

# How to... Research for Organizing

#2 in a series of citizens' guides by the  
Western Organization of Resource Councils

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*Research is digging facts. Digging facts is as hard a job as mining coal. It means blowing them out from underground, butting them, picking them, shoveling them, loading them, pushing them to the surface weighing them, and then turning them loose on the public for fuel — for heat and light. Facts make a fire which cannot be put out.*



*To get coal requires miners.  
To get facts requires miners,  
too -fact miners.*

—Pennsylvania miner John Brophy, at the 1921 convention of the United Mineworkers of America.

Research for organizing can be a powerful force, creating a “fire which cannot be put out.” Of all of the tasks involved in community organizing, few are as crucial as research, and fewer are handled as awkwardly. Still, it is one of the most rewarding tasks when done well.

Research for organizing is not the same as the other kinds of research commonly seen and understood by most people. It is different than academic research, investigative reporting or even public interest research. In community organizing, research is a *tool*.

## Why do Research?

As with any tool, research is more effective when you have a clear *purpose* for using it. Here are some purposes for organizing research.

- Gathering facts that weaken your opponent's position.
- Dispelling fear and doubt.
- Building confidence.
- Getting people angry and, often, gaining the evidence you need to build public outrage.
- Clearly identifying and focusing sharply on the *decisionmakers* who can give you what you want.

- Deciding exactly what you want.
- Pinpointing your opponents strengths and weaknesses and, in the process, identifying yours as well.
- Mapping out fruitful areas for recruitment of new members.
- Identifying areas of research that require further investigation.
- Building leadership and getting people involved.

## Types of Research

There are a number of overlapping parts to organizing research. Research occurs before you begin organizing, throughout each campaign and after the campaign is over. The most important forms of organizing research are:

**Community Analysis** — Collection and analysis of details about the community in which you are organizing, such as: physical geography; population demographics; patterns of community service; identification of potential allies and resources; issues people care about; income, race and ethnicity; and major business or industrial centers. The list may expand or contract according to conditions in your community. .

**Power Structure Analysis** — The information needed to graph the relationships of power in your community. Who are your community's power brokers, generally: and for each issue your group is working on? There are two key questions here: (1) who is responsible for causing the problem? and (2) who has the power to solve the problem? (The answers are sometimes, but not always, the same.)

In addition to the formal legislated lines of command and power, researchers must also investigate *informal* power relationships. The bureaucrat you have targeted in your organizing may have formal, legal responsibility to report to the next person within the agency, but may be far more under the sway of a powerful politician or

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businessman whose name will never appear in that agency's table of organization.

**Researching the Decisionmaker** — Who can give us what we want? What will it take to make this person give us what we want? How can we find and reach this person effectively? Do we have enough power or 'leverage'? If we fail to win with this person, do we have any recourse?

**Fact Gathering and Analysis** — Studying corporate annual reports or profit and loss statements, analyzing statistics, looking at budgets, reading the newspaper and saving potentially useful news clips. Sometimes we know what kind of facts and analysis we need, such as information on laws, regulations, or budgets that relate to an ongoing campaign. Other times, however, our fact-gathering is hardly more than a fishing expedition or insurance against some future need for information in a yet to be launched campaign.

**Monitoring** — After the party's over, we know from experience our opponents may renege on agreements and concessions they've made. We must be able to determine when that happens and be able to take action. Monitoring can also help to establish whether or not a target is behaving as badly as suspected and to decide when an issue is "ripe" enough to generate broad public interest.

### Putting Research to Use

Each type of organizing research has practical, strategic applications. Some common examples:

- Use community analysis to target the best communities to organize and to spot potential issues to talk about with potential members.
- Use power structure analysis to predict how and where your opponents will retaliate.
- Establish the legal basis and historical precedents for what your group wants.

- Prepare comparisons between the conditions members of your group must endure in their lives with the way your opponents live.

- Uncover past indiscretions and other embarrassments committed by your opponent and use them in your strategy.

- Unearth the sources of financing and ownership behind your opponent and use these findings to go after a "secondary" target—someone who can make your opponent give you what you want.

- Find people interested in your group's Issue

- Counter your opponent's scare tactics.

### Potential Pitfalls

**Little or No Research** — Anti-researchers argue, "We don't need a lot of research if we've got enough people." In fact, they're right. You need more people than facts to win. There are plenty of great stories about organizing campaigns that were won because people were there and were strong, despite the fact that they had not done their homework.

They were also wasting a lot of energy and taking a terrible risk. Suppose the opponent raises that fatal piece of information which totally contradicts your group's position? People can feel awfully stupid, demoralized and angry when they lose because the basic homework was not done.

**Too Much Research** — You'll know you have this problem if your group keeps delaying action until "we can gather just a little more research," or lets the researchers call the shots and set the tempo for organizing, or your members are thinking that "once this stuff gets in the paper, they'll *have* to give in." It's time for your group to reassess how much research is done when you're producing more reports and exposes and giving more "facts" to the media than doing actions. So how much research is enough? The answer is a question: How much research do you need to organize

enough people to fight and win? Research is a tool, not an end product.

research tasks shouldn't simply be dumped on already overtaxed leaders.

**Staff does it all.** One of the most important jobs of organizers and leaders is to involve members and other leaders in research. As with all aspects of organizing, involving people in research ought to be thought through;

But if research is a powerful tool, members and leaders ought to be the ones to use it — to have the fun of digging up information and using it to build powerful organizations and win.

**Make a plan.** Organizing is applied research: you need a plan. What do you need to know? Why do you need to know it? Where will you find it? Don't lose sight of the issue for which the research is conducted. Your research is useless if it is too complicated to be distilled into a simple fact sheet or briefing; too late to be used in the campaign; unfocused or off the point; or wrong.

**“Only believe what you see with your own eyes — and have your eyes examined regularly.”** In the journalism business, this is called “confirmation.” In organizing research, much of what you can collect may be rumor, hearsay, and other unsubstantiated information. Researchers must know the difference between proof and semi-intelligent opinion. Wherever possible — and necessary — substantiate your facts. The best way to do that is to get it in writing.

**Use the phone, but understand its limitations.** The phone is a vital research tool, but a phone conversation is not proof. The phone is good for helping you locate information that you can then go get in writing. But telephone sources can lie, hide their emotions better than when you see them face-to-face, and are less likely to give you more than you ask for.

**Develop sources and use them well.** Many good sources of information, in many occupations, respond well to compliments. Keep a file of good research contacts. Ask them about their research resources and keep notes on their answers. Many good “inside sources” are lower level bureaucrats, people who are frustrated and want to blow the whistle on what's going on. If you agree to protect the confidence of a source like this, you must honor your pledge.

**Know the rules for access to information.** Generally, organizing researchers start with the resolve that the public has a right to information. And generally this is true, well supported by law and established procedure. But in most bureaucracies, controlling records is the only power most lower level bureaucrats have. Court records are mostly open to the public, for example, but courthouse clerks are very leery of letting anyone other than lawyers or their employees use them. You can make a big show of asserting your rights, and wait weeks for what you want, or you can play by their rules, gain their trust, and get what you want much faster. The same goes for invoking your rights under the federal Freedom of Information Act or state Open Records and Sunshine Laws. Remember, your objective is not to expand the horizons of the First Amendment, but rather to get useful information for your organization.

**Don't overlook or minimize routine sources of information.** Researchers have been known to puzzle over the problem of how to get a powerful person's home address for hours when they could have found it in seconds just by looking in the phone book. If you want to find out what issues are important in a community, don't sit in the library — go out and talk to people.

## How to Research for Organizing

Be a vacuum cleaner. Get copies of everything that might be helpful in one visit to avoid repeat trips. Travel and file search time are expensive. You can analyze the material later in a more relaxed setting, rather than doing so as you search the files in the hopes of saving a few dollars in copying costs. If you get it all the first time, you may find useful information your research plan didn't anticipate.

Let people in on the fun. A team of new leaders in a group went to their County Building to investigate property ownership records, the first time any of them had even set foot inside that building. Several hours later they returned — with very useful information which was later used to organize, but also with a new sense of confidence. "For the first time" said one, "I felt like those people {in the county building} worked for ME!"

Your membership has — or can learn — the skills to do all the research you really need. When textile workers assembled to research the holdings and power of J.P. Stevens in their South Carolina town, no one really believed they could do it. When residents in Appalachia mobilized to study land ownership patterns, there were many doubters. No one really took the housewives of Love Canal seriously when they started a study of the effects of toxic chemicals on their community.

In each case, the job was done, probably better than if it had been taken on by a team of PhD's, and the process helped build strong organizations. In each case, the information was owned by the people who used it to fight for their families, jobs, homes and interests. It's amazing what you can do with a little common sense, some street smarts and a determination to fight for what is yours.

### For more on Researching:

**Advanced Leadership and Staff Development**, a community organizing workshop held each year by WORC.

**How to Research Corporations**, #4 in this series of citizens' guides to community organizing.

**Research for Action: A guidebook to Public Records Investigation**, don Villarejo, California Institute for Rural Studies, 1980.

#### More How To's:

*How to Deal With Intimidation*

*How to Use the Freedom of Information Act*

*How to Research Corporations*

*How to Hold an Accountability Session*

*How to Deal With the Wise Use Movement*

*How to Do a Radio Commentary for the HPNS*

*How to Run a Good Meeting*

*How to Recruit Members*

*How to Develop a Winning Strategy*

*How to Take Action*

*How to Deliver a Message in the Media*

*How to Speak in Public*

*How to Hold a Press Conference*

*How to Hold a House Meeting*

*How to Develop a Fundraising Plan*

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Let us know when you use these *How To's*. Give us suggestions for improving and updating them.

### More about WORC:

The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a association of six grass-roots organizations with 6,000 members and 40 community-based groups, united to advance the vision of a democratic, sustainable and just society through collective action. Find out more about WORC, and hear our award winning radio program, the High Plains News Service, on the World Wide Web:

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