



# IMPROVING PUBLIC DECISIONMAKING

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND  
DATA INTERMEDIARIES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## INTRODUCTION

Local governments are on the front lines in tackling community challenges, such as improving school readiness, revitalizing neighborhoods, or closing gaps in health outcomes. Local governments can accelerate progress in public goals if they partner with organizations in other sectors and use data internally for planning and operations (Living Cities and Governing 2017). By tapping external organizations skilled in data analysis and community engagement, governments can more effectively identify priority issues, find new allies, and devise data-driven policies and programs.

Local data intermediaries already help many city and county governments across the United States. These civic groups assemble data and assist community stakeholders in using the information for better decisionmaking. This brief aims to encourage more of these collaborations by demonstrating how data intermediaries support governments. This could entail strengthening relationships with existing data organizations or establishing new ones where they do not exist.

The brief first relates the emergence of data intermediaries and their role in the current environment. It then describes how these organizations' distinctive characteristics benefit local governments. It concludes with recommendations to elected officials and agency staff about ways to connect with external data and analysis expertise. Three companion case studies about Baltimore, Columbus, and Oakland are available at <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/localgovt>.

## EVOLUTION OF DATA INTERMEDIARIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local data intermediaries emerged in the 1990s to address a need that was not being met: recurrent data on the changing conditions of neighborhoods across topics for broad community use. To effect community change, these organizations paired increased data access with hands-on assistance and training for community groups, foundations, and action coalitions. In 1996, six pioneering intermediaries formed the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), a peer-learning network housed at the Urban Institute of intermediaries that focus on the use of neighborhood-level administrative data and on addressing neighborhood inequities.

NNIP Partners collaborate with government agencies to access administrative data, conduct policy analysis, and inform cross-sector coalitions, but most NNIP Partner organizations operate from nonprofits or community-oriented university research centers. In part, this is because supporting community stakeholders in using data is not a core function of local government. Being outside the public sector also underpins intermediaries' reputation for independence and unbiased information because their services are not tied to a mayor's agenda. It also means that relationships and initiatives can be sustained through political transitions.

The value that a local data intermediary provides a community has stood the test of time, but the environment for data and technology has changed dramatically. More data and analytic tools are available than ever before, so the challenge now includes helping people to navigate through the multitude of sources. Many more players have entered the field too. Alongside the growth of the NNIP network to 32 cities, other types of data intermediaries now exist that serve state or regional jurisdictions or focus on a single issue (e.g., schools or crime).

City and county governments have also improved their internal data systems and more regularly apply data in policy, planning, and operations. Many maintain open data portals with hundreds of updated nonconfidential datasets. National initiatives have raised the profile of the need for more effective use of data and analysis by the public sector. As part of the What Works Cities initiative, the Center for Government Excellence and the Sunlight Foundation assist agencies and create tools to expand the number of cities committed to publishing and using their own data. Peer-learning networks for local governments, such as Harvard University's Civic Analytics Network, offer inspirational examples and facilitate learning among chief data officers and other public leaders. The goals of national networks, such as NNIP, that support data intermediaries, align with these government capacity-building efforts because the whole community benefits from better-informed public-sector decisionmaking.

## UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF DATA INTERMEDIARIES

City and county governments ask data intermediaries to provide products and services that supplement public-sector data systems and staff knowledge. These activities might be performed internally or by any contractor, but local data intermediaries have a unique combination of characteristics that enhance their services. First, their technical or topical knowledge is paired with an **understanding of local context**. In addressing any question, intermediaries' grasp of critical factors—such as the housing and labor markets, the political environment, or related nonprofit initiatives—facilitates efficient and nuanced responses. A holistic understanding of neighborhoods means that they can highlight connections between

issues such as health and housing or crime and education. For example, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance at University of Baltimore's Jacob France Institute (BNIA-JFI) aided in the city government's application and implementation of the federal Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Grant. BNIA-JFI improved the bid's competitiveness by persuasively documenting the needs of the McElderry Park neighborhood on several measures. Leveraging its community connections and deep neighborhood knowledge, BNIA-JFI provided data and technical assistance to the steering committee during the three-year initiative. BNIA-JFI's range of expertise facilitated its support of the committee's plans to reduce persistent crime in the neighborhood through diverse strategies such as workforce development, community building, and youth development.

Local data intermediaries also possess **a reputation for impartiality and rigor**. They take precautions to protect confidential data and vet preliminary findings with stakeholders. Diverse audiences view their analysis as credible and not biased by political aims. In one example, the City of Columbus, Ohio commissioned Thoughtwell to document the conditions of large apartment developments along a major corridor on the city's north side. Having this information provided by a neutral organization alleviated political concerns as the city determined actions related to property owners.

Because of their broad mission and community standing, data intermediaries forge **relationships with other organizations** that span sectors and issues. They are trusted by government agencies, philanthropy, nonprofits, and resident groups. This positions them to convene groups and government staff to discuss causes and solutions to community problems based on common facts. Similarly, they connect local agencies to other levels of governments, such as introducing a city housing agency to the county's public health department or a peer agency in a neighboring jurisdiction. Thoughtwell conducted a youth needs assessment for Franklin County, partnering with The Columbus Foundation, the United Way of Central Ohio, the YMCA of Central Ohio, two county agencies, and other early child care providers. In the short term, early child care providers and their funders used the information to identify gaps in the face of upcoming legislative changes in reimbursement rates and advocate for additional investment. More broadly, the project developed a shared baseline for tracking progress and strengthened collaboration with organizations working toward the success of the county's children and youth.

Finally, local data intermediaries enhance the community information environment. This includes **building government capacity** to collect high-quality data to use in policy and operations. The Oakland Unified School District contracted with the Urban Strategies Council to provide technical assistance to help teachers, principals, and administrators shift their understanding about the causes of chronic absenteeism and share best practices on how schools could use

data to monitor students' attendance and intervene early. Building on this technical assistance, the district developed new policies and procedures to address students' needs and be accountable to the community, including weekly reports on absenteeism disaggregated by grade, ethnicity, and gender.

## **INFLUENCES ON THE MIX OF INTERMEDIARY SERVICES**

The roles data intermediaries play in any given place depends on many factors, starting with the public sector's needs and interests. Mayors set different priorities related to transparency, policy topics, and resident engagement. In pursuing these goals, governments, and agencies within governments, exhibit different stages of maturity in analyzing data and partnering with external groups. Whatever the capacity level, data intermediaries are strong advocates for investments in government staff training and data infrastructure, including open data systems.

Similarly, intermediaries have various missions and expertise. An intermediary might concentrate on initiatives to improve outcomes for children and families or on understanding housing markets and policies. Its employees may be experienced in data analysis, evaluation, visualization, coalition management, or community engagement. The examples in the previous section illustrate how intermediaries apply these skills for direct services, but they also perform activities that indirectly advance government goals. For example, staff contribute their knowledge of neighborhoods to government advisory committees and task forces, whether revitalizing a specific neighborhood or working on a citywide issue, such as school readiness. Providing data and analysis to nonprofits and funders results in more effective interventions and insights on community needs for everyone. More broadly, intermediaries improve residents' data literacy, organizing events and training for residents and nonprofits on using data and technology, better equipping them to participate in informed discourse about public policy and program choices.

The types of activities related to local government are also determined by the source and amount of funding. Many data intermediaries raise their own operating funds and cover the costs of collaboration with the public sector through multiple sources. For example, the Oakland Unified School District hired the Urban Strategies Council for the consultation on absenteeism, while the City of Columbus issues an annual contract to Thoughtwell to pay for tasks determined throughout the year. Intermediaries may also pay for their work with governments through philanthropic, state or federal grants, such as Baltimore's Byrne Innovation Grant. In this way, data intermediaries help their governments access additional resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

All local governments should learn from the examples in this brief and the case studies about how data intermediaries can enhance their ability to use data to inform planning and operations. Within metropolitan areas in the NNIP network, elected officials and agency staff should consider ways to connect with their NNIP Partner organization. This will require time from both sides to understand each other's interests and capacities, but cultivating an ongoing and multifaceted relationship pays off in several ways. First, continuing exchange will surface opportunities to work together and facilitate understanding of which potential projects are a good fit. Any resulting formal work also serves the government's broader interests by strengthening an organization whose services benefit the entire community. Finally, regular interactions aid in sustaining the relationship over time. Intermediaries have a long-term stake in constructive interactions with governments, but tensions may arise. For example, an NNIP Partner may testify about their analysis to the city council to encourage the mayor to shift public resources to a new issue or geographic area. A track record of working together builds mutual respect that allows for dialogue around points of disagreement.

For places not in the NNIP network, local governments should explore relationships with organizations that may provide data intermediary services, such as applied university centers, nonprofit research organizations, or regional planning agencies. Academic centers may already participate in networks championing partnerships with local governments, such as the MetroLab Network or the Consortium of University Public Service Organizations. If no institutions provide data and related services, individuals within governments can promote the idea of a data intermediary and encourage relevant organizations to reach out to NNIP and the other networks to learn more.

All local governments should join with area data intermediaries to raise the whole community's ability to regularly share and use data to improve decisionmaking. Internally, governments can implement best practices around sharing their data, through open data portals and responsible sharing of confidential data. Governments should improve their staff's ability to use data in planning and operations and create the culture to put these skills into everyday practice. This can be accomplished through locally developed training programs, such as San Francisco's Data Academy, or through engaging with national support initiatives such as What Works.<sup>1</sup> Governments can also promote their nonprofit contractors' use of data for planning and performance management. Recent NNIP resources on data and technology training enable stakeholders to advocate for training and implement community-based courses.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of local governments can also participate in local events like Baltimore's or Pittsburgh's Data Days.<sup>3</sup>

Over the 20 years since NNIP began, city and county governments have undertaken exciting innovations in using and sharing data for public operations and planning. Trusted local data intermediaries are available to provide complementary services, contributing their understanding of the local context, a reputation for impartial analysis, and a set of relationships that spans sectors. Their services build local capacity of governments to use data for better decisionmaking, and foster the data literacy of other community actors for more informed interventions and public dialogue. By engaging with these organizations, local governments can take advantage of all available resources to inform policies and programs and better serve their residents and neighborhoods.

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## NOTES

1. See the academy's website at <https://datasf.org/academy/>.
2. "Expanding Training on Data and Technology to Improve Communities," National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/activities/projects/expanding-training-data-and-technology-improve-communities>.
3. See BNIA-JFI's website at [https://bniajfi.org/data\\_day/](https://bniajfi.org/data_day/) and Bob Gradeck and Eleanor Tutt, "Pittsburgh's Data Day: Using Civic Data to Spark Hands-On Community Engagement," Living Cities (blog), October 19, 2017, <https://www.livingcities.org/blog/1226-pittsburgh-s-data-day-using-civic-data-to-spark-hands-on-community-engagement>.

## REFERENCE

Living Cities and Governing. 2017. "[Key Outcome Elements: Public-Sector Innovation](#)." Washington, DC: Living Cities and Governing.

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.



For more information about NNIP, go to [www.neighborhoodindicators.org](http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org) or email [nnip@urban.org](mailto:nnip@urban.org).