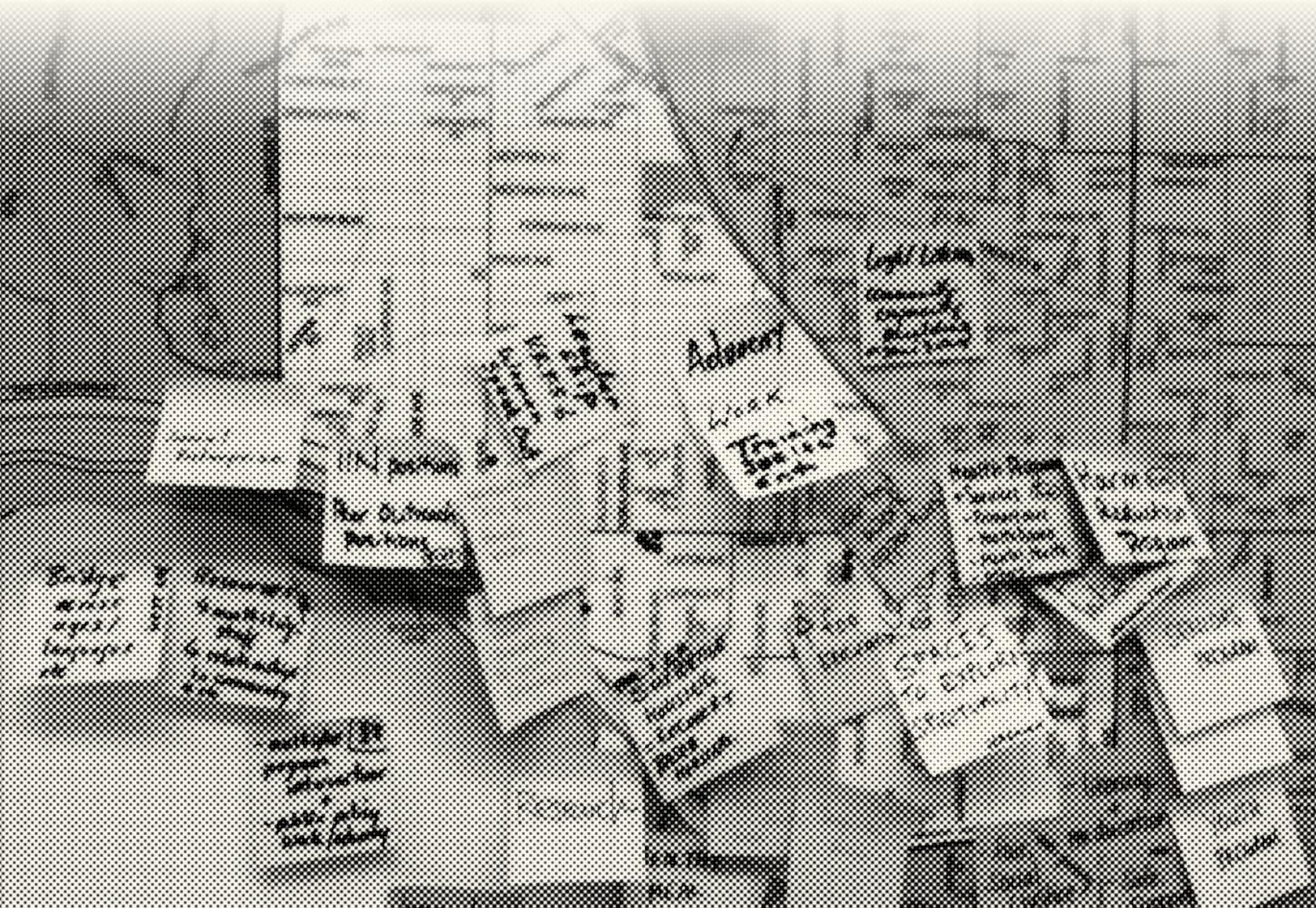




Community-Based Research

Lessons from Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust



November 2025

Written by Celia Wandio

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Contents

Introduction to Community-Based Research	3
Background: Parkdale Rooming House Study	3
Research Question & Scope	4
Methodology & Research Team	5
Analysis	7
Action Planning	8
Monitoring & Evaluation	9
Further Resources	10

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Introduction to Community-Based Research

Community-based action research (CBR) is a participatory research approach that combines information gathering with community engagement and action. In this approach, researchers and community members collaborate on data gathering and analysis - it is the explicit commitment to community interpretation and ownership of data that makes CBR unique, and uniquely suited to CLTs.

CBR prioritizes producing results that lead to concrete action in the community as well as policy advocacy. CBR proposes that researchers and community members should test their learnings and recommendations by taking action.

In this guide, we outline the key steps involved in carrying out a community-based action research project as a community land trust. For each step, we share examples from the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust's Parkdale Rooming House Study.

Background: Parkdale Rooming House Study

From its inception in 2014, the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) was aware of the threats to Parkdale's rooming house stock. However, there was limited information available on existing rooming houses in the neighbourhood, the specific issues rooming house tenants were facing, and potential solutions to their problems. The Parkdale Rooming House Study (PRHS) was initiated in 2016 to fill these knowledge gaps, to shape PNLT's housing strategies, and to organize community organizations and tenants around shared goals for community action and policy change.

Supported by the Maytree Foundation, the PRHS was led by PNLT with extensive collaboration from the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre, Working for Change, John van Nostrand Developments, Habitat Services, and rooming house tenants. The purpose of the study was threefold:

1. To develop a current baseline count of rooming houses in Parkdale.
2. To assess the impact of neighbourhood change and real estate speculation on rooming house conversion and affordability, and on the displacement of tenants.
3. To identify proactive measures to preserve rooming houses, protect affordability, and improve the housing of tenants.

The study's report, titled [*No Room for Unkept Promises: Parkdale Rooming Housing Study*](#), was published in May 2017 and has proved very influential in shaping both PNLT's housing program and municipal housing policy.

Research Question & Scope

Like any other research project, community-based research projects should begin with a clear research question/objective and a clear scope. CLTs will generally be asking a question about a local housing/land use challenge and how to address it through community-led solutions and policy change. The research question can also be framed as an objective or purpose, and should clearly state the topic of your research.

The scope should be wide enough to be useful but narrow enough to be feasible, given time and resource constraints. When determining your scope, you should consider:

- **Geography** - what area is and isn't included in your study?
- **Population** - what populations/communities are the focus of your study? Who do you want to hear from?
- **Housing/land types** - what housing and land types are you focusing on? Consider housing tenure, land use, land ownership, property condition, affordability, etc.
- **Timeframe** - if your study involves looking at historical data, you should set a date range you are interested in studying, ignoring information outside of this range.

Parkdale Rooming House Study

The objective of the PRHS was to both document the current status of rooming houses in Parkdale and to identify proactive measures to preserve them and protect tenants from eviction. The study was confined to set geographic boundaries: the area running along Dufferin from the Gardiner to Queen, following the rail corridor two blocks north of Queen Street, east along Seaforth and Pearson to Roncesvalles, and south again to the Gardiner. This area captures all of South Parkdale and a portion of Parkdale above Queen that still retains some of its affordable units. The study was scoped to this area as it became apparent through the street survey that few rooming houses north of this boundary remained.

The scope of the study was limited to rooming houses; early in the research process, the research team set a definition of what qualified as a rooming house, based on a mix of the City of Toronto's licensing definition and their own set of characteristics. This predetermined yet flexible definition was important to enable consistent and complete data collection. The population targeted in this study was those who live in accommodation defined as rooming houses; this group was also involved in the data collection process, as described below.

Methodology & Research Team

Once you have a research question and scope for your CBR project, it is important to come up with your research methodology. In the context of research projects, “methodology” refers to the ways you gather information. Different ways of gathering information can include:

- Conducting surveys;
- Doing interviews or conducting focus groups with key stakeholders;
- Carrying out counts of some form (for example, counting the number of people walking in a given area);
- Conducting secondary source research (that is, reviewing existing reports, articles, and other resources that have been created on your topic).
- Analysis of census or administrative data;
- Conducting social and community mapping (often with a map as a starting point, and activities to generate data to populate the map).

Which method is used will depend on the type of research being conducted, the research questions, and your priorities. It is recommended to use more than one method of data collection for a research project, ideally ensuring the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Using multiple methods enables data triangulation - that is, the combining and comparing of data from different sources (and across quantitative and qualitative data) to create a full picture of your topic. For example, in the PRHS study it was powerful to triangulate quantitative data collected from a community-led rooming house count and municipal licensing records with qualitative interviews with tenants about their experiences.

CLT-led research projects, including CBR projects, are often carried out in partnership - with academic institutions, other community organizations, or other stakeholders. When working in partnership, it is important to involve all partners in determining which research methods to use. This may require all partners educating each other about the advantages and disadvantages of various methods based on community as well as academic perspectives.

When working in partnership with academic institutions, CLTs should take time to develop a detailed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each partner. It is also advised that CLTs seek to retain ownership of all data and results from the research, and to have final say over the publishing of any research results. CLTs will want to ensure that no potentially harmful research results are published and that the narrative presented contributes to the CLTs work. The CLT’s responsibility to protect its community from harm should always supersede academic objectives. Finally, when working with academics you will usually need to undertake complex ethics reviews that can slow down the project and limit the type of activities that can be undertaken as part of the research. In some cases, the ethics

review process can disallow community action activities that a CLT deems important. For this reason, PNLT has found that some research is better undertaken independently. Either way, a CLT should determine its own local expectations of how to undertake research in an ethical way.

In developing your project's methodology, you will form a research team - this should consist of all those who will play a role in guiding the project, including your community-based researchers (CBRs). Working with community-based researchers is one of the key ways CBR projects differ from other research projects. Your community-based researchers will be people with lived experience of the issue(s) being researched and/or knowledge of the area in question. It is very important to make sure community-based researchers are given adequate training and support, and to ensure they are properly compensated for their time and expertise.

Parkdale Rooming House Study

The PRHS employed multiple methods carried out by a research team composed of different key stakeholders. The research team included five community-based researchers, who were recruited from among Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) members as well as among graduates of a pre-employment program at the charitable organization Working for Change. All of the researchers had experience living in rooming houses, and several lived in the Parkdale neighbourhood. They were given an orientation to the project and received training in interview protocol and practices.

Rooming house count

The starting point for the rooming house data collection was a review of existing municipal data: the City of Toronto's Municipal Licensing & Standards list of licensed rooming houses and bachelorettes. The PNLT had also maintained a list of sites of interest, identified by community members and organizations.

The community-based researchers assisted in the development of a questionnaire that they used to conduct a neighbourhood-wide sidewalk survey. They also conducted door-to-door follow-ups, interviews (with local residents, landowners, social service providers, and city staff), and analysis of documentary sources to identify rooming houses and confirm their current status and characteristics. The study sought to generate a wide range of data about each property, all of which was entered into a central database.

Preservation Strategy Development

In order for the researchers to identify proactive measures to preserve rooming houses, protect affordability, and improve the housing of tenants, the research process also involved a two-month phase of strategy development. Throughout this

process, the research team actively consulted other non-profit housing organizations, sector experts, development consultants, City of Toronto staff, front-line housing support staff, tenants, and knowledgeable neighbourhood residents. The process included:

- Several multi-partner strategy development meetings
- Expert pressure test pitch
- Strategy co-design workshop

Analysis

Once you have gathered your data, it is time to figure out what the data is telling you. This is the analysis stage. During the analysis stage the data collected as part of the study is interpreted in order to highlight useful information, understand results, and suggest conclusions. Analysis can be qualitative (thematic) or quantitative (based on numbers) and involves the identification of trends and themes that support your research's conclusions.

There are many ways in which community-based researchers can be involved in the analysis phase of the project depending on the skills and interests of the CBRs, the amount and form of data collected, and the extent of analysis, among other factors. However, what is critical is the collective involvement in the interpretation of the project's findings. Community-based research is unique because of the explicit commitment to community interpretation and ownership of the data, in contrast with academic research projects that can be extractive.

It is also important to understand that analysis does not necessarily mean the end of data collection. Analyzing your data may lead you to identify further research questions or actions, or gaps in the data collected; in this way, community-based research can be iterative, meaning it feeds back into itself and steps may be repeated until a satisfactory conclusion is reached.

Parkdale Rooming House Study

In the preliminary analysis phase, the community-based researchers reviewed the initial data and decided to adjust the project approach as a result. When analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data, what was immediately apparent was the rapid rate at which rooming houses were being lost to the speculative real estate market and the parallel increase in evictions. Rather than solely quantifying the loss of rooming houses, the researchers sought to understand the underlying economics of rooming house provision and mitigate the factors contributing to rooming house disappearance. This fed back into further data collection: the research team compiled details on operating costs, income sources, subsidy models, sales data, and planning and development statistics from publicly available sources.

In analyzing the large amount of data collected, the PRHS researchers returned to their guiding research questions and the impetus for the research. These questions formed the basis for their analysis. The PRHS ultimately documented 198 rooming houses in Parkdale with an estimated 2,715 dwelling rooms; and they found that in the previous 10 years, 28 rooming houses had been lost due to conversion and upscaling, displacing an estimated 347 vulnerable residents. These synthesized statistics presented a new and concerning picture of an escalating crisis of rooming house loss and evictions. The study identified a further 59 properties, housing 818 people, that were believed to be at imminent risk of being lost. These two sets of statistics painted a picture of a crisis requiring a major coordinated response by government and community. The study also uncovered other ways rooming house tenants were losing their homes to evictions, and the consequences of eviction on vulnerable tenants.

Action Planning

The goal of community-based research is to enable you to take action on issues impacting your community. This next stage - action planning - is therefore key, and involves mobilizing your research findings. Typically, action planning involves clarifying and prioritizing the problem(s) that the analysis suggests; identifying potential solutions to these problems; and creating a plan to implement the solutions. At this stage, some kind of summarizing output will usually be produced - this can be in the form of a written report, a video, a presentation, or something else.

When conducting community-based research, it is very important to think about how the knowledge you have generated can be used to the community's ongoing benefit. This means identifying community-led housing solutions as well as potential policy solutions; communicating your findings in a clear, non-academic way; and tying the findings to tangible actions you can take in collaboration with your community.

Parkdale Rooming House Study

The PRHS's action plan took the form of a series of recommendations for a 10-year affordable housing preservation strategy, implicating different stakeholders across the public, non-profit, and private sectors in actions to respond to the identified crisis. They emphasized the need for a multi-partner, coordinated response to address this issue, and they identified the appropriate role for the CLT in this response. The key directions for action were:

1. Proactive eviction prevention & response
2. Affordable housing preservation through acquisition and rehabilitation of at-risk private rooming houses by a non-profit community land trust
3. Development of new affordable and supportive housing

4. Policy and planning tools that support development without displacement

Under each action, they listed multiple specific recommendations, as well as who is responsible and the target outcomes, where relevant.

In the years following the publishing the study, the PNLT worked to coordinate the implementation of the recommendations resulting in the following accomplishments:

- Successfully working with community partners to support the City of Toronto to implement multiple policy changes, including an official plan amendment to protect rooming houses from demolition and the creation of the Multi-Unit-Residential Acquisition (MURA) Program.
- Implementation of 3-year neighbourhood-wide Rooming House Proactive Eviction Prevention (PEP) program.
- NLT's acquisition and preservation of two at-risk properties, preserving 51 units; NLT continues to seek to preserve one additional at-risk property every year.
- Coordination of a preservation strategy, through which eight at-risk properties have been preserved by other local non-profit organizations.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Identifying and working towards solutions is one thing; verifying if the solutions have the intended effect is another. It is worthwhile to return regularly to your action plan to verify that recommended solutions are being implemented. You may also conduct small studies at different intervals - for example, every 1-2 years - to see if the solutions are having a positive effect in addressing the issues your research identified.

The Parkdale Rooming House Study

PNLT found that while the findings from the PRHS helped convince some within the public sector of the need for acquisition funding, there was still reluctance to develop a new dedicated funding program. To address this reluctance, PNLT undertook a further research report, published in 2020 and titled “Fixing The Leaky Bucket: A Comprehensive Policy & Program Framework to Preserve Toronto’s Supply of Deeply Affordable Housing.” The purpose of this report was to expand on policies suggested in the 2017 report and demonstrate clear precedents for a City of Toronto acquisition funding program.

This continued dedication to mobilizing research findings was effective: after a successful rooming house acquisition pilot program, the City of Toronto approved the Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition Program in 2021.

Further Resources

- Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts - [Starting a CLT](#)
- Detroit URC - [Community-Based Participatory Research Principles](#)
- PAN BC - [Community-Based Research Resources](#)
- The Neighbourhood Land Trust - [No Room for Unkept Promises: Parkdale Rooming Housing Study](#)
- The Neighbourhood Land Trust - [Fixing The Leaky Bucket: A Comprehensive Policy & Program Framework to Preserve Toronto's Supply of Deeply Affordable Housing](#)
- The Neighbourhood Land Trust - [Parkdale Tower Rental Housing Study](#)
- The Neighbourhood Land Trust - [Scaling the Community-Based CLT](#)