



The value of qualitative research and community engagement in planning

BY IZABELA MOLENDOWSKI, RPP

Qualitative research is often overlooked and dismissed as too anecdotal and lacking in objectivity, even though it is a highly important and valuable component of informing planning processes and decisions.

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Released in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Toronto Foundation's *2020 Fallout Report* documented the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on marginalized populations as the first wave hit the city. The *Fallout Report* provides a stark contrast between how Toronto's working-class and racialized communities have been impacted by the pandemic compared to the city's



wealthiest and whitest neighbourhoods. As we head into a phase of the pandemic with cautious optimism due to vaccine availability, planners find themselves grappling with how to plan for towns and cities especially after the pandemic has brought existing systemic inequality to light.

There are many lessons to be learned from the report's qualitative research, as well as the data provided by Toronto Public Health. Most importantly, the qualitative research presented in the Fallout Report underscores previously overlooked impacts of the pandemic on many communities in the city and highlights specific areas of concern, such as unequal access to reliable public transportation and food insecurity.

Over the course of this pandemic, Toronto Public Health has released its quantitative research on which communities have experienced the highest rates of COVID-19 cases and indicated that the demographic groups within these communities are predominantly working-class and racialized. Once vaccines were widely available in mid-2021, data was also released on which communities in Toronto were experiencing the lowest vaccine uptake, which signaled where many communities were struggling with direct access to vaccine supply.

The Fallout Report's research validated what community leaders working directly within these marginalized neighbourhoods have been raising awareness about years before the pandemic, magnifying the lived experiences of residents impacted by the uneven distribution of resources in Toronto. It further strengthened the existing data with a more detailed narrative about inequality in Canada's largest city. It also presents a good example of how important qualitative research is for informing planners,

policymakers, and community leaders about the significant areas of concern in a community.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNERS

Within the planning profession, qualitative research should be valued as highly as quantitative data to build an understanding of the planning context in a specific area. Planners should strive to obtain an understanding of residents' lived experiences before working towards revitalizing their communities, as it clearly informs planners about the current needs and concerns of the community. Qualitative research is also able to expand on quantitative data and fills gaps in research that quantitative data is not able to answer by exposing the nuances that shape how different communities function. It is also able to provide indications of why the social issues reflected in statistics are occurring and suggests to planners and decision makers what measures may be taken to resolve these issues.

APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Ideally, obtaining an understanding of lived experiences should be gathered through direct communication with residents, such as by organizing public consultations and community meetings. Although qualitative reports and studies informed by grassroots community

leaders are highly valuable, they may be further strengthened by gathering direct testimonials from community members themselves rather than solely obtaining this information through the non-profit organizations working within the communities.

Similar reports detailing income and racial inequity should strive to obtain testimonies from residents directly impacted by socioeconomic and spatial inequality, as an effort to elevate their voices and provide them with a platform to share their lived experiences.

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THE VALUE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ANECDOTAL EXPERIENCE

It is important to acknowledge that there is bias in data collection and social science research against qualitative findings which highlight people’s lived experiences. Qualitative research is dismissed for being “too biased” and “anecdotal,” often when the voices of racialized and low-income individuals are being brought to the forefront. In reality, the actual bias in social science and planning research is the internalized bias against the voices of marginalized groups – especially Indigenous and Black folks – which has manifested from the systemic racism and classism embedded in Western colonial governance structures and planning systems.

Planners should be aware of these biases and actively work toward decolonizing the planning process. City-builders can strive to emphasize the importance of obtaining qualitative information about the communities they are trying to help by listening to the folks sharing their lived experiences. Collaborating with grassroots community organizations and non-profits directly serving the communities is a good way to obtain qualitative data, as these groups have formed a trusting relationship with local community members.

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It’s also important to remember that a “one-size-fits-all” approach should not be applied to community engagement, since different communities will have varying needs. Low-income and marginalized communities are not a monolith, and even though they may form a part of the same town or city, they should not be approached in the same manner simply due to the fact that the demographic data shows they have populations with similar socioeconomics and other indicators of class differences. Working with grassroots community

organizations at the forefront of engagement helps provide an understanding of the specific concerns that need to be addressed in a particular community which may differ from those of another community with similar demographics.

Urban Strategies has collaborated with grassroots organizations working within communities for several engagement-oriented projects, such as the Eglinton East Planning Study that was led in partnership with the East Scarborough Storefront. Projects where engagement involved direct collaboration and dialogue with community members include the Galleria Mall Redevelopment, the Alexandria Park Revitalization, and the Waterloo Community Building Strategy for the ION LRT. A large part of the success behind these projects was driven by the considerable amount of qualitative information provided directly by community members, which helped strengthen the vision, plans, and outcomes for long-term planning strategies in their communities.

Emphasizing the importance of organizing public consultation and community meetings where local residents are able to directly express their needs and interests is a crucial component of planning. Yet, it is often dismissed as simply checking off a box on a list of things to do before submitting a development application. The community-specific information presented in the Fallout Report also demonstrates how impactful qualitative research is for informing planners, policymakers, and leaders about the particular needs of different communities and has effectively contributed a detailed narrative to the existing quantitative data presenting inequality in Toronto.

While political will is needed to secure support for improving low-income areas, raising awareness about pressing issues with local leaders and politicians is a component of planning which will require further consideration into the future. This is especially the case if we are striving to plan for more equitable towns and cities in response to the drastic inequalities that have come to light during the COVID-19 pandemic. (P)



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