

# So you want to do community-based research?: An introduction to CBR



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Research in Indigenous communities — sometimes on Indigenous people, sometimes with Indigenous people, and increasingly, led by Indigenous people — has existed for a long time. Many of us do research as part of our daily work without even realizing it! We might be contact tracing, learning about a new drug regimen, or working with a person and their specialists to determine the best course of treatment. More and more Indigenous people are becoming researchers, whether by working on research teams, taking courses, or doing a degree — and using these skills to support our communities. In addition to having more Indigenous researchers, **community-based research** is one approach that can help ensure research benefits Indigenous communities.

For many of us, the word “research” is daunting. You might think about dusty books and yellowed papers stacked so high there will never be time to read them all. Maybe you imagine a sterile science lab full of test tubes and beakers, or a dark room where someone pours over a single mathematical equation for decades. Intentionally or not, there are cases past and present where research that is done on Indigenous communities causes harm. When CAAN began to build our research focus, we shared a feeling of Indigenous people being ‘research to death’ and made the decision that our research approaches had to be different. We wrote the paper “Researching Ourselves to Life” to orient our vision for CBR.

**What do we mean when we talk about Community-based Research, in general?** The main goal of community-based research—CBR for short—is to work with community to use research as a tool for positive and lasting change. CBR often takes place as a partnership between people trained in research who work at post-secondary schools or hospitals, and people with lived and living experience. More and more, there are Indigenous people who are both. Ideally, the questions that the research sets out to answer will come from the people and/or place most directly affected—not from researchers who are not connected to what is most important to understand. By engaging people with lived and living experience from the outset of a project, CBR works to meet community needs, and follows direction from and priorities that have been set by community. When the research can benefit community, the project tends to go more smoothly. For example, community members know who should be involved, they understand community politics and dynamics.

## INFO SHEET – So you want to do community-based research?: An introduction to CBR

Community can mean many things: it can be a community based on geography or a nation, it can be based on a shared experience, such as living with Hep C, or experiencing an overdose, or shared identity such as being Two-Spirit. In all of these examples, First Voice perspectives—the voices of people who have a firsthand experience of the context being researched—are vitally important. Research designed based on living and lived experiences, rather than academic curiosity, is meaningful. This type of research often engages people who have a deep investment in seeing positive change occur for their relatives, friends and peers

CBR can use any research methods, including **qualitative** (interviews, focus groups and arts-informed research, for example) and/or **quantitative** (surveys, reviews of health care records) to ensure scientific rigour.



**Reciprocal Learning** is at the heart of CBR: every person involved in a research team a role as a teacher and a learner.<sup>1</sup> However, many types of training—in social work, health care, research methods, or basic science for example—positions people with these credentials as “The Experts”. In a culture where credentials are considered very important, expertise based on living and working experiences can be forgotten. At CAAN, expertise from living and working is immensely important within and beyond CBR. The AHA Centre, which is part of CAAN, has started using the concept of [Capacity Bridging](#) to highlight its importance. This idea reminds us that people without a First Voice perspective have a lot to learn from people with living or lived experience. Capacity bridging highlights the skills and expertise of everyone on the team, and the need for everyone to learn from each other, rather than knowledge only coming from people with formal credentials. No one person can possibly have all of the answers, knowledge or skills needed to address the complex issues that many communities are looking to address through research. Everyone on your research team—yourself included—brings a lot to teach and has a lot to learn. This is the power of CBR—by creating space for diverse perspectives, skills and expertise, we work together to find the best solutions to the issues we are attempting to address.

In community-based research, anyone can become a researcher: you don't need a PhD or any other degree. At CAAN, most of our projects start with ideas from people with lived and living experience. Many of our friends and colleagues from community have become skilled researchers by becoming involved in research projects. CBR projects include teaching research skills to members of the team who may not already have this knowledge or training. In order to get funding or ethics approval, community members may need to partner with a researcher in an academic position. In other cases, CBR starts when researchers approach community-based organizations with an idea. Sometimes, researchers also bring a First Voice perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Nicholson

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## Relationships first

The success of your CBR project hinges largely on the relationships between team members. As with any relationship, taking the time to get to know one another is vital to building trust, understanding and rapport among your team members. Elder Albert Marshall reminds us to think of relationships on research teams like you would any other. When we meet someone new, we share stories about who we are and where we come from. It is important for everyone involved in research to share their authentic, 'real-life' selves when building relationships, and starting a research project. Relationships with researchers – just like other relationships – may have ups and downs, and not every relationship is a good fit. CBR takes time because we start with getting to know each other. Heather Castleden is one researcher whose practice of CBR with Indigenous communities included spending a year having tea with community members to build relationships.<sup>2</sup> In CBR, the pace of the research process needs to make room for the rhythms of the community.

## Wise CBR practices for Indigenous organizations navigating CBR partnerships:

When done well, CBR makes space for people with lived and living experience to take on leadership roles, especially when it comes to things like project decision making. At times, a CBR project might feel good, and at other times, you may see it changing course. Relationships, trust, and capacity bridging are such important parts of CBR.

If your organization is thinking about CBR, you might want to consider:

- What is your goal for CBR? Are there other ways to fulfill this goal?
- Will academic research partnerships support this goal? These partnerships may be able to provide funding, time, or expertise your organization may not otherwise have. Or, your organization may be able to do this work with resources you already have.
- Who do you want to work with?
  - Are there people in your community or organization who have research skills already?
  - Are there researchers that already have relationships with the organization?
  - Are there ways to train people in your community to do research?

If you are thinking about engaging in research in your organization, or with an external research partner, you may want to think about:

- What relationships and experience does the organization and/or research team have with Indigenous Peoples and communities? What has it been like when the organization/research team has worked with Indigenous communities in the past?
- How will the research benefit people with lived and living experience?
- How will the research benefit the organization? For example: will it give you information you can use to write new grants to fund your work; complete your program evaluation requirements; create jobs for people in your organization or; help you understand your community's strengths or needs or resources (such as new clinical tests or treatments)?
- How much time will the research take? What is their timeline? How much will the research cost? Will research change any of your other priorities? How does this capacity fit with the work you are already doing?



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<sup>2</sup> Castleden, H., Morgan, V. S., Lamb, C. (2012). "I spent the first year drinking tea": Exploring Canadian university researchers' perspectives on community-based participatory research involving Indigenous peoples. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, 56(2): 160–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.2012.00432.x>

# INFO SHEET – So you want to do community-based research?: An introduction to CBR

Relationship and trust-building is at the heart of any good CBR project. How a research relationship feels is an important sign about whether or not it is a good fit.

- How do people with lived and living experience feel about the research team?
- Are everyone's ideas, expertise, and knowledge considered when making decisions?
  - Does everyone involved in the project understand how decisions are being made?
  - What happens when you disagree with a decision?
- How will the research team honour and respect the stories, teachings, and experiences that they will hear?
- Consider asking how researchers might share their time, skillset, privilege, expertise and so much more to benefit Indigenous Peoples – even after the research is over.

In an effective partnership, community organizations gain additional resources by having more staff, volunteers, ways of engaging with service users and offering new ways to be involved in the organization.

## What comes out of CBR?

The research process can be just as important as the research findings. CBR and capacity bridging can lead to learning new skills, and better supporting community organizations and people with lived and living experiences. Lessons can also be learned about how the project was designed, what worked to engage service users and staff members. New skills may include research, project administration, political advocacy, or communities. These skills can be life changing.

CBR often has both lessons learned about the process of working together, as well as findings from the research question the team set out to answer. These can be used in many ways, such as creating resources, backing up advocacy messages with data, or promoting successful programs. In some cases, CBR produces art or videos that can be used after the project. Teams may also write journal articles to share the insights from the project and promote the research partnership and the community organization's involvement. These articles can show the community organization's research skills and expertise in the topic. In some cases, the research process and/or findings can provide evidence for new programming or ongoing funding.

If CBR is something you are interested in, learn more from these resources, or connect with the team at CAAN!

### CAAN RESOURCES:

[Principles of Research Collaboration](#)

[Journal of Indigenous HIV Research \(JIHR\)](#)

[Capacity Bridging](#)

[Research in a Good Way](#)

[Joining a CBR Team](#)

[Jargon Busting 101](#)

### Resources outside of CAAN:

[Two-Eyed Seeing](#)

[View of The Ethical Space of Engagement \(utoronto.ca\)](#)

