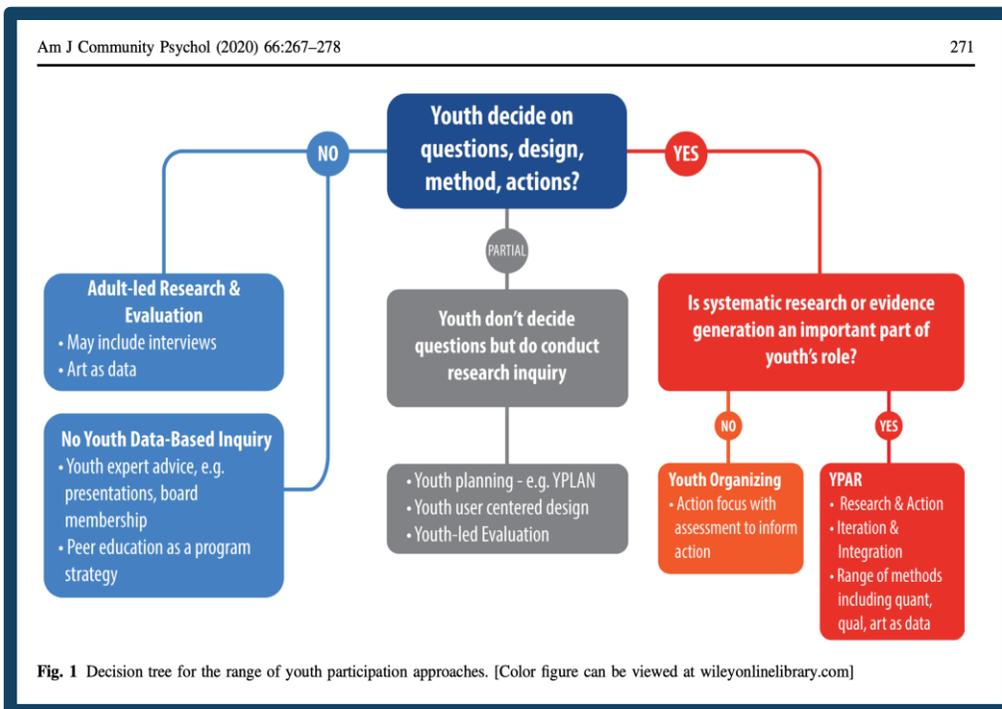




# Comparing Youth Participatory Approaches

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Young people are taking leadership roles in responding to environmental threats, gun violence, systematic racism in the criminal justice system, and health equity. There is no “one size fits all” approach to youth participation for practitioners or for



researchers. Young people have the capacity, right, and ability to advocate for health equity and address urgent issues that impact their own health and well-being. *Used with Author Permission*

“Youth engagement” and “youth voice” are broadly used terms that smooth over key distinctions in approaches. Further clarity is needed to advance shared understanding among diverse research and practice communities and how youth participatory approaches can subvert the social and economic pathways of unequal power that shape health.

## Highlights

**Six common CP-informed youth participatory approaches were compared.**

**Despite many commonalities, approaches differed on the level of emphasis on research to inform action, how much decision-making power young people have throughout the process, and the role and power of adults.**

We conducted a landscape analysis of youth participation to examine the commonalities and distinguishing features of several youth participatory approaches that are relevant to health equity efforts including: (a) youth-led participatory action research, (b) youth organizing, (c) youth-led planning, (d) human-centered design, (e) participatory arts, and (f) youth advisory boards. Investigating and identifying the key features of these youth participatory approaches reveal the relevance, strengths, and challenges in promoting health equity.

### **Methods**

We reviewed research articles about youth participatory approaches that focus on health outcomes and/or seek to shift social conditions that impact health and well-being. Each article was reviewed by two authors who compared and synthesized relevant themes. A final list of 24 articles were selected to analyze. We provide a conceptual frame regarding diverse forms of youth participation.

### **Results**

- All reviewed approaches include adolescents, involve support from adults, integrate an action component, offer supportive/safe spaces, and create conditions for young people to develop agency, positive social identity, and empowerment.
- The approaches differed on the level of emphasis on research to inform action, how much decision-making power young people have throughout the process, and the role and power of adults.
- Different youth participatory approaches also vary in degree regarding their focus on health outcomes and/or intent to shift social conditions that impact health and well-being.
- There are numerous gaps in the research literature on youth participation, including: a) less research with children and younger adolescents, and b) fewer studies in low- and middle-income countries. This speaks to a need for c) more consistent reporting standards including the type and phases of youth engagement and power sharing, age of youth, adult roles, and outcomes measured to enable stronger syntheses and comparisons across studies; and d) further strengthening the evidence base via the use of experimental and quasi-experimental (QE) designs with systematic process and outcome assessment.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?**

We have analyzed youth participation approaches informed by Community Psychology theory on psychological empowerment as well as on the distinctions among first-, second-, and third-order changes.

First-order changes address a health issue or empower youth without attending to the underlying contextual factors that shape the health issue.

Second-order changes work on underlying inequitable social conditions to prevent health issues.

Third-order changes transform the culture and “social fabric” of the community, focusing on structure and process rather than a specific health problem.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Research and Practice:** We provide more clarity for practice and scholarly audiences about the key features of different forms of youth participation--especially regarding the leadership and power of young people in shaping phases of the participation process. For example, there are important distinctions between adult-led research in which young people's "voices" may be heard through diverse forms of qualitative research such as interviews, poetry, or photographs--versus youth-led forms of inquiry and action.

**Research:** Our paper also highlights numerous gaps in the research literature on youth participation, including a) less research with children and younger adolescents b) fewer studies in low and middle income countries, c) a need for more consistent reporting standards including the type and phases of youth engagement and power sharing, age of youth, adult roles, and outcomes measured to enable stronger syntheses and comparisons across studies; and d) a need to further strengthen the evidence base via the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs with systematic process and outcome assessment.

*Original Citation: Ozer, E. J., Abraczinskas, M., Duarte, C., Mathur, R., Ballard, P. J., Gibbs, L., ... & Afifi, R. (2020). Youth Participatory Approaches and Health Equity: Conceptualization and Integrative Review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.*

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