NATIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD INDICATORS PARTNERSHIP

URBAN INSTITUTE

# Integrating Arts and Data to Reimagine Community Knowledge

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*March 2026*

**Local data and research initiatives play key roles in shaping knowledge about the role of arts and culture in communities. With limited national data sources available to measure local arts and culture ecosystems and their impact, local data initiatives have approached the topic in myriad ways. However, this diversity of approaches makes it challenging to synthesize learnings across localities. This brief examines local arts and culture research agendas and the relationships among them.**

## Introduction

This brief examines the intersection of local data and research initiatives with arts and culture in communities. These initiatives take place within the context of useful but limited national data sources. Federal data with national coverage, such as the National Endowment for the Arts's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and NORC at the University of Chicago's National Survey of Artists, are useful for identifying broad patterns and trends, but generally cannot be geographically disaggregated to capture critical aspects of local arts and culture. This is why local efforts to measure the presence and impacts of arts and culture are important.

This brief examines two ways that local research efforts engage with arts and culture: first, by measuring the incidence and impact of arts and culture, and, second, by incorporating artistic practices into research and engagement with data. It uses examples of initiatives that have involved arts and

culture research and practice to illustrate both approaches. The brief is based on a review of selected studies and interviews with field experts and members of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP). NNIP, with the Urban Institute as its national partner, is a network of local organizations in more than 30 US cities that helps local communities use data to shape strategies and investments so that all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive.

The aims of this brief are to identify useful research and engagement models given the current context of uncertain resources, clarify the relationships between art and research practice, discuss challenges that local arts and culture data efforts face, and highlight the importance of local and cross-local partnerships to support research and practice.

# Supports for Arts and Culture Research and Practice

Arts and culture research does not take place in a vacuum: the federal government has supported a range of initiatives designed to link practice to research and support communication and collaboration, although the future status of these initiatives is unclear. State and local governments and, particularly, foundations have also played a long-standing role in building the field. This section provides a short overview of the current federal landscape followed by an overview of select initiatives that have linked arts and culture research to practice. It examines how these efforts have attempted to balance the place-based nature of arts and culture interventions and assets with the desire to have more universally and systematically comparative data.

## A Changing Federal Role

The federal government has had a long, if somewhat limited, role in supporting local arts and culture initiatives and research. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) have supported arts and culture products, programs, and institutions through grantmaking, research, and convening. Other federally supported institutions, such as the Smithsonian Institution, also shape and support cultural institutions across the US. However, the scope of this support has a history of constraints.[1]

These agencies faced substantial cutbacks and loss of staff in 2025, with the Trump administration proposing to cancel grants and shut down the NEA, NEH, and IMLS.[2] This substantially reduced funding to support local arts and culture institutions, both through a lack of grants (awarded directly to recipients or indirectly through state and local humanities councils, arts agencies, and library systems), and indirectly as a result of cancelled research and convening activities.

Federal funding cuts also ended some ongoing research and engagement efforts that would have supported knowledge building in the field. For example, the NEA had expected to build on a project designed to better understand local arts agencies and develop a framework for engagement; both projects were terminated in 2025. It is in this context that local and state efforts are taking place.

## Building a Multifaceted Approach to Local Arts and Culture Research

The Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project (ACIP), a multifaceted research and engagement initiative active between 1996 and 2006 and headed by Maria Rosario Jackson while at the Urban Institute, is still relevant as a framework today. The project aimed to develop neighborhood indicators related to arts and culture that could be used for planning, policymaking, and community-building. It had four guiding principles:

1. Identify cultural assets beyond the traditional.
2. Broaden understandings of participation and engagement.
3. Link to quality of life.
4. Expand networks of support beyond the arts alone.

ACIP had three features that remain useful to local arts and culture research initiatives: its classification of data and indicators, its focus on engagement, and its concern with building bridges between arts and culture and other fields. One key component of the project was the notion of "cultural vitality," used to identify local opportunities for cultural participation, measure cultural participation, and track supports (such as through funding, volunteering, working with artists, and integrating arts and culture into other fields).[3]

ACIP carried out case studies, cross-site projects, and convenings and other forms of engagement. The project's Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators report, for example, involved seven local collaborators across the US (five of which were NNIP partners) who were working to integrate arts and culture indicators into their work. These collaborations helped test ACIP assumptions and recommended indicators (Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, and Herranz 2006).

The ACIP framework still has significant value for thinking through arts and culture research: the importance of thinking broadly, encouraging local knowledge and engagement, and placing arts and culture in a broader context with other fields.

## Creative Placemaking and Local Data

Place has been a key component of arts and culture practice and research and is central to the subfield of *creative placemaking*, which NEA defines as an effort to integrate "arts, culture, and design activities into efforts that strengthen communities."[4] This incorporates both economic impacts and broader social impacts. Creative placemaking as an approach took off in the 2010s, in part because of the 2010 publication of the *Creative Placemaking* white paper (Markusen and Gadwa 2010); the 2010 founding of ArtPlace America (which operated until 2020);[5] and NEA's Our Town creative placemaking grant program, which made its first grants in 2011(National Endowment for the Arts 2021).

These initiatives had strong research components. As a part of Our Town, NEA sponsored the 2014 Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study, prepared by the Urban Institute, which aimed to

identify and validate nationally available and public metrics that could be used to track outcomes relevant to community-based creative placemaking work (Morely et al. 2014). ArtPlace America, meanwhile, commissioned field scans investigating the relationship between the arts and other fields (such as housing, community safety, and health).[6]

These research efforts in some ways map onto opposite ends of the ACIP data classification system. The VALI study focused on nationally available indicators because they were widely available, collected in the same way across communities, and routinely updated. According to the study's report, this "would mitigate if not preclude the need for each creative placemaking project team to collect its own data on community outcomes, and it would enable comparisons of indicator values for different communities" (Morley et al. 2014). The ArtPlace field scans, meanwhile, generally built their findings out of case study investigations.

Some national initiatives have focused more on building national arts and culture data resources, while others have focused more on providing tools for local efforts. These approaches are not inherently in conflict. Instead, they represent alternative approaches to the topic of arts and culture that have continued in other efforts. The examples above are only a sample of initiatives designed to be useful to arts and culture researchers, many of which remain active. Some efforts continue to focus on compiling and examining national-level data; for example, The National Arts Statistics and Evidence-Based Reporting Center, led by the American Institute for Research (AIR) for the NEA, serves as an ongoing resource for data on arts and culture.[7] The National Survey of Artists, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, is another national resource on artists and culture workers.

Other efforts focus more on supporting local work. NeighborWorks America, in coordination with Americans for the Arts, provides resources and tools for local data collection and examining arts and culture as a part of its Success Measures framework.[8] Another example is the 2021 *We-Making* project, which used a case study approach to map "the relationship between place-based arts and cultural strategies, social cohesion, and increased equitable community well-being."[9]

The Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project and the creative placemaking field are research frameworks and concrete initiatives that have gone beyond case studies that can inform local data efforts—they hit on key themes to consider, useful approaches to follow, and challenges to work through. The next sections show how local arts and culture data and research continue to build on these insights.

## Local Arts and Culture Activation as Data and Process

This section highlights two distinct approaches to working with arts and culture in local data and research initiatives: as data to be collected and reported and as processes to be activated. Clarifying this distinction can help researchers and practitioners as they conceive of and implement projects and learn from other efforts.

## Two Approaches to Data and the Arts

Research requires data and evidence to answer questions. This involves identifying metrics; collecting, cleaning, and analyzing data; and sharing findings with audiences interested in the results. This section defines two approaches to incorporating both data and arts and culture in research.

The first approach, *arts and culture as data*, is the process of using indicators and metrics to identify cultural practices and assets and their impacts. This process is most often used by local data and research initiatives.

The second approach, *arts and culture as process*, *is* the process of using artistic practice as a channel for improving processes, engagement, findings and products. This approach differs from traditional research practices in that it introduces an artistic element. This can help draw people in and encourage engagement in a way that is more inclusive and less extractive.

This focus on research practice and engagement exists within a broader reorientation of research approaches that use art as a tool, such as participatory research approaches. Because of the nature of incorporating art into engagement, initiatives in this space often result in a tangible artistic product. These types of initiatives are a subset of those using arts and culture as process. Because the process is central to these initiatives, we include them here.

Table 1 explains these two approaches and how they relate to one another. These are *ideal types* (used to highlight pure exemplar cases) because in practice, arts and culture–related research often incorporates both approaches to some extent. But it is still useful to highlight that different approaches have distinct goals. .

TABLE 1

### Arts and Culture Research Approaches

| Approach | Role of arts and culture | Goal | Relationship to data |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arts and culture as data | Obtaining and analyzing data to map the arts and culture field and, sometimes, to connect to other related outcomes | Understand components of the arts and culture ecosystems and their impacts | Impact metrics; asset mapping; measures of production and consumption |
| Arts and culture as process | Using arts and culture–informed practices to guide research design and process | Foster engagement and buy-in, improve results, and/or create artistic products | Inclusive data collection and discussion; identifying processes of art-creation, distribution, consumption |

**Source:** Framework developed by the author.

## Arts and Culture as Data

*Arts and culture as data* refers to indicators and metrics that identify cultural practices and assets and their community impacts (arts and culture also have impacts at the individual level, but this brief focuses on community-level impacts). This approach covers a wide range of indicator topics, including measures of program impact; measures of artistic production, consumption, and support; and the locations of cultural assets.

Many common metrics in the arts and culture space are *outputs* that measure existence or incidence (how many, where). Measures of *outcomes* attempt to show the measurable benefits of a given cultural activity or resource. These metrics can be closely related, but it is important to keep them distinct: for example, is cultural event attendance the end goal or a step toward community impact through increased social cohesion? Depending on the goal, an indicator can be an output or an outcome. Table 2 summarizes the themes and subthemes that characterize these indicators.

TABLE 2

**Arts and Culture Indicator Themes: Production, Support, Consumption, and Community Impact**

| Theme | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| Production | Independent artists<br>Employee artists<br>Arts/ cultural mapping |
| Support | Government support<br>Foundation/ private giving<br>Volunteerism |
| Consumption | Attendance |
| Community Impact | Livability<br>Social cohesion and social capital<br>Economic impact |

**Source:** Framework developed by the author.

There are also increasing efforts to more effectively measure the role of arts and culture in fostering local social benefits. Although it was focused on civic assets, the Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative provided tools and resources for measuring these sorts of impacts within a set of participating communities, with the goal of identifying a framework to be used elsewhere (Gaynair et al. 2020).

Cultural mapping, the process of systematically identifying and recording a community's artistic and cultural assets, is a particularly important approach (stressed in the ACIP, for example), with both nationally available datasets and examples of local activities. Federal surveys on firms and workers, and IRS data on nonprofit organizations are starting points for mapping the locations of artists and cultural producers, even accounting for limitations in identifying local conditions.[10] Cultural mapping efforts are common examples of local arts and culture data and research initiatives. Examples from NNIP partner organizations show how these projects can have distinct goals, whether they investigate a particular

question to inform suggestions for change (such as the Detroit Youth Arts Mapping Project, discussed in box 1), serve as a general resource for community members (see Baltimore's GEOLOOM project, discussed in the Challenges of Engagement and Sustainability section, below), or build local awareness and celebrate resources. An example of this last type is the Cultural Treasures of South LA project, a cross-sector collaboration of USC's Neighborhood Data for Social Change, the South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone, and the City of Los Angeles. The project entailed community-driven cultural asset mapping intended to celebrate local treasures and resources that had meaning to the community and to expand the idea of a resource beyond traditional or formal cultural spaces.[11]

BOX 1

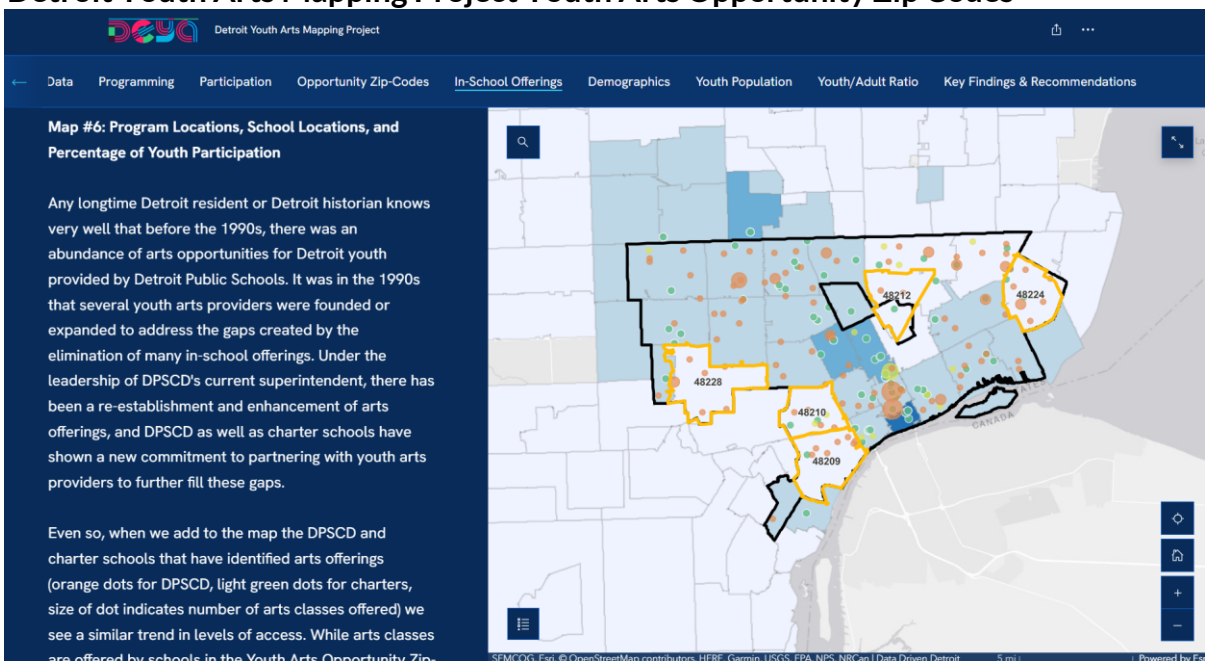
**Detroit Youth Arts Mapping Project**

Detroit Excellence in Youth Arts (DEYA) partnered with NNIP partner Data Driven Detroit (D3), to conduct a youth arts ecosystem scan in the city. The goal of the Detroit Youth Arts Mapping Project was to better understand the youth arts ecosystem and identify opportunities for collaboration, programming, and more equitable investment.

In the project, DEYA and D3 collected data from youth arts programs and discovered an uneven distribution of cultural opportunities for young people: those living outside the city disproportionately benefitted from Detroit cultural opportunities compared with those living in the city (50 percent of youth participating in city programs lived outside of city boundaries). The project identified five "Youth Arts Opportunity Zip Codes" showing where youth had the greatest gaps in participation and local availability of arts programs; 36 percent of youth living in the city lived in these zip codes (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

## Detroit Youth Arts Mapping Project Youth Arts Opportunity Zip Codes




**Source:** Detroit Youth Arts Mapping Project, reprinted with permission, "Map #6: Program Locations, School Locations, and Percentage of Youth Participation," accessed February 23, 2026, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/334138e0e39b45b1b96dca8986d0b1a5.

The report and project, published in March 2024, offered several recommendations: identify strategic investment opportunities in Youth Arts Opportunity Zip Codes; support research to understand barriers and challenges; more fully map youth arts participation, particularly in schools; and devote more resources to support program expansion.

Although the impact of the project is still being determined (recommendations around increasing resources and investment exist within an uncertain resource environment), the project's research questions, approach, and presentation of data show how a local data-collection effort can produce a clear and concise statement of an issue or challenge and a path forward. For D3, the project served as a road map for using data to support arts and cultural programming. These results can serve as a resource in the years ahead for those working on these issues in the region, who can ask questions such as: do these patterns still exist? How can this knowledge inform our planning and practice?

Local research initiatives that focus on arts and culture as data can have various forms and goals. Some have more pronounced community engagement components than others. The diversity of these approaches speaks to their importance for informing local arts and culture research efforts.

## Arts and Culture as Process

*Arts and culture as process* refers to activities where art not only serves as an object of research but also actively informs the process of research and engagement. There does not need to be an artistic end product, but there should be engagement with art, artists, or cultural activities that support a given activity or initiative. This approach helps bring together people with different backgrounds, but it also complicates traditional research and data-collection approaches, since authentic engagement (especially involving people with different assumptions and lived experiences) requires time and resources and a willingness to question assumptions.

> **"The beauty of arts is a force of integration—other planning processes were about separation. A&C [arts and culture] is destroying the separation in ways that is good for us as humans but makes rational data approach difficult."**
>
> *—Practitioner interviewee*

There is a long-standing history of using art and artistic practice as a part of social movements pushing for social change and supporting communities. As with creative placemaking, these efforts use creative practices to foster community engagement and sense of purpose. An example is Creative Community Development from NeighborWorks America, which in 2018 examined the role of arts and culture in contributing to "equitable and engaged communities that offer opportunity to all" (NeighborWorks America 2018).

Artists can support these community-building efforts through their role as an artist tasked with creating an artistic artifact *and* through their role as a facilitator to support creative problem solving (box 2). An artistic product or cultural artifact does not need to be the end point of this process, although most discussions found in policy guidebooks or assessments focus on examples where that is the case.[12]

BOX 2

**Data as Process: The Creative Engagement Approach of Boston's Metropolitan Area Planning Council**

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), an NNIP partner serving the metro Boston region, launched its Arts and Culture Department in 2017. The department does cultural planning, cultural asset mapping, other cultural data initiatives, and creative community development. MAPC also has artists in residence supporting their work. As a government entity, MAPC's Arts and Culture Department has worked to understand and communicate the idea of arts and culture as a public good while recognizing that cooperation with the arts sector can be fraught, given concerns about displacement and the impact of regulations and laws that may restrict artistic production or consumption.

In its Arts and Planning Toolkit, MAPC describes creative engagement as an "an approach to community engagement that uses creative tools and artistic experiences to help diverse stakeholders imagine new approaches to planning processes and spark creative problem solving."[13] The toolkit

presents a five-point spectrum ranging from less intensive efforts ("creative curiosity," asking questions as a part of traditional planning activities) to more intensive ones ("creative metamorphosis," providing a creative outsider "the autonomy, resources, and support to transform a project, process, organization, or community").

The toolkit features case studies showing how creative engagement can work.

- **Chinatown Creative Engagement in Boston:** The Boston Chinatown Cultural Plan Working Group engaged artists to work with community members and inform the plan's subsequent approach.
- **The Takachizu community archive project in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo:** The project developed a crowdsourced archival exhibition in 2017 involving members of Los Angeles's Japanese American community facing uncertainties around local development pressures. The project continues as an online archive.
- **The Imagining Equity project in Minneapolis:** Part of the city's comprehensive plan development, this project involved an artist-designed mobile engagement tool that displayed user-generated stories of historical inequities as scrolls. The process of both creating and using the scrolls encouraged engagement and supported the city's planning efforts.

These examples show how artists have engaged in planning activities, including cultural plans and regional planning efforts, and what challenges can arise from this work. Artists need to navigate between project management and artistic roles and goals; build inclusive relationships with local communities, organizations, and other partners; and identify the how these projects fit in with—and are limited by—the broader planning processes and economic and social contexts within which they occur.

The research and measurement tools discussed in the Arts and Culture as Data section above measure specific local conditions and impact. In contrast, incorporating arts and culture into an engagement process leads to questions about research and community engagement advocacy and practice. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC) "Creativity and Community Action" essay and workbook characterizes relationships between artists and community activists in three dimensions (Greenberg 2021):

- **Reach:** the scope of active participation
- **Power:** the depth of participation and advancement of a sense of agency
- **Impact:** the intended goal (such as promoting equity)

This approach, by focusing on the aligned but still-distinct positions and goals of the artist and the community, helps clarify the scope of and limits to arts and cultural engagement activities.

The University Center for Social and Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh, a NNIP partner, illustrated how local data organizations take this approach. Center staff were inspired by the Data Culture Group at Northeastern University to incorporate arts into their efforts to build data capacity. The center developed a set of workshops and presentation materials identifying ways that people in creative fields and others can explore issues around data, and a speaker series in which artists

discuss how they incorporate data into their practice.[14] The center also incorporated artists into projects to build community power, such as engaging an artist to work with community members to design a street mural as a traffic-calming activity, which is currently under permitting review.

During an interview, one person involved in these projects noted the center's practice of integrating arts and culture is focused on "changing mindsets of people who are used to doing data in a certain way; maybe [the] goal is less a dashboard or product and more about starting a conversation and getting people to care and talk to one another and be creative and do things differently." The interviewee also highlighted the value of integrating arts and culture into center projects to help support people discussing emotionally difficult topics. For example, engaging with data through art activities facilitated conversations among practitioners and researchers to understand maternal health and infant mortality in Allegheny County.

The 2025–26 Creative Justice program at the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, an NNIP partner, is the first year of a cohort-based model that illustrates another approach by linking university resources to community-based projects across the state. The program incorporates what an interviewee called "creative power" into organizing campaigns by using art to make data and research findings more accessible and actionable. Specifically, as described by staff, the project embeds two artists in the center's work to integrate art into research methodology in three ways: training and mentorship (where artists from each year's cohort will mentor the next), collaboration with staff researchers on projects, and work with a community or organization to create and exhibit an artistic project.

The program design is informed by three lessons from the center's previous efforts. First, artist-community engagement is more successful if it takes place throughout the process, because an artist coming in at the end of a project misses important community context. Second, building a successful artist–community relationship requires work to set up expectations on both sides, as community partners may not have contracted with an artist before. As a staff person noted, artists need to "respect the agency of community partners and their vision even if that didn't align with [the artist's] vision." This approach shows how the documentation process can support the evaluation component.

Projects that center arts and culture in the process may or may not lead to the creation of an artistic artifact (such as the mural in the Pittsburgh example above). What makes these projects part of *arts and culture as a process* is that they are built around collaboration between an artist and community participants. If the goal is, for example, building community cohesion or empowerment, an art artifact can play a role (in communicating, say, community history and culture to the viewer), but the engagement process is what ensures that any final product is reflective of the community. As argued in an article on the role in artistic leadership in supporting local communities , "Artist-led projects have the potential to create long-lasting impact, because the cultural artifacts they produce—films, paintings, sculptures—remain long after the projects launch. These artifacts can inspire people and generate awareness about social issues through multiple generations."[15]

Thinking of the creations of these initiatives as artifacts helps show how closely related *arts and culture and data* and *arts and culture as process* are in practice. Nonetheless it is useful to tease apart the distinctions in these approaches.

# Challenges of Local Arts and Culture Data and Research

There are a wide variety of resources available to people working on local art and culture initiatives, including federal and national data and resources and templates for data collection. But there are challenges and constraints too, especially in a resource-constrained environment.

## Limits of National and Regional Data for Local Needs

Data collected at higher levels of geography than the local level present two limitations. First, these data are often unable to be analyzed at the local and neighborhood level. Second, available indicators often do not directly measure outcomes of interest in the arts and culture sphere.

Nationally available data can be useful for context but may be less helpful for directly measuring local conditions. With relatively smaller sample sizes, survey measurements at the county or state levels may not be available. NORC at the University of Chicago's survey on artists, for example, has data at the regional level.[16] Even subnational sources such as data collected at the state level may not be structured in ways that integrate well with local efforts. One interviewee noted that although state arts agencies integrate data on programs, the data are not available in a way that allows them to inform local planning-related decisionmaking.

The VALI study highlights the challenges in identifying and collecting data that appropriately link artistic and cultural practices to community impacts. Researchers on that project organized workshops to review potential indicators and their relevance for measuring livability and creative placemaking impact. Although participants thought most indicators were useful for measuring livability, responses were much more mixed for their value in measuring creative placemaking impact.[17]

That said, the national level, even less-than-ideal metrics may have their use for benchmarking or reflection. One interviewee noted that if an imperfect metric looks particularly good or bad in relation to other places, that in itself is useful for thinking through why the data show what they do.

## Challenges of Local Data Collection

Limitations inherent in readily available and accessible data sources have provided opportunities for a range of local data initiatives. As noted above, cultural mapping is often used to collect local data (see box 1), but challenges remain. Given the insecure spaces that art often takes place within, and that some artists live within, mapping can be a fraught decision. Concerns about arts-led gentrification and displacement and the semilegal status of artists have existed for decades (Zukin 1982). Efforts to

integrate arts and culture data into government systems need to avoid vulnerabilities (either real or perceived) and recognize there will likely be roadblocks and resistance to engagement, as discussed below. Box 3 examines how Baltimore's GEOLOOM tried to overcome these difficulties through its approach to crowdsourced data.

Another challenge in local data collection is funding sustainability. Local data are difficult and time-consuming to collect and update. Once a team has produced a project's initial set of deliverables, they may lack additional funding to sustain the work and update resources. Even lauded projects like the GEOLOOM (see box 3) cultural mapping resource in Baltimore did not receive funding to continue their initial work.

Ongoing funding is particularly important for efforts designed to measure impact over time. Mapping social cohesion or livability and their relation to arts and cultural production often requires new data collection. So while there may be time-limited case studies that examine the relationship between arts and culture and community impacts, there are very few efforts to measure the impact of these relationships consistently over longer time horizons.

## Challenges of Engagement and Sustainability

There are several challenges in implementing arts and culture practices into local data and research efforts. Some challenges are field-specific. The NeighborWorks Creative Community Development study identified the following challenges: a lack of understanding of how creativity/art can support community development; difficulty in articulating impact; finding partners with shared expectations, frameworks, and approaches; avoiding displacement and promoting inclusion; and insufficient resources. Some of these challenges pertain to community development while others are related to measuring impact, building shared expectations, and grappling with limited resources.

Another challenge is the tension between promoting and protecting cultural spaces during engagement and collaborative work. There are long-standing concerns about arts and cultural assets being used to promote development and tourism in ways that can lead to gentrification and displacement, which is related to the tensions inherent in local cultural asset mapping noted above. Many artists may want to limit their direct involvement in systems that could make their practice more difficult (such as zoning or ordinances that limit, for example, studio, practice, and performance spaces).

Limited resources also present significant challenges to funding new efforts and sustaining existing ones. Even when new initiatives have resources, it can be difficult to sustain these initiatives and their engagement practices. If a project deliverable or product does not lead to immediate impact (however defined and intended), resources are often not available to build on the initial work. Projects often end before long-term or even medium-term impacts can be assessed. This is also related to the challenges of keeping engagement active: there are many examples of robust engagement practices that can lead to initial successes but that have diminishing impacts over time, especially for those not involved in the original creative process (Small 2004; Treskon and Esthappan 2018). Murals fade and are forgotten, and cultural mapping can become out of date. The impact of cultural mapping projects is often unclear or not articulated, in terms of both meeting stated goals (box 1) and usage and take-up (box 3).

BOX 3

## Baltimore's GEOLOOM co>map and the Challenges of Sustainability

Baltimore's GEOLOOM co>map project illustrates how arts and culture initiatives can thoughtfully incorporate community engagement into local knowledge-building and sharing. It also illustrates the challenges of sustaining these efforts in the long term.

GEOLOOM co>map was an online cultural mapping initiative in the city of Baltimore designed to use several sources to identify and map cultural assets. The end goal was to support livability and identify community needs throughout the city, including helping locals know what assets were nearby, assisting tourism and community development goals, and identifying neighborhood-level needs and gaps in arts funding and programming.

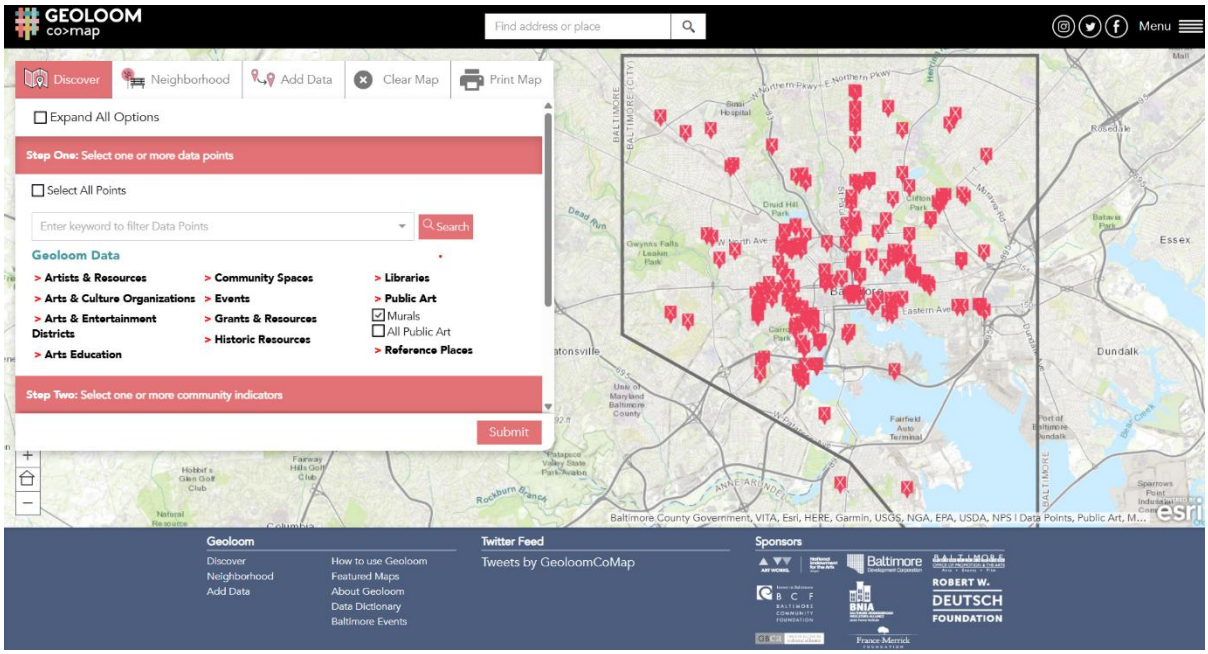
Led by NNIP partner Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore, the project was informed by a 2015 field scan and conversations with city cultural agencies that identified the need for a multifaceted approach to data collection. A working group was formed in 2016 to ensure stakeholder diversity and the usefulness of the in-development tool. Community engagement included a 2017 cultural participation survey and focus groups to test the tool before its July 2017 launch.

Data sources used included library membership data, event permits, public art resources, art-school partnership, historic preservation grants, and a range of sources to identify arts and culture organizations. The project also included a crowdsourcing component to identify sites without a web presence (such as studies or murals). Because a crowdsourced asset could have led to publicity about an asset that producers or users may not have wanted, the project team spent substantial time reviewing and validating these assets. Only about 20 to 25 crowdsourced data points made it onto the GEOLOOM map, illustrating both the value and challenges in including community-collected data (figure 2).

The initial release highlighted how the tool could be used for multiple reasons: short videos were created to highlight its value to three groups: everyone, business and developers, and artists and organizations.

FIGURE 2

**Baltimore GEOLOOM co>map**




Source: GEOLOOM co>map, reprinted with permission, accessed February 23, 2026, https://www.geoloom.jacobfrance.org/.

Although GEOLOOM's value was recognized,[a] its active period was short-lived: because of declining engagement from some initial stakeholders and challenges obtaining funding to continue the work, the project wound down in 2017. The map remains online as a snapshot of time rather than an up-to-date guide to support action.

The GEOLOOM project illustrates the promises and challenges of this sort of engagement. Building an inclusive process and product designed to be useful to a range of users takes time and resources to build, and it needs to be regularly reviewed and refreshed to remain current. GEOLOOM remains a model for how to catalog and share arts and cultural resources, but also an example of the importance of sustainability.

[a] The project was featured in 2018 Community Scope article produced by the Community Development Department of the Federal Reserve of Richmond and was a "Map of the Month" in September 2017 for Data-Smart City Solutions at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University. See Christine Hwang and Seema D. Iyer, "Cultural Mapping in Baltimore: The Creation of GEOLOOM co>map," in *Community Scope* (Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Volume 6:1, 2018) https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/historical/frbrich/frbrich_communityscope_06-01.pdf; and Daniel Harsha and Chris Bousquet, "Map of the Month: Baltimore's GEOLOOM co>map," Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School Data-Smart Solutions, September 27, 2017, https://datasmart.hks.harvard.edu/news/article/map-of-the-month-baltimores-geoloom-comap-1131. There is also a toolkit available based on the project. See Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance Jacob France Institute, *Cultural Mapping: A Handbook for Developing a Creative Placemaking Tool* (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance Jacob France Institute, 2017).

Given the long-standing history of arts activism working outside of formal policymaking and political systems, it is not surprising that there are tensions between the goals of arts and culture–focused practitioners and representatives of those systems. During a study of a rezoning in Brooklyn, New York, an initial arts-focused, informal community engagement and visioning activity was followed

by the city's more formalized and constrained community engagement practices. Those involved in the initial effort were disillusioned when it became clear that their work in the initial activity was not going to be used by the city (Treskon 2012).

A final challenge is linking arts and culture to other issue areas. This was called for both in the ACIP work and Art Place America's commission of cross-section field scans. Interviewees noted some successes in reaching across boundaries (particularly in the areas of health and justice) but also noted the ongoing difficulty and fragility in that sort of bridging work, particularly in broadening impact beyond those already invested in arts and culture initiatives.

# Conclusion

A key question informing this brief is what is the role of local arts and culture data in mediating between research and action? The brief examines national data, local data and metrics, and local arts-based engagement efforts. Successful local arts and culture data activities often make use of all three. Even activities that are nominally focused on arts and culture as data and concerned with identifying metrics of impact or location of resources are stronger for incorporating engagement and making use of national data where available. But even innovative and robust efforts have challenges in sustaining momentum.

There have long been productive collaborations between arts and culture practitioners, people working on community-based data initiatives, and other researchers. These efforts have built resources and shared approaches that are useful for understanding the geography and impacts of arts and culture on communities. These collaborations have highlighted the value of local knowledge and data collection, community engagement, and arts-informed practices.

These initiatives also offer several lessons. First, these initiatives take time and significant resources. Second, they tend to be time-constrained: tied to either a particular policy, program, or research question or to a time-limited initiative. Third, they receive limited federal funding, so it is particularly important for local and national funders to invest in these creative collaborations and ongoing spaces for reflection and assessment.

For project-based initiatives, stakeholders need to be clear and realistic about their exit strategies—and think through impacts not just at project conclusion, but over a longer period. Funders can support these efforts as well as help ensure that new initiatives can continue to build on past projects. Employment in artistic and creative fields is unstable and ever-changing, and the nonprofit sector within which so much of this work takes places also deals with funding instability. Instability limits institutional memory and weakens ties among people, initiatives, and places. The time-constrained and project-oriented nature of supports and resources affects research and local data initiatives, too: time-limited initiatives that fund research often do not continue funding for measuring impacts for communities or artists over the longer term. So while project funding helps produce artifacts (works of art, maps, and databases), it does not provide enough funding to fully explore their potential.

Communities can focus on building ongoing relationships and forums among practitioners and funders to share success stories and challenges and to explore moving beyond traditional philanthropic models of supporting only certain civic assets. Some local arts and culture ecosystems already do this, and others can benefit from these examples and knowledge sharing. Communities can also strengthen communication and information sharing with other localities to identify innovative ideas and share learnings. Working within a given place to identify stakeholders is important, but looking elsewhere to identify potential thought partners is also crucial.

There is a substantial body of work examining the local impacts of arts and culture and highlighting how arts and culture can contribute to social change. The research models and examples presented here show the importance of approaching this work systematically. By being clear about how different approaches to integrating arts and culture and local data initiatives have distinct aims, researchers and practitioners can more effectively implement initiatives and measure impact.

The field that uses arts and culture data is at an inflection point. Funding and support from federal agencies is weak, amid broader economic uncertainty, the wind down of COVID-era supports, and the loss of some social safety net provisions. Providing resources for arts and culture work—challenging in the best of times—is especially difficult in a time of competing resources. Arts and culture has long existed in a boom-and-bust cycle and the present moment appears challenging.

This makes supporting networks to share information and best practices particularly important. Within communities, engagement and communication can build stronger ties between artists and the arts and culture sector and other community elements. Building ties across communities helps disseminate creative ideas and best practices to inform the efforts of other place-based arts and culture initiatives.

# Notes

[1] For example, the National Endowment for the Arts mostly stopped awarding individual artist awards after 1994 amid the fallout of the "culture wars." Adjusted for inflation, their 2024 appropriations were roughly in line with those from 1994 after significant cutbacks and were much lower than their appropriations in the early 1990s. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator," accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm; "National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History," National Endowment for the Arts, accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.arts.gov/about/appropriations-history.

[2] Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations Requests for IMLS," 2026 Congressional Budget Justification, accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.imls.gov/publications/2026-congressional-budget-justification); National Endowment for the Humanities, "Fiscal Year 2026 Congressional Justification," May 2025, https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/NEH%20FY%202026%20Congressional%20Justification.pdf; National Endowment for the Arts, "Appropriations Request for Fiscal Year 2026," May 2025, https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-FY26-Congressional-Budget-Request.pdf; Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, "Statement of Agency's Reinstatement of Terminated IMLS Grants, " December 3, 2025, https://www.imls.gov/news/statement-agencys-reinstatement-terminated-imls-grants

[3] This approach is still being used to measure local arts and culture ecosystems, notably in SMU DataArts' Arts Vibrancy Index, which ranks communities based on 13 measures in 3 themes: arts providers, arts dollars, and

government support. See "Our Methodology," SMU Data Arts, accessed February 25, 2026, https://culturaldata.org/arts-vibrancy-2024/methodology/

[4] "Creative Placemaking," National Endowment for the Arts, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking

[5] "ArtPlace America," accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.artplaceamerica.org/

[6] ArtPlace identified ten: agriculture and food, economic development, youth development, environment and energy, health, housing, immigration, public safety, transportation, and workforce development. "About ArtPlace," ArtPlace America, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.artplaceamerica.org/about-artplace/. Scans are available at "Field Scans," Creative Placemaking Research, accessed February 25, 2026, https://creativeplacemakingresearch.org/field-scans/.

[7] "NASERC: Reporting Trends and Impact in American Arts and Cultural Data," American Institutes of Research, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.air.org/project/naserc-reporting-trends-and-impact-american-arts-and-cultural-data; "National Arts Statistics and Evidence-based Reporting Center (NASERC)," National Endowment for the Arts, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/NASERC

[8] "Success Measures, Arts and Culture Tools," Success Measures at NeighborWorks America, accessed February 25, 2026, https://successmeasures.org/artsandculturetools

[9] The lead funders of this project were the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kresge Foundation, and ArtPlace America was a thought partner. See "New Report Examines the Role of Arts and Culture in Fostering Social Cohesion and Community Well-Being," April 15, 2021, National Endowment for the Arts, https://www.arts.gov/news/press-releases/2021/new-report-examines-role-arts-and-culture-fostering-social-cohesion-and-community-well-being.

[10] "Counting the Uncounted: Artists Living on the Margins of Federal Statistics," October 20, 2025, SMU Data Arts, https://culturaldata.org/learn/data-at-work/2025/artists-living-on-the-margins-of-federal-statistics/.

[11] "Cultural Treasures of South LA," accessed February 25, 2026, https://sla.culture.lacity.gov/.

[12] The role of data in community engagement is another rich topic. For one example of an artist team working with community groups to call attention to air quality issues, see Isabella Luzarraga, "Five Things to Know About Community-Based, Interactive Data Visualization," Emerson Today, February 17, 2022, https://today.emerson.edu/2022/02/17/five-things-to-know-about-community-based-interactive-data-visualization/.

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[16] "RAO_REGION: Regional Arts Organizations Geographic Regions," National Survey of Artists, 2024 ICPSR, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/studies/39447/datasets/0001/variables/RAO_REGION?archive=icpsr.

[17] For measuring livability, 19 indicators were seen in a "mostly favorable" light and 4 received" mixed views." For measuring creative placemaking impact, 10 were seen in a "mostly favorable" and another 10 received "mixed views" (Morely et al. 2014).

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# Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We greatly appreciate the insights of national experts Sunil Iyengar and Maria Rosario Jackson. Conversations from NNIP partners shaped the concepts presented in this brief: Liz Monk and Bob Gradeck at the University of Pittsburgh; Lee Guekguezian at the University of Minnesota; and Annis Sengupta of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. In addition, a panel at the annual NNIP Partners Meeting in Detroit further informed the brief. Panelists included Nafeesah Symonette from Detroit Excellence in Youth Arts, Caroline Bhalla at the University of Southern California, and Brandon Stanaway and Abbey Judd at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.


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