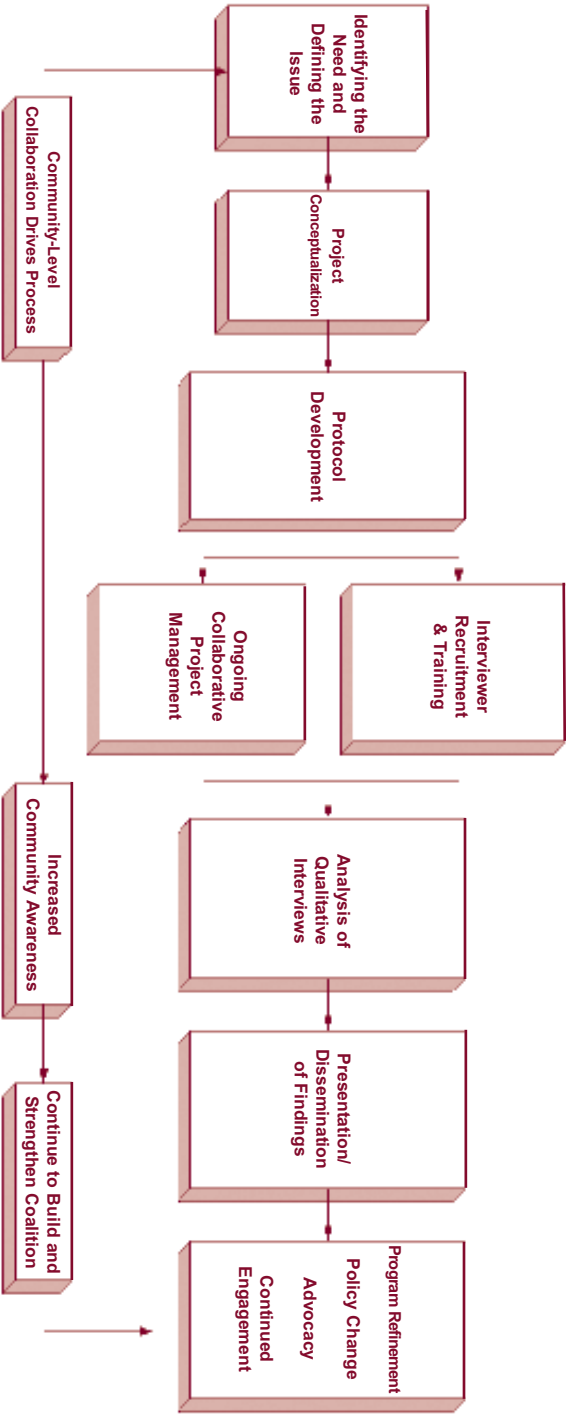
strategies to examine risk and protective factors (across family, school, peer, and neighborhood domains) for youth violence, the qualitative research component is the focus of this article. The qualitative component was designed to gather rich, detailed information from court-adjudicated youth regarding the critical events and influences in their lives.

***Collaborative Project Management:*** The true hallmark of community-university engagement in this youth violence prevention initiative has been collaborative project management. The collaborative drving this community-university partnership is culturally diverse and multidisciplinary. Partners include local clergy, school principals, service providers, university faculty, law enforcement, elected officials, neighborhood residents, and juvenile justice representatives. The local chief of police and a university faculty member jointly facilitated all meetings. Within this context, diverse stakeholders in the issue of youth violence prevention decided on a common vision for how to move forward (i.e., applying a system of care model to serving court-involved youth) and were willing to devote time, effort, and resources to achieve that vision. For example, the chief court counselor for the High Point juvenile court office was willing to provide office space for the new service coordinators. Collaborative members committed to ongoing monthly meetings with subcommittee meetings in between to move from project conceptualization to start-up.

***Interview Protocol Development:*** One of the most significant ways that community partners shaped the research component of this initiative was through interview protocol development. First, a comprehensive review of risk and protective factors for youth violence provided by researchers formed the basis for developing key questions. It is not surprising that a great deal of overlap emerged between research-based findings on youth violence and local needs and concerns of diverse community partners. Next, a community-based subcommittee (headed by a Ph.D.-level anthropologist specializing in ethnography) began working to create a semistructured interview protocol. After an initial round of revisions by community and university partners, a local pastor volunteered to review the protocol with school-age youth that regularly attended his church's youth ministry. Although the youth found the protocol to be largely effective and understandable, suggestions were made as to wording and ordering of the questions. Their major piece of advice was to make the questions as simple and direct as

possible, avoiding "research language" in favor of everyday speech and terminology. Sample questions included: "As you see it, what are the problems or difficulties that you face right now that made you get into trouble?" and "Who would you say has the most influence on you?" and "What do you need to help you feel supported and successful?"

***Recruitment, Training, and Procedures:*** At that point, with a refined interview protocol in hand, it would have been possible to have university researchers and trained graduate students begin to interview youth and caregiver participants in the initiative. University and community partners, however, were committed to another paradigm. To further extend the community's involvement in the qualitative research, the collaborative management team decided to recruit and train community-based interviewers to conduct the qualitative interviews. The collaborative suggested potential interviewers to the anthropologist who had directed the protocol development committee. Some members of the collaborative themselves volunteered to participate. Overall, five community interviewers (pastor, youth group leader, outreach center coordinator, guidance counselor, grandmother) came forward. Despite their varied personal and professional backgrounds, they each

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expressed a passion for working with young people. Moreover, they were energized by the chance to contribute to an overall strategy that had the potential to take a proactive and preventive stance toward youth violence. The two male and three female interviewers each completed two, 2-hour training sessions conducted by the anthropologist. This trainer was subsequently available to debrief after an initial round of interviews, and was a resource for ongoing consultation. Once training had been completed, the interviewers conducted and tape-recorded a semistructured interview with the youth and caregiver separately (and usually in the family's home). Interviews, which typically lasted about one hour, commenced only after formal written consent was obtained from both youth and caregiver. Over the course of the project, nearly twenty of these intensive interviews were completed.

***Analysis of Qualitative Interviews:*** The qualitative interviews were analyzed in both an informal and a formal way, each of which is summarized here. The informal analysis refers to the almost immediate and direct feedback of the interview findings into ongoing project management and implementation. For example, immediately after an interview was completed, the audiotape of that interview, along with any handwritten notes turned in by the community interviewer, were given directly to the service coordinator assigned to that family's intervention team. The service coordinator could then listen to the interview and gain an immediate understanding of critical issues and repeated themes mentioned by a particular family. Those issues and themes, in turn, indicated to the service coordinator potential leverage points for a successful intervention. The notion of informal analysis was also evident at the collaborative management team's monthly meetings. At these sessions, interviewers who had been out in the field interviewing families were able to bring back fresh insights and new research questions. Even more important, the interviewers were able to stress general trends that they were hearing across interviews. Consequently, the interviewers continually focused the collaborative on ensuring that the service coordinators' intervention plans mapped onto families' stated challenges. Through this informal analysis of the interview data, the research component was used to directly inform the intervention and evaluation components by helping to determine whether services were appropriate, relevant, and timely.

The qualitative data were also examined according to formal procedures for analyzing interview data (summarized in *Frabutt, MacKinnon-Lewis, and Moorefield 2002)*. Interviews were transcribed and entered into qualitative analysis software (Ethnograph 5.06, Qualis Research Associates) by university research staff. A constant comparative method *(Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990)* was utilized to facilitate data reduction into emerging themes and categories. Common, as well as irregular, patterns in the data were derived. Coders clarified themes, monitored for thematic overlap, and often added, deleted, and modified thematic categories as analysis proceeded.

The research team ceased interview coding when no new themes emerged *(Creswell 1998; Unrau and Coleman 1997)*. Throughout coding and analysis, the Ethnograph software program was used to organize and sort specific transcript segments. After coding over ten thousand lines of narrative text, numerous

higher-order thematic categories emerged, with subcategories or themes subsumed within them. Lines of text were counted for each theme and ranked in order from most lines of text to least lines of text. For example, one of the most prominent themes from the youth interviews centered on substance abuse issues. Commenting on how lucrative selling drugs could be, one adolescent noted, "I used to bring more money home than the teachers do. More money than teachers, I know it, man!"

***Dissemination of Findings:*** As mentioned earlier, the qualitative interview findings have been reflected back to the collaborative management team both by the community interviewers and by the research team. One of the monthly management team meetings was attended by North Carolina's cabinet-level secretary of the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP). As a result of his interest in the overall model and the use of research methodology to inform practice, representatives of the collaborative team were asked to present the model to DJJDP staff in a nearby city as well as an adjacent county. Beyond these local levels of dissemination, university researchers have presented findings in paper and poster formats at regional and national research conferences

*"All partners have been exposed to a new paradigm of research and community action."*

*(Frabutt, MacKinnon-Lewis, and Moorefield 2002; MacKinnon-Lewis et al. 2003)*. Summaries of these findings, or the papers and handouts themselves, were always directed back to the collaborative management team. A caregiver from the project helped design, plan, and present a workshop along with the research team at a national training institute for effective mental health services for youth *(Arbuckle, Frabutt, and Hold 2002)*. Manuscripts for publication have been submitted and are in preparation (e.g., *Forsbrey and Frabutt 2003*). These articles draw on the qualitative data—adolescents' stories of coping with strong emotions, arson, underachievement, school truancy, running away, violent behaviors, physical threats, theft, depression, and suicide attempts—to illustrate how practitioners working with court-involved youth and/or their caregivers can improve and refine their intervention strategies. In sum, the scholarship that has emerged from the work of the university-community partnership has the potential not only to

highlight a local effort, but also to uplift a model that can inform best practice and policy.

***Lessons Learned: Partnership Synergy for Long-Term Change:*** Both sides of this university-community partnership now have the potential to further capitalize on an array of lessons learned throughout the process outlined in this article. All partners have been exposed to a new paradigm of research and community action. Partners were challenged to stretch beyond their standard comfort zones, which meant, for example, that university researchers had to relinquish some control, and community distrust of scientific process or methods had to be addressed. In doing so, the partnership essentially redefined traditional roles, thereby enacting what

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Small *(1996)* has described: "Pursuing a collaborative relationship redefines the research relationship from one of 'expert' and 'learner' or 'researcher' and 'participant' to one of two partners developing a shared agenda. Citizens are no longer merely the objects of study, but partners in the process of defining the research. As a result, local citizens come to see themselves not merely as recipients of research knowledge, but as partners in the process of acquiring knowledge" *(13)*.

The breadth, complexity, and perspective that came from working with individuals from diverse backgrounds to solve the common problem of youth violence and aggression opened the door to other fruitful collaborations. As a result of exposure to a new paradigm of research and action, the university-community partnership is fertile ground for planning and initiating other child- and family-focused projects. Community engagement, ownership, and project buy-in have built trust, establishing a foundation for further innovative efforts. Moreover, a sense of empowerment exists to apply the skills, method, and approach outlined here to other youth issues. The university-community partnership was also encouraged by youth success stories that occurred throughout the project. For example, one community volunteer worked with a youth participant to file the necessary paperwork to open a small-engine repair business. The youth's

mechanical skill made the business opportunity a good fit, and it encouraged him to consider further training in mechanical technology at the local community college.

In reviewing the partnership's efforts thus far, there are also identifiable areas that could have more fully embraced both university and community expertise. For example, although the qualitative interview findings were discussed within the context of the monthly project management meetings, could community members have been more actively involved in the formal analysis process? An ideal qualitative analysis strategy to aim for in future efforts would be to ensure that a community representative is a member of the coding team. This community-based reviewer/coder would bring invaluable local knowledge that could enlighten community-specific challenges that youth and their caregivers face.

Room for improvement also remains in the partnership's ability to involve youth more directly in the overall process. In the current initiative youth input was sought in a few critical instances (refining and revising the interview protocol and receiving feedback from youth regarding their satisfaction with intervention services), but there are surely more opportunities to include a youth voice in the partnership's efforts. For example, the project management team has not had ongoing youth participation. Beyond a youth representative on the management team, it would be wise to convene a youth panel when new topic or project areas are under consideration. As noted earlier, although a parent presented with university researchers at a national conference, the same venue also featured research presentations involving youth participants (e.g., *Skowyra et al. 2002*). Clearly, there are creative and useful strategies to promote youth involvement in the entire process—from identifying needs initially to disseminating project results—that will ultimately improve not only the product but also the process.

## Acknowledgment

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