

Destroying Stereotypes about the Innercity Poor

Essay by Per Jansen

In 2007, as a student at the University of Cincinnati, I participated in a research-focused community engagement project with the Day Labor Organizing Project (DLOP), a workers' center in Cincinnati, Ohio, that was attempting to organize day laborers and ensure the protection of their labor rights. The project's methodology (a combination of survey and in-depth interviews) required us to embed within the community. Many specific aspects of the project proved challenging, and the methods we used may help others whose goal is engagement with marginalized populations who are often cautious and hesitant when interacting with those outside of their own reference groups.

Day laborers make up the bottom of the urban employment ladder; they begin their workdays at 5 a.m. and perform back-breaking work under hazardous conditions to earn around \$50 a day. The supply of workers far exceeds demand, leaving them in a weak bargaining position. Day labor firms, concentrated in the poorest urban neighborhoods, can fire workers for any reason and enforce strict rules and procedures to maintain control of the workforce. Many firms deduct charges from the workers' pay, frequently bringing pay beneath minimum wage. In Cincinnati, most day laborers are African-Americans; many are homeless and have had brushes with the law. These conditions result in a population with little defense from mistreatment.

Engaging this particular demographic often proves difficult, as was the case in our work with them. First, researchers, as well as DLOP activists, had access to the laborers only during the early morning hours (approximately 4-5 a.m.) when workers line up for a better chance at receiving a job. Second, speaking with workers during working hours was not possible and would result in their termination. Additionally, day-labor firms are located in neighborhoods that suffer from high crime rates, presenting a safety concern to researchers going there in the early morning. Finally, many workers were hesitant to speak with DLOP for fear of retaliation and termination if their participation with a labor-organizing effort was discovered.

To overcome these challenges, DLOP used the efforts of retired day laborers, who directly engaged current laborers and sought to recruit them for the organizing efforts. As former workers, they do not face the retaliation current day laborers do, and they did not look suspicious in day labor halls. The former day laborers also attended rallies, spoke at city council meetings, and met with churches and civic organizations around the city. These efforts put a personal face to the stories of deprivation and labor abuse, helped to enlist volunteer support from undergraduate students for both the research project and the organizing effort, and built a positive media narrative encouraging support from city politicians. The former laborers helped with the research project as well. They formed teams with student research assistants, escorted them through neighborhoods, and encouraged cooperation from day laborers who were concerned for their anonymity.

Many factors make engagement with formal day laborers difficult, and day-labor firms easily exploit this weak position in the labor market. However, engagement through safe, trustworthy channels brought multiple benefits to the project, facilitating research and enabling the incorporation of new workers into the labor organizing effort.

The project had a deep impact on the student research team, including myself. Working in the early morning was difficult, but for us, the project and early hours ended, a small price to pay for an eye-opening glimpse into the lives of hardworking people who do this work every day. Destroying stereotypes about the urban poor and developing professional relationships with kind, dedicated people from dramatically different socioeconomic backgrounds proved personally rewarding and relevant to my future goals as an attorney representing the indigent, especially on labor issues.

About the Author

Per Jansen is a graduate student in community planning at the University of Cincinnati.