



Strengthening Science and Community Impact Through Equitable Research Practices



By: Heather Hyden and Soojin Conover
Full Report





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Introduction

The work of the Humana Foundation is centered on advancing equitable access and outcomes for diverse communities by eliminating the social and structural barriers to good health and healthcare. We foster community-centered collaborations and evidence-based, scalable investments that advance health equity and support seniors, veterans and school-aged children in living connected, healthy lives. In particular, the Foundation's efforts focus on creating healthy emotional connections, as a vital part of a holistic approach to care and shaping a healthier approach to nutrition to support lifelong health and well-being. We also adopt a listening approach to understand the needs and improve outcomes for individuals and communities by learning from people and organizations on the ground.

One way we work toward health equity is through our research strategy. The purpose of this report is to share our research strategy including how we operationalize it and highlight trends we are seeing in how our partners are integrating equitable research practices in their approach, design and methodology. We believe that supporting innovative, solution-oriented research focused on equity is how we can improve outcomes for individuals and communities, and to learn from people directly impacted by health disparities.

About the Authors



Heather Hyden

Public Health Strategy Lead, The Humana Foundation

Heather Hyden, MS in Community and Leadership Development, has over 15 years of community development and public health expertise. Her depth of knowledge spans grassroots organizational development, local government, academia, non-profit consulting and philanthropy. She has published across diverse platforms including magazines, peer-reviewed journals and institutional reports. Over her career, she has built new systems, policies and collective action for improved nutrition, maternal health, and story-based evaluation. She is currently leading the publication strategy for the Humana Foundation and continues to teach research methods and leadership fundamentals at the collegiate level.



Soojin Conover

Innovation Portfolio Strategy Principal, The Humana Foundation

Soojin Conover serves as the Humana Foundation's Innovation Portfolio Strategy Principal. In her role, she leads the Foundation's data and research strategy, including its research grants program, to ground its work in data-driven analysis and evidence-based research to address health equity issues in emotional health, nutrition, and food security. Soojin brings extensive experience in public health research and data analytics to guide informed decision making and promote health equity. Prior to joining the Humana Foundation, she held analytical roles at non-profit organizations. Soojin received her Ph.D. in Public Policy and Political Economy from the University of Texas at Dallas, where she specialized in health research and geographic information systems.



Our Research Strategy

Our research strategy is built on two key pillars:



First, we use a **test-and-learn** approach to foster solution-focused, innovative and scientifically rigorous research.



Second, we reinforce our mission which is focused on **equity and transparency**.

“ More research on scalable health equity interventions that lead to positive long-term outcomes is needed. We intend to foster research with practical implications for healthcare or public health policymaking and practice, ensuring that new knowledge can be shared with the broader ecosystem. ”

- Soojin Conover

Annually, we develop a research agenda based on the gaps we've identified and our health equity goals. We seek applicants with multidisciplinary teams who leverage interventions or strategies focused on serving low-resourced and racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Additionally, we ask potential applicants to describe how they will engage community while prioritizing equitable approaches. This is aligned with our approach to health equity, as we believe strong research should include equitable engagement with people directly impacted by health disparities. We also intentionally ask applicants to describe how their research is innovative and how they intend to increase representation of diverse populations in their study. This focus on diverse and marginalized populations supports our goal to improve health equity for communities across the country.

Since we launched our research program in 2023, 11 studies have been developed to design and evaluate interventions or develop strategies to enhance nutrition security, address nutrition-related conditions, prevent suicide, and promote mental health with an emphasis on social connectedness. We have noticed insightful trends in how the research teams are using equitable research practices to eliminate unnecessary barriers to health. By centering equity, they strive to increase access and opportunity and community leadership, bring human dignity to the forefront of their approach and co-create research designs and programmatic interventions.



Community-Engaged Research

Community-engaged research (CEnR) has increased over the last few decades. Involving local communities in the research process aims to ensure health equity interventions are effective and sustainable. Building trust between communities and research institutions has been identified as one of the most important core determinants of research participation.¹ Several objectives have been outlined to build these critical relationships toward trust and deeper engagement by directly impacted communities:



Utilize an asset-based approach

by building on existing community knowledge and resources.



Strengthen local community's capacity

to address public health challenges.



Increase the relevance of research for local communities.



Bridge gaps between research findings and actionable practice and policy.

One method under the umbrella of CEnR is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Outputs of CBPR are culture-centered interventions, partnership synergy and appropriate research design. These outputs lead to intermediate outcomes such as university and community policy changes, sustainable partnerships and projects, community empowerment, knowledge democracy, cultural reinforcement, capacity building and research productivity.² In the long-term, it supports community transformation and improved health outcomes.

As a recent article states,

“ When researchers include the people they study in the research, outcomes improve.”³

We reviewed all studies funded by the Humana Foundation in 2023 and 2024 and descriptively summarized research practice themes. In addition, we conducted six interviews with principal investigators to further understand their community-engaged research experience and best practices. After we identified equitable research practice themes, we further analyzed how each research project fits along a continuum of community-engaged research. Since the academic partners are developing and/or implementing an intervention, their research approach, methods and tools all fall along the continuum of community-engaged research (CEnR). Along the continuum is passive engagement on one end where research teams inform communities of their intervention and/or results, while on the other end community members are partners informing every step of the process from designing research questions to analyzing and disseminating results.

In our review of funded studies, we found three key themes.

Below is a list with a description of sub-themes and the number of studies found to fit each.



Currently, the teams are in the middle of their research timelines. Therefore, this insights article focuses on outlining equitable research trends and sharing why these approaches are important to promote health equity. In the article, we have organized research approaches, designs and methodologies based on principles of access, community leadership and respecting human dignity. Sharing these insights can help funders identify community-engaged research trends, understand why these approaches are critical to removing barriers to health, and apply these trends in their own research strategies. By sharing our research strategy, we hope to encourage other funders who are considering a plan for research funding. Increasing the number of research projects centering on equity supports knowledge, innovation and sustainability within the health and healthcare ecosystem.



Expanding Access and Opportunity in Research

Research teams aim to reflect the needs of the communities they serve. This approach helps ensure that interventions are relevant and accessible, leading to higher participation rates and greater impact. For example, our research partners recognize the important role that food plays in family and community life. To maximize participation and effectiveness, their food interventions are tailored to reflect dietary traditions and preferences. Research teams utilize surveys, advisory boards, and experience to develop meal programs that are both culturally appropriate and nutritionally sound. Examples include:

- **Offering 20 different recipe choices** developed over a decade of collaboration with diverse communities to participants of culinary intervention.
- Partnering with an organization that has adapted the Mediterranean diet for Southeastern U.S. preferences (Med-South) to **provide home-delivered meals to seniors.**

Several of our partners also prioritize cultural representation within their research teams to strengthen trust and community engagement. A strong connection between researchers and participants leads to better study design and more reliable results. For example, one partner has built an all-Latina research team, including community partners, to work with Latino youth. By having researchers who share cultural backgrounds with participants, teams can build trust and improve engagement.

“ In the Latino community, everything is about trust. We work with churches because it is a safe space. We always try to serve with empathy and improve their lives, not just their mental health, but overall. So, when people we work with succeed, they pass the word to others. The trust is the only way we can be successful at what we do. ”

- Community Partner

Beyond representation, some research projects are designed to address the unique needs of specific groups. This ensures that research findings can lead to meaningful action. Examples include:



Research teams focusing on **diverse youth** to study their unique health and well-being challenges.



Targeted recruitment strategies that reflect local population demographics.



Outreach efforts that rely on **trusted community networks**, including churches, radio, and local non-profit organizations.



Offering outreach materials and research findings in **Spanish**.

Finally, research teams are committed to making their programs as accessible as possible. Many provide critical nutrition and mental health resources while also ensuring that participants benefit from their involvement.

One key strategy is the use of wait-listed control groups in randomized controlled trial designs. Instead of excluding participants who are not initially selected for an intervention, the wait-list model ensures that more people ultimately receive support. This approach not only strengthens the research by increasing participation and data collection but also extends the benefits of these programs to a larger portion of the community. By designing studies this way, researchers balance the need for rigorous evaluation with a commitment to fairness, ensuring that communities involved in the research also see tangible benefits. This model fosters trust between researchers and participants, demonstrating that **the goal is not just data collection, but real, lasting impact on people's lives**.

These strategies reinforce the principle that research should be practical, community-engaged, and designed for long-term impact. They aim to be culturally relevant, reduce barriers to participation, identify the unique challenges for the diverse communities they serve and to strengthen relationships between researchers and participants.



Promoting Community Leadership

When considering the range of approaches to community-engaged research, one well-established model is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This method prioritizes collaboration between academic institutions and local communities, ensuring that those impacted by research have a role in shaping it. As demonstrated by our partners, this approach allows for meaningful engagement, leveraging both academic expertise and the firsthand knowledge of community members.

“ We do everything together—conceptualize, discuss, make changes, co-write and co-present. She has her expertise, and I have my expertise and when we bring it together, we can serve the community better. ”

- Research Partner

This perspective highlights the various ways that community members can actively contribute to research and underscores the value placed on their insights. Across our portfolio, research teams have worked with community groups in the following ways:

- **Community Advisory Boards (CABs)**, which bring together diverse voices to guide research efforts. Some research teams also facilitate youth-led advisory boards, ensuring younger generations have a voice in shaping studies that affect them.
- Forming partnerships with local **community-based organizations (CBOs)** such as nonprofits and schools. These relationships help research teams engage with the community, recruit participants, and ensure that projects strengthen trust, which, in turn, enhances the effectiveness of research initiatives.
- Formative research provides a structured way to ensure **community voices** are considered in research design and implementation.

Current research states: “CABs help build trust within communities typically excluded from setting research or policy priorities and ensure a research initiative is sustainable by reflecting community priorities and investing resources in the people and organizations that remain in a community, regardless of funding or project lifecycles.”⁴ As noted by our partners, a major strength of advisory boards is their role in fostering trust. By listening to individuals from different backgrounds, researchers can ensure their work remains relevant and effective.

“ In part because adolescence has changed so much since I was a kid. Making sure that we are asking the right questions and asking in a way that’s right for today’s teenagers is critical. It’s good science because it helps us check our bias. ”

- Research Partner

Beyond providing insights during the research process, advisory board members are also helpful in verifying findings.

“ Working with an advisory board makes the science stronger, for example, as a verification method. Historically there has been a top-down approach when experts come in and think they know. Oftentimes, the community’s true voice is not included, which minimizes the impact. We hope to include their lived experience with data to get the full picture. ”

- Research Partner

In addition to advisory boards, researchers are also utilizing panels and formative research to ensure their interventions meet the specific needs of the target audience. They have specifically used them in the following examples:

- **Adapting a nutrition education program for seniors.** This approach aligns with the ADAPT ITT framework⁵ (a multi-step community engagement process to facilitate the adoption of existing evidence-based interventions in unique situations), which enhances program effectiveness across diverse populations.⁶
- Conducting thorough formative research to **evaluate literacy levels** before implementing data collection tools.

In conclusion, leveraging community leadership through strong relationships are at the heart of effective community-engaged research. Our partners emphasize that there is no single formula for building trust, but consistency and respect are essential. By showing up and engaging in meaningful ways, research teams can establish credibility and ensure their work truly benefits the communities they seek to serve. As one principal investigator put it, **“If you enter the community with humility, you will get better science in the end.”** This commitment to collaboration and respect leads us to the next theme: respecting human dignity.



Respecting Human Dignity

Respecting human dignity is fundamental to equity-focused research because it acknowledges the inherent worth of individuals and fosters mutual trust between researchers and the communities they serve.

We found several examples of our partners implementing this approach, including through respectful and multifaced communication, prioritizing participant well-being, and providing fair compensation to those involved in research and advisory roles.

In the first sub-theme the academic partners focus on reducing stigma. For example, rather than requiring individuals to complete a food insecurity questionnaire to participate in a food pharmacy program, one partner opted to remove this prerequisite for program enrollment. Their rationale is clear:

“ There is a lot of stigma around food insecurity. We didn’t want people to feel uncomfortable about answering the USDA screener questions, so it is not a requirement for participation. Our local food bank partner has a philosophy that if people come, they determine if they need to be there, so a food security screening is not necessary. Our whole team has adopted this philosophy. ”

– Research Partner

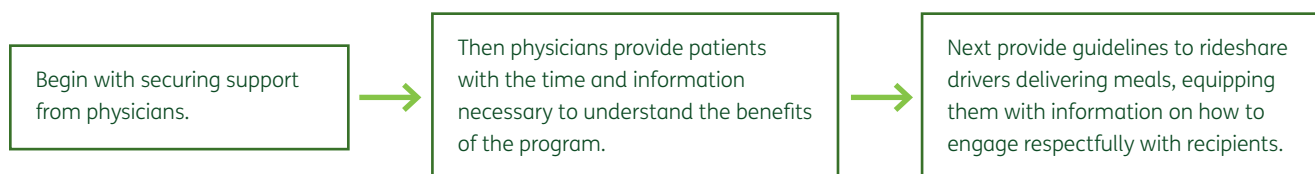
This approach reduces discomfort for participants and allows individuals to determine their own needs. The intervention model also offers a shopping-style food distribution system instead of pre-packaged boxes, allowing recipients to make their own food choices. The principal investigator elaborates below on the importance of this approach:

“ In rural communities there is a lot of pride and independence. We are embracing this culture by creating a shopping experience instead of a traditional food bank; this will center dignity and build upon the strengths of a rural community. ”

– Research Partner

In the second theme we found several examples of researchers prioritizing communication to meet a few goals of their interventions. Below are three examples:

- Utilizing text messaging to conduct outreach and provide project updates, which leans into a communication method most familiar to participants.
- Focusing on the dignity of seniors by training meal delivery drivers to greet participants, ensuring every interaction is welcoming and supportive.
- Establishing a multi-layered approach to strengthen doctor-patient relationships and encourage long-term participation in a fresh food prescription program. With the following steps:



A third sub-theme is a focus on addressing sensitive health topics with compassion and care. For example, research teams working on suicide prevention for school-aged youth emphasize the importance of humility and community input:

“ Because I research suicide in schools – a topic that can be really painful for school staff – it is important to be as sensitive as possible and to imagine how your research protocols will be received from all angles. My community advisory board helps me do that, helps me imagine how it might feel to participate in the survey we are designing. ”

– Research Partner

Safety was another aspect of following principles of care and compassion. It was especially important for interventions serving senior populations. Three examples highlight the academic partner’s focus on this human dignity issue:

- **Vetting food delivery drivers** from partner organizations to ensure safety.
- **Fostering intergenerational relationships** between college students and senior nutrition security program participants to address social isolation.
- **Including safety oversight in hands-on nutrition education**, with staff present to monitor proper use of cooking equipment among senior participants.

Finally, the research teams prioritize respecting participants’ time and contributions. Below are several examples:

- Research teams leading healthy food programs provide **free nutrition education, groceries, and meals.**
- **Participants receive compensation for their time**, with survey and interview stipends ranging from \$20 to \$75, depending on time commitment.
- Advisory board members and key informants, such as parents, teachers, and students, are **compensated fairly** for their insights.
- **Allocating funding** to schools assisting with student and teacher recruitment.

To create lasting impact, research teams are embedding dignity into their work by fostering trust through communication, reducing stigma, prioritizing safety, and respecting participants’ time and contributions.

By implementing these thoughtful strategies, they strengthen relationships with the communities they serve, ultimately improving participation, retention, and long-term impact.

Conclusion

In summary, research teams in our portfolio have applied innovative research strategies that are informed by communities they are serving. By using community-engaged research frameworks, they partner with non-profits, schools, community clinics and those most impacted by health disparities. Equitable research practices were found in all stages of the research process through recruitment, data collection, analysis and sharing their findings. They have shared with us the value of these practices. Being intentional about opportunity and access helps build trust, deepen relationships, address research gaps and create data collection tools and interventions that meet the unique needs of diverse communities. By prioritizing community leadership in the research process, not only is mutual trust established, but it also leads to well-founded research and greater impact. Finally, weaving dignity through all aspects of their projects increases participation, retention and again, deepens trust.

All the equitable practices we have highlighted are aligned with our health equity mission and research strategy. For funders who are interested in adding a health equity research strategy to their portfolios we offer a few recommendations.

1

Ensure your research strategy is focused on achieving health equity goals.

2

Focus on how health equity goals are achieved through innovative and community-engaged research practices.

3

Familiarize yourself with equitable research trends to best identify them in research proposals.

4

Clarify to applicants that you are seeking equitable approaches to research and targeting underserved, lower-resourced, and diverse populations.

5

Consider funding models that provide researchers with flexibility needed to work effectively with communities. Ensuring they have the resources to adapt and address public health challenges is a vital investment in healthier, more resilient communities.

As a next step, we will continue to learn from each research partner about the efficacy of using community-engaged research practices. We will also evaluate their impact and gain insight into what worked, the challenges they faced, and how they identified opportunities for change. We look forward to sharing these insights in a future publication. **By offering concrete examples of how partners are weaving equity throughout their research methods and interventions and commitment to future publications focused on lifting the impact of these methods, our hope is to encourage more funders to consider equitable practices in their research funding initiatives.**



About Us

The Humana Foundation is dedicated to fostering health equity by dismantling social and structural barriers to health and healthcare through evidence-based interventions. Our mission is to support diverse communities, including seniors, veterans, and school-aged children, to live healthier, more connected lives. Our approach emphasizes creating emotional connections and promoting nutritional health as part of a holistic care strategy. By engaging directly with communities, we aim to improve health outcomes by listening to and learning from those on the ground.

Citations

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