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Engaging Urban Youth Typically Absent in Political Research

A methodological strategy to attract youth from vulnerable neighbourhoods to talk about democracy

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Abstract

Research on democratic attitudes seldom includes urban youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, largely because they are extremely difficult to recruit. This research note introduces the IPEnCoPa method, a five-phase, trust-based recruitment strategy designed to access young adults in Brussels' poorest area, the Croissant Pauvre. It combines an informal community gatekeepers relational strategy, culturally attuned communication and sustained interpersonal engagement. IPEnCoPa is a recruitment strategy that can overcome the institutional mistrust and communicative barriers that characterise marginalised urban contexts. Applying this method enabled the successful organisation of six focus groups of six to seven participants, five composed entirely of youth who would have been unreachable through conventional recruitment pathways. The research note demonstrates how recruitment must be understood not as a technical step but as a relational process in parts of cities where public institutions are often perceived as distant or hostile. IPEnCoPa offers a replicable, adaptable framework for studying hard-to-reach urban youth and broadens methodological debates in urban political research.

Keywords: *Urban Youth; Recruitment; Democratic Attitudes*

Introduction

This research note elaborates a specific strategy to engage urban youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged and ethnic minority neighbourhoods of Brussels in discussions on their perceptions of democracy. Populations living in deprived urban environments are often unattainable for any kind of research or civic engagement (e.g., Gallegos et al. 2023; Goedhart et al. 2021), even more when it comes to focus group settings (Douglas et al. 2021). Additionally, young people in these kinds of urban areas are especially disengaged from any kind of political activity, whether conventional or alternative forms (Schlozman et al. 2005; Keppens 2023), and not the least in terms of voting motivation (Kenny et Luca 2021; Maxwell 2019), making them often an invisible group in society and research.

Achieving to grasp these forgotten urban populations' issues and demands with regard to political topics is therefore an important academic and societal endeavour. Consequently, gathering these individuals to the same place on the same time, to participate in academic research and to discuss politics demands a careful consideration of the recruitment strategy. Certainly since there's no one-size-fits-all approach to recruit hard-to-reach populations, as it is strongly dependent on the targeted group, and the locational context (Shaghaghi et al. 2011). Nonetheless, this work is an attempt to form an inspirational foundation on which can be built, based on the target group's urban specificities.

The academic literature about recruitment of participants in difficult urban areas is often limited to health sciences and social work research with an emphasis on their recruiting networks and techniques (Saario et al. 2021; van der Ven et al. 2022). In contrast, political sciences are rather scarce in recruitment strategy papers, subsequently leaving a significant methodological blank spot. Moreover, methodological papers on recruitment strategies for difficult-to-reach urban populations often mention the use of community gatekeepers, but typically do so only in vague terms and without articulating a comprehensive approach to engaging them, and to keep participants engaged in the process once originally recruited (Bonevski et al. 2014; Shedlin et al. 2011). Such studies frequently assume – perhaps too readily – that simply spending time within the target community will naturally lead in-group members to become more willing to participate in academic initiatives.

Therefore, this research note addresses this methodological challenge by introducing the IPEnCoPa method – a five-phase recruitment strategy designed to reach youth in structurally disadvantaged urban contexts. The acronym stands for Identification, Persuasion, Engagement, Commitment, and Participation, and reflects a stepwise, trust-based approach grounded in local community dynamics. IPEnCoPa offers a replicable and context-sensitive blueprint for fostering meaningful participation among urban hard-to-reach populations. By emphasising this well-defined strategy that leverages community gatekeepers, I explore how to facilitate their engagement in focus groups lasting between two and two and a half hours. Six focus groups, each consisting of six to seven participants aged 18 to 30, were successfully organised with individuals from the *'Croissant Pauvre'* area in Brussels, containing some of Belgium's poorest neighbourhoods. Notably, five of these focus groups comprised self-identified politically uninterested youth who would have been challenging to recruit through conventional methods.

Methodological Challenge: Recruiting Urban Disadvantaged Youth

The literature identifies a range of factors that contribute to the difficulty of recruiting urban youth populations, often focusing on organisational, communicative, and cultural/contextual barriers (e.g., Mendelson et al. 2021; Friedman et al. 2015). For the sake of clarity and contextual relevance, we focus here on the barriers most pertinent to our target group in the Croissant Pauvre area of Brussels, and hard-to-reach urban populations in general.

A central concern in urban contexts is mistrust often rooted in historical misconduct or perceived absence of tangible benefits (e.g., Bonevski et al., 2014; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). In this specific context, however, it is not necessarily linked to past negative experiences with academic research as such. Rather, it stems from a broader perception of institutional discrimination against the vulnerable neighbourhoods of Brussels (Mazzocchetti 2012). This perception often translates into feelings of deprivation, alienation, and in some cases, the development of conspiracy theories targeting state institutions, including educational and academic actors. During one of the conducted focus groups, for instance, a discussion surrounding the COVID confinement measures led to a conversation about the "people in power above us who do everything to prevent us from reaching powerful positions in society, because they are afraid we would take over everything." As such, families in disadvantaged circumstances may fear that engaging with researchers could lead to unintended consequences, such as institutional retaliation or the withdrawal of social benefits if they disclose too much about their personal situations (Dodson et Schmalzbauer 2005). This reluctance has direct implications for recruitment strategies, particularly when working through (social) organisations that may be perceived as state-linked.

Another major urban obstacle is the intersection of language and culture. The Croissant Pauvre, for example, is home to diverse ethnic minority populations – particulary of North and Sub-Saharan African descent – which demands sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences (Crozier et Davies 2007). However, more crucially, in working-class migrant neighbourhoods, it is essential to understand local norms, informal language, and community codes. Public services and academic researchers are often criticised for using technical jargon or adopting overly formal demeanours that hinder trust-building (Devaney 2008). This communicative gap is even more pronounced when working with youth, who frequently develop their own forms of slang and social codes. Additionally, many families in these areas have limited or no interaction with public authorities, either because such institutions are physically distant or effectively invisible in their daily lives. This lack of state presence further weakens any motivation to participate in research perceived as institutionally affiliated (Avis et al. 2006). In Brussels, for instance, socio-spatial polarisation is vividly illustrated by the relative scarcity of general practitioners in poorer areas compared to wealthier neighbourhoods (Missine et al. 2025). This was exemplified during my recruitment process with one broad consensual critique among all participants I talked to: "They talk, they talk, sometimes even about us, but when do they come here? Never!" The absence or invisibility of public services undoubtedly undermines trust in any institution perceived as linked to the state.

These complex and overlapping barriers must be taken seriously when designing recruitment strategies in urban contexts. Crucially, one must resist the temptation to adopt one-size-fits-all approaches. Each group must be considered in light of its specific needs, histories, and sensitivities. While the use of community gatekeepers is often proposed as a catch-all solution for reaching mistrustful or vulnerable groups, this strategy is frequently described in overly broad terms. Without a nuanced understanding of the specific role, position and relationships of such gatekeepers within the target community, this approach risks overlooking the very sensitivities it is meant to address.

Community gatekeepers are defined as people who are "usually representatives of, and support, the communities that they themselves are from, thus possessing a rich understanding of the socio-cultural, political, and religious norms, values, and practices of their local community members" (Bashir 2023, 1052). In other words, they are ideally positioned to act as intermediaries between researchers and hard-to-reach populations. Without the support of such key individuals, recruiting and building trust with vulnerable or marginalised groups can become exceedingly difficult. However, it is important to acknowledge that community gatekeepers occupy a critical role in access negotiation. Researchers often become highly – if not entirely – dependent on their willingness to grant or deny access to potential participants (Macnab et al. 2007). As such, recruiting individuals from hard-to-reach groups involves a double layered effort: before approaching potential participants, one must first invest in building trust and credibility with the gatekeeper.

In my research conducted in the Croissant Pauvre, a context marked by low levels of participation, nor interest in institutional and public initiatives, I encountered limited access to what I refer to as first-level or 'direct' gatekeepers – such as parents, family members or close friends. As a result, I relied instead on indirect gatekeepers: professionals working in social or educational services who maintain close, long-standing relationships with the young people I sought to recruit (Clough et al. 2005). Nonetheless, not all organisations are equally appropriate – either ethically or strategically – for facilitating access, particularly given the fears some vulnerable individuals harbour about losing social benefits if they disclose sensitive information. This dynamic introduces a potential third layer of negotiation: researchers may first need to persuade the organisation itself to support the research, before engaging its personnel to assist with recruitment.

Position of the Researcher

As a then 28 year-old, highly educated, French speaking white male of Western European descent who grew up in similar neighbourhoods in the same area as those of the participants, I occupied a position of both insider and outsider in relation to the communities I engaged with. This dual positionality probed

to be a crucial asset during the recruitment. While I did not share all the personal or cultural experiences of the participants and the gatekeepers, my familiarity with the linguistic codes, spatial dynamics, and unspoken norms of these neighbourhoods fostered initial trust and mutual recognition. This ability to navigate both academic and street-level registers – including speaking in informal French and using culturally familiar references – contributed to a perception of relevance and safety among many participants. Rather than being viewed as an institutional outsider, I was more often approached as someone who understood "where they came from", even if I did not fully share their current lived realities. One focus group even exclaimed that I would be a good leader for them after I asked them how they would define a good political representative.

Obviously, not all recruitment efforts were successful. Some potential participants ceased responding after initial contact or withdrew on the day of the focus groups (often without announcing), while others – despite expressing positive feelings during informal interactions – ultimately declined to take part. Still others preferred to avoid any form of engagement with me altogether. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood codes insider knowledge I possessed substantially facilitated the recruitment process among this particular group of young people. While my profile may still have carried implicit associations with education, authority, or whiteness, these were often offset by the early relational investments made during recruitment. The trust building interactions helped reduce participants' hesitation and laid the foundation for the open and engaged atmosphere during the actual focus group discussions. As such, participants in different focus groups were not afraid to criticise the white *bobo* gentrifiers in their neighbourhoods in my presence as moderator, assuming clearly I wasn't one of them.

IPEnCoPa Recruitment Method

The proposed recruitment method, termed IPEnCoPa (Identification, Persuasion, Engagement, Commitment and Participation), offers a potential framework for future research involving hard-to-reach populations. As mentioned earlier, recruiting young people from vulnerable urban settings requires a degree of flexibility and adaption to the specific characteristics of the target group. As such, the IPEnCoPa model should not be applied in a rigid, one-size-fits-all manner. Instead, adaptations may be necessary – both in the sequencing and implementation of its phases – depending on the context and needs of the population in question.

In this specific case, I managed to recruit a total of 37 young people aged 18 to 30 from the *'Croissant Pauvre'* area of Brussels, who – for the great majority of them – would be have been unlikely to participate in focus group discussions about politics. The model builds on the common methodological reliance in urban studies on community gatekeepers, but offers a more nuanced approach to engaging with them, especially in cases where gatekeepers are indirect and informal. For ethical reasons, we deliberately avoided recruitment through formal social welfare organisations for the reasons noted above. Therefore, we chose to collaborate only with informal gatekeepers known to have trust-based and long-standing relationships with participants, for instance, community workers, social youth organisation personnel or sports coaches. Trust and in-group saliency are crucial when encouraging hard-to-reach populations to engage in activities they might otherwise avoid (Wilson 2020). By contrast, formal gatekeepers were deemed less appropriate both because of their perceived association with institutions and because they often lack the relational proximity required to facilitate trust. Consequently, I adopted the *'most appropriate gatekeeper'* approach (Emmel et al. 2007), prioritising individuals who are genuinely embedded in the everyday lives and lived experiences of the target group in this research.

Building on these reflections, I structured the recruitment strategy in five phases: Identification, Persuasion, Engagement, Commitment and Participation (IPEnCoPa). Below, we outline each phase of the method and the rationale behind it:

I. Identification Phase

The first phase focuses on identifying both the target neighbourhoods and the *'most appropriate community gatekeepers'* (Emmel et al., 2007) in theses specific areas.

First, I mapped specific neighbourhoods characterised by high levels of socioeconomic vulnerabilities using indicators such as the median net income, proportion of residents receiving social welfare aid, and the proportion of long-term unemployed residents. This process led me to the *'Croissant Pauvre'* area in Brussels – a crescent shaped zone in the centre of the Brussels-Capital Region, known for its structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These areas are home to large ethnic minority populations and are marked by limited or absent civic and political engagement, aligning closely with definitions of hard-to-reach populations (Douglas et al. 2021). Second, once all potential neighbourhoods were delineated, we identified relevant informal community gatekeepers, in other words trusted figures such as youth workers and volunteers operating in local youth organisations like the well-known local *'Maisons des Jeunes'* (Eng: Youth Houses') in Brussels with close, often daily, relationships with young people. These organisations – financed by the local and very often regional authorities – play a central role in Brussels' youth infrastructure, with a specific mission to reach and support young people who remain disengaged from the formal institutions. Surprisingly, young people do not link these organisations to state institutions, although they are financed by public authorities, showing the value of such local initiatives. Some recruited participants even told me, "we have more trust and feel way closer to the personnel of the local association than any other existing politician here." Their embeddedness in the community and daily contact with them youth make them uniquely positioned to facilitate access to our target group.

Figure 1:Identification phase

II. Persuasion Phase

This phase focused on establishing trust and perceived relevance: first with community gatekeepers, then with potential participants.

Effective outreach to identified gatekeepers required adaptation to local behavioural norms specific to these urban neighbourhoods of Brussels. As explained in the literature, traditional means of formal communication (e.g., e-mails) may be perceived as distant or overly institutional in vulnerable communities (Devaney 2008). Instead, I prioritised informal channels such as phone calls, WhatsApp messages, or unannounced in-person visits if no communication was possible in any other way. Compared to all the e-mails I sent, the informal pathway delivered significantly more positive answers. Furthermore, I had an appropriate proximity with these neighbourhoods' codes and norms, since I grew up in a similar area in the north-west of Brussels. This provided me with a relevant understanding of the informal codes

of communication and approachment, which increased the in-group familiarity, thereby increasing the likelihood of being taken seriously and trusted by community gatekeepers and potential participants (Abrams et Hogg 2010). In other words, in these contexts it is always better to act with modesty and humility, and not as someone who's trying to explain how they should act to bring young people from the neighbourhoods to you. It is important to consider this before sending someone into the field.

Once initial contact was made with the gatekeepers, I used a dual relevance strategy as persuasion:

- **External relevance:** emphasising that the study would be read by policymakers and academics, offering an opportunity to channel the concerns of their youth to the influential audiences, and that this research would genuinely be used to develop recommendations to improve the relationship between politics, politicians, and the youth from their neighbourhood;
- **Internal relevance:** ensuring the gatekeepers understood the project would also benefit their community directly, by recognising and amplifying the voices of youth who often feel invisible, and provide them the chance to get in touch with a subject they would never engage with in 'normal conditions'. Moreover, also offering them a method for a way of engaging with difficult topics to discuss with their youth.

These initial efforts were supplemented by 'goodwill practices'. These included offering non-research-related workshops or discussion sessions in organisations, allowing me to demonstrate my methods and intentions in an accessible and transparent way, resulting in even more confidence. In some cases, young people who participated to a non-research-related group discussion shared positive feedback with their gatekeepers, reinforcing the value and legitimacy of my initiative. This even led some organisations to contact me again to ask for the method and questions I used during the focus groups to reproduce this during their own activities. Although this process can be time-consuming and demanding, it proved effective in overcoming barriers to access and in building trust. Such trust can only be earned by offering something of reciprocal value, by showing that participation in the research process is also potentially meaningful or beneficial to those involved.

- Pre-goodwill strategy:

Before gatekeepers agreed to support our recruitment efforts, I sometimes offered a pre-goodwill activity: a non-research-related focus group session or informal discussion held in their organisation. These sessions served two main functions:

1. They demonstrated to the youth and to the community gatekeepers what our methodology entailed: non-judgmental, respectful listening in a structured yet informal setting;
2. They allowed the gatekeepers and youth present to see firsthand that the conversation was engaging, meaningful, and potentially empowering the participating youth.

By observing the format and participants' interest, gatekeepers often became more willing to act as facilitators or advocates for the actual research. Moreover, participants of these pre-goodwill sessions often spoke positively about their experience to peers, facilitating a snowball effect rooted in enthusiasm rather than in obligation.

- Post-goodwill strategy:

In some instances, gatekeepers offered me to get in touch with participants directly – without the need for a pre-goodwill session. In this case, I implemented a post-goodwill strategy, whereby either I or participants themselves returned to the gatekeeper after the focus group to share positive feedback and express appreciation for the opportunity. I also offered to organise a similar discussion within the organisation if there was interest. This served as both validation of the gatekeeper's involvement and

encouragement for future collaboration. These follow-up, non-research-related initiatives not only helped me to strengthen my relationship with the gatekeepers but also created new recruitment opportunities. They often triggered broader community engagement through snowballing, as we asked to spread the word among local youth and additional participants were recommended or came forward independently.

Of course, some organisations did not respond initially despite all channels through which I tried to reach out, and some first reacted interestingly but then did not follow-up on the initiative afterwards. However, the overt majority of the local youth organisations with which I had an initial contact showed interest in the initiative, and reacted even more positively to the goodwill propositions I provided. As such, it is a question of not letting go once a an organisation reacts, to follow-up the process yourself and not hesitating to get back to them again through informal channels. The first organisation where I initiated contact, for example, made me call them and go physically to their place several times again to have a confirmation they had promised me. This was never seen, by any organisation, as too 'pushy', and they thanked me for following up on the matter. Don't be afraid to follow-up closely, often in these contexts it is the only way to get something moving.

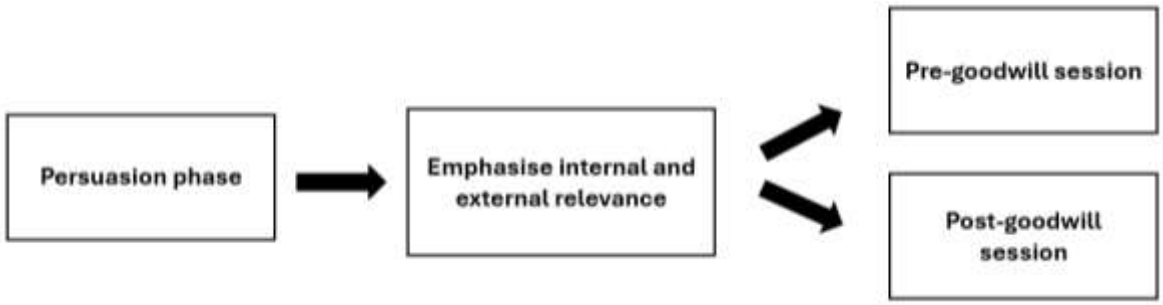

Figure 2: Persuasion Phase

III. Engagement Phase

During the engagement stage, I initiated contact with potential participants referred by gatekeepers or identified through snowballing after goodwill activities. Crucially, rather than sending impersonal invitations to a scheduled focus group, I adopted a more relational approach: I met each participant individually in advance, outside any formal institutional setting. These pre-engagement encounters served multiple purposes. First, they allowed me to gather background insights that extended beyond the standard intake questionnaire, particularly regarding political interest, life circumstances, and social embeddedness. Second, they were vital in establishing a personal relationship – helping participants feel recognised, rather than reduced to mere 'respondents'. Third, these informal meetings offered the opportunity to assess whether the individual fit the targeted profile, not only through self-reported data but also through an informal discussion.

Importantly, these encounters also reframed the nature of the research itself. Rather than presenting the focus groups as a data collection exercise, I described it as a space to articulate everyday frustrations, experiences, and hopes regarding politics and society. In these discussions, again, it is important to show humility, to listen and asked them questions about how they feel about certain issues. Eventually, among a lot of participants, this nurtured a self-efficacy making them genuinely believe they had something to talk about when discussing politics. For many, this lowered the participation threshold to a focus group about a subject they normally never discuss with friends or family. It alleviated the pressure to 'perform' political knowledge. This framing drew on insights from the community-based participatory research (CBPR), which emphasises mutual trust, dialogue, and researcher humility (Sixsmith et al. 2021).

My positionality played an instrumental role in this phase. The fact that I, as a recruiter and eventual moderator, shared a similar socio-spatial background with the participants, including the neighbourhoods' informal linguistic and behavioural codes, facilitated a sense of in-group proximity.

While not erasing all differences, this shared experiential knowledge potentially enhanced the perceived legitimacy of the research and the trustworthiness of me as a recruiter, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained engagement throughout the subsequent phases of the study.

IV. Commitment Phase

Given the risk of drop-out common in research – and even more for focus groups (MacDougall et Fudge 2001) – with vulnerable populations, I implemented a structured recommitment protocol. Ideally, focus groups were scheduled within one or two weeks of initial recruitment to maintain momentum. During this period, participants received regular and personalised contact:

- **Weekly check-ins** if the focus group was several weeks away;
- **More frequent contact** (every 2-3 days) in the final week.

Each contact with participants during the commitment phase served a specific purpose, whether to confirm logistical details, share the focus group location, or simply maintain personal contact. I deliberately staggered information across several contact moments: e.g., providing the time and date before the location to create repeated, low-pressure touchpoints that helped reinforce participants' sense of involvement and responsibility. This phase also enabled me to activate a controlled, trust-based form of snowball sampling. Importantly, I did not treat referrals as automatic inclusions. Instead, I invited referred persons to an informal encounter, ideally in the company of the participant who had recommended them. Meeting snowballed recruited participants prior to the focus groups had a dual function. On one hand, they allowed me to assess whether the new individual matched the target profile of politically disengaged urban youth. On the other hand, and perhaps more crucially, they turned the referrer into an active ambassador for the project. Seeing a trusted peer explain and endorse the research process helped to legitimise the project's relevance and alleviate doubts or scepticism among potential recruits. In several cases, referred potential participants not only agreed to participate but later became recruiters themselves, demonstrating how this interpersonal snowballing could replicate organically, participant by participant. Additionally, if the referrer still had to participate in a focus group, this was also a good excuse to keep in touch with that person, and increase even more the certainty of participation. These face-to-face interactions also elevated the quality of engagement from the start. Meeting in person before formal participation gave referred individuals a sense of importance that would have been far harder to establish through text-based invitations alone. This layered recruitment approach aligns with respondent-driven methodologies (Biernacki et Waldorf 1981; Magnani et al. 2005), but significantly extends their logic by embedding trust-building and participant empowerment at each chain of the commitment stage. For instance, all participants who decided to participate after such a discussion with one of their friends (a minority decided not to participate after the discussion because they did not feel interested or motivated) eventually came to one of the focus groups, demonstrating the trustworthiness of participants recruited after a 'snowball discussion'.

V. Participation Phase

On the day of the focus group, I contacted participants one last time a few hours in advance to confirm attendance and address any final doubts. For every focus group, I over-recruited by three to four participants: six to eight participants were necessary per focus group, and ten participants were recruited each time to anticipate 'no shows'. At the first focus group, this had already been proven necessary. Of the ten participants who were recruited, six eventually showed up, just enough to start the focus groups. For this reason, with the following focus groups in mind, I activated a standby list of interested participants who had indicated to be flexible if necessary, in case of last-minute cancellations. These replacements were only contacted if they had already undergone the engagement and commitment phases. Interestingly, this 'rescue list' was only activated for the politically engaged group[1]. The 'no shows' – which were often young boys – in the other focus groups never exceeded three to four participants. And,

[1] One of the six groups contained young people from the *Croissant Pauvre* who were politically active in a political party.

even more importantly, all participants who decided to participate, stayed for the full two or two-and-a-half hours. Showing the commitment of the participants once they were recruited and decided to participate during the focus group.

Upon arrival, participants were welcomed in a deliberately relaxed setting. For instance, their name cards were not put on a particular spot on the table in advance but were given to them, as to give them the feeling that I was not imposing anything, not even where they had to sit. As a moderator I talked informally to everyone a little bit before the start of the focus group to underline that this was not in any kind a form of examination, but a relaxed discussion about what they think.

The high-level of interpersonal engagement throughout the IPEnCoPa method was essential to achieving meaningful participation. Participants reported feeling respected, heard, and valued. Several participants also reported that the session exceeded their expectations, remarking that it was the first time they had been invited to speak seriously about politics. This level of satisfaction reflects the cumulative loop with a high-quality experience which led to a cumulatively higher recruitment afterwards.

Phase	Objective
Identification	Identify suitable neighbourhoods and the most appropriate informal community gatekeepers.
Persuasion	Build trust with gatekeepers and highlight the relevance of the research, and offer them goodwill sessions as an example.
Engagement	Establish personal contact with potential participants and assess suitability.
Commitment	Maintain contact and ensure attendance at the focus group. Use it potentially as a moment to recruit further through already convinced participants.
Participation	Ensure effective turnout and respond to last-minute cancellations.

Figure 3: Overview of the IPEnCoPa Recruitment Strategy

Conclusion

This research note presents the IPEnCoPa method as a concrete strategy for recruiting urban youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. By combining place-based vulnerability mapping, informal gatekeeper networks, trust-based persuasion, and sustained interpersonal engagement, the method succeeds where standard recruitment strategies often fail. Namely, in fostering a genuine commitment and meaningful participation among the disadvantaged urban youth who are often absent from academic research.

The five phases of the IPEnCoPa method collectively form a cumulative process of trust-building and engagement:

- **Identification** involved mapping structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods and locating the most embedded informal gatekeepers within those communities;
- **Persuasion** focused on establishing credibility and mutual interest with these gatekeepers and their networks, using pre- and post-goodwill practices to reinforce trust, next to internal and external relevancy argumentations for the participants and gatekeepers;
- **Engagement** consisted of informal, one-on-one pre-meetings with each participant, which humanised the research process and framed participation as a safe and meaningful opportunity for themselves;
- **Commitment** maintained ongoing contact and validation, using layered communication and controlled snowballing to sustain momentum and broaden the reach to other potential participants;
- **Participation** culminated in a welcoming, non-institutional environment that honoured participants' presence, transforming initial scepticism into active contribution and often, post-session satisfaction.

In doing so, this paper addresses a notable methodological blind spot in political science. While disciplines such as public health and social work have long struggled with the challenges of engaging with urban hard-to-reach populations, political science continues to rely heavily on convenience sampling, institutional recruitment, or abstract references to 'community engagement'. IPEnCoPa instead offers a grounded, stepwise alternative that responds directly to the layered forms of mistrust, marginalisation, and communicative exclusion that often characterise life in structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Beyond its practical value, the method also makes a normative contribution: it challenges researchers to approach recruitment not merely as a technical step, but as a relational and ethical process. Building trust is not accessory to research with politically alienated populations from, for instance, difficult urban neighbourhoods, it is a necessity. The trust generated through this recruitment strategy was not only ethical in intent, but also methodological in effect: most participants were directly more open, reflective, and engaged than we could reasonably have expected without such relational groundwork.

While developed in the specific urbanised context of the Brussels' *Croissant Pauvre*, the logic of the IPEnCoPa method is adaptable to other urban and marginalised settings, nevertheless with an associated serious reflection on the specific case and/or community one is studying. In other contexts, it might be better to advance differently, to use the developed phases in different orders or to emphasise on one phase more than another. Naturally, the IPEnCoPa method requires time-intensive, face-to-face groundwork and may not be feasible in all research settings, particularly those with no access at all to gatekeepers. In all such cases, the central insight remains: if political science seeks to understand democratic disconnection, it must begin by earning the right to access vulnerable groups, through methods grounded in proximity, care, and trust.

This model for recruitment of difficult-to-reach youth populations in an urban context serves as an inspiration and foundation for recruitment strategies based on specific target groups in other research projects. As noted previously, recruiting hard-to-reach populations demands an important consideration of the group's specificities. A recruitment strategy will never be able to be copy-pasted the same way to all vulnerable societal group.

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Statements and declarations

Not applicable.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved on October 20th , 2023 by the Ethics Committee in Humane Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) with reference number: ECHW_456-WP8.

Consent to participate

Before recruitment and a second time before the start of every focus group, all participants signed an informed consent, which was approved on October 20th, 2023 by the Ethics Committee in H umane Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) with reference number: ECHW_456-WP8.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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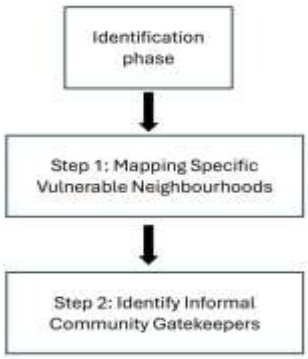
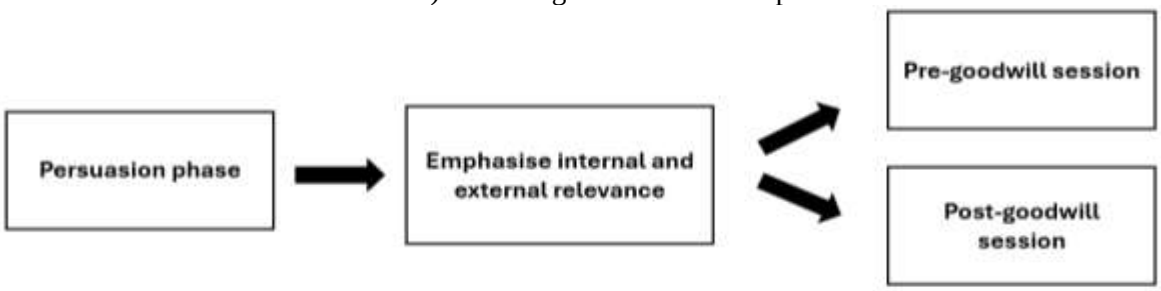
Artwork, figures, and other graphics

A) Figure 1: Identification phase



B) Figure 2: Persuasion phase



C) Figure 3: Overview of the IPEnCoPa Recruitment Strategy

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Participation	Ensure effective turnout and respond to last-minute cancellations.

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