



Incorporating “Lived Expertise” into Research

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MDRC researchers have increasingly engaged people who have firsthand experiences with the programs, policies, and systems MDRC studies. People can draw on their lived experiences to inform how researchers design studies, the topics they investigate, and how they interpret their findings. Some people develop expertise on these topics stemming from their own experiences and a rich understanding of the systems, services, and context that shape people’s experiences, the challenges they face, and the needs they may have. Such expertise is known as “lived expertise.”¹

One way MDRC researchers have been engaging people with lived expertise is through advisory councils. Lived expertise advisory councils have been assembled to help interpret study findings, develop dissemination plans, and inform data-collection tools such as interviews and surveys. These councils can make studies more responsive to the needs and perspectives of the communities involved in the research. In turn, this responsiveness can make research easier to translate into action and increase the chances that the findings have a real-world impact on people’s lives.²

Lived expertise advisory councils have made important contributions to specific studies at MDRC.³ However, many important research decisions — such as what methods will be used or what interventions will be tested — had already occurred before these councils were assembled. Without

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early input from an advisory council of people with lived experience, research teams design studies that may not fully capture the nuanced perspectives and realities of the communities involved in the study, leading to outcomes that may not be as relevant.

To learn more about how advisory councils could be incorporated into earlier stages of the research process, MDRC designed the Council of Lived Experience Advisers (CLEA) to guide research conducted in its [Center for Criminal Justice Research](#) (CCJR). The CLEA brought together a diverse group of people who were formerly incarcerated and had a wealth of knowledge about the challenges people who are incarcerated face and the systems they navigate. They had honed this expertise through years of work in the criminal-legal-system-reform movement in New York City and in their professional work as advocates, researchers, and workers in government agencies and community-based organizations. The initiative enabled them to act as advisers and provide their insights on specific studies in the early stages of study design and implementation, work with MDRC researchers to inform existing studies, advise on CCJR’s objectives, and discuss how CCJR could carry out research that was more relevant to the communities who stood to benefit from its findings.

The CLEA was made up of 10 people with lived expertise who convened virtually and in person six times in 2024. CCJR researchers could sign up to work with the CLEA at any stage of research — from study development to the presentation of findings in a report. Each meeting focused on a different topic brought forward by CCJR researchers. One, for example, focused on developing a study to evaluate approaches that help people returning to the community after incarceration complete postsecondary degrees that they started while incarcerated. Another focused on writing interview guides to explore women’s experiences with reentry into the community after incarceration. MDRC compensated advisers for their time preparing for and attending meetings. The initiative was guided by a group of researchers at MDRC known as the “pilot team,” who provided orientation and training for advisers and researchers, planned and guided interactive meetings between the groups, and helped researchers implement the insights and suggestions of advisers after the meetings.

This issue focus shares recommendations for implementing lived expertise advisory councils, based on the experiences of MDRC staff members and CLEA members. It was written by Raul Armenta and Kyla Wasserman of MDRC and two CLEA members, Eric Waters and Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin. The issue focus is designed for researchers, scholars, and organizations seeking to establish similar advisory boards.

Recommendations

Facilitate Authentic Relationships from the Start

Authentic engagement is a core tenet of community-based research that is seen as central to its success.⁴ Many people’s experiences with research have been ones where researchers parachute in to ask questions or collect a sample and leave without giving anything back. Therefore, getting to know each other and developing trust were integral to the CLEA. Without these relationships, the

CLEA might have resulted in surface-level interactions and communication barriers that would have made it harder to reach the pilot program’s goals.

The process of developing authentic relationships started well before advisers and researchers started collaborating. Below are two strategies that the pilot team used to foster trust, respect, and open engagement:

- **PREPARING TO WORK TOGETHER:** The pilot team designed the CLEA in partnership with a consultant who had strong connections to people with lived expertise in the New York City area. This partnership shaped the pilot team’s plans for the CLEA, for example by leading them to develop orientation sessions for researchers and advisers to learn to work together. Before the CLEA’s launch, the pilot team led workshops with other researchers in CCJR on recognizing personal biases and understanding oneself in relation to others, such as the CLEA advisers. One workshop focused on strategies to distribute decision-making more equitably between researchers and the people who are often the subjects of research. These activities prepared researchers to engage with the CLEA with an open mind and welcome the voices of CLEA members in research decisions. CLEA members said that a high mark of the pilot program was researchers’ openness, which they thought promoted mutual learning between the groups. Separate orientations were developed for advisers to orient them to the initiative and MDRC’s research.
- **ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY THROUGH A TRUSTED INTERMEDIARY:** The consultant also connected the pilot team with applicants who expressed a strong interest in the research field but who did not have existing connections to MDRC, allowing MDRC to collaborate with experts who might otherwise have hesitated to express interest in joining the CLEA. Throughout the pilot program, CLEA members repeatedly said that they would not have taken part in the initiative without the involvement of someone they already knew and trusted.

Find Common Ground

At the start of the pilot program, lived expertise advisers and the pilot team worked together to establish a vision and shared set of goals for their work together, encapsulated in an “intention statement” that outlined what the CLEA could achieve:

The intention of the Council of Lived Experience Advisers (CLEA) is to partner with the Center for Criminal Justice Research at MDRC on how to shape, mobilize, and critique research, stories, and studies about individuals who are impacted by the criminal legal system to actualize a fair and just society for all.

The intention statement offered direction by emphasizing partnership in research, dignifying individuals’ experiences, and harnessing the power of evidence to create change.⁵ Throughout the CLEA, advisers returned to the importance of using humanizing language in both conversation and written materials about research studies, for example, by referring to “people who are on parole” rather than “parolees.” Having multiple conversations about language and the purpose of the shared work was the foundation for a trusting, open collaboration.

Promote the Leadership of People with Lived Expertise

The MDRC pilot and research teams organized and led the majority of CLEA meetings, but one of the most engaging and interactive meetings took place when advisers with lived expertise led the discussion. In preparation, advisers assigned reading before the meeting and set the agenda and topic selection. Their leadership resulted in fruitful conversations about finding ways to engage people with lived expertise in every project, recommendations for compensation for such consultants, and recommendations for how CCJR can approach participatory research earlier in the life cycle of projects. Creating opportunities for advisers to lead meetings and set the agenda of council activities can have many benefits, such as providing space for advisers to build or use their leadership skills, offering new focus and direction for the board, and increased chances for peer-to-peer learning among advisers.

Acknowledge Advisers’ Contributions Through Financial and Other Means

Advisers shared that the reality for people with lived expertise is that they are often underpaid and overextended as they attempt to contribute to work they care about deeply. MDRC paid advisers for their contributions and to recognize that people with lived expertise face many obstacles to employment due to a former conviction. In line with MDRC’s practice for the CLEA, advisers recommend applying prevailing or market-based consulting rates that are competitive in the local or national context and reflect the skill and knowledge provided by people with lived expertise.⁶

A central tenet of participatory research is that the engagement should benefit all stakeholders. It is easy to imagine how MDRC researchers would benefit from the CLEA: Advisers’ insights could lead to better, more relevant research. How engaging in the CLEA would benefit advisers is more abstract because research can take a long time to effect change, if it is able to do so at all. Some strategies for working towards mutual benefit include:

- **COAUTHORSHIP AND RECOGNITION OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO RESEARCH:** Lived expertise advisory councils can lead to the codevelopment of research that grows out of advisers’ interests and knowledge of their communities’ needs. Providing credit for the source and process through which the research was developed can strengthen the legitimacy of research and support these experts’ professional growth.
- **NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES AND MENTORSHIP:** Advisory councils can provide opportunities that can help people with lived expertise establish or expand their professional connections in areas relevant to their interests.
- **EVALUATION TRAINING:** Program and policy evaluation training can equip people with lived expertise with the skills and tools to go after research grants or spearhead evaluation initiatives within their communities or with local organizations.

- **FORMAL RECOGNITION:** A certificate of recognition, for example, can help people with lived expertise use their contributions as advisers to advance their career prospects in relevant fields. Certificates can also help people meet their parole or probation conditions by demonstrating their active involvement in the community.


Notes and References

1. For more information on the term “lived expertise,” see Council of State Governments Justice Center, “Centering Lived Expertise: How to Meaningfully Elevate the Voices of People Directly Impacted by the Criminal Justice and Behavioral Health Systems” (website: https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Centering-Lived-Expertise_508.pdf, 2023).
2. Lisa M. Vaughn and Farrah Jaquez, “Participatory Research Methods — Choice Points in the Research Process,” *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1,1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>.
3. For example, young people encouraged the research team to ask about their experiences with mental health in interviews with young people taking part in [Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential](#), which became a central part of the study’s findings. Expert advisers shared their opinions about possible factors responsible for county-level differences in outcomes on [New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform Advancing Racial Equity](#) study. Finally, advisers helped the research team collect fuller, more nuanced information by coleading focus groups on [Fatherhood TIES](#).
4. For more information about the importance of meaningful, authentic engagement, see Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research, “Guide to Community Engagement Part 1” (website: <https://advancingpretrial.org/improvement-guide/guide-to-community-engagement-part-1/>, 2022).
5. For more information on vision and principles for the CLEA see Raul Armenta, Nicole Arzola, Erika B. Lewy, Alejo Rodriguez, Kyla Wasserman, and Keri West, “Centering the Insights of Lived Experience Advisers in MDRC’s Criminal Justice Research” (website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/centering-insights-lived-experience-advisors-mdrcs-criminal-justice-research>, 2023).
6. MDRC paid each adviser \$350 for preparing for and participating in each meeting. For more information about compensating people with lived expertise and others taking part in community-based research, see Mel Langness, Justin Winston Morgan, Saidy Cedano, and Elsa Falkenburger, “Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook” (Urban Institute, 2023).

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