

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Mental Health Mondays: A Case Example on How Community-Academic Partnerships Can Address the Youth Mental Health Crisis

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Mental health disparities remain a significant challenge in urban communities, particularly among youth exposed to neighborhood-level stressors such as gun violence, economic hardship, and systemic inequities. This manuscript outlines an innovative community-driven initiative led by a licensed clinical social worker, employed from the target community, in cooperation with university researchers. We describe an innovative, community-based mental health initiative—Mental Health Mondays—designed to provide support, education, and a safe space for local youth and families in Paterson, New Jersey. Utilizing a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, this initiative leverages community partnerships to foster engagement and promote mental health awareness. Additionally, this manuscript discusses the role of universities in supporting community-driven mental health initiatives and the importance of resource-sharing to address mental health inequities in urban settings.

Introduction

The youth mental health crisis has risen to epidemic proportions in the United States (Schweizer et al., 2023). While these trends are alarming across all demographics, they are particularly severe among youth living in urban, under-resourced communities, where mental health needs are often compounded by structural inequities and limited access to care. Urban youth face unique environmental stressors—including exposure to community violence, housing instability, underfunded schools, and systemic disinvestment—that place them at heightened risk for mental health challenges (Opara et al., 2020). Neighborhood-level factors present in urban communities, including poverty, lack of green spaces, inadequate schooling, and the criminalization of youth, all intersect to create an environment where mental health needs are often unaddressed (Callaghan et al., 2021; Sampson, 2012). Community-based mental health initiatives are critical in bridging the gap between need and access by integrating local expertise, lived experiences, and trusted partnerships to foster holistic well-being. These programs are especially important in urban areas that have been historically underserved by traditional mental health systems. Research shows that youth in these communities often experience structural barriers to care—including cost, stigma, provider shortages, and mistrust of institutions—which limit their engagement with clinical services (Alegria et al., 2010; Lindsey et al.,

2013). By rooting services in familiar, non-clinical settings such as schools, community centers, and faith-based organizations, community-based programs reduce stigma, increase accessibility, and create culturally safe spaces for healing (Bumpas et al., 2025). Moreover, when programs are co-designed with local youth and community stakeholders, they are more likely to reflect the community's values and address specific sociocultural stressors, such as racism, trauma, and community violence (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Evidence-based examples such as Healing Hurt People and the Chicago Youth Programs have demonstrated the effectiveness of urban, community-centered mental health interventions in improving youth coping, reducing trauma symptoms, and fostering resilience (Farahmand et al., 2012).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Approach

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a collaborative research approach that involves community members, researchers, and other stakeholders in the research process (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). CBPR emphasizes co-learning, capacity-building, and the development of sustainable interventions tailored to the unique needs of the community. By valuing the expertise of community members, CBPR fosters trust and ensures that interventions are relevant, culturally competent, and sustainable (Israel et al., 2005). In the context of mental health, CBPR enables researchers and practitioners to co-develop initiatives that are accessible and meaningful to community members. It shifts the traditional power dynamic in research, allowing those most affected by mental health challenges to have an active role in designing and implementing solutions. This participatory approach enhances program effectiveness and sustainability while promoting community empowerment. This article describes the development and implementation of a community-based mental health initiative using community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods. Specifically, we detail the creation of Mental Health Mondays, discuss the financial and institutional support required to sustain such efforts, and offer practical recommendations for university-based researchers seeking to implement similar programs in their local communities.

Case example: The Paterson Prevention Project

The Paterson Prevention Project is a community-based five-year research study, funded by the National Institutes of Health aimed at understanding the impact of neighborhood environments on substance use and mental health among youth between the ages of 13-21 years old in Paterson, New Jersey (Opara et al., 2021). Paterson, New Jersey is a densely populated urban city of approximately 157,000 residents (2023 estimate), with a median age of just over 33 years—significantly younger than state and national averages (U.S. Census, 2023). The city is ethnically diverse, with a Hispanic or Latino majority (~62%), followed by Black or African American residents (~23%) and a growing Asian community (~5%). Economically, Paterson faces considerable challenges with over 20% of residents live below the poverty line.

Launched in 2020, the Paterson Prevention Project employs participatory research approaches to ensure that the voices and experiences of community members guide the research process and inform the development of interventions. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of neighborhood influences on health outcomes. This includes a quantitative survey assessing substance use patterns, mental health indicators, and environmental risk and protective factors; qualitative focus groups and interviews, which involved in-depth discussions with youth, caregivers, and key community stakeholders to explore lived experiences, identify gaps in resources, and understand community perceptions of mental health and substance use. Research in this community has indicated a growing crisis in addressing youth mental health and overall collective community trauma (Opara et al., 2021).

A key component of the study is the inclusion of two advisory boards, the Community Advisory Board and Youth Advisory Board, which both provide insight, oversight, and direction on the overall study. The Community Advisory Board consists of 10 local leaders who bring expertise in mental health, education, social services, and grassroots organizing. The board helps to contextualize research findings and activities align with the needs and priorities of Paterson residents. The Youth Advisory Board is composed of six Paterson youth, ages 13-21, who provide critical perspectives on the challenges young people face in the community, particularly regarding substance use and mental health. Their involvement ensures that research activities are youth-centered, relevant, and culturally appropriate. In addition, both boards hold us as researchers accountable, to ensure that our work is beneficial to the overall community in real time. The ultimate goal of the Paterson Prevention Project is to co-develop sustainable initiatives and interventions that can be delivered within the community to address substance use and mental health challenges.

Development of Mental Health Mondays

Mental Health Mondays emerged as a direct outcome of community-engaged research practices embedded within the Paterson Prevention Project. As part of a broader effort to center community voice in all phases of research, the study's Principal Investigator (PI) developed and offered a community research fellowship in 2021 to a member of the project's community advisory board (second author). The fellowship aimed to build local research capacity by training interested community partners in basic research skills and immersion in research lab. Through this collaboration, the PI and selected community fellow, who is a licensed clinical social worker, co-developed the concept of delivering mental health education and prevention strategies through structured conversations paired with shared meals—creating an accessible, welcoming environment to engage residents in discussions about mental health, trauma, and substance use. This initiative was designed to be simple, not requiring a lot of resources and easy to implement. The goal of

the initiative was to reduce stigma and increase awareness but also to foster community trust and introduce the larger research initiative. In February 2023, the Paterson Prevention Project officially launched the Mental Health Mondays series in response to the escalating mental health crisis among youth in Paterson, New Jersey, offering culturally grounded programming that integrates prevention science with community-driven dialogue centered around protecting the mental health of youth. The Mental Health Mondays model is to provide monthly open sessions where community members (specifically youth and their families) could engage with a licensed clinical social worker on pressing mental health topics in an warm and supportive setting. The first four sessions were held in a local neighborhood church. Later sessions in 2023 and 2024 and currently were held in a city-owned building, to allow for more access to community members. The sessions were held every last Monday of the month. Workshop topics included “navigating parent-child relationships”, “recognizing anxiety”, “what is depression”, “self-care tips for families”, “stress management”, “anger coping skills”, “substance use and abuse”, and “intimate partner violence”. Dinner is served at every session. Monthly dinners, program materials and salary support of staff was funded by The Paterson Prevention Project. The sessions were not intended to be a forum where research activities were conducted but for a way to disseminate research findings through a trusted community partner and provide a safe space to educate the community on mental health awareness and substance use prevention strategies.

The development and implementation of Mental Health Mondays was guided by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, which centered equity, power-sharing, and community leadership throughout all phases of a project. Unlike traditional implementation models, the CBPR framework integrates strategies to address structural power imbalances and elevates the lived experiences of community members as critical sources of knowledge. Importantly, Mental Health Mondays was not adapted from an existing evidence-based intervention; rather, it emerged in direct response to the expressed needs of families, youth, and school staff in Paterson, NJ, who voiced a lack of accessible, culturally responsive mental health education and support. This program was co-developed to provide both critical mental health information and a safe, healing-centered space within a community setting, ensuring that the intervention was locally relevant, sustainable, and grounded in the realities of the community it serves. The sessions include around 30 community members at a time, with the only requirement is to be a resident of the city of Paterson. The sessions were designed to be interactive, with the lead community partner and social worker developing presentations on topics such as anxiety, depression, stress, and self-care monthly. Each session incorporated discussion-based activities that encouraged participants to share their experiences and ask questions in a non-judgmental setting. The sessions were open to all Paterson residents including children, parents, and older adults and allowed for an intergenerational discussion around

Table 1. Major Components of the Mental Health Mondays Sessions

Component	Description
Education and Awareness	Informative discussions on mental health topics, delivered in an accessible and culturally relevant manner.
Community Support	An open forum for youth and families to share experiences and receive guidance from mental health professionals and public health practitioners.
Provision of Resources	Practical tools and referrals to local mental health services, including mental health clinics, support groups, and crisis hotlines.
Skill-Building Activities	Interactive exercises focused on enhancing coping strategies, mindfulness, and stress reduction techniques.
Shared Meals	Dinner was provided at each session to foster a sense of community and reduce barriers to participation.

mental health. Additionally, as sessions have evolved, new topics organically emerged based on participant interest and concerns. Rather than focusing on clinical diagnoses—which can be stigmatized in communities where therapy is often viewed with hesitation—these sessions centered on real-life challenges in their community that impact mental health. These sessions encouraged open dialogue about why mental health matters, emphasizing that seeking therapy is not a sign of weakness but rather a valuable opportunity to talk to someone without judgment. As conversations unfolded, sensitive topics such as trauma and grief, naturally emerged, providing space for honest reflection and support. Participants not only learned about mental health but also gained practical coping skills they can take with them, access valuable community resources, and receive individual support if needed. Monthly topics were agreed upon between the lead and study Principal Investigator. In addition, youth and family members whom attended the sessions also requested for specific topics to be discussed such as “how to deal with racism”, and “how to discuss substance use with your parents”. By normalizing these conversations, Paterson Prevention Project’s Mental Health Mondays empowered participants to prioritize their well-being, strengthen relationships, and develop strategies to navigate life’s challenges.

The initiative has served over 100 youth and families over the past two years, with regular attendance of around 50 residents (including youth) who have attended more than 6 times in one year. The program’s success highlights the critical role that universities can play in community mental health by funding and supporting initiatives that are grounded in the needs and lived experiences of local residents.

The Role of Universities in Supporting Community-Based Mental Health Initiatives

Higher education institutions and funders whom are investing in community-based work have a responsibility to bridge the gap between research and practice by investing in community-based mental health programs. Universities for example can advocate and support these initiatives in several ways:

1. Funding and Resource Allocation

Universities, particularly those receiving local, state, and federal research funding, have an obligation to reinvest in the communities they are nested in and in which their research is conducted on. This reinvestment should not be limited to long-term academic outputs, such as publications and conference presentations, but should also include immediate, tangible benefits for community members. While data collection, dissemination of research findings, and intervention development are critical for informing systemic change, these processes often take years to yield practical outcomes. In the meantime, community members continue to face pressing mental health challenges that require urgent attention. It is essential for universities to adopt innovative, real-time strategies to address these needs, rather than waiting for research cycles to conclude before taking action. Initiatives like Mental Health Mondays demonstrate how universities can utilize research funding creatively to provide immediate support and build community trust. By allocating resources toward initiatives that offer direct services—such as mental health workshops and educational sessions—universities can create sustainable community partnerships that not only improve mental health outcomes but also foster long-term engagement. Moreover, incorporating community voices in implementation strategies and decisions ensures that resources are directed toward the most pressing local concerns, reinforcing the principle of community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Israel et al., 2019; Sánchez et al., 2021).

Furthermore, universities should make it easier to allocate funds for non-traditional initiatives such as dinners or shared meal gatherings, for community members and potential partners. Often, even when federal or state level grantees approve such spending, universities may make it difficult for researchers to get reimbursed, leaving them with limited ways to provide resources that could be beneficial to the community. Agencies awarding research grants to universities should establish dedicated funding streams for community-driven initiatives, rather than requiring programs to rely solely on discretionary funds from research grants. Institutional commitment to ongoing financial support can help ensure the longevity and scalability of these programs, making them a consistent resource for underserved populations. By embedding financial investments into their mission, universities can transition from being extractive research entities to proactive partners in community well-being. By prioritizing these principles, universities can work alongside communities to co-create meaningful, lasting change in mental health and beyond.

Resource allocation can also include allowing faculty researchers and students to receive more credit in being involved in the community by encouraging the dissemination of their work. Within the context of Paterson Prevention Project's Mental Health Mondays, the Study PI and graduate students from the University played a hands-on role in the program. While the community partner (CP) led a majority of the meetings monthly, the

study team from the PI's lab which includes postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and research staff, also participated in leading sessions as well. These in-person engagements served multiple purposes: they aided in bridging the gap between academia and the community, reinforced the partnership's authenticity, and ensured that research findings were translated into actionable solutions that resonate with local stakeholders. Bridging the gap between academic research and community needs is essential for creating meaningful and sustainable mental health interventions. Through Mental Health Mondays, researchers and students from the university had the opportunity to engage directly with community members, gaining firsthand insight into the challenges youth and families face. These informal discussions fostered mutual learning, allowing the study team to contextualize their findings within real-world experiences while equipping community members with accessible, evidence-based mental health knowledge. By translating research findings into lay terms and engaging in open dialogue, this collaboration strengthens trust, ensures culturally relevant dissemination, and empowers communities to actively participate in shaping solutions that address their mental health needs.

2. Training and Capacity Building within Communities

Universities can play a pivotal role in providing trainings for community health workers, educators, youth and local service providers in basic research principles. Recognizing the need for localized expertise and sustainable engagement, the Paterson Prevention Project study PI, for example, established a Community Research Fellows Program and a Community Outreach Workers Program, hiring up to eight outreach workers from the city of Paterson as contracted employees of the university. The Community Research Fellows Program was a one-year immersive program for a community partner to work collaboratively with The Paterson Prevention Project by learning how to collect data, research ethics and participating in data analysis meetings. This initiative, funded by a federal grant, ensured that individuals with deep-rooted connections to the community are directly involved in mental health and substance use prevention efforts. Through this program, emerged the creation and success of the Mental Health Mondays initiative as often community members and partners tend to have a different view of the data and how to approach solutions.

The outreach workers, ranging from teens to older adults, were all passionate advocates for mental health awareness and substance use prevention in Paterson. Their role was multifaceted, where they attended Mental Health Mondays events, assisted in organizing outreach events, and actively participated in research activities (e.g. collecting survey data). As trusted members of the community, they served as liaisons between residents and university researchers, fostering engagement, reducing stigma, and ensuring that research activities and initiatives remain culturally relevant and responsive to local needs. To strengthen their capacity, all outreach workers received comprehensive training facilitated by an external consultant

specializing in research methodologies and design. Through this integrated approach, the Training and Capacity Building initiative empowers community members with the tools they need to advocate for mental health, contribute meaningfully to research, and implement locally driven solutions. By hiring community outreach workers as university contractors and embedding academic teams directly within the community, the Paterson Prevention Project exemplifies how universities can foster sustainable, equitable, and impactful partnerships that go beyond traditional research models.

Conclusion

Addressing the mental health crisis in urban communities requires innovative, community-centered approaches that prioritize accessibility, cultural relevance, and sustainability. Our example of the Mental Health Mondays initiative exemplifies the power of Community Based Participatory Research approaches in developing effective mental health interventions that resonate with the needs of the community. Research funders, universities and research institutions must continue to play a pivotal role in supporting such initiatives by providing funding, resources, and collaborative expertise. By fostering these partnerships, we can work toward a future where all communities have access to the mental health support they deserve.

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