


A Systematic Review of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in the United States: Methodologies, Youth Outcomes, and Future Directions

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Abstract

Objectives. To use a systematic review methodology to describe the state of the youth participatory action research (YPAR) literature and synthesize findings about the youth outcomes reported in these studies. **Methods.** We screened and coded studies using a process consistent with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Of the 3,724 articles found in the database search, 67 reports of 63 distinct studies were included in the final sample. These reports were coded for reports of YPAR principles and project characteristics, study methods, and reported youth outcomes. **Results.** The YPAR literature comprises predominantly qualitative studies, with only two randomized trials. The most common outcomes associated with participation in YPAR were those related to agency and leadership (75.0%), followed by academic or career (55.8%), social (36.5%), interpersonal (34.6%), and cognitive (23.1%) outcomes. **Conclusions.** This systematic review provides emerging evidence of the skills and competencies youth may develop through YPAR and offers methodological recommendations for future research that can provide greater evidence of causality.

Keywords

adolescence, community-based participatory research, social determinants, systematic review, youth participatory action research

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) involves young people constructing knowledge by identifying, researching, and addressing social problems through youth–adult partnerships (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). While the use of YPAR is burgeoning in health education, the practice of this approach may be outpacing empirical knowledge about key processes and outcomes. To inform program assessment, development, and testing, a synthesis of the YPAR literature is needed. The current study uses a systematic review methodology to describe 20 years of YPAR studies, identify the types of youth outcomes most often associated with this approach, and propose directions for future research and practice.

YPAR Principles and Processes

The current study was guided by Rodriguez and Brown (2009)'s conceptualization of YPAR, which includes three key *principles*. First, YPAR is inquiry based; topics of investigation are grounded in youths' lived experiences and concerns. Second, it is participatory; youth are collaborators in

the methodological and pedagogical process. Finally, it is transformative; the purpose of YPAR is to actively intervene in order to change knowledge and practices to improve the lives of youth and their communities. Consistent with these principles, Ozer and Douglas (2015) have identified key *processes* in YPAR. Youth and adults share power during an iterative process that includes developing an integrated research and action agenda; training in, and application of, research and advocacy methods; practicing and discussing strategic thinking about how to create social change; and building alliances with stakeholders.

Recent Reviews of YPAR

Two recent integrative reviews examined the extant literature on YPAR. One focused on investigating the role young

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people play in such projects, finding that among the 56 studies reviewed, too often youth were not fully integrated into all aspects of the research (Jacquez et al., 2013). A second review identified outcomes associated with YPAR in 45 international studies, finding increases in social justice awareness, social and cognitive development, perceptions of youth as change agents, and stronger relationships with adults and the broader community (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). This body of work provides initial insights about the characteristics and outcomes of YPAR and related programs, suggesting that although the degree of youth involvement can vary across studies, participation in YPAR programs may be associated with important developmental outcomes.

The current study aimed to build on our understanding of YPAR programs in key ways. Both previous reviews relied on a search strategy that was limited to the specific terminology of “participatory research.” Yet the field uses various terms to describe this approach, so studies of programs that reflect the principles and processes of YPAR but do not use that specific label were excluded. The current review aimed to cast a broader net, using a variety of search terms related to YPAR and then screening in articles based on whether the program being studied reflected the key principles outlined by Rodriguez and Brown (2009). Unlike previous reviews, our study also aimed to characterize the empirical methods being used to investigate YPAR programs. This review also considered whether study and program characteristics are associated with specific youth outcomes. Finally, neither of the past reviews were “systematic”; they did not follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). The current study is guided by this framework, used for the transparent reporting of systematic reviews (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009).

Research questions guiding our systematic review included the following: What methods have been used to assess youth outcomes in YPAR studies? What youth outcomes are associated with participation in YPAR? Do the outcomes reported vary by the characteristics of the study or the YPAR program?

Method

Following the PRISMA guidelines, our search and coding process was guided by replicable protocols.

Search and Sampling Strategy

Selected for their relevance to YPAR programming, four databases were searched: PubMed, ERIC, Social Service Abstracts, and PsychInfo. The review period included articles published between 1995 and 2015. To identify records of interest, we entered search terms using the Boolean operators AND/OR,

using asterisks to truncate the search terms. Our search criteria included terms associated with the study *population* (separated by OR): student, emerging adult, youth, high school, middle school, minor*, juvenile*, adolescent* and teen* AND search terms associated with *intervention* (separated by OR): community involvement, youth voice, student voice, youth organizing, student organizing, youth activism, student activism, youth empower*, youth leader*, youth civic, youth advoc*, student advoc*, youth decision-making, student decision-making, social change, participatory action research, youth engage*, youth advisory board, youth advisory council, youth action board, youth action council, youth community development, youth involvement, youth led, youth council, youth coalition, youth outreach, student council, youth adult partner*, youth commission AND search terms associated with *study methods* (separated by OR): evidence-based, effective*, treatment*, intervention*, outcome*, experimental stud*, quasi-experiment*, case stud*, case-control stud*, cross-sectional, cohort stud*, observational, promising practice*, randomized control trial*, interview*, qualitative, survey, focus group, pre-experiment*, evaluation.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria focused on four key elements: (1) study characteristics (empirical studies, published in peer-reviewed journals, conducted in the United States, published in English); (2) population (program participants comprised children or youth 25 years or younger; for youth of ages 18 to 25 years, samples were excluded if they consisted only of undergraduate or graduate students); (3) intervention (inquiry-based program that involved youth in data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation); and (4) outcomes (study reports on the experiences, outcomes, or impact of the program for the youth participants or their surrounding environment).

Study Selection

The systematic search process included four phases (see Figure 1), led by a research team consisting of two doctoral students and two faculty members. All four were involved in establishing the eligibility criteria and in searching, screening, and coding the studies. After conducting electronic searches using the databases and search terms described, Phase 1 involved preliminary screening of the abstracts to determine whether they met the initial criteria. Our search resulted in 3,724 studies, of which 399 were duplicates; 2,858 records were screened out because the studies were conducted outside the United States, because they did not involve a youth program, or because they were not written in English. In cases where insufficient information was provided in the abstract, the articles were retained and moved forward for Phase 2.

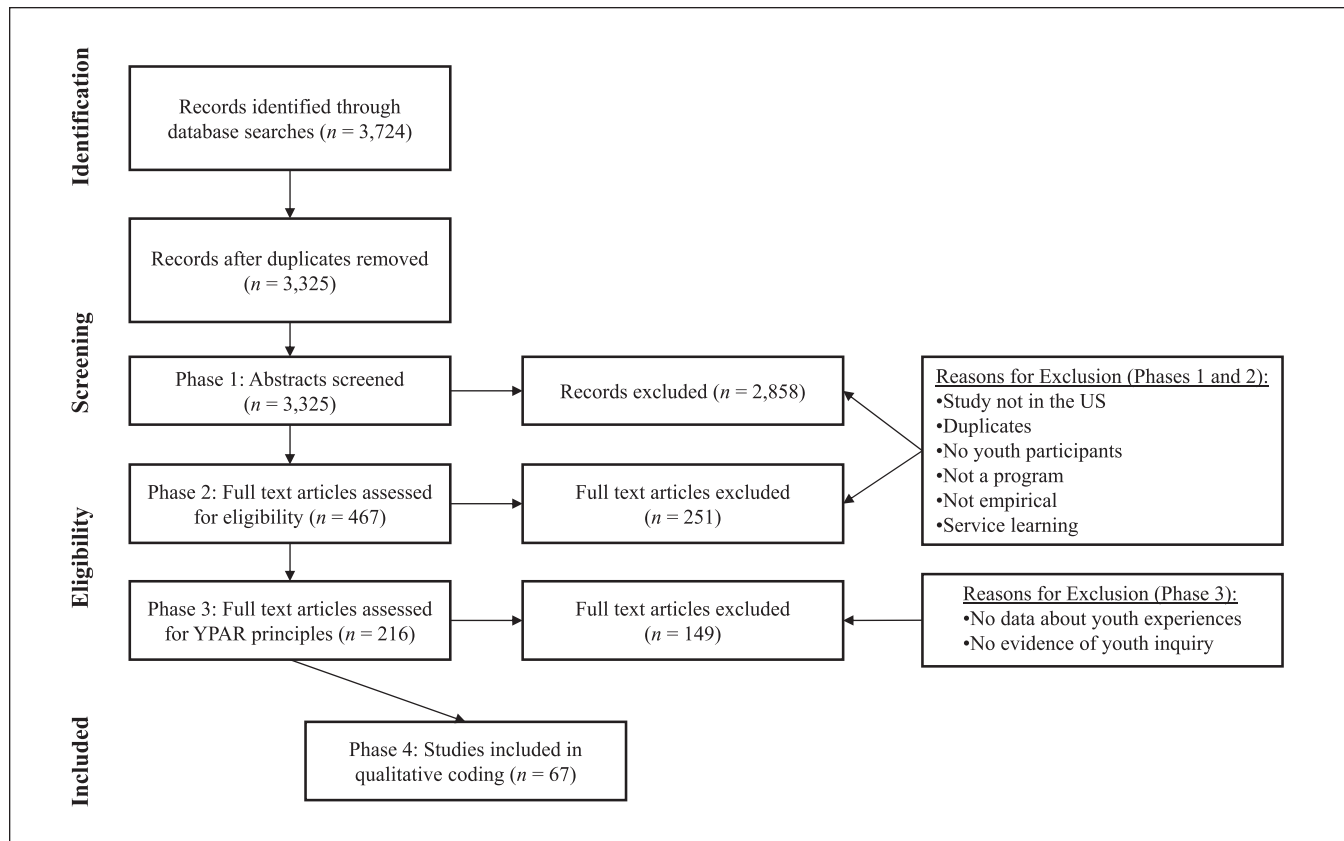


Figure 1. Identification, screening, and eligibility of the review sample.

Source: Moher et al. (2009).

Note. YPAR = youth participatory action research.

In Phase 2, full-text articles were retrieved and further assessed for meeting the same initial screening criteria. In Phase 3, all the articles that met the screening criteria were read to determine if they met two additional eligibility criteria: (1) whether they included results about the effects of the program on youth or their environment and (2) whether there was evidence of youth inquiry. Phase 4 involved coding all the remaining articles using a standardized, a priori codebook.

To reduce bias, the screening criteria were thoroughly defined in a spreadsheet, and the entire team of four researchers used this spreadsheet to together screen a subsample of 50 articles. Where discrepancies occurred, they were discussed, consensus was reached, and the screening criteria were further defined in the spreadsheet. Once the screening criteria were finalized, the remaining articles were screened by a single researcher; however, if the researcher was unsure whether a study met any of the criteria, the article and the issue were discussed by the research team at the weekly meetings.

Data Extraction Process

An a priori codebook was developed based on the principles of YPAR and the PRISMA guidelines. This codebook was piloted with 40 articles, with each article coded by all

four independent coders. Discrepancies in the codes were discussed and clarified, and the codebook was refined. Once the codebook was finalized, the remaining eligible articles were all coded by two researchers, who met weekly to reach a consensus on any discrepant responses.

Data Items

Our coding sheet was primarily composed of “multiple-choice” or double-coding options, in which the coder could select all the applicable codes (exceptions are noted below). Every data item on our coding sheet had a “missing” option, reported in the tables. The selected articles were coded for the following data items.

YPAR Principles. The coders noted whether each article labeled the intervention as YPAR, CBPR (community-based participatory research), photovoice, and/or another variant of participatory research. They also captured the level to which each article demonstrated the three principles associated with YPAR: (1) inquiry based (youth investigated one or more topics by collecting information, data, and evidence), (2) participatory (youth shared power with adults by making

choices/decisions about the topic, methods or actions, project planning, results dissemination, or social action), and (3) transformative (the program resulted in a project, product, or policy to change knowledge and practices to improve the lives of youth). Whereas the “inquiry based” criterion was required for review inclusion, the other two principles were assessed at three levels: (1) not present, (2) alluded to in the introduction, or (3) described with examples in the methods, results, or discussion section. The codes for YPAR principles were mutually exclusive.

Study Characteristics. Study author(s)’ discipline and funding source(s) were recorded for each study. In addition, study methods were coded as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research methods (these codes were mutually exclusive). Furthermore, we coded each study design as explicitly stated by the study’s author(s), including ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental, case study, cross-sectional, pre/post, and/or longitudinal. Data type was coded to include administrative, archival, interview, focus group, survey, observations, photos/video, and/or other. Data sources included youth in the PAR project, youth not directly involved in the PAR project, community members, representatives from a partner agency, parents and caregivers, and/or other. Sample sizes were recorded, and demographics were coded, including age, gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

YPAR Project Characteristics. The YPAR topic investigated by the youth was recorded qualitatively and subsequently coded into six overlapping categories: Inequities, Health, Education, Violence and Safety, Resources for Youth, and/or Other. The setting in which the YPAR program was delivered was coded as school, church, youth/community center, university, and/or clinic. The frequency of YPAR program meetings was captured as number of sessions per week, and the total program duration was coded as number of weeks. The youths’ method of social action was coded as education/awareness building (i.e., talking with or disseminating a product to a community/stakeholder group), advocacy (i.e., meeting with a decision maker to ask for changes to a specific policy or practice), and/or organizing (i.e., mobilizing community members to ask decision makers for changes to a law or policy). The audience of the youths’ social action was coded as governmental agencies and other elected or appointed decision-making bodies, schools and organizations, social networks, the academy, and/or the general public.

Youth Outcomes Associated With YPAR. Youth outcomes were defined as any change or improvement in participants’ growth or development as reported by the study author(s). The purpose of this review is to highlight youth outcomes that were consistently documented by scholars and could be worthy of further investigation and programmatic support.

Consistent with this aim, this review is inclusive of the variety of epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies that are found in the YPAR literature. The trends described therefore reflect a wide diversity of understandings about what counts as evidence of participant growth. This broad focus precluded the use of a statistical measure of evidentiary rigor, such as effect sizes or statistical significance.

The type of growth experienced by participants was qualitatively recorded and subsequently categorized into eight deductively identified categories of youth outcomes: social (e.g., connectedness, social support, community attachment, belonging), agency/leadership (e.g., self-determination, self-efficacy, confidence, civic engagement, citizenship, voice, empowerment, social responsibility, participatory behavior, identity, self-awareness), emotional (e.g., stress, symptomology, the ability to identify and express emotions, regulating emotions, anger management), interpersonal (e.g., communication skills, assertiveness, empathy taking, active listening, conflict resolution, teamwork), cognitive (e.g., problem-solving, decision-making, and thought appraisal abilities), academic/career (e.g., organization, time management, study skills, goal setting, public speaking, writing, planning), and/or critical consciousness (i.e., the ability to recognize any injustices or inequalities in society).

Synthesis of the Results

The final data set was cleaned to remove errors from data entry, and the qualitatively coded items were reduced to quantitative categories. Once the data were cleaned, they were imported into STATA 13. At that point, the articles were collapsed into unique studies, with the 67 articles included in this review representing 63 distinct studies (see Tables 1 and 2). Descriptive statistics were conducted on all the study variables. Fisher’s exact test was used to compare differences in the frequency of studies in particular categories (Table 3).

Results

A majority of the included studies ($n = 44$, 64.7%) were published after 2009, indicating that this body of literature is still emerging. The vast majority of the articles ($n = 51$, 89.7%) were published by authors belonging to professional schools (e.g., education, social work, psychology), followed by the humanities, arts, and sciences ($n = 13$, 22.4%). Another 5.2% ($n = 3$) of authors represented an institute or a school district. Most of the articles utilized the terminology of YPAR or CBPR, but 27% ($n = 17$) of the studies labeled their programs using other terms like youth *empowerment* or *leadership*. In the 38 studies that reported program meeting frequency, the researchers met a mean of 1.6 times a week (standard deviation 1.20, minimum 1, maximum 5). In

Table 1. Study Characteristics.

Reference	Youth sample	Setting	Methods	Design	Data type
Arches (2012)	10	School	Qualitative	Case study	—
Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, and Matthews (2013)	—	School, university	Qualitative	Ethnography	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, photos/videos
Berg, Coman, and Schemul (2009)	316	School	Mixed	Quasi-experimental	Survey, archival/artifacts, observations, interview, focus group
Bertrand (2014)	—	School, community, university	Qualitative	Ethnography	Observations, interview
Borgida, Worth, Lippman, Ergun, and Farr (2008)	1,456	School	Quantitative	—	Survey
Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, and Huebner (2011)	9	Community	Qualitative	—	Archival/artifacts, observations, photos/videos
Brown (2010)	9	School	Qualitative	Ethnography	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Cammarota and Romero (2009) ¹	—	School	Mixed	—	Survey, archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Cammarota and Romero (2011) ²	—	School	Mixed	—	Survey, archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Christens and Dolan (2011)	20	Community	Qualitative	Case study	Archival/artifacts, interview
Conner and Strobel (2007)	2	School	Qualitative	Grounded theory, case study	Observations, interview, focus group
De Jesús, Oviedo, and Feliz (2015)	12	School	Qualitative	—	Interview
Dzewaltowski et al. (2009)	2,211	School	Quantitative	Random clinical trial, longitudinal	Survey
Fox and Fine (2013)	40	University	Qualitative	—	—
Frentichs, Spolie, Curtis, Peterson, and Huang (2015)	74	School	Mixed	—	Administrative, survey, archival/artifacts, observations
Galletta and Jones (2010)	33	School	Qualitative	—	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, focus group
Gant et al. (2009)	26	Community	Quantitative	Pre and post, one group	Survey
García, Mirra, Morrell, Martínez, and Scorza (2015)	—	School, university	Qualitative	Ethnography, grounded theory	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, photos/videos, other
Gomez and Ryan (2016)	10	—	Qualitative	—	Interview
Hamilton and Flanagan (2007)	12	—	Qualitative	—	Survey, observations, interview, focus group
Harden et al. (2015)	—	University	Mixed	Grounded theory, pre and post, one group	Survey, interview
Hope, Skoog, and Jagers (2015)	8	—	Qualitative	—	Interview
Horn (2014)	8	School	Qualitative	Ethnography	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, focus group
Irizarry (2011)	7	School	Qualitative	Ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Jones, Warnaar, Bench, and Stroup (2014)	781	—	Mixed	—	Survey, observations, interview
Kirshner (2009)	8	Community	Qualitative	Ethnography	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011)	9	School	Qualitative	Grounded theory	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Kohfeldt and Langhout (2012)	16	School	Qualitative	Ethnography	Observations
Kroeger et al. (2004)	6	School	Qualitative	—	Archival/artifacts, interview
Kulbok et al. (2015)	2	Community	Qualitative	—	Interview
Langhout, Collins, and Ellison (2014)	11	School	Mixed	—	Interview, other
McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, and Roz (2007)	—	School	Qualitative	Grounded theory	Observations, other
Hilfinger Messias, Jennings, Fore, McLoughlin, and Parra-Medina (2008)	32	Community	Qualitative	—	Focus group, photos/videos
Mitra (2004) ¹	43	School	Mixed	Grounded theory, case study	Administrative, survey, archival/artifacts, observations, interview

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Reference	Youth sample	Setting	Methods	Design	Data type
Mitra (2005) ²	16	School	Qualitative	—	Administrative, archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Mitra and Serriere (2012)	6	School	Qualitative	Case study, longitudinal	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, focus group
Noonan (2015)	4	School	Qualitative	—	Observations, interview
Otis and Loeffler (2006)	—	Community	Mixed	Case study	Survey, observations, focus group
Ozer and Douglas (2013) ¹	398	School	Mixed	Random clinical trial	Survey, observations, interview, focus group
Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, and Hubbard (2013) ²	78	School	Qualitative	—	Observations, interview, focus group
Ozer and Wright (2012) ³	29	School	Qualitative	—	Observations, interview, focus group
Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis (2010)	32	School	Qualitative	Case study	Observations, interview, focus group
Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez, and Morgan (2010)	35	School	Qualitative	Case study	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Pritzker, LaChapelle, and Tatum (2012)	30	School	Mixed	Quasi-experimental	Survey, focus group
Reich, Kay, and Lin (2015)	14	School	—	—	—
Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy (2007)	25	University	Mixed	Grounded theory, case study	Survey, archival/artifacts, observations, photos/videos
Ross (2011)	20	—	Qualitative	Case study	Archival/artifacts, observations
Sanchez (2009)	3	Community	Qualitative	—	Focus group
Schaafsma, Tendo, and Tendo (1999)	14	School	—	—	—
Scott, Pyne, and Means (2015)	13	University	Qualitative	Grounded theory, case study	Observations, interview
Smith, Bratini, and Appio (2012)	7	Community	Qualitative	Case study	Focus group
Smith, Davis, and Bhowmik (2010)	9	School	Qualitative	—	Focus group
Suleiman, Soleimanpour, and London (2006)	26	School	Mixed	Case study	Survey, interview, other
Taines (2012)	13	Community	Qualitative	—	Observations, interview
Teixeira (2014)	10	Community	Qualitative	—	Observations
Torre (2009)	100	School, university	Qualitative	Case study	Observations
Turner, Hayes, and Way (2013)	2	School	Qualitative	Ethnography, grounded theory	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Voight (2015)	1,165	School	Mixed	Case study	Survey, archival/artifacts, observations, interview
Wagaman (2015)	8	Community	Qualitative	—	Archival/artifacts, observations, focus group
Walker and Saito (2011)	—	Community	Qualitative	Case study	Archival/artifacts, interview, focus group
White, Shoffner, Johnson, Knowles, and Mill (2012)	10	—	—	—	—
Wilson et al. (2007) ¹	122	School	Qualitative	—	—
Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, and Martin (2008) ²	122	School	—	—	—
Wright and Mahiri (2012)	8	Community	Qualitative	Case study	Archival/artifacts, observations, interview, focus group
Yoshida, Craypo, and Samuels (2011)	36	—	Qualitative	—	—
Zenkov et al. (2014)	90	School	Qualitative	—	Survey, archival/artifacts, photos/videos, other
Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, Franzen, and Reischl (2011)	60	School	Mixed	—	Administrative, survey, archival/artifacts, observations, focus group

Note. Superscript indicates multiple records from the same study. A dash (—) indicates that this information was missing.

Table 2. Reported Youth Outcomes.

Reference	Youth outcomes									
	Agency/ leadership	Social	Emotional	Interpersonal	Cognitive	Academic/ career	Critical consciousness	Other		
Arches (2012)	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bautista et al. (2013)	0	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Berg et al. (2009)	0	X	0	0	0	X	0	X	0	0
Bertrand (2014)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Borgida et al. (2008)	X	0	0	X	0	X	0	0	0	0
Brazg et al. (2011)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Brown (2010)	X	0	0	X	0	X	0	0	0	0
Cammarota and Romero (2009) ¹	X	0	0	X	0	X	X	0	0	0
Cammarota and Romero (2011) ²	X	0	0	X	0	0	X	X	0	0
Christens and Dolan (2011)	X	X	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0
Conner and Strobel (2007)	X	X	0	X	X	0	0	0	0	0
De Jesús et al. (2015)	X	X	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dziewaltowski et al. (2009)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fox and Fine (2013)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Frerichs et al. (2015)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Galletta and Jones (2010)	0	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0	0
Gant et al. (2009)	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Garcia et al. (2015)	X	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Gomez and Ryan (2016)	X	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hamilton and Flanagan (2007)	X	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0
Harden et al. (2015)	X	X	0	0	X	X	0	0	0	0
Hope et al. (2015)	0	0	0	X	X	X	0	0	0	0
Horn (2014)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Irizarry (2011)	0	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Jones et al. (2014)	X	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kirshner (2009)	X	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011)	0	0	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0
Kohfeldt and Langhout (2012)	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0
Kroeger et al. (2004)	0	X	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Kulbok et al. (2015)	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Langhout, Collins, and Ellison (2014)	X	X	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	0

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Reference	Youth outcomes									
	Agency/ leadership	Social	Emotional	Interpersonal	Cognitive	Academic/ career	Critical consciousness	Other		
McIntyre et al. (2007)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hilfinger Messias et al. (2008)	0	0	0	—	0	0	X	0	0	0
Mitra (2004) ¹	X	X	0	0	X	X	0	0	0	0
Mitra (2005) ²	X	X	0	X	X	X	0	0	0	0
Mitra and Serriere (2012)	X	X	0	X	0	X	X	0	0	0
Noonan (2015)	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0
Otis and Loeffler (2006)	X	0	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0
Ozer and Douglas (2013) ¹	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Ozer et al. (2013) ²	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ozer and Wright (2012) ³	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Ozer et al. (2010)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Phillips et al. (2010)	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Pritzker et al. (2012)	X	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reich et al. (2015)	X	0	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0
Rogers et al. (2007)	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Ross (2011)	X	0	0	X	X	0	0	0	0	0
Sanchez (2009)	X	X	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Schaafsma et al. (1999)	X	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scott et al. (2015)	X	0	0	0	X	X	X	0	0	0
Smith et al. (2012)	X	X	0	X	0	0	X	0	0	0
Smith et al. (2010)	X	X	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Suleiman et al. (2006)	X	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Taines (2012)	X	X	0	X	0	X	0	0	0	0
Teixeira (2014)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Torre (2009)	0	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Turner et al. (2013)	X	0	0	0	0	X	X	0	0	0
Voight (2015)	X	X	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	X
Wagaman (2015)	X	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	0
Walker and Saito (2011)	X	0	0	X	0	X	X	0	0	X
White et al. (2012)	X	0	0	X	0	X	0	0	0	0
Wilson et al. (2007) ¹	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wilson et al. (2008) ²	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wright and Mahiri (2012)	X	0	0	X	0	X	0	0	0	0
Yoshida et al. (2011)	X	X	0	X	X	X	0	0	0	0
Zenkov et al. (2014)	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0
Zimmerman et al. (2011)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. Superscript indicates multiple records from the same study. A dash (—) indicates that this information was missing.

Table 3. Research Characteristics Across Studies.

Research characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)
Methodology (<i>N</i> = 60, 3 missing)	
Qualitative	41 (68.3)
Quantitative	3 (5.0)
Mixed	14 (23.3)
Design (<i>N</i> = 36, 29 missing)	
Ethnography	9 (25.0)
Grounded theory	11 (30.6)
Phenomenology	1 (2.8)
Randomized trial	2 (5.6)
Quasi-experimental	2 (5.6)
Pre- and posttest	2 (5.6)
Case study	19 (52.8)
Cross-sectional	0 (0)
Longitudinal	2 (5.6)
Data type (<i>N</i> = 55, 8 missing)	
Administrative	3 (5.5)
Survey	18 (32.7)
Archival/artifacts	24 (43.6)
Observations	35 (63.6)
Interviews	34 (61.8)
Focus group	19 (34.6)
Photos or video	6 (10.9)
Other (e.g., reflections, social network analysis)	5 (9.1)
Data source (<i>N</i> = 60, 3 missing)	
Youth in the YPAR project	56 (93.3)
Nonparticipant youth	10 (16.7)
Program staff	25 (41.7)
Community members	2 (3.3)
Partner	10 (16.7)
Parent or caregiver	0 (0)

Note. YPAR = youth participatory action research.

the 42 studies that reported program length, the researchers met for a mean of 60.1 weeks (standard deviation 50.0, minimum 5, maximum 208). The most common setting for program delivery was schools ($n = 38$, 67.9%), followed by community organizations ($n = 15$, 26.8%) and universities ($n = 8$, 14.3%).

The vast majority of studies provided specific and concrete examples of what the principles of participatory ($n = 59$, 93.7%) and transformative ($n = 56$, 88.9%) looked like in the program of interest. In terms of topics that the YPAR programs addressed, the most common were education ($n = 30$, 50.0%), social inequalities ($n = 24$, 40.0%), health ($n = 19$, 31.7%), violence and safety ($n = 15$, 25.0%), resources for youth ($n = 6$, 10.0%), and other issues ($n = 11$, 8.3%). Fifty seven of the 63 studies provided details about the method of social action used by the participants: Of these, 82.5% ($n = 47$) reported using an education and awareness approach; 43.9% ($n = 25$), advocacy; and 15.8% ($n = 9$), organizing. The target audience for these social actions were mainly schools and community organizations ($n = 34$, 58.6%)

and social networks (e.g., peers and family; $n = 34$, 58.6%), followed by policymakers ($n = 23$, 39.7%) and the academy ($n = 23$, 39.7%).

What Methods Are Used to Assess Youth Outcomes in YPAR Studies?

The selected YPAR articles were primarily qualitative ($n = 41$, 68.3%; see Table 3). A smaller number utilized mixed methods ($n = 14$, 23.3%), and very few utilized exclusively quantitative approaches ($n = 3$, 5%). In terms of study design, a small majority were case studies ($n = 19$, 52.8%), with only a few randomized trials ($n = 2$, 5.6%) and quasi-experimental studies ($n = 2$, 5.6%). However, the research design was not explicitly stated in 42.6% of the included studies and was coded as missing. Most studies used multiple forms of data to triangulate their findings, with observations ($n = 35$, 63.6%) and interviews ($n = 34$, 61.8%) being the most popular. Likewise, the studies drew on several sources of data, such as youth in the YPAR program ($n = 56$, 93.3%) and program staff ($n = 25$, 41.7%).

The mean youth sample size was 135 participants, with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 2,211, and a large standard deviation of 391. Sample size was missing in 8 cases. Among the 58 studies that reported on participants' developmental stages, the vast majority of the participants were adolescents ($n = 43$, 74.1%), followed by preteens ($n = 19$, 32.8%). Very few studies included school-age children ($n = 4$, 6.9%) or emerging adults ($n = 6$, 10.3%). Other characteristics of the study samples were provided less consistently. For example, only 1 study provided data about how the participants identified themselves in terms of their sexuality. Just 20 studies included information about the participants' socioeconomic status (of these, 95.2%, $n = 20$, included low-income youth). Of the 44 studies that reported gender, 95.5% ($n = 45$) included girls, and 88.6% ($n = 39$) included boys, but just 1 study (2.3%) reported that transgender students were involved. These studies appeared to mostly involve youth of color, though information about race or ethnicity was missing in 16 studies. Of those that did provide this information, 72.3% ($n = 34$) involved Black youth, and 70.2% ($n = 33$) involved young Latino/as. It was less common for these programs to involve White ($n = 22$, 46.8%), Asian ($n = 13$, 27.7%), Native American ($n = 4$, 8.5%), or Pacific Islander ($n = 1$, 2.1%) participants.

What Youth Outcomes Are Associated With Participation in YPAR?

The most common outcomes associated with participation in YPAR were those related to agency and leadership ($n = 39$, 75.0%; see Table 4), followed by academic or career ($n = 29$, 55.8%), social ($n = 19$, 36.5%), critical consciousness ($n = 16$,

Table 4. Youth Outcomes Reported Across Studies.

<i>N</i> = 52, 11 missing	<i>n</i> (%)
Agency and leadership	39 (75.0)
Social	19 (36.5)
Emotional	0 (0)
Interpersonal	18 (34.6)
Cognitive	12 (23.1)
Academic/career	29 (55.8)
Critical consciousness	16 (30.8)
Other	3 (5.8)

30.8%), interpersonal ($n = 18$, 34.6%), and cognitive ($n = 12$, 23.1%) skills. No studies reported emotional outcomes.

How Do the Outcomes Reported Vary by Characteristics of the Study or Program?

We used Fisher's exact test of independence to consider whether the outcomes reported varied by the characteristics of the study or program. Studies authored by faculty in the humanities, arts, and sciences were significantly less likely to report social outcomes (7.69%, $n = 1$, compared with 42.9%, $n = 15$ for all other disciplines; $p < .05$), as were studies that were labeled as YPAR (23.7%, $n = 9$, compared with 71%, $n = 10$ for all others; $p < .01$). No other outcomes or author disciplines were significantly related to each other. The methodology of the study (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) and dosage (length of program in weeks) was unrelated to the type of youth outcome reported. However, studies of programs offered in a school setting were less likely to report outcomes related to agency and leadership (60.5%, $n = 23$, compared with 83.3%, $n = 15$ for all other settings; $p < .05$). Studies that provided concrete and specific examples of transformative social action were more likely to report outcomes related to agency (82.2%, $n = 37$, compared with 28.5%, $n = 2$ for all others; $p < .01$). The method of social action employed by participants in the program was unrelated to the type of youth outcome reported.

Limitations

Several limitations related to the study design suggest that caution in interpreting the study findings is warranted. First, our literature search ended in 2015, so our review does not reflect more recent advances in the field (e.g., Anyon, Kennedy, Durbahn, & Jenson, 2018; Bender et al., 2017; Morales et al., 2017; Voight & Velez, 2018). Our search was also limited to empirical studies published in academic journals. This decision was strategic because we knew that there would be concerns about the rigor of these studies and believed that limiting our review to peer-reviewed publications would strengthen readers' confidence in the findings. As a result, our review may reflect publication bias in

reporting the positive outcomes associated with YPAR. Similarly, we did not assess risk of bias in the studies included in the review, primarily because we had difficulty finding rubrics applicable to the diverse methodologies included in our sample.

Other limitations relate to our coding process. Although the phenomena we aimed to capture when coding for YPAR principles were multifaceted, reflecting a range of activities and degrees of youth participation, our codebook did not capture these nuances and treated all forms of inquiry, participation, and transformation the same way. We also did not code for the involvement of young people as coauthors of manuscripts.

Discussion

Our systematic review of the literature indicates that research on YPAR primarily draws on qualitative methodologies to assess youth outcomes. A strength of this body of work is that many studies involved the triangulation of multiple data types from several sources to come to conclusions. Few studies, however, used mixed methods or those that allow for causal inference, such as experiments that involve random assignment to the intervention or a comparison group. Without such designs, we were unable to calculate or synthesize effect sizes across YPAR studies, leaving the field with little information regarding the magnitude of the effects of YPAR programming.

This may be due to tensions between the underlying epistemologies of YPAR and intervention research. YPAR is rooted in a legacy of critical scientific inquiry that emphasizes the empowerment of participants, context, and multiple situated ways of knowing, whereas intervention studies typically reflect positivist traditions that value replicability, controlled conditions, and the ability to predict (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, & Morrell, 2017). Those implementing a YPAR program may not even consider it an intervention, as this language is not consistently used in all of the disciplines within which YPAR studies are situated.

Regardless of the root cause, more research is needed that would provide practitioners and policymakers with evidence of the causal impact of YPAR on youth outcomes. In the absence of such studies, YPAR programs will not be eligible to be listed on registries of evidence-based programs. This will likely constrain the diffusion of this approach because funders increasingly require grantees to select programs from these registries. Future research should consider delayed-treatment approaches, where youth are randomized but all have the opportunity to participate in programming eventually, which may be more compatible with the worldview of YPAR practitioners.

Given the current state of the literature on YPAR, it is not yet possible to make claims about the causal impact of this approach on participant outcomes. However, our review does point to several that were consistently reported across

multiple studies and therefore warrant further investigation. Those related to leadership and agency were by far the most common. Skill development in this area may be important in building civic engagement among young people who are traditionally disempowered. This is especially true for youth of color, who often composed the samples in the studies we reviewed. Other areas of youth development documented in this body of research are consistent with effective social-emotional learning programs (e.g., social, interpersonal, cognitive). Such skills are promising precursors to other long-term outcomes such as academic success, employment, and housing stability (Jenson & Bender, 2014).

That none of the studies reviewed reported emotional outcomes such as improved mental health symptoms is surprising; one might expect that such outcomes would improve as young people build other related skills, such as interpersonal competencies. It could be that researchers of YPAR programs, because of their empowerment perspective, are less likely to assess emotional outcomes because they are more commonly the target of deficit-based interventions. Further research is needed to more particularly understand whether YPAR participation is associated with improved emotional outcomes.

The large amount of missing data in our review also suggests that there is a need to begin establishing common metrics and reporting guidelines for YPAR studies. Standardization of reporting study design, sample size, and outcomes would allow researchers to make more meaningful comparisons across programs and draw more rigorous conclusions about program impacts.

Implications for Practitioners

Our review suggests that YPAR may be a useful approach for health educators and public health professionals to promote skill development among diverse young people. Practitioners may want to consider implementing freely available YPAR program manuals or curriculum (e.g., Anyon et al., 2007; YPAR Hub, 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2017), in addition to more traditional health promotion activities, particularly with youth who identify with oppressed groups, for whom YPAR may be most relevant.

Because study outcomes varied by few program characteristics, our review suggests that YPAR processes and principles, more than setting, topic, or method of action, may influence participant growth. This finding has implications for the development of YPAR program manuals/curricula, which may need to emphasize adherence to a set of techniques more than particular content on, say, social science research methods.

At the same time, a few relationships that were observed between outcomes and program characteristics offer important insights regarding developing agency among young people. YPAR programs in school settings were less likely to report outcomes related to agency and leadership than programs in other settings. It may be that equalizing power in ways that make youth feel like they have greater agency may

be more challenging in settings where youth–adult relationships are characterized by hierarchical structures in which adults are dominant authority figures (Langhout et al., 2014).

In contrast, studies of YPAR programs that described concrete and specific examples of transformative social action were more likely to report outcomes related to agency. Thus, taking social action may be an important component of YPAR projects that seek to build agency in their youth participants; this is a modifiable component that could be built into all YPAR projects. YPAR programs aiming to increase youth agency may therefore carefully select contexts in which transformational efforts will be feasible or even welcomed and intentionally build in time and space for such transformation as part of the project.

A final implication is that to expand the scope and scale of YPAR, practitioners need to be open to evaluation designs that involve a comparison group of youth who are not participating in the program.

Conclusion

Youth engagement has been recognized as a best practice in public health education and promotion by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010). Our review suggests that YPAR provides structured opportunities for youth engagement to address social determinants to health. Indeed, a large majority of the YPAR projects included in this study reported a social action component that involved systems change. This review also provided emerging evidence of the types of youth outcomes these programs may influence, including agency, leadership skills, and social and academic competence. YPAR is therefore a promising tool for engaging youth in public health planning and youth-driven transformative community change. Additional research is needed to identify the causal links between program principles, processes, and outcomes.

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- *The asterisk denotes that this study was included in the systematic review.*
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