

Episode 1: What is Connected Communities in a Time of Physical Distancing

In the first episode of the Signal Boost CCPD season, we explore the context of the study and our initial findings. In following episodes, we dive deeper into more specific findings and the implications for future investment in community-centred resilience. Featured in this episode is an interview with Garrett Morgan, doctoral student in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto working under the co-supervision of Dr. Blake Poland at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Garrett was the research associate for the CCPD project, and provides much of the background in which CCPD takes place and why it emerged during this specific moment in time.




Garrett Morgan
University of Toronto:
Dalla Lana School of Public Health

The CCPD research study was developed following a literature review on community resilience which revealed an increasing call for resilience strategies that centred communities, but little guidance as to how. CCPD, therefore, focused on what resilience means for communities on the ground, how grassroots and formal responses connect with each other, the role of relationships, and ways in which grassroots responses are supported (or not) by formal systems.

Studies in community resilience typically emphasize bureaucratic structures and how they can best respond to changing conditions, the resulting uncertainty, and how to return to a state of normalcy after crisis events occur.






Maintaining focus on large systems ignores lived realities of people, and especially those in already marginalized communities with challenges that were exacerbated by the pandemic and its impacts. In these communities, returning to a state of “normal” is unacceptable because “normal”, in many cases, led to the marginalization of communities in the first place. As we learned through the CCPD project, the role of grassroots’ groups is critical to bouncing forward in ways that are more equitable, and this requires significant relationship-building and communication between the grassroots, and the decision-makers that impact their lives.

Our research findings demonstrated that there is a fundamental disconnect between formal emergency responses to crises and the on the ground grassroots response. Specifically, our research shows that:

- **In a crisis grassroots leaders in marginalized communities step up to fill gaps left by the formal systems, often at great personal cost**
- **There are few two way communication channels between grassroots groups working on the ground and the official response to a crisis**
- **Where there were good pre-existing relationships between organizations and grassroots groups, the social infrastructure that was in place pre-pandemic was better able to support grassroots responses**

Garrett explains that “what we did on [this project] is that we tried to track or highlight specific actions or context or pre-existing relationships that lead to either positive or negative, community responses. We're really [focused] on community relationships, [...]not just from community member to community member but also [...] how residents relate to community agencies or organizations that are active in their neighborhood.”



The relationships Garrett refers to in this context are much more than people knowing and liking each other. Relationships are the foundation of social infrastructure in marginalized communities. Relationships refer to the capacity for people inside and outside of organizations and institutions to contact one another, identify who needs what, who has what to contribute, and how to best leverage that contribution to address ongoing stresses and acute shocks. Relationships support collective action, problem solving and long term strategy development. Grassroots leaders from communities that had pre-existing trusted relationships with staff in organizations reported that their communities fared better and were able to more effectively weather the social, economic and health impacts of the pandemic.

Through the CCPD project, we learned about how community social infrastructure might better support community-led equitable responses, recovery and “bouncing forward” from the pandemic and potential future shock events. Featuring interviews from grassroots leaders and community partners, the Signal Boost CCPD podcast dives deeply into the specifics of how relationships are present and practiced in communities. This podcast series and companion pieces will provide context and insights on how to move forward to, as Garret explains, a “different future”.

[You can listen to the first episode of the Signal Boost: CCPD podcast, What is Connected Communities in a Time of Physical Distancing, here.](#)