

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

## ⇒ WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

— and what does it have to do with stopping police brutality against women and trans people of color?

Participatory Action Research or “PAR” is a way of collecting information for organizing that honors, centers, and reflects the experiences of people most directly affected by issues in our communities.

People use PAR to learn more about their material conditions — wages, housing, environment, workplaces, health care — and each other. It is particularly useful when, as is the case for law enforcement violence against women and trans people of color, there is little or no information available that reflects our experiences of a particular problem.

PAR is not so much a set of procedures to follow to gather information as it is a philosophy and approach to gathering and using information. It is also a way to build and strengthen communities and our understandings of ourselves, each other, and our relationships. It can be a powerful outreach, basebuilding and organizing tool to help bring people together to build movements for change.



Graphic by Cristy C. Road, [croadcore.org](http://croadcore.org)

## ⇒ SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PAR

- ⇒ We are experts in our own experiences, and have many different ways of knowing and getting information about our conditions.
- ⇒ We control the gathering and use of information about our communities. We decide what information we need to make the changes we want and how to get it. We decide what questions we need to answer and how. We lead and are integrally involved in all aspects of the design & implementation of the research, and of the analysis and distribution of the information gathered.
- ⇒ We gather information to inform our actions for change.
- ⇒ We reflect on the information we’ve gathered and the way in which we are gathering it throughout the process. We also reflect on the action we’ve taken and decide if we need more information before taking further action.
- ⇒ The people we gather information with and from are active and not passive participants in the process. We use information gathering to build community and movement, to develop leadership, and to empower ourselves to make change.
- ⇒ We are not trying to “prove” an assumption or hypothesis, we want to learn more about ourselves and our communities as a way to make change.
- ⇒ We agree on principles and values that will guide our information gathering and stay accountable to them throughout the process.<sup>1</sup>



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## ⇒ OK, SO HOW DO WE DO IT?

First, we collectively figure out what we want to know about law enforcement violence against women and trans people of color, what information already exists, and what is missing. Who has knowledge, experience, information? In other words, who is most affected? What are our goals in obtaining this information? How do we create spaces for people to talk and organize around the issue? What action do we want to take? What results are we looking for?

Then we collectively decide what specific questions we need to ask and of who. How do we reach out to various members of our community with knowledge?

**Some information gathering methods used for PAR include:**

- ⇒ Community-based surveys (see samples in this tool kit, and the Creating Surveys guide on the resource CD);
- ⇒ Group discussions (“focus groups”);
- ⇒ Individual interviews;
- ⇒ Community art projects where people represent their experiences through visual art, poetry, spoken word, theatre or music about the issues;
- ⇒ Photo or video documentation;
- ⇒ Story telling and oral history;
- ⇒ Any other way you come up with!

We collectively discuss and evaluate the information we have gathered and what actions it suggests we can take. We decide how we want to share the information with the community and if and how we want to share it more broadly.

## ⇒ HOW CAN WE USE PAR TO ADDRESS POLICE BRUTALITY AGAINST WOMEN & TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOR

To create a space to talk about our experiences of law enforcement violence, and build a collective understanding of the forms it takes, the places it occurs, and how prevalent it is, and to empower survivors and make connections with each other...

To gather stories and statistics about how we experience law enforcement in the context of “quality of life” policing, policing of sex work, immigration enforcement and Border Patrol, police responses to domestic violence, the “war on drugs,” the “war on terror” to inform our resistance to law enforcement violence and help us to build toward increased safety...

To find out about how other communities in the US and other countries have organized to challenge law enforcement violence or build community responses to violence which don't involve the police...

For example, Different Avenues, a community-based organization in Washington, D.C., did a **participatory research project about how sex workers were being impacted by the D.C. police department’s enforcement of “prostitution free zones.”** They recruited people from among their constituents and trained them in data collection, analysis, and report writing. Together, the participants developed a survey, administered it, analyzed the results, presented them back to the community for feedback, and then released a report, which is being used to develop a campaign against police harassment and abuse against people who are, or are perceived to be, sex workers in D.C. The report, *Move Along: Policing Sex Work in Washington, D.C.*, describes the research process they used, and can be found on the Resource CD that accompanies this toolkit.



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FIERCE!, a membership-based organization building the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth of color in New York City, did a participatory research project documenting police harassment and abuse of queer youth of color in the West Village in New York City. Sista II Sista, a Brooklyn, NY based collective of working class young and adult Black and Latina women, did a participatory research project about women's experiences of violence, and, based in part on the results of the survey, did a **video documentary and action about sexual harassment of young women of color by police in their neighborhood**. New Orleans' Safe Streets/ Strong Communities did a **community-based survey about police harassment and abuse and community safety after Hurricane Katrina as part of a campaign to rebuild a safer, more just New Orleans**.

These surveys and more can be found in this toolkit as examples of how groups have used participatory action research to document law enforcement violence against women and trans people of color.

Additional information about participatory action research can be found in the following documents found on the resource CD which accompanies this toolkit:

- Documenting Our Stories: Decolonizing Research Through Community Based Research Projects, The Data Center, 2005
- Power to Our People! Participatory Research Kit: Creating Surveys, The Data Center, 2004
- Participatory Research, Escuela Popular Norteña, 2005

## ➤ ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *A Guiding Framework for Participatory Research for Social Change*, Community Development Project, Urban Justice Center, prepared for Spin Project Workshop on Making News with Reports, June 16, 2005; *Some Important Principles of Participatory Action Research*, Community Development Project, Urban Justice Center; Sung Sil Lee Sohng, *Participatory Research And Community Organizing*, available at: <http://www.cdca.org.za/articles/Participatory%20Research%20And%20Community%20Organizing%20by%20Sung%20Sil%20Lee%20Sohng.doc>; Y. Wadsworth, *What is Participatory Action Research?* Action Research International, Paper 2, 1998, available at: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html> (last visited September 14, 2008)





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