

Lessons Learned from Troubled Teens—Reflections on the Value of Community-Based Research in Reaching Out to At-Risk Youth

Paula Goldman
University of Notre Dame

Early in my undergraduate career at the University of Notre Dame, I was fortunate to participate in a week-long immersion experience focused on urban homelessness. I felt at that time that I was well versed in service learning. Over the course of the week, however, I realized that there was a flaw in my approach. Although I had felt a sense of contribution, I had done nothing to break through the distance and discomfort that most fundamentally threaten the dignity of the homeless and marginalized.

This realization marked a transition in my approach to service. I had always had an interest in youth homelessness, but my focus shifted to investigating what the youth themselves have to say about what they experience and what they need.

With this philosophy in mind, I began working with Vanessa Kelleybrew, the executive director of the non-profit Individuals and Families in Transition (iFIT) in Elkhart, Indiana. iFIT serves as a headquarters for many youth programs, including the aggression management program Getting Over Angry Lives (GOAL), and Vanessa and I found an intersection point between her need to improve the effectiveness of GOAL and my devotion to understanding youth homelessness. We established a common interest in the degree to which teen aggression and homeless status are related. We also shared a desire to explore whether teens who are struggling with homelessness are less able to respond positively to interventions like GOAL.

From these shared interests, my community-based research project *Examining the Relationship between Youth Homelessness and Aggressive Behavior* evolved. Ideally, I would have involved the youth themselves in the design of the study in order to empower them from the very start. However, because at-risk adolescents are considered a vulnerable population, IRB approval was required before I could have any direct contact with the youth. Therefore, I opted to work with iFIT staff in hopes that they both understood the needs of the population and had experience working with them. My dialogue with iFIT took place throughout the semester preceding the launch of the study and culminated in a long meeting with Vanessa and the instructor of the anger management program. We defined the final hypothesis and study structure during this meeting. I also obtained many ideas for the interview questions from this meeting, although the final questions were shaped via collaboration with my faculty mentor, Professor Benedict Giamo, who has extensive research experience involving homeless youth.

My project ultimately involved surveys, pre- and post-tests, and formal interviews with the participants in GOAL, but the most important implication of my partnership with iFIT is that it led me to spend hundreds of hours bearing witness to the stories of marginalized teens. This study was designed both for the benefit of my community partner, iFIT, and for the teens included in the study. The primary purpose of the investigation was to improve the responsiveness of iFIT programming to the needs of its teen participants. Further, this research project held significance for the larger Elkhart community. Funding for Elkhart's youth homeless shelter was cut during the economic crisis, causing the shelter to close. My project asked the question: Are teens in the Elkhart community acting out aggressively due to home instability and having nowhere to turn? This research was the first step in making a case for the necessity of a

youth shelter in Elkhart. I pursued this study in hopes that my findings would be part of the evidence used to appeal for renewed funding.

The execution of this study was the greatest challenge of my undergraduate education. Perhaps the most insurmountable obstacle was a loophole that I had not anticipated: I had designed a study in which it was possible to be *too* correct. I had not considered that if aggressive behavior and homelessness were as intertwined as I predicted, then the transience of the participants in the GOAL program would lead to high attrition from my study. In retrospect, I would have needed a sample size large enough that attrition would have a negligible effect, or resources vast enough that I could track the progress of students even after they left the program, in order for my study to be sufficiently powerful to detect a relationship between homelessness and aggression. Because I could not meet those criteria, attrition caused my final sample size to be a small fraction of the group that I began with, which impeded my ability to collect results that were statistically significant. Also, there was selective attrition of the teens who were experiencing homelessness or home instability because those teens, by definition, had the most transient lifestyles.

This reality calls into question whether focusing on quantitative results was the best approach. There were a variety of reasons that I chose a quantitative design at the outset of the study. First, I wanted to capture a sample large enough to assess qualitatively via interviews. Conducting dozens of interviews was simply not reasonable given that I was a full-time student rather than a full-time researcher. Second, because the number of questions that I could feasibly ask in each interview was limited, I was concerned that I would not have enough data to readily discern patterns. I hoped that with more questions, presented in survey form, I would improve the chances that the study would detect any true association that existed. Moreover, I was drawn to quantitative analysis of my results because strong, percentage-driven statements like “64.3% of participants in the Getting Over Angry Lives program agreed with the statement ‘If I knew that there was a safe place to go that would take me in, I would strongly consider leaving the place that I stay now’” are extremely valuable in research intended for persuasive purposes. Lastly, I was drawn to a quantitative approach because my primary training is in the biological sciences, which has conditioned me to use quantitative analysis whenever possible. For all of these reasons, I chose to rely primarily on quantitative data to understand the relationship between youth homelessness and aggression and then supplement with qualitative data to understand why.

In retrospect, this study, as designed, only had the potential to gauge correlation—not causation—between youth homelessness and aggression. In order to establish causation, I needed to ask more explicit questions exploring whether homelessness caused aggressive behavior. I also needed to more definitively rule out the possibility that aggressive behavior instead caused homelessness. Qualitative interview data was also the best available way to identify confounding factors that may have mediated the relationship between homelessness and aggression. Thus, perhaps I should have used quantitative analysis as a supplement to my qualitative findings instead of the other way around.

Another oversight in my research model was that it was based on the underlying assumption that the youth with whom I interacted would feel fortunate to have my time and attention. I had not yet recognized that it was I who was privileged to have them share their life stories with me. I had contemplated that they would ask the question, “Why would I help them?” but was not ready to answer their challenge, “Why should we help you?” Trust is not readily given by the youth in this study. Most have interacted extensively with the justice system or

academic disciplinary system, which taught them that being asked questions only leads to being punished for giving honest answers. This naturally breeds avoidance. For some, the use of avoidance as a coping mechanism has been further reinforced at home. I had my work cut out for me to break through these teens' guarded, avoidant attitudes to earn their trust and openness.

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings of my project, the approach that I took in working with my participants was very effective. A crucial part of earning my participants' trust was to delineate myself from iFIT. While I was working with iFIT and hoped to help their programming, my true partner was the youth themselves. My goals were complementary to those of iFIT but still distinct. It was crucial to communicate this to the youth. After all, iFIT works with the justice system and academic disciplinary teams, so the teens still perceive them as coming from a place of authority and punishment. I, on the other hand, had no authority and wanted only to understand and empower. It was challenging but extremely important to make sure that the youth saw this distinction.

I hoped that the youth would be more willing to accept this distinction if they saw it for themselves. I therefore decided to attend GOAL aggression management classes each week. I participated in every activity and shared what I wrote during reflective exercises. I quickly found that community-based research conducted from within the community is infinitely more effective than research done by an investigator looking from the outside in. By sitting among them, the participants came to understand me at the same time that I was learning to understand them. They realized that I belonged in a different category than the endless chain of adults whose job it is to give them surveys and ask them questions. I did not have to be there. It was not part of my job and there were no tangible rewards for the time that I spent with them. I was there because I wanted to hear what they had to say.

By immersing myself in the iFIT community, I discovered that there is something uniquely powerful about youth conducting research about youth. I firmly believe that the depth of information that I collected would not have been entrusted to an older investigator from whom the participants felt more distant. My ability to relate to my teen participants in subtle ways and the fact that I have a sister younger than many of them allowed them to eventually treat me as an older sister to be confided in rather than an adult to regard with suspicion.

My ability to connect with the participants may also be attributed to them coming to see me as an empowered young person. I was there because I saw their need and believed that something could be done about it. Through my participation in the GOAL class, I found that empowerment was the single most effective motivational tactic for this population. To make these teens feel small and ashamed of the reasons that brought them to iFIT would only make them resentful and guarded. The key was to instead make them feel proud of who they are and bigger than the obstacles they face. The foundation of the GOAL course is to empower teens with the understanding that they can choose to be angry or choose to make changes. My approach in this study was a perfect complement to that foundation. I not only modeled empowerment but also invited my participants to have a voice and affect change with me.

As I witnessed the growth of many teens, I became convinced that teens are not condemned to a set trajectory. The popular idea that early intervention is the only effective type of intervention may be supported by empirical evidence but is challenged by my anecdotal evidence. I saw firsthand that even post-adolescence is not too late to change an individual's life course. Empowerment may be the key.

I came away from this project with a strong belief in the community-based research model. I find myself strongly aligned with the philosophy of using collaboration between

academia and community partners to affect social change. That being said, I am not sure that this project affected change as dramatically as I had hoped. My understanding is that iFIT has used my research to substantiate a new focus on home stability within its GOAL aggression management curriculum. However, knowing that homelessness is a real issue for its teen participants has not yet enabled iFIT to make major strides to fix it. For example, the local youth homeless shelter is still far from reopening. I realize that my findings alone are not robust enough to affect a change as great as reopening the shelter. However, there may be potential to use my findings to encourage others to do something for the cause either by attracting more sophisticated researchers or arousing public outrage. Media such as a local newspaper may be an appropriate venue to report my findings in order to rally public sentiment to the cause of reopening the shelter.

While I understand that community-based research cannot always impact the community partner as profoundly as the researcher hopes, I continue to believe passionately in the model. Researchers adhering to this model set themselves apart from other researchers because they build relationships with community members in order to understand what they define as the highest possible quality of life and to empower them to achieve that standard. This approach allows those in the community being studied to speak up instead of solely being spoken for. I move forward from this project with a strong conviction that community-based research can be a uniquely powerful forum to serve others in a way that communicates dignity.