ARCvi | Actionable Resources for Change in Violence Intervention

Temple University College of Liberal Arts | Public Policy Lab

Quick Guide: Engaging a Research Partner for CVI Work

ARCvi Domain: Working Together

Purpose: This guide was designed to help community violence intervention (CVI) organizations understand when and how to engage a research partner in ways that strengthen program learning, grant writing, evaluation readiness, and sustainability. The guide emphasizes that the right research partner should bring integrity, humility, and respect for the organization's mission, values, staff, participants, and community.

Why Engage a Research Partner?

CVI programs are often asked to show impact, track outcomes, explain their theory of change, and respond to funder reporting requirements all while doing urgent, complex, people-centered work. A strong research partner can help make that work more visible and more fundable.

But the right research partner is not only someone with technical expertise. They should also be someone whose values and philosophy align with the organization's approach to violence intervention. A good partner should understand that CVI work is relational, community-rooted, and often led by people with deep lived and professional experience. They should approach the work with integrity, respect, and a commitment to elevating the voices of participants, frontline staff, and community members — not speaking over them or reducing their experiences to numbers alone.

A research partner does not need to take over your program or turn your work into a purely academic project. At their best, research partners help CVI organizations clarify what they do, document why it matters, use data for learning and improvement, and communicate impact to funders, policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders. The goal is not simply to "prove" the work from the outside, but to support organizations in telling a fuller, more credible, and more useful story about their impact.

A Note on History and Trust

Research has not always served communities well. Historically, academic researchers have studied communities experiencing violence and poverty without giving much back — publishing papers, advancing careers, and leaving little of value for the people they studied. Some research has misrepresented communities, exposed vulnerable participants, or been used in ways that caused harm.

CVI organizations have every right to be cautious. A good research partner will understand this history, not be defensive about it, and will work to demonstrate their trustworthiness over time rather than assuming it from the start.

How a Research Partner Can Strengthen Your Organization

A research partner can bring a fresh perspective on program implementation, activities, and the relationship between program components. Because researchers often work across multiple programs, cities, or fields, they may help identify patterns, implementation challenges, and opportunities that are hard to see from inside the day-to-day work.

Research partners can also build your capacity to document what you do. This may include developing a logic model, clarifying your theory of change, identifying performance indicators, building a simple database, or helping staff collect information in ways that are useful but not overly burdensome.

A strong partner can help distinguish program challenges from organizational capacity challenges. If outcomes are not improving as expected, the issue may not be that the model is weak. It may be that the program needs more staff, better referral systems, stronger data systems, clearer eligibility criteria, or more consistent implementation.

Finally, a research partner can provide an independent assessment of program outcomes. This can be especially valuable when communicating with funders, public agencies, and community stakeholders.

What Can a Research Partner Help With?

At the front end, researchers can help with strategy development, problem analysis, needs assessments, grant writing, and logic model development. They may also help identify and use data that are difficult for organizations to access on their own.

During implementation, a research partner can help the organization understand whether the strategy is being carried out as intended. They can assist with troubleshooting, performance monitoring, reporting requirements, and formative feedback.

At the evaluation stage, a research partner can help design a study to assess outcomes. This might include comparing outcomes before and after program participation, tracking changes over time, or developing a more rigorous evaluation design when appropriate and feasible.

Research partners can also help communicate findings. Useful products may include funder reports, dashboards, case studies, community briefs, presentations, grant language, policy memos, and stories that explain the work in clear and credible ways.

Types of Research Partners

There are many different kinds of research partners. The best fit depends on your goals, budget, timeline, and the type of support you need.

- Universities or colleges
- Think tanks or research organizations
- Federally funded training and technical assistance providers
- Independent consultants (these can be researchers from universities or think tanks working outside their formal institutional role)
- Graduate students, fellows, interns, or volunteers working under supervision

Each type of partner has advantages and limitations. Some organizations may need a full evaluation partner. Others may only need an advisor for 20 to 40 hours per year. The right arrangement depends on the scope of work.

Questions to Ask Before Looking for a Partner

Before reaching out to a potential research partner, clarify what kind of support you need and what you want the partnership to produce.

- What do we want help understanding or improving?
- Do we need support with a grant proposal, a logic model, data collection, reporting, evaluation, or communications?
- What products do we want at the end of the partnership?
- Do we need someone who can wear multiple hats?
- Does the grant solicitation require a research partner or evaluator?
- Are there specific subcontracting, consultant, or budget rules we need to follow?
- What is our total program budget, and how much can reasonably be allocated to research or evaluation?
- Do we need a local partner, or could a non-local partner work?
- What examples of past work or references should we ask for?

Being clear about what you need will make it easier to find the right person and avoid misunderstandings later.

How Partnerships Usually Begin

Research partnerships can begin when a community organization reaches out for help, when a researcher approaches an organization, or when a funder, public agency, coalition, or technical assistance provider helps bring partners together. Don’t be afraid to cold-call a researcher!

If a Researcher Approaches You

If a researcher asks to partner with your organization, you do not have to say yes immediately. It is appropriate to ask questions about the purpose of the study, what your organization would receive, what time commitment would be expected, how data would be protected, and whether you would review products before they are shared.

If the researcher is mainly interested in “evaluation,” ask whether the work will also provide formative feedback and practical guidance. A study that only judges success at the end may be less useful than a partnership that helps the organization learn and improve along the way.

Also ask whether the partnership is designed to answer the researcher’s questions, or whether the organization’s priorities will shape the agenda. Research that serves only academic goals may place a burden on your organization without giving much back. A good partner should be willing to adapt their questions to serve your needs, not just the other way around.

Contracting and Budget Options

There are several ways to structure payment for a research partner. An hourly or "**time and materials**" contract can work well when the scope is evolving or when the organization needs flexible support. This type of contract allows the research partner to bill for the actual time spent on tasks such as meetings, data cleaning, analysis, reporting, technical assistance, or grant support. Because the final cost depends on the number of hours worked, nonprofits should set clear expectations up front. The agreement should include hourly rates for each team member, a maximum budget or "not-to-exceed" amount, the types of activities that can be billed, and how often invoices and progress updates will be provided. It is also helpful to require brief descriptions of work completed with each invoice so the organization can see how funds are being used.

Time and materials contracts are often best for early-stage partnerships, planning periods, troubleshooting, or projects where the exact deliverables are not yet fully known. However, they may be harder to manage if the organization needs a firm price, a fixed set of products, or very predictable costs.

In those cases, a **fixed-fee contract** tied to specific deliverables may be a better fit. A fixed-price contract tends to work well when the scope of the work is well defined. In this arrangement, the partner is paid a set amount for a defined set of deliverables. The organization should be very clear about deliverables, timelines, data access, meeting expectations, and revision processes.

A senior researcher can also serve in a smaller advisory role, sometimes through a consultant line item. This may be appropriate when the organization needs periodic guidance rather than a specific set of research tasks or a full evaluation.

For federally funded work, organizations should pay close attention to rules about consultant rates, subcontracts, indirect costs, and allowable expenses. Some federal grants cap consultant daily rates, and some solicitations include specific expectations for evaluation partners.

What to Look for in a Research Partner

A good research partner should have technical skills, but fit and values matter just as much. Look for someone who respects community expertise, understands that CVI work is complex and relational, can explain research ideas in plain language, and is willing to produce practical products, not just academic papers.

It is reasonable to ask potential partners about their prior work, their approach to community collaboration, their experience with funder reporting, and their views on data ownership and publication. It is also reasonable to ask for references.

- Respects community expertise and understands that CVI work is complex and relational
- Can explain research ideas in plain language
- Is willing to produce practical products, not just academic papers
- Has experience with community-based programs, violence prevention, public safety, public health, or related fields
- Understands trauma, confidentiality, and the risks of misrepresenting community work
- Can meet deadlines and communicate clearly
- Is willing to listen before recommending solutions
- Has references or examples of relevant work
- Understands or is willing to learn about IRB processes and participant protections

Core Values Matter

Trust is central to any research partnership. Before beginning the work, partners should talk openly about values, expectations, and how decisions will be made.

It is okay for organizations to ask for products that are useful to their goals. Researchers also benefit from these partnerships because they learn from organizations doing the work on the ground. A strong partnership should recognize the value that both sides bring.

- Who owns or controls the data?
- Who reviews products before they are shared?
- How will participants, staff, and community members be represented?
- What information must remain confidential?
- What products will be useful to the organization?
- How will findings be shared with the community?
- What happens if results are mixed or disappointing?
- How will the partnership support learning and improvement, not just judgment?

Power, Equity, and Decision-Making

Research partnerships are not automatically equal. Researchers often hold institutional power — through university affiliation, academic credentials, access to funding, or control over how findings are published and shared. This imbalance does not have to be harmful, but it must be named and addressed.

Strong partnerships proactively discuss how power will be shared. This means talking openly about who sets the research agenda, whose questions get answered, who has final say on products, and how credit is distributed. CVI organizations should not be passive subjects of a study — they should be active partners in shaping what gets studied and how.

The literature on research-practitioner partnerships consistently identifies shared governance as a key predictor of partnership success. Consider documenting these agreements in a written partnership agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU) even if the partnership is not grant-funded.

Questions About Power to Raise Early

- Who has final say on what gets published or publicly released?
- How will credit be shared if the research produces academic papers or presentations?
- What happens if the researcher’s and organization’s priorities diverge?
- Can the organization end the partnership if the relationship isn’t working?
- How will we make decisions when we disagree?

Research Ethics and Human Subjects Protections

If your research partner will be formally studying participants — conducting interviews, surveys, focus groups, or analyzing identifiable data — that work may need to go through an Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRBs are independent committees that review research involving human subjects to make sure participants are protected.

For CVI organizations, this matters for several reasons. CVI participants are often from communities that have been harmed by research in the past. They may be involved in the criminal legal system, face housing instability, or be at risk of violence. Extra care is needed to protect their identities and data.

Even if formal IRB review is not required, it is worth discussing with your partner how participant information will be stored, who can access it, how long it will be kept, and what happens to data if the partnership ends. These conversations protect both your participants and your organization.

Key Ethics Questions to Ask

- Will this work require IRB review? Who is responsible for obtaining it?
- How will participant data be stored and kept secure?
- Who has access to identifiable information?
- What will happen to data if the partnership ends or funding runs out?
- Are there mandatory reporting obligations that could affect participant trust?
- Can participants be identified in any reports or publications?

Common Challenges and How to Navigate Them

Even well-matched partnerships face challenges. Knowing about common pitfalls in advance can help you plan for them.

Different Timelines and Pacing

Researchers and practitioners often move at different speeds. Funders and community conditions may require fast responses, while research processes — IRB review, data collection, analysis, and writing — can take much longer. Discuss pacing expectations early, and build flexibility into your agreements so that urgency on one side does not strain the relationship.

Staff Turnover

Staff turnover at either organization is one of the most common reasons research partnerships stall or fall apart. If key contacts leave, institutional knowledge and relationship trust can be lost. Mitigate this by documenting agreements in writing, involving more than one staff member in the partnership, and creating transition plans in case of turnover on either side.

Conflict and Disagreement

Disagreements will arise — about priorities, findings, timelines, or how data is interpreted. This is normal. What matters is having a process for working through conflict before it becomes a crisis. Agree early on how disputes will be handled, who the decision-makers are, and what a respectful process for raising concerns looks like.

Disappointing or Complicated Results

Not every evaluation will show clear positive outcomes. Programs may be in early stages, data may be incomplete, or results may be mixed. A good research partner will help you interpret complicated findings honestly, without overstating or minimizing them. Discuss this possibility before the work begins, and agree on how findings will be framed and shared.

Scope Creep

Research partnerships can expand beyond the original agreement if boundaries are not clear. Researchers may want to study additional questions; funders may add new requirements. Try to keep the scope focused, document any changes in writing, and adjust the timeline and budget when the scope changes.

Tips for Finding a Research Partner

Start with your existing networks. Ask funders, local coalitions, city agencies, universities, other CVI organizations, and technical assistance providers for referrals.

Local partners can be especially helpful because they may understand the policy environment, neighborhoods, public agencies, and community context. However, a non-local partner can still be valuable if they have strong experience, communicate well, and are willing to learn the local context.

Do not be afraid to cold call or email a researcher, university department, or research center. Many researchers are interested in community-engaged work, and even if they are not available, they may know students, colleagues, fellows, or consultants who are.

If funding is limited, consider asking whether a researcher can provide a small amount of unpaid guidance, share existing data for a statement of need, connect you to resources, or help identify future funding. Volunteer or small-scale collaboration can sometimes grow into funded work.

Final Takeaway

A research partner should help make CVI work clearer, stronger, and more sustainable. The goal is not to make community organizations “more academic.” The goal is to help organizations use research, data, and evaluation in ways that support their mission, strengthen grant proposals, improve programs, and tell a more complete story about impact.

The best research partnerships are built on mutual respect, clear agreements, and honest communication — especially when things get hard. CVI organizations bring the lived, local, and practical knowledge that makes the work possible. Researchers bring tools to document, analyze, evaluate, and communicate that work. When those forms of expertise come together with shared power and shared purpose, the result can be stronger programs, stronger proposals, and stronger evidence for the field.

Useful Products to Request from the Research Team

A research partner can be most helpful when the organization asks for concrete products. Possible products include:

Logic model and/or theory of change	IRB protocol support
Evaluation plan	Data collection plan
Performance measurement framework	Data dashboard or reporting template
Survey or interview tools	Data-sharing agreement support
Written partnership agreement / MOU	Funder report language
Grant proposal language	Literature summary or evidence brief
Community-facing summary	Case study
Presentation slides	Policy brief
Final evaluation report	

Selected Starting Points and Additional Reading

- Philadelphia Department of Public Health's CVI Coalition Research Subcommittee
- LISC Community-Based Crime Reduction resources on research-practitioner partnerships
- Black and Brown Collective Members
- Black and Brown Collective Report: Practices for Conducting Community-Engaged Research with those at Highest Risk of Gun Violence
- Chicago Beyond Report: Why Am I Always Being Researched
- Journal article describing example research-practitioner partnership that co-produced logic model and performance metrics for a Philadelphia violence reduction program:

Roman, C. G., Talley, A., Sierka, C., George, K., Water, K. V. de, & Aye, J. (2025). Collaborative Creation of a Logic Model and Performance Metrics for Evaluating a Violence Reduction Program. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *24*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406925131986

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