

Youth Engagement—A Key Ingredient for Effective Youth Impact Assessments

Background

A [youth impact assessment](#) (YIA) is a [structured set of questions](#) and a strategy designed to uncover both the expected and unintended consequences of a proposed policy, program, or practice on young people. By prioritizing the consideration of children as elected and government officials make decisions, impact assessments have proven to be a promising strategy for keeping kids’ needs front and center and bringing about positive changes for children.

While other countries have a long history of incorporating youth impact assessments into government decision-making, YIAs are just getting off the ground in the United States. Because of the promise they have shown elsewhere, it makes good sense to try YIAs more widely in the U.S. And in spreading their use, we have an opportunity to do them effectively right from the start.

Prioritizing Youth Engagement in Youth Impact Assessments

Engaging young people in every step of the youth impact assessment process adds to YIAs’ effectiveness. The most compelling reason to involve young people in impact assessments is that the policy decisions YIAs are designed to influence affect youth directly. In addition, whether it’s technology or current strains on their mental health, young people understand their environment and rapidly changing world better than adults and can better match solutions to their current realities. In fact, one [researcher notes](#) that youth are always about three years ahead of adults in understanding the experiences of their peers.



Youth IN ACTION

Youth Organize to Make Sure City Government Prioritizes Their Needs

After years of advocacy, in 2018, a coalition of [youth leaders](#) and other community stakeholders in Richmond, California succeeded in securing the passage of a [ballot measure](#)—including leading the signature-gathering effort to get the measure on the ballot—to create the [Richmond Fund for Children and Youth](#). The Fund supports services for youth, such as health and social services, education and job training, arts programming, and youth leadership services, especially for Richmond’s most marginalized young people up to age 24. These include those from communities of color, LGBTQ+ youth, homeless youth, youth in foster care, and others.

A critical feature is that the measure requires the Fund’s Oversight Board to be comprised of approximately half youth, ages 15-24, with each member of City Council and the Mayor appointing youth members. This requirement institutionalizes young people’s involvement in city decision-making relevant to them, their families, and their communities.



An added value of engaging youth in YIAs is to support their development as future civic leaders in their communities. Their leadership in impact assessments can introduce them to how governments operate and how policy decisions are made. It also can help youth build important leadership skills and spur a pattern of engaging young people in other aspects of decision-making in their communities.

Youth can play a leadership role in developing the assessment questions, advocating for youth-friendly policies, and working with government officials and other stakeholders to implement those policies. Particularly important is to ensure youth leaders engaged in YIAs represent those whose unmet needs are greatest and who have historically been overlooked in policy decisions—such as youth of color and those who are disabled, LGBTQ+, low income, homeless, and/or live in rural areas.

The Youth in Action examples in this fact sheet demonstrate not only the necessary and critical role youth can play in influencing policy decisions that affect them but also the importance of government officials in working directly with youth to shape those decisions.



Youth IN ACTION

Youth-Led Research Leads to Local and State Improvements in New Mexico's Juvenile Justice System

[Formerly incarcerated and allied youth](#) in Bernalillo County (includes Albuquerque), New Mexico conducted a [Youth Participatory Action Research project](#)—designing and implementing their own research effort—to shed light on the experiences of young people within the county and state juvenile justice systems. They conducted focus groups and administered a [survey](#) to understand young people's experience with the juvenile justice systems.

The youth developed recommendations based on their findings and [worked directly](#) with juvenile justice system officials to influence how their recommendations were implemented. For example, they secured changes to the state's probation agreement, allowing more flexibility for youth who work and/or have after-school activities and other obligations that make it difficult to comply with the existing probation agreement. They also led the effort to change how the drug court works, making it possible for a failed drug test to lead to enhanced treatment rather than longer sentences.

Ways to Include Young People in the Impact Assessment Process

Those who work with youth know that ensuring young people's authentic voice is represented takes a commitment of time, funding, and other resources. This holds true for engaging them in impact assessments. Like other youth engagement efforts, the process ought to be designed by and with youth to ensure they have a meaningful role in the YIA process. The following are ways to involve young people throughout the YIA process.

- **Recruitment**
Tap into youth-centered activities and spaces to recruit young people to engage in the project. These include summer and after-school youth programs, youth internships, youth councils, social media, schools, and other spaces where youth gather. It will be critical to recruit those most affected by policy decisions, and that may require tailoring outreach to recruit youth of color and other groups of marginalized young people. Finally, ensure youth understand the project and the influence they can have.
- **Fact-Finding**
Support [youth-led participatory action research](#) (YPAR) where youth design and lead their own fact finding. Their findings ought to inform YIA priorities and proposed policies to address them.
- **Co-Leadership**
Equip young people to co-lead YIA leadership structures (e.g., steering committee, workgroup, etc.) so that they are an integral part of selecting areas for focus, drafting the assessment questions, providing their perspective on policies that are assessed, and influencing and implementing recommendations in the impact assessments.
- **Engaging with Policymakers**
Ensure young people have meaningful opportunities to discuss their experiences and ideas with policymakers and other decision-makers.
- **Sharing Findings**
Support youth in disseminating the results of the impact assessment to public officials, the media, the community, and their peers.

Ways to Support Young People's Success in Youth Impact Assessments

For young people to engage meaningfully in YIAs and other civic activities, they often need information and coaching as well as concrete supports like stipends and transportation. The following suggestions build on best practices from other successful youth engagement efforts.

Provide mentorship, education, and skills coaching. Youth may need information and mentorship to develop skills in youth-led participatory action research, the policymaking process, community organizing, outreach and education, communications, and other competencies related to leadership and civic engagement.

Make participation comfortable for young people. For example, it is important to adapt to youths' availability when scheduling meetings and other events and to hold meetings at sites—such as community centers, schools, and other places—where youth feel comfortable. And young people may be more comfortable engaging digitally rather than always in person. Finally, making sure there is mutual understanding of decisions made in the process of doing impact assessments—for example, through knowledge checks-ins—is critical.

Address youths' needs so they can participate fully. It will be important to pay stipends to young people for their time. In addition, YIA organizers will want to provide other needed assistance ranging from transportation support to access to computing devices. And, as with all populations, YIA organizers ought to pay particular attention to access issues, ensuring those with physical and other limitations can fully participate in the process.

Engage in continuous learning and improvement. Ensuring youth engagement is authentic and meaningful requires continuous feedback and improvements where needed. In partnership with youth leaders, this could be accomplished by checking in with youth in groups and one-on-one to get feedback on the process as well as participating in a learning community of like-minded organizations that focus on youth engagement in impact assessments.

Youth IN ACTION

Scottish Youths' Involvement in an Impact Assessment Improves the Situation for Young People in Out-of-Home Placements

In using Child Rights and Welfare Impact Assessments (CRWIAs) to fulfill its duty to advance the rights of young people, the Scottish Government [asks](#) how young people have been involved in the development of proposed policies.

For example, in February 2021, the Scottish Government published a [CRWIA](#) of a proposed bill aimed at ensuring, whenever possible, that children who are placed in out-of-home care are placed with their siblings and/or have direct contact with their siblings and other individuals with whom they have a relationship.

The government took several steps to seek young people's input on the bill, with the final policy reflecting this input. For instance, they administered a [child-friendly survey](#) to nearly 300 youth and consulted with youth who have had experience in the care system. Results from this youth engagement found that young people were supportive of being allowed to stay connected to their siblings as such contact is good for the child. Young people also stated that their voice should be a critical part in shaping the policy.

Once enacted, youth helped to [develop](#) the [guidance](#) on implementing the law. And as the provisions of the bill are carried out, the Scottish Government will seek feedback from young people to assess how the regulations are working.



In Closing

As use of youth impact assessments spreads in the U.S., leaders who design them have the opportunity to demonstrate the tremendous value of involving young people and to develop models for how to do so most effectively.

For Further Information

[Youth Impact Assessments: Putting Kids Front and Center in Policy Decisions](#)

[Using Child Impact Assessments in Your Community or State: A Starter Guide](#)

[Child & Youth Impact Assessments: Sample Tools](#)

Contact Kids Impact Initiative at info@kidsimpact.org



Kids Impact Initiative

www.kidsimpact.org

Copyright © 2021 Kids Impact Initiative,
a project of Community Partners.

All rights reserved. Permission to copy, disseminate or otherwise use this work is normally granted as long as ownership is properly attributed to Kids Impact Initiative, a project of Community Partners.