

# Collaborating with Community-Based Partners to Conduct Surveys

## *Insights from the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety Evaluation*

Eleanor Lauderback, Lauren Farrell, and Eona Harrison

### KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Value of **training community partners to administer surveys**

---

Importance of **engaging partners early in evaluation design and setting expectations up front**

---

Need to **work with partners to create processes and structures** that work in their context

---

Value of **consistent and comprehensive training** to develop shared understandings

---

Importance of **flexibility and gratitude for partners**

Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) is an aspirational adolescent pregnancy prevention program that empowers youth and their caretakers to challenge gendered and societal norms, build healthy relationships, and connect with local health services. The Urban Institute developed the PASS program in 2012 in partnership with the DC Housing Authority and residents and community-based organizations from the Benning Terrace Development using a community-based participatory research approach. In 2017, Urban began a quasi-experimental evaluation of the program in partnership with Sasha Bruce Youthwork (Sasha Bruce). Urban and Sasha Bruce expanded PASS to four other communities in Washington, DC, to determine whether the program leads to certain outcomes for young people compared with alternative community-based programming at different sites.

The PASS intervention comprises two gender-specific curricula: Sisters Rising and Brothers Rising. The Sisters Rising and Brothers Rising intervention is structured to facilitate small group discussions, role playing, take-home exercises, bonding, and skills building. Core elements include gender-based, age-specific, and culturally responsive content and learning tools; assertive communication and safe boundaries training; information about gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and assault; bystander intervention; examination of real-life scenarios that make it difficult to foster and negotiate healthy dating and sexual relationships; emphasis on shared partner responsibility in consistently practicing safe sex; and connections with trusted adults and local service providers.

Our main data collection activity during the PASS evaluation involved surveying young people participating in PASS and other programs for comparison. Drawing on ongoing project process documentation and reflections from the research team, community partners, and program facilitators, this fact sheet highlights surveying successes, challenges, and lessons learned throughout the evaluation.

## PASS SURVEYS AND DATA COLLECTION

For the evaluation, young people participating in PASS and the comparison sites were surveyed four times: before any programming began (wave 1), immediately post-program (wave 2), three months post-program (wave 3), and nine months post-program (wave 4). The surveys measured participants' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding topics such as sexual health, gender norms, and healthy relationships, which align with the PASS curriculum topics.

Urban and site partner staff were trained on how to complete informed consent procedures, record unique identification numbers for participants, and upload survey data to Qualtrics.

Staff administered the surveys through a youth-friendly application on tablets and smartphones. Young people received a \$20 gift card as an incentive to participate in each survey wave.

### WHAT APPROACHES SUPPORTED SUCCESSFUL SURVEYS?

- **Training partner staff to administer surveys.** Our partner staff have strong relationships with participating youth and stay engaged in their lives in between survey waves. Working closely with our site partner staff to administer surveys improved retention rates for later waves, young people's focus while taking the surveys, and survey completion rates (more questions answered).
- **Finding out what works for partners.** Urban worked with site partners to determine the structures and procedures that made sense to them. For example, we created unique identification numbers that were simple and meaningful to each site. These procedures also included being flexible about the best way to reach youth, whether through in-person survey administration on tablets or sharing the survey links via text, social media, or email.
- **Creating an accessible structure for data sharing.** To maintain confidentiality, site partners were unable to see responses after a young person completed the survey. Hence, the project used secure Box folders as a common place to share files tracking survey and programming progress. Site partners documented which young people took the survey using their unique identification numbers, and Urban staff confirmed that surveys had been uploaded on the back end and flagged any issues.
- **Creating comprehensive and consistent training.** Urban took time at the start of each cohort to review the surveying process with our partners, including how to use the survey tablets, familiarizing them with the Qualtrics application, and emphasizing the importance of using unique identification numbers to link specific young people to the survey and track their data over time. Developing a shared understanding of the process and making sure partners felt supported made data collection run more smoothly and efficiently.
- **Showing flexibility and gratitude for partners.** Urban demonstrated flexibility and gratitude by creating reasonable contract deliverables, offering fair compensation, and moving survey dates around to accommodate partners' and communities' needs. We demonstrated our commitment by not only showing up for surveying but also spending time with partners to build personal relationships. Getting quality data is about giving community partners the resources and trust they need to do what they do best: connect with young people.

### ADAPTING SURVEY ADMINISTRATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, staff conducted all surveys in person on tablets. When the pandemic began, Urban worked closely with our partners to adapt survey procedures to keep partner staff and young people safe and healthy, while also completing data collection. This meant:

- Including links that could be distributed over text or social media, so young people could take surveys on their cell phones;
- administering informed consent procedures over the phone or on Zoom;
- organizing outdoor activities, including food and supply distribution, to reengage youth and their families; and
- increasing the use of social media to communicate with and reengage youth.

## WHAT SURVEY CHALLENGES DID THE PASS EVALUATION FACE?

- **Youth reengagement over all four waves of surveys.** The evaluation struggled to retain young people for all four waves of surveys, given the length of time between programming and later waves of surveys (three months and nine months) and, later, the pandemic. Young people may have moved away from the community, gone on to college, or become incarcerated in that time; sometimes youth were not interested in completing another lengthy survey. Our site partners' deep relationships with the participants were key to combating this challenge, and they also developed creative ways to reengage youth over time such as movie and game nights, group dinners, and other activities.
- **Evaluation target numbers per site and cohort.** Original target numbers for youth engaged per site and per cohort largely overestimated how many young people our partners could recruit and retain in programming and surveys. By the time our partners pushed back on these numbers, it was too late to change the evaluation design to accommodate a smaller sample size. We worked with our partners to adapt the program model to reach additional youth, including by developing an "intensive" format that could be delivered in a condensed period of time; this was especially useful during summer and holiday breaks and for participants in Sasha Bruce's youth residential settings.
- **Survey length and sensitive questions.** Both our partners and participating youth consistently shared frustrations around the length of the survey, which takes about 45 minutes when completed thoughtfully. The survey also includes sensitive questions regarding sexual and reproductive health and behaviors, relationships, and community safety. These topics, while aligned with the PASS curriculum, were often completely unrelated to the comparison programming, making it difficult for young people at the comparison sites to see a connection with their experiences.
- **Unexpected events in our partner communities.** Our partner communities experienced major disruptions throughout the evaluation, including episodic gun violence and the impacts of the pandemic. These events affected our ability to conduct surveys according to the planned wave timing, requiring flexibility and at times skipping survey waves when necessary to keep people safe. Beyond offering flexibility, we always used principles of trauma-informed care to guide our interactions with young people and community members, especially related to instances of violence and the ongoing effects of the pandemic.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- **Engage partners in evaluation design early on.** Although we engaged our site partners in the evaluation design, we were not able to change key pieces of the scope and sample size based on their feedback, which ultimately caused challenges for the research team and our partners. For future projects, we should allow partners to review our research design before making final decisions about implementation to create realistic expectations and determine evaluation goals. Federal funding and timelines can make this approach challenging, but investing time earlier on in the project can improve the evaluation design and create efficiencies later on.
- **Collaborate to create processes and structures that work for community partners and researchers.** By working alongside our partners to determine what worked for them, we were able to ensure survey data collection processes that satisfied the needs of the research team and evaluation without creating an undue burden on our partners. This approach ultimately improved data collection, quality, and security.
- **Involving partners in data collection can improve survey completion and data quality.** Our partners' deep relationships with young people and parents in their communities were an invaluable asset when engaging youth over a long period of time for PASS surveys. As a result of their connections with the participants, facilitators were able to improve attendance in later survey waves. Facilitators also communicated the importance of complete and honest responses to the survey questions in a way that was meaningful to them, which improved completion rates and data quality.

- **Offer consistent and comprehensive training for partners.** By offering consistent training on survey data collection across partners and Urban staff, we were able to create a shared understanding of the process and ultimate purpose of the surveys for the evaluation. Revisiting this training before each cohort helped partners feel supported and prepared to administer surveys to the youth.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

- A key theme of many of these lessons is the value of including community partners in the evaluation design and data collection processes. Their insights and contextual knowledge of the communities they work in can improve the feasibility of the evaluation design and data collection process. Additionally, their relationships with youth and parents can improve engagement and attendance at programming and surveying opportunities, ultimately leading to higher completion rates and higher-quality survey data.
- Training community partners in research evaluation design and data collection procedures can increase their capacity to develop and administer surveys in their communities in the future. Data tracking and surveying are often important requirements of funding opportunities and can also help our partners assess the impact of their programs over time.
- Program evaluations are often structured for “proving” rather than learning. We designed the PASS evaluation to determine whether the program could be considered an evidence-based model, rather than using the data to learn about what aspects of the model work and what we can improve over time. This objective relied entirely on the survey data, using the qualitative data collected over the course of the project for contextual purposes. The evaluation also focused mostly on the content of the curriculum rather than facilitators’ delivery methods and approaches; however, our qualitative data show that the latter is often the key factor in successful youth engagement and retention. Future evaluations of community-centered youth programs could better assess and improve effectiveness by incorporating more robust qualitative data collection and structuring questions to support both proving and learning. This includes designing questions that are both directly related to key program outcomes and targeted to understand the broader context in which these programs operate.

## ADDITIONAL READING

### *Community-Engaged Surveys: From Research Design to Analysis and Dissemination*

Eona Harrison, Matthew Mizota, Hannah Daly, and Elsa Falkenburger.  
<https://urbn.is/3nqcSjV>.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This fact sheet was funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services through the Administration on Children, Youth and Families. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts.

We also thank Susan Popkin for serving as the project's technical reviewer, and the rest of the PASS research team (current and former), who are listed on the project's web page (<https://urbn.is/2GRKO7k>), for their important contributions. We are grateful to our partners at Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Exodus Treatment Center, Inc., Brotha's Huddle, YaayMe! Inc., and Kenilworth Rec at KPMC Apartments for their continued trust and crucial contributions to the PASS model and evaluation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Eleanor Lauderback** is a research associate in the Center for Labor, Human Services, and Population. Her research focuses on child, youth, and family well-being and community engagement in the research process.

**Lauren Farrell** is a policy analyst in the Justice Policy Center and manager of the Community Engaged Methods Resource Center. Her work is rooted in values of community engagement, anti-racism, and action research, and her research focuses on participatory research practices across multiple topics.

**Eona Harrison** is a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute and the PASS project manager. She focuses on pathways that lead to racial disparities in unintended pregnancy rates, infant and child outcomes, and general health.