



# Local Data as an Equity Tool

## How Data Intermediaries and Backbone Organizations Use Data to Improve Service Provision and Center Community Voices

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the calls for racial justice that followed the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, local place-based organizations have focused more on better building equity at the local level and on how data can both hinder and build racial equity. To better understand the role of backbone organizations and data intermediaries (two types of place-based organizations) in improving service provision and centering community voices during the pandemic, we interviewed organizations affiliated with the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), Promise Neighborhoods, and StriveTogether to identify strategies and key practices place-based organizations can use to build local data capacity with their partners, use local data to improve service provision and day-to-day operations, and amplify community voices.

## Introduction

In this brief, we focus on two types of place-based organizations—backbone organizations and data intermediaries—that act as mediators between data and local stakeholders. Backbone organizations and intermediaries can be housed in many types of entities, such as nonprofits, governments, and foundations, but they all serve as educators, conveners, collaborators, and voices for change (Hendey et al. 2016). We define backbone organizations as entities focused on coordinating service provision among multiple partners in a community and collecting and managing the data associated with delivering those services and assessing their performance. Intermediaries, on the other hand, usually do not provide services and instead focus on maintaining community-wide data infrastructure and data capacity that support a range of uses, including reporting trends or indicators and building stakeholders'

capacity to use data to effect change. In some cases, an entity can be a backbone organization and an intermediary. Much can be learned from how these place-based organizations collect data, activate partnerships with evidence-based solutions, and engage residents in their communities, especially to respond to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and to enact systems-level change.

Moreover, we define local data as qualitative and quantitative information from more localized sources, such as state and local governments, community-based organizations, and residents themselves. Better understanding the availability and accessibility of local data and how they are used can help us understand the nature and impacts of inequity and how data can work to address or reinforce inequities, particularly during crisis.

For this brief, we interviewed staff from two projects affiliated with the US Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods initiative, two organizations affiliated with the Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, and StriveTogether; the interviewees' organizations operate as backbone organizations and/or intermediaries.<sup>1</sup> Two of them, the South Ward Promise Neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, and the West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood (WPPN), receive implementation grant funding from the Promise Neighborhoods initiative. Both are backbone organizations that coordinate the delivery of a cradle-to-career pipeline of services intended to improve educational and community outcomes for children and families living in the Promise Neighborhood communities and attending Promise Neighborhood schools.<sup>2</sup> The WPPN also serves as a data intermediary because Drexel University, the lead Promise Neighborhoods grantee, is an NNIP partner and is actively engaged in community indicators work. As Promise Neighborhoods grantees, they are also expected to collect and report data on outcomes and use performance data for continuous learning and improvement. By establishing relationships with school districts, local nonprofits, and city and state leaders, Promise Neighborhoods grantees can use data to evaluate the implementation of new programming and services. Moreover, during the life of their federal grants, grantees typically initiate and execute data-sharing agreements, which are another powerful way to share data.

Connecticut Data Collaborative (CTData) and Data Driven Detroit (D3) are NNIP member organizations and data intermediaries. The NNIP is a learning network coordinated by the Urban Institute that connects independent partner organizations in more than 30 cities. Partner organizations share a mission to ensure all communities have access to data and the skills to use it to advance equity and well-being. Among other work, they conduct community and regional indicators projects, manage data-sharing systems between regional data organizations and service providers, and provide data capacity support to local nonprofits. They also support local data-capacity-building efforts, typically by assembling, transforming, and maintaining data, disseminating information and applying it to achieve impact, and building communities' capacity to use data to understand conditions and improve outcomes (Hendey et al. 2016).

Lastly, StriveTogether is a cradle-to-career network of partners focused on building economic mobility for children and families. Its 70 partners across 29 states employ a theory-of-action framework focused on achieving racial equity and economic mobility. We spoke with StriveTogether national staff

about local partners' practices, and in this brief, we share examples of how some of those partners use local data to advance their goals.

We chose these five entities for their strengths in implementing place-based initiatives and working with local data. We conducted a stakeholder analysis, held virtual interviews, transcribed and coded interviews, and consolidated key findings for publication. In the interviews, we focused on organizational data use and culture, local data capacity, and data outreach and application strategies, focusing largely on these subjects in the context of the pandemic. We supplemented our analysis with a brief document and literature review.

This brief outlines three steps to building local data capacity and using data to build racial equity: enhancing data access for community change, building local data infrastructure for responsive services, and using data to amplify community voices.

## Enhancing Data Access for Community Change

To build local data systems and enable communities to access their data more easily, it is important to first build a foundation by assembling, transforming, and maintaining data. As data intermediaries, CTData, D3, and the WPPN exemplify how to create data systems that are useful and accessible. As a data intermediary in Detroit, D3 is responsive to community needs and selects data that help local groups understand the neighborhood trends they care about. Its staff shared that during the foreclosure crisis of the early 2000s, they changed their work based on stakeholder feedback that the need for real-time data on evictions was particularly acute. The organization had previously relied primarily on federal datasets, such as the American Community Survey, and working with local data as well enabled it to provide relevant and timely data analysis (such as on local vacancy rates and tax foreclosures). In its recent pandemic-related work, D3 started compiling COVID-19 case and death rates with other contextual indicators, such as asthma-related hospital visits, to determine medical vulnerability, because it understood that data on COVID-19 cases and deaths alone would not sufficiently capture inequities. One D3 staff member we interviewed shared,

[COVID-19] caused us to rethink and re-look at the indicators we were collecting, to see gaps in what indicators were measuring that we might not have seen otherwise. Initially we had four categories that we expanded out, and a lot of the expansion of the equity and impact indicators section was driven by what we were seeing in terms of COVID-19 and the racial justice uprisings, and how even the framework we had conceptualized was inadequately addressing the questions people were asking about those things. This is when we created a dozen new indicators, vetted by a local task force, and who pushed us to have conversations that we otherwise might not have had.

This realization led D3 to create 11 new neighborhood-disaggregated indicators to measure equity and impact, including children in poverty and population living in close quarters.

Backbone organizations like the South Ward Promise Neighborhood and the WPPN also enhance data access to change communities. To meet their yearly reporting requirements, these two Promise

Neighborhoods meet with all of their partners to ensure that all Promise Neighborhoods–related programming and partners are collecting population-level data and program-level data. In compiling these data and working with the Urban Institute’s technical assistance to ensure data quality, these Promise Neighborhoods build data systems on which community stakeholders can collaboratively evaluate neighborhood outcomes.

## Building Local Data Infrastructure for Responsive Services

Local data (i.e., survey data, qualitative data, or smaller quantitative data) can enable service-providing organizations to distribute resources equitably to ensure marginalized populations aren’t left behind, particularly during the pandemic. Organizations trying to improve service provision should assess their local data landscapes, reach out to partners, and create data-collection plans. The initiatives we spoke with use various data methods to assess community needs and prioritize services and programs. This was especially true in 2020, when needs were heightened and services had to be adjusted to the new reality the pandemic created.

StriveTogether explained how its data have enabled it to respond to the pandemic. One staff member said,

We’ve seen lots of partnerships continue to use data to be responsive and think about recovery, the common examples we’re seeing are around the digital divide, so our partner in Tulsa made internet access maps to help the district and partners allocate resources based on data. Also saw a lot of mental health services, meal access data, how remote learning is actually going in districts and then a lot of qualitative data collection, what are the pressing needs of families and young people to help lift that up and inform changes.

Local data can also help justify collaborative advocacy efforts. Discussing a data toolkit used by local network partners to advocate for systems change, a StriveTogether interviewee shared,

This toolkit allows us to use targets and data points and how to connect a result like third-grade reading with the development of a policy agenda that supports that outcome and then go through how to build a coalition and advocate and see that passage through effective execution. It’s this whole loop that starts with the data point and the toolkit is the way of offering a frame for the elasticity or strength of the fiber of the collective.

That toolkit spans the spectrum of improving services from local implementation to larger systems-level change (McAfee, Blackwell, and Bell 2015).

Furthermore, considering community perspectives alongside quantitative data and other qualitative data enables responsive and iterative crisis response. The South Ward Promise Neighborhood highlighted how a community survey provided it a baseline and guidance for improving its wraparound services; for instance, earlier in the pandemic, it adapted its programs to provide families food when they were food insecure. The WPPN had a similar experience: it followed up a

neighborhood survey with a COVID response survey and used the results of that survey to connect families to a COVID resource coordinator.

In addition, the South Ward Promise Neighborhood solicits qualitative reports from its partners that have highlighted issues not covered by its survey. As one of its staff members shared,

What's really helped us is being open to qualitative data from our partners, having them submit to us narrative reports helps us understand their experiences as direct service providers and their efforts in the community, including what they see and hear from their community members.

Qualitative data collection has allowed the program to dig deeper on issues it feared were going undetected in the neighborhood survey, namely people's experiences with discrimination and structural racism. Interviews with community residents surfaced discrepancies between what staff see as discrimination or structural racism and how those things are experienced or interpreted by residents. As that staff member continued,

We asked about experiences with discrimination and structural racism related to housing and employment. When asked directly about racism in the qualitative interviews, people would say no, but then you would continue the interview and instances of blatant and clear discrimination, having children, poor credit, etcetera, would surface.

Understanding how residents experience racism has allowed staff to adapt their housing programming to better serve residents. This shows how understanding the limitations of quantitative data and allowing communities to name their experiences, rather than providing them preset answers, elucidates the unique structural inequities communities face and enables organizations to take meaningful steps toward equity.

StriveTogether partners also shared how they are using qualitative data to go beyond individual-level services to change the systems that drive disparities. As one staff member highlighted, they are

using a broad array of data and stories to inform their work and identify the root cause of disparities to change policy, practice, and shift power. StriveTogether partners are connecting their individual efforts and initiatives with larger policy efforts to address entrenched disparities ... and supporting partners in connecting data to broader stories, advocacy efforts, and campaigns.

In this way, having access to data that reveal structural disparities helps identify not only programming priorities, but how to address root causes by connecting with ongoing efforts.

## Using Data to Amplify Community Voices

For data intermediaries and backbone organizations seeking to more transparently align their data and data services with community needs and interests, it is necessary to find effective ways to meaningfully engage with residents and collaboratively create a research agenda. Organizations beginning this journey will encounter stages of the data life cycle at which they can include community voices and resident input. These stages are design, data collection, data interpretation, and dissemination.<sup>3</sup>

Intermediaries and backbone organizations must begin each of these stages by earning community trust, not just building it. The difference is that whereas building trust involves promising change with a forthcoming program or data-collection process, earning trust involves demonstrating one's organization is trustworthy through concrete actions in ongoing projects, which starts by creating transparent expectations and lines of communication at the outset. Beyond centering community input through survey data, qualitative data, and smaller quantitative data, data practitioners can share the outcomes of data collection in an accessible way.

## Past and Potential Harms of Data Work

Data are neither inherently empowering nor inherently equitable, and data collected with good intentions but without community input have frequently done more harm than good. For instance, direct harm has been caused during data collection, harmful narratives have been borne of data collected uncritically, and data have been extracted from communities without their benefiting from it (Gaddy and Scott 2020). Moreover, merely bringing more community members into an organization's local data work will not necessarily make data more equitable. In recruiting processes for data walks, advisory groups, or other data activities, an organization could accidentally favor certain neighborhoods, racial groups, and class statuses, or people who have already been active with that organization. In addition, engaging community members can place undue burden on the community and can be a frustrating process if expectations are not clearly laid out. It is important that organizations ensure diverse residents are included, even organizations with limited funds and staff capacity. In some instances, though, it may be important to prioritize certain people for input (for instance, by engaging youth in a survey about a new high school program).

Importantly, collecting and disseminating data can overburden communities. This is a concern especially for research that doesn't include a plan to share findings with the community and thus extracts knowledge without equitably distributing the benefits. A practitioner from the WPPN shared about their local Philadelphia community,

I think communities, particularly communities of color, are sick of being researched. Residents are exhausted by it. And they are re-traumatized every time a big grant is announced in their neighborhood and they don't see any practical benefits to them. It reinforces that researchers and government agencies don't care about us, they care about their bank accounts.

Chicago Beyond's guidebook, *Why Am I Always Being Researched?*, details how although well-funded research has been widespread in Chicago for decades and produced great work, little change has reached residents at the neighborhood level. Repeated instances of research being funded that has no direct material or strategic benefit to residents fosters legitimate feelings of distrust and alienation (Chicago Beyond 2018). West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood staff noted the importance of making research tangible and actionable rather than tokenizing by engaging residents early in the process and maintaining that engagement throughout research. The WPPN created a community advisory council and hired resident surveyors to provide meaningful feedback on survey instruments and processes. Resident leaders suggested ways to make survey questions more relatable and flagged

issues that may be relevant to community members. In the early years of the Promise Neighborhoods grant, resident leaders encouraged the WPPN to make its neighborhood survey longitudinal so the community could hold it accountable for improving outcomes for students and families. More recently, the WPPN introduced a data dashboard, COVID-19 Vulnerability Indicators, that visualizes the areas of Philadelphia that have been burdened most by the pandemic and its economic impacts.<sup>4</sup> West Philadelphia has been hit not only by the pandemic but by worsening gun violence, and the WPPN hopes residents can use the dashboard to better understand the neighborhood's unique needs and advocate for more resources in the hardest-hit areas.

It is imperative that data practitioners first understand how research has harmed communities and how some processes continue to exclude certain people from research. These processes include the collection of data that are top heavy (that is, distanced from community oversight) and used to perpetuate negative stereotypes, and data that have little direct benefit for residents, organizers, or local nonprofits. Instead, data practitioners can make data collection and dissemination more inclusive and community based, which creates the conditions to amplify community voices. The rest of this section covers a few ways data practitioners can earn the trust of residents by investing in their research capacity, crediting and compensating community members for their contributions, and sharing data.<sup>5</sup>

## Community in Design and Oversight

One way community input can be centered in local data work is by directly collecting feedback from community members on existing and upcoming work. This can occur at any stage of the data-collection process but is particularly fruitful when it begins and even before the design phase. As a first step, an organization can seek input from a few residents it is already connected to, such as through its existing data work or programming. Many residents can be engaged through a recurring and active advisory process. This can include implementing a community advisory board to advise organizations on key research and programming priorities, or a community research review board to review data-collection and dissemination processes and raise concerns about community harm. Both bodies can include different types of members, including students, residents, activists, teachers, local nonprofit administrators, and small-business owners, and can create spaces for open dialogue.

The WPPN shared that its community advisory board is aiming to create a community research review board to ensure all residents have a say in what happens in their community. According to one staff member,

We have a very long way to go before we have shifted power in these communities and that's what we're trying to do through Promise Neighborhoods and the Urban Health Collaborative, this community research review is key to that. The community having power over what research they approve and support is a big part of taking power back.

Bringing in community members and residents as advisors has the dual benefit of giving them more input over data-related priorities, questions, and processes and making projects more transparent as community members are treated as active stakeholders, rather than as research subjects.

## Community in Data Collection

Data practitioners can also center community input by hiring community members or small nonprofits to participate in projects intended to improve local data. Collecting survey data in particular can be onerous and expensive and can therefore make it difficult to justify spending money on incentives or subcontracts. But finding ways to include residents in collecting local data typically expands the reach of surveys, especially among communities reluctant to respond to them, and makes survey work less extractive.

Although backbone organizations and data intermediaries—which frequently operate behind the scenes to ensure data quality, wrangle key datasets, and aggregate data for public use and to improve service provision—are typically well established in their communities, their roles and purposes may not always be immediately clear to residents they collect data with. The first step in fostering transparency between data practitioners and residents is to clearly communicate the purpose and priorities of a specific data-collection process, such as the Promise Neighborhoods neighborhood survey. This includes sharing what is outside the scope of a particular data-collection process to avoid setting unrealistic expectations and working with residents to address unmet data needs. For instance, if residents frequently request data that cannot be collected by existing processes, this could be an opportunity to create a new data-collection process to meet community members' needs.

Connecticut Data Collaborative involved its community in data collection by partnering with community-based organizations and residents to see how the pandemic was affecting different groups.<sup>6</sup> A survey tool developed by the University of Connecticut was deployed, and CTData worked with five local organizations to understand the data and provided them flexible funding so they could choose how best to engage the community. One nonprofit, the Hartford Health Initiative, used its funds to host a data walk of the survey data summarized by CTData, and provided incentives to residents to participate. One CTData staff member explained that “data walks are one of the many ways we can engage with the folks who are represented in the data to make sure that we’re representing their data in a way that is truthful to them.” CTData staff expressed the importance of capturing and sharing data that are representative of community members’ lived experiences, which data analysts may not collect and interpret adequately. For instance, during the data walk, residents suggested that the Hartford Health Initiative add a women’s fitness class for mental health to its programming. Another one of the nonprofits, Sudanese American House, used the subcontract funds to create data visualizations and summaries of survey responses, and to hold a virtual data walk. This was the first time the Sudanese American population had seen themselves in data. By choosing to invest in a rigorous data partnership with local organizations, CTData better prepared itself to create an iterative data-collection process.

As data intermediaries partner with service organizations, advocacy groups, and even directly with residents, they can “translate” data by creating avenues for community members to engage with it, and they can coordinate data analysis across organizations by creating systems for partners to share data and building the infrastructure necessary for effective collaboration. For example, in 2018, CTData was approached by youth-serving organizations interested in better tracking educational outcomes to improve service delivery.<sup>7</sup> Some of those organizations were sharing data, but they lacked a cohesive



governance structure, which caused data sources to be siloed and risked duplication of efforts. CTData worked across these organizations to develop the Hartford Data Collaborative, a shared client-level data infrastructure system that will serve the needs of funders and nonprofit leaders alike. This approach allowed CTData to identify partners that needed additional support in collecting and storing high-quality data that are clearly labeled, accessible, and usable. Members of the Hartford Data Collaborative benefit from access to CTData's staff expertise. In turn, the larger Hartford community benefits from CTData's commitment to advancing data literacy and ensuring that those affected by data the collaborative collects can use it.

Furthermore, compensating residents for their contributions to data collection can lead to new employment opportunities for those residents. For example, the WPPN has been hiring and training community members as surveyors with the goal of maintaining the Promise Neighborhoods neighborhood survey after its federal grant ends. One of the surveyors it hired to help deploy the neighborhood survey has been hired full time thanks to their great work and contributions, and another has become the coordinator of the initiative. There are many ways to uplift community voices, such as providing small incentives for participating in surveys, providing larger incentives for being on advisory boards to participate in design and interpret data, and even creating full-time job opportunities for residents in local data work. These are inclusive ways of countering the harms researchers have done collecting data in communities. More generally, centering communities in data work not only materially benefits residents, but makes the process of creating, administering, and disseminating data more transparent.

## **Community in Data Dissemination**

Another way to foster transparency with community members is to enable them to access data collected from them, while protecting confidential data as needed. This can be done by using data visualizations, communicating data, and doing community engagement, among other methods. A recent Urban Institute report (Schwabish and Feng 2021) on applying equity awareness in data visualization suggests ways data practitioners can portray their data equitably. These include using people-first language, ordering labels and responses purposefully, and carefully considering colors, icons, and shapes. Producing engaging and accessible data visualizations also requires considering what formats to use, which can include one pagers, infographics, websites, white papers, ArcGIS StoryMaps, and accessible videos. It is important to choose the data visualizations and formats most appropriate for an audience.

When communicating public-facing data, it is important to choose channels through which the data are most likely to reach community members. These could include emails, social media posts, mailers sent to survey respondents, data walks, and community meetings. An NNIP report (Anoll 2019) on how to engage young people to effect community change shares examples of how NNIP partners have found new ways to disseminate results to their communities. A key takeaway from that report is that visualizing the impact of an issue through the arts—film, drama, photography, and games—is a great way

to communicate a community's experience. In general, centering community input in all aspects of local data work makes it easier to disseminate data effectively.

## Conclusion

Local data is a key tool for identifying gaps in policies, practices, and resource flows. To be effective, local data practitioners at backbone organizations and data intermediaries should identify how their organizations can help improve their communities. They should also consider how to use data to improve their services and center community voices at every stage of data collection, from design through dissemination.

Data collected from different nonprofit partners and local government agencies can be aggregated to inform programming and policy decisions. There is a growing need for qualitative and quantitative data that are current and geographically granular, and researchers working to rapidly and iteratively gauge and respond to communities' needs should understand how to incorporate such data. Data intermediaries and backbone organizations play a key role in helping their communities attain equitable outcomes, which they can do by building local data capacity, creating data-driven partnerships, and centering community voices.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted between March and May 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> More on the Promise Neighborhoods initiative is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> Sonia Torres Rodríguez, "Fostering Resident-Led Research across All Stages of Research," Medium, March 18, 2021, <https://medium.com/local-data-for-equitable-recovery/fostering-resident-led-research-across-all-stages-of-research-537f698764e1>.
- <sup>4</sup> "COVID-19 Vulnerability Indicators," Drexel University Urban Health Collaborative, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://drexel.edu/uhc/resources/coronavirus/vulnerability-indicators/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Sonia Torres Rodríguez, "Earning Trust by Collaborating with Resident Researchers," Medium, March 18, 2021, <https://medium.com/local-data-for-equitable-recovery/earning-trust-by-collaborating-with-resident-researchers-e504a740e015>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Data for COVID-19 Response & Recovery," Urban Institute, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://puttinglocaldatatowork.urban.org/data-covid-19-response-recovery>.
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