

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH DATA: NNIP AND FEDERAL PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

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In the first decade of the 21st century, the problems of America's distressed low-income communities were as daunting as they had ever been. The Obama administration designed new programs to address those problems more effectively. Those programs sought to be locally tailored and better coordinated than their predecessors. Such changes implied that hard data would be essential to these programs' effectiveness by helping grantees set priorities, choose among alternative courses of action, and monitor performance.

Data applicable to such programs are still not readily available in many communities, but over the past 20 years, some cities have fortunately seen the development of rich neighborhood-level information systems that can meet the needs of place-based initiatives. The institutions that manage many of these systems belong to the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), a network of local organizations coordinated by the Urban Institute to advance data-driven decisionmaking in local communities, with a focus on empowering low-income neighborhoods. NNIP partners' expertise in building local stakeholders' capacity to use data has been critical to the design and management of many federal place-based initiatives. All place-based programs, whether federally or locally initiated, can learn from NNIP

partners' experiences, but many urban centers do not yet have institutions that have taken on these capacities. Developing this multipurpose information infrastructure in many more US cities is vital to the nation's ability to effectively guide community change.

This brief provides an overview of NNIP and selected federal place-based initiatives. It then describes roles NNIP partners have played in these efforts and implications for future work in this field. Case studies are available that describe NNIP partners' involvement in specific place-based initiatives in Kansas City; St. Louis; San Antonio; and Washington, DC.¹

NNIP OVERVIEW

In the mid-1990s, civic leaders in several cities funded local groups to begin assembling neighborhood-level data. These groups developed long-term agreements with multiple local agencies to share their administrative data, created useful indicators from the data, and then updated it regularly. For the first time, it became possible to track changing conditions in neighborhoods using several indicators, such as

¹ *These briefs are available at the NNIP website. <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/activities/partner/nnip-partners-support-federal-place-based-initiatives>.*

births and deaths, property sales, employment, crime, and public assistance.

In 1996, the initial groups that took on this work joined the Urban Institute to form NNIP to further develop these capacities and spread them to other localities nationwide. Currently, NNIP partners (also known as “local data intermediaries”) are operating in about 30 cities, and NNIP capacities are being developed several others. The local partners vary in institutional structure, but most are university institutes or nonprofit organizations. NNIP partners’ most important role is to ensure that data are applied in practical ways to support policymaking and community building. NNIP partners also pledge to give priority to distressed neighborhoods in all work.

All NNIP partners assemble and process data to create and maintain local indicators over time. Beyond raw numbers, they prepare visualizations and analyses to reveal the data’s meaning. Partners also provide training and technical assistance to nonprofit groups and government agencies on how to access and use data. Partners often convene diverse groups to develop a common understanding of a given topic and facilitate discussion on ways for the community to respond.

FEDERAL PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

The Obama administration has explicitly acknowledged the importance of “place” in all federal departments’ programs (Orzag 2009).

Following the lead of many philanthropic comprehensive community-change efforts, the federal agencies recognize that disadvantaged communities cannot be transformed by programs that focus on only one issue (e.g., housing, education, workforce development, or social services). Most federal programs operate in silos with rules and modes of behavior that extend down to the local level and seriously frustrate coordination across programs.

Our case studies feature three federal initiatives that promote holistic action to improve neighborhoods.² The Choice Neighborhoods program, operated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, focuses on the physical and social transformation of a deteriorated public- or assisted-housing project, but also addresses comprehensive revitalization of the neighborhood surrounding that project. The US Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods program is based on the approach of the well-known Harlem Children’s Zone. It focuses on building a continuum of solutions that guide the development of children from birth, through schooling, and into successful careers. Finally, the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program, a multiagency program administered by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, promotes more transportation

² For more information on these programs, see US Department of Housing and Urban Development (n.d.), *Promise Neighborhoods Institute (2011)*, and Marsh (2014).

choices; promote equitable, affordable housing; and enhance economic competitiveness.

NNIP INVOLVEMENT: ROLES AND BENEFITS

The federal agencies responsible for individual place-based programs encourage local grantees to use data in all phases of their work, though expectations vary across programs.³ Local NNIP partners have assisted grantees with a variety of data and analysis needs, as illustrated by the case studies mentioned earlier and summarized in Figure 1 on the next page.

Some partners provided limited assistance to initiatives, such as providing statistics for a grant application or supplying data for a particular analysis. In other cases, the NNIP partner served as the primary data partner, responsible for data-related services in all stages of the initiative. Some grantees decided to build data and analytic skills in-house, tapping NNIP partners or other support organizations as needed. In a few instances, like the regional planning agencies in Boston and Kansas City,

³ *The work described in this section relates to the four key functional areas of data use: situation analysis, policy analysis and planning, performance management, and case management. A more complete explanation of these functions and how they have been applied in other contexts is provided in chapter 5 of Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014). In the chapter, we suggest that the first three of these are the main areas in which community information is used to support decisionmaking in local governance generally. A fifth use, not described here, is evaluation.*

the NNIP partner organizations were the direct recipients of the Sustainable Communities grants.

Leaders of the place-based initiatives in which NNIP partners have participated benefitted from the preexisting partner institutional and staff capacities. NNIP partners' data holdings, reputations in communities, and established relationships can save grantees time and money. Most NNIP partners have operated in their cities for many years and are highly respected and trusted by their communities. They establish good working relationships with civic leaders, public officials, community groups, and other entities that can be valuable in the implementation of any place-based initiative.

Technical capacities can also be leveraged. NNIP partners are knowledgeable about local data availability, including how to find and secure other useful data they do not already collect and how to construct surveys to obtain other information. Partners develop data systems containing ready-to-use and reasonably up-to-date information on conditions for all neighborhoods in their cities, which are made available to place-based program grantees. NNIP partners also focus on preserving data over time, allowing users to see trends. Such data cannot be assembled overnight; building relationships with data providers to obtain and understand the data takes years.

Figure 1: Local NNIP Partner Organizations' Roles in Place-based Initiatives

Using administrative data to assess conditions in the focus area

Grantees need to understand the nature and extent of neighborhood problems and opportunities. In **St. Louis**, Rise is developing a dashboard for the organizations and residents of Wellston as part of a Choice Neighborhoods planning grant. The dashboard will describe housing characteristics, educational outcomes, transportation access, health and safety, and resident engagement, providing information critical to designing the implementation.

Collecting and using survey data to identify and address residents' needs

Much of what we want to know about children and families is not captured in administrative data. In **Washington, DC**, NeighborhoodInfo DC staff at the Urban Institute assisted the Kenilworth-Parkside Promise Neighborhood in conducting neighborhood and school surveys to capture resident and student perceptions. The staff used these data with resident-based working groups to design the initial programs. New waves of survey data collection are now under way, helping grantee staff use the data to monitor performance and improve programs.

Working with stakeholders to interpret data and decide among alternative actions

Policy analysis and planning are necessary to guide the interventions' development and to assess the comparative advantages of alternative courses of action. As part of the Sustainable Communities program in **Kansas City**, the Mid-America Regional Council provided data, computational tools, and technical assistance to stakeholders in selected corridors to assist them in redevelopment planning. This work demonstrated the feasibility of higher-density, mixed-use redevelopment in many locations, allowing MARC to significantly raise the priority for corridor development in budget allocations.

Improving performance management through training and technical assistance

Grantees must track program outputs and regularly measure the program's performance. In **San Antonio**, Community Information Now works with out-of-school time service providers and Eastside Promise staff to improve how participant data is shared and integrated across organizations and to explore patterns in students' academic outcomes. Community Information Now also ensures that their partners understand and follow data privacy policies.

The technical skills would not be as useful without partners' deep understanding of local neighborhoods and experience in engaging communities. Partner staff view neighborhoods holistically and envision solutions across topical silos, aligned with the principles of the comprehensive programs. They work interactively with local groups to discern what data are desirable for each task and identify the best options. They facilitate dialogue with data, allowing client organizations to ultimately "own" the results of the process and build analytic skills.

IMPLICATIONS FROM NNIP EXPERIENCES

For local funders and civic leaders, NNIP experience demonstrates the benefits of investing in locally embedded data organizations to support data collection and analysis for place-based initiatives and broader local capacity for informed decisionmaking. A grantee would typically face enormous expenses when trying to access the data and process them for its selected neighborhood. Obtaining even the past year's data on food stamp reciprocity, for example, would require negotiations for the confidential data, geocoding the file to assign geographic identifiers, understanding the fields and assessing data quality, and then finally extracting the data for the neighborhood.

Supporting the development and sustainability of NNIP-type data intermediaries will achieve substantial economies of scale. Starting data

collection and training from scratch every time to analyze a recurring issue or understand changing conditions in a neighborhood is infeasible. In addition, the effort necessary to obtain data on key indicators for any one neighborhood is likely comparable to that of obtaining it for all of a city's neighborhoods. With a well-constructed neighborhood information system, data and technical assistance are available when needed for a variety of users. Local organizations following the NNIP model also build their own capacity in supporting place-based initiatives, which then improves their ability to serve multiple efforts across all neighborhoods.

In the cities that do not have NNIP partners, local universities and research institutions may offer similar data and analytic support services for place-based programs. With the encouragement of local funders, the grantees and researchers should look beyond the single initiative to see how their data efforts could be used by other community improvement efforts. In the best case, the researchers' experience in helping one local program will spark interest in the broader NNIP model.

Federal agencies also have significant roles to play in supporting local coalitions' efforts to enhance data capacity from funding and program design to technical assistance and evaluation. In the past, the federal government has directly supported the development of local data intermediaries in the past. The Technology Opportunities Program provided matching

grants totaling \$5.7 million over a 10-year period to seven cities developing neighborhood-level information systems focused on community improvement, communication, and resource sharing.⁴ A similar grant program could be developed to spur local investment in neighborhood information systems and data intermediaries in more cities.

The federal government can also sponsor research on how to build and leverage local data capacity. As an illustration of growing agency interest in this topic, the US Department of Health and Human Services engaged the Urban Institute in 2014 to consider the challenges of and opportunities for performance measurement and evaluation of federal place-based initiatives, in particular, the availability of administrative data to examine outcomes of interest across diverse programs and contexts.⁵

For potential grantees, the federal government should continue to specify expectations about data-driven decisionmaking in its notices of funding availability for place-based initiatives. At the proposal stage, federal agencies can make expectations clear for grantees about the value of data in planning and award points for data

⁴ *The Technology Opportunities Program was administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration of the Department of Commerce. See Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014) for more details.*

⁵ *The resulting report suggests that the federal government could support grantees and strengthen local capacity through program design, technical assistance, and promoting partnerships with existing data intermediaries and integrated data system efforts (Galvez et al. forthcoming).*

capacity. For example, examining local administrative data to understand neighborhood conditions enhances the quality of needs assessments and program planning. A federal program launched in 2014, the Performance Partnership Pilots, reflects these principles. That program is designed to improve outcomes for disconnected youth and it requires applicants to describe the proposed partnership's data and evaluation capacity, including its ability to collect, analyze, and use data for decisionmaking, learning, continuous improvement, and accountability. The criteria awarded extra points for those applicants who proposed and demonstrated the ability to conduct a local evaluation.

Once grants are awarded, federal agencies can provide organizations with technical assistance on using data effectively. Currently, the US Department of Education contracts with the Urban Institute and PolicyLink to draft practical guides and provide on-site advice to grantees that are building data systems to track outcomes for their children and youth.⁶ Grantees can also learn from their peers through government-sponsored in-person and virtual events.

Federal agencies can also use their communication channels to showcase places where building data capacity for one initiative is nested in a broader effort to improve the ability to use data to address other community

⁶ *See, for example, Comey et al. (2013).*

problems. Having a strong local community information infrastructure will allow the initiative team to spend less time and money on data assembly and get started earlier on planning and launching the program. Of similar importance, federal investments that bolster

responsive local data and data-related services will create a virtuous circle that encourages more-informed decisions across the entire community and leads to better outcomes for vulnerable residents and distressed neighborhoods.

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NNIP is a collaboration between the Urban Institute and partner organizations in more than thirty American cities. NNIP partners democratize data: they make it accessible and easy to understand and then help local stakeholders apply it to solve problems in their communities.

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