Rethinking Research for Equity-Oriented Systems Change

Lessons from Cincinnati

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Cincinnati's Truth & Equity initiative, led by the Center for Community Resilience (CCR) in partnership with Joining Forces for Children and many other local organizations and coalitions, has been working to dismantle structural racism and promote justice and equity throughout the region. It also catalyzed an ongoing effort to uncover the city's past and chart a more equitable path forward (CCR 2022). Rooted in a collaborative, community-embedded approach, the initiative has shown how public policies—such as the city's 1948 Metropolitan Master Plan—contributed to the disinvestment and displacement of historically marginalized neighborhoods.[1] In 2023, this work helped prompt a formal apology from Cincinnati's city leaders for the harm caused by these actions.[2] Today, many Cincinnatians are focused on what will be done in the wake of this apology, particularly on how the communities most harmed can be repaired and revitalized.

The work of this community partnership continues to evolve. CCR, a research-to-action hub at George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health emphasizing equity, community partnership, and systems alignment, recently developed the *Closing the Wealth Gap: Stakeholder Report* through deep engagement with residents in the Avondale and Riverside neighborhoods (Purva et al. 2025). The report builds on earlier truth-telling efforts by offering a roadmap for equity-oriented, place-based investments.[3] Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Policies for Action research program,[4] the report outlines promising strategies, such as neighborhood-based resource hubs, financial empowerment initiatives, and support for

homeownership and small business development, that can foster long-term economic resilience and help close racial and spatial wealth gaps. Approaches include channeling targeted investments into education, financial security, and access to capital, and reflect the shared commitment of many community members, city officials, and institutional partners to create more inclusive opportunities and strengthen economic resilience. Recommendations such as these demonstrate the critical value of community-partnered research in guiding equity-oriented systems change, but equally importantly, they invite reflection on the role of research more generally in supporting the kinds of active collective reparative efforts in Cincinnati.

Given the policy-focused work underway in Cincinnati, for this study, we sought to interview a small group of community leaders to better understand their views on research and its role in advancing equity and justice. The interviewees were identified following a 2024 site visit with CCR, which offered an opportunity to learn more about the local context and ongoing efforts. A few months later, we conducted a separate set of in-depth interviews, independent of CCR's work, with seven individuals deeply engaged in Cincinnati's journey toward equity and repair. These included civic leaders, policymakers, researchers, organizers, advocates, and neighborhood liaisons.

The purpose of these interviews was not to assess CCR's work or others involved in the Truth & Equity initiative, but to surface broader insights: what kinds of research are most useful for equity-oriented systems change; how research has been experienced or applied within their communities; and what advice they would offer to researchers and funders aiming to be more responsive, collaborative, and accountable.

Although the interviews were grounded in Cincinnati-specific agendas and projects, the insights shared transcend any single community. They offer powerful reflections on the evolving relationship between policy research, community power, and structural change—and on how research might more effectively support those most harmed by past and present injustices.

This brief presents the collective perspectives of those interviewed and contributes to a growing body of evidence on community-based participatory research. Several recurring themes emerged across conversations, including the following:

- deep skepticism about traditional research practices and their extractive tendencies

- clarity about the types of evidence and support communities most need

- concrete examples of how research can be structured to build trust, shift power, and catalyze systems change

The final section distills these reflections into a set of lessons for researchers, research funders, and the institutions that shape and support their work.

The Limits and Harms of Traditional Research

Nearly every person we interviewed expressed skepticism—if not outright criticism—of traditional approaches to research, particularly when they are conducted *on* communities rather than *with* or *by* them. Interviewees were deeply critical of academia's narrow view of evidence, and while they recognized that data and evidence are often required to justify policy shifts or resource allocation, they voiced deep ambivalence about who produces that evidence, whose interests it ultimately serves, and who actually benefits from its findings.

"A large number of traditional academics… do not see the lived experience under the evidence umbrella."

"They parachute in, get what they need, and leave before the ink is dry. The community doesn't even see the report."

"There is a lot of data, but I don't see how the data is being used… I never get a chance to see the results of what people have discovered here in this community."
—Interview participants

There was strong consensus that communities most impacted by systemic inequities are rarely the beneficiaries of research—and are often harmed by it. Several interviewees described how data have been used to justify redevelopment and displacement, rather than to support community well-being. Many emphasized the extractive nature of conventional research relationships, in which academics or consultants affiliated with elite institutions collect data and insights with little return to the community—whether in the form of findings, resources, or decisionmaking power.

"You can collect data till the cows come home, and nothing can change."

"You can't keep parachuting in with a study, drawing conclusions, and then disappearing. That's not partnership—that's extraction."

"The reports sit on a shelf, and the researchers move on. Meanwhile, the same communities are still fighting to be heard."
—Interview participants

From the perspective of the interviewees, researchers often extract data to build academic careers, fulfill grant requirements, or influence policy decisions made far from the community—without concern for downstream impacts, including those that may be unintended or harmful. Even when community partners are included, interviewees noted that they are too often confined to narrow advisory or outreach roles, rather than treated as coinvestigators, coauthors, or copresenters. Several respondents also warned against superficial engagement that tokenizes a small number of individuals without meaningfully sharing power, or the cooption of work by higher-ranking individuals within an organization.

"I'm asked to participate in every meeting… and even asked to sign off on grants… as soon as the check comes, we hear nothing back."

"You see this carousel of community folks… paraded around… [and ask yourself]… Are they just the people who tell you what you want to hear?"

"They agreed with it, but because it wasn't their idea… we were kind of like, put in the corner. Now they're putting their brand on it and just taking it and running with it."
—Interview participants

Importantly, many of these critiques came not only from community leaders but also from researchers themselves who were interviewed, including those working from within or near academic and research-intensive institutions. These respondents noted that dominant models of research remain rigidly hierarchical and insufficiently responsive to the demands of justice and transformation, constraints some had experienced firsthand. They argued that even the best-intentioned research tends to prioritize technical rigor over shared power and cocreated solutions.

"Even in its best versions, [research] has failed, because what we really have been doing is falling deeply in love with describing problems."

"We have not utilized [research] well, nor have we really communicated to others what is even possible through it and invited people in."
—Interview participants

Several researchers also critiqued the dominant reliance on individual-level data and analysis as a major limitation—one that tends to blame poor outcomes on individual choices or behaviors, while obscuring the structural and systemic roots of inequity.

"We lack the tools and the language because… most of us don't have the ability to think outside the level of the individual."

"We want to bring it down to the individual to understand it there, and then somehow be able to lift it back up. And yet that fails entirely."
—Interview participants

In short, participants conveyed a clear and consistent message: the traditional research enterprise—particularly when it lacks authentic partnership and power-sharing—often reinforces the very inequities it purports to address. Research by outside "experts" is frequently used as a gatekeeping tool, required to validate the lived experiences of communities only when policy or funding decisions are at stake. Institutions tend to privilege the knowledge produced by academics or evaluators over the

insights of those who live and work in the systems being studied. When disconnected from community priorities and accountability, research can become not only irrelevant but also extractive, exploitative, and ultimately harmful to efforts aimed at systems change.

What Communities Need from Research and Researchers

Despite their deep concerns about traditional research approaches, interviewees recognized the critical role that evidence can play across all phases of systems change—from reimagining and agenda-setting to implementation and accountability. They spoke with urgency and specificity about the kinds of research and research-related supports they most want and need. Without meaningful partnerships or infrastructure, such as that provided by Cincinnati's Truth & Equity initiative, many described having to rely on informal or ad hoc methods to gather evidence, including Google searches, personal contacts, or Freedom of Information Act requests.

"Some people don't see an issue as an issue until they have the evidence."

"It's kind of a hodgepodge... we just went on the internet and found information."
—Interview participants

What communities need, interviewees emphasized, is research that is timely, transparent, actionable, and grounded in priorities they themselves define. That means research that accounts for historical and systemic context, produces insights that can inform immediate decisions, supports reparative investments and policy advocacy, and validates lived experience while providing credible evidence for external audiences, such as funders or legislators.

"We need answers that are grounded in the real world, not academic debates. Research should help us do something, not just know something."
—Interview participant

When research is not codeveloped or tailored to the needs of a specific community or neighborhood, the consequences can be harmful. One interviewee explained that "affordability" for new housing developments was calculated using citywide averages rather than neighborhood-specific data, resulting in prices that were far out of reach for longtime residents. Timeliness also emerged as a critical theme. Interviewees explained that communities can't afford to wait years for findings while developers, policymakers, or funders move forward without them.

"By the time everything gets published… you've missed the boat."
—Interview participant

Utility was another recurring theme—what mattered most was whether the research could actually be used. Interviewees emphasized the importance of data disaggregated by race, gender, geography, and other community-relevant markers to support the case for equity-focused investments and policy change—even when such data are difficult to obtain. Many also called for layered data that combines hyper-local insights with national comparisons, helping to situate community concerns within larger systems and structures.

"We need that local piece… but also national pieces to show that this is a small part of a larger puzzle."
—Interview participant

Participants also emphasized the need for research that reflects the complexity of real life—data that cuts across sectors, silos, and institutional boundaries. Transportation, housing, employment, and health systems are deeply interconnected in people's daily lives, yet are often treated separately in research and policy analysis. Public transit routes and schedules, for example, directly affect people's ability to access jobs, groceries, and health care. Research must demonstrate how these systems interact—often compounding one another—and how their failures may underlie a wide range of poor outcomes for communities.

"We have all these data points... but at no point are we willing to connect all the dots."

"It's not about fixing broken people... It's the recognition that we have a system that was designed to break people."
—Interview participants

Crucially, many respondents underscored that simply documenting disparities is insufficient. They want research that generates solutions, illuminates root causes, supports accountability, and sustains the work of organizing, advocacy, and systems change.

Respondents also emphasized that community members need training and tools to interpret and apply data—and to counter outdated or harmful narratives. Clear, credible, and well-packaged research can also ease the burden of translation, freeing up community leaders and staff from having to repeatedly explain or justify their positions to skeptics, developers, or decisionmakers.

"Just coming in to give me a report ... is not enough. Give me the tools to translate what you have discovered into a very simple strategy."

"Give us dashboards, one-pagers, talking points—something we can actually take into a meeting and use."

"I have to speak like five different languages... community members, policymakers, funders, businesses, staff."
—Interview participants

In short, interviewees articulated a strong and consistent demand for research that is useful, usable, and aligned with community-defined priorities. This includes the following:

- historical and systemic framing

- actionable, disaggregated, and timely data

- cross-sectoral and intersectional analysis

- translation tools to engage diverse audiences

- research that supports, not undermines, efforts to build power, accountability, and equity

The interviewees do not reject research. They want it done differently: on their terms, in their time, and in ways that equip them to lead change in their communities.

How Research Can Support Real-World Systems Change

Community leaders and practitioners had much to share about *how* research should be conducted to support meaningful systems change. A powerful throughline across all interviews was the call for community-led or deeply community-partnered research—not simply research that includes community voices, but research that is co-created, co-owned, and coapplied in ways that build trust and drive action.

To respondents, this means working with residents to codevelop research questions and design, ensuring shared access to data and findings—not just polished final reports—and recognizing community members as coauthors who are fairly compensated. It requires building authentic, sustained, and relational partnerships, rather than engaging in one-off projects. It calls for democratizing data by equipping trusted community members with the tools, training, and support they need to interpret, communicate, and act on findings in real time.

"Community members should be leading the questions, not just answering them."

"Research must be shaped not just by what institutions want to know, but by what communities want to change."

"You have to think about what you're going to bring to that community… not just what you're taking."
—Interview participants

Respondents emphasized that genuine listening and codesign help surface unexpected insights and avoid unintended consequences—such as new investments that inadvertently trigger displacement or

reinforce mistrust. Institutional timelines, grant cycles, and academic incentives often conflict with the long arc of community trust-building and change.

"One neighborhood said they didn't want a grocery store—not because they didn't want food, but because they feared gentrification. That's a nuance you miss without community voice."

"They didn't want a rec center, because they knew that would drive up housing costs. We would have never thought of that."

"We [researchers] need to stop assuming we know what's best. Even good intentions can create harm if we're not listening."
—Interview participants

Several interviewees highlighted the unique role of trusted research partners, especially those who combine academic legitimacy with deep community alignment. CCR was repeatedly cited as a powerful partner—offering technical assistance, credibility with institutions and funders, and a national network for relational learning and rapid exchange.

"We could kind of lean into the institutional name… this is not just us doing these little, you know, community-based participatory research projects."

"That research slash technical assistance… those are the people that are like gold to me."

"The research itself is not as powerful as the interpreter."
—Interview participants

These partnerships not only helped translate complex systems into accessible, actionable insights for community and policymaker use—interviewees explained that they also helped bridge research to accountability. When evidence is generated but fails to result in concrete change, community trust erodes. Respondents stressed that data must be paired with tangible action, enforcement mechanisms, and ongoing organizing.

Another key theme was how authentic community-research partnerships strengthen coalitions. Rather than forcing every actor into the same mold, interdisciplinary, cross-sector collaborations allowed groups to contribute based on their unique strengths—mirroring how social movements operate.

"We all didn't do everything… the people who did policy focused on that, education folks focused on that. We supported each other."

"It was rooted in a way that allowed everyone to use their knowledge and expertise in the way that made the most sense for them… that's how social movements work."
—Interview participants

Across the board, interviewees were clear: research can be a powerful tool for advancing equity, but only when done with communities, not on them. Its role must go beyond describing systems to actively supporting their transformation. Participants articulated a bold, grounded vision for equitable research practice—one that is codesigned with those most impacted by structural inequities, rooted in mutual respect and reciprocity, and positioned to build trust, strengthen civic infrastructure, and catalyze reparative change.

At the same time, they spoke candidly about the complexities and contradictions inherent in pursuing community-partnered research that aims to be both rigorous and responsive. They noted that even the best evidence can be misused or weaponized, and that researchers are often expected to remain "objective" in ways that can undermine justice and obscure power dynamics. Understandings of "community-led research" varied—from full leadership by grassroots groups to strong, reciprocal partnerships with institutional researchers or anchor organizations. Many also acknowledged that community-generated knowledge continues to be undervalued or dismissed, especially in arenas that prioritize academic credentials over lived experience.

These reflections underscore a critical shift in mindset and practice—one that funders and commissioners of research, and researchers themselves, must embrace if research is to be a true driver of equity-oriented systems change.

Lessons for Commissioners, Funders, and Producers of Research

The reflections shared by Cincinnati's community leaders offer actionable guidance for those who commission, fund, or conduct research intended to support equity-oriented systems change:

- **Prioritize long-term, trust-based relationships**. Avoid one-off engagements that extract knowledge or community labor without lasting reciprocity. Building real trust takes time, consistency, and shared purpose. Funders should resist short grant cycles that prioritize speed over relationship and process.

- **Support community leadership in the research process**. Communities should not just be consulted or included; they should help shape research questions, methods, products, and uses. This includes compensating residents and community partners fairly, crediting them as coauthors, and ensuring their insights drive the work.

- **Invest in local research and data infrastructure**. Communities need the tools, training, and platforms to generate, access, and use data independently. This includes funding for local data hubs, technical assistance, and community-centered learning collaboratives.

- **Translate findings into usable, action-oriented formats**. Reports alone aren't enough. Communities need dashboards, fact sheets, talking points, and other tools that support organizing, advocacy, and decisionmaking in real-time. The best research products are codeveloped and reduce the burden on community members to interpret or justify their positions.

- **Fund and strengthen bridging organizations and local ecosystems**. These are trusted intermediaries that help connect resident experience to evidence and policy. They often serve as the connective tissue between the community, researchers, and institutional actors. Sustaining their capacity is essential to long-term systems change.

- **Broaden what counts as credible evidence**. Lived experience, relational insight, and place-based knowledge must be recognized as valid forms of evidence—alongside academic studies or statistical models—especially when shaping policy that affects those same communities.

- **Align institutional incentives with equity goals**. Academic norms, grant requirements, and evaluation metrics often reward extraction and detachment. Funders and institutions should reconfigure expectations to reward collaboration, responsiveness, and mutual accountability.

Conclusion

The work underway in Cincinnati reminds us that research can do more than document the past or explain the present—it can also help communities shape a more just future. However, this requires that

research be grounded in local leadership, guided by trust, and aligned with efforts aimed at action and repair.

The *Closing the Wealth Gap: Stakeholder Report* offers a compelling example of how community-partnered policy research can surface root causes of inequity and point toward practical, place-based strategies for change. Developed with deep resident engagement and supported by the Policies for Action program, the report reflects an emerging model of research that informs—not just analyzes—policy. Local news network *WLWT5*'s coverage on "Let's Talk Cincy"[5] underscores how research, when grounded in community priorities and clearly communicated, can support broader conversations about what fair and equitable policies and policymaking might look like.

The insights shared in this brief build on that momentum. They suggest that research intended to guide equity-oriented policy and systems change must be shaped by those most affected, attentive to historical and structural context, and designed with real-world application in mind. That includes aligning timelines, formats, and expectations so that research can be both credible and actionable—informing policy decisions that are timely, grounded, and accountable to the communities they affect.

Cincinnati's experience highlights what's possible when research and policy are aligned with community leadership, shared goals, and sustained collaboration. In such contexts, policy research becomes not only a tool for understanding the past but a resource for shaping a more just and resilient future.

Notes

[1] "America's Truth: Cincinnati," Center for Community Resilience, accessed October 7, 2025, https://ccr.publichealth.gwu.edu/americas-truth.

[2] Sarah Baldauf, "CCR Documentary Inspires Apology from Mayor, City Council to Cincinnati's Lower West End," Center for Community Resilience, Milken Institute School of Public Health, June 20, 2023, https://ccr.publichealth.gwu.edu/ccr-documentary-inspires-apology-mayor-city-council-cincinnatis-lower-west-end.

[3] "Closing the Wealth Gap," Center for Community Resilience, Milken Institute School of Public Health, accessed October 7, 2025, https://ccr.publichealth.gwu.edu/closing-wealth-gap.

[4] Policies for Action (P4A) is a signature research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. This includes working to dismantle structural racism and other barriers to health. P4A approaches health and health justice not through a narrow focus on health care, but by examining and addressing the upstream structural drivers—the policies, systems, and societal conditions that shape people's opportunities to live healthy and fulfilling lives. P4A seeks to build a robust, actionable evidence base that helps uncover the root causes of inequities and identify the types of policy and systems change most likely to generate lasting, transformative impact. In the United States—where health and opportunity are profoundly stratified by race—any serious pursuit of health equity must also center racial equity, and grapple with the ways structural racism has been embedded in our laws, geographies, infrastructures, and institutions. See "Building a Culture of Health in America," Policies for Action, accessed October 7, 2025, https://policiesforaction.org/.

[5] "Let's Talk Cincy: A Look at a New Study That Focuses on Closing the Wealth Gap in Cincinnati," *WLWT5*, January 31, 2025, https://www.wlwt.com/article/let-s-talk-cincy-a-look-at-a-new-study-focuses-on-closing-the-wealth-gap-in-cincinnati/63631785.

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