THE NORTHERN TRUST INSTITUTE

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY SCAN

In their efforts to strengthen the communities they serve, community leaders often need to identify the needs and service gaps of a community or learn about its existing resources and potential partnerships. To answer these questions and help build their development strategy, leaders can turn to a community scan.

"Northern Trust's Community Impact Consulting Services built a community scan for the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte County. The foundation's goal is to move the county into the list of top ten healthiest Indiana counties by the year 2030. The scan was designed to identify the current conditions impacting health and to demonstrate what areas most need to improve to reach the goal," says Maria Fruth, President and CEO of the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte.[1]

A community scan is a multidimensional, descriptive analysis of a neighborhood, town, city, county, region or state. While its focus can be as narrow or as broad as needed, a comprehensive community scan will include demographics, social factors, economic data, housing data and anchor institutions.

Fortunately, sources of information for a community scan have never been as numerous or as easy to access as they are today. While some data may be unavailable for small towns and rural areas, data from most populated areas will be available from multiple sources and with different levels of aggregation. Most data are only a Google search away.

The U.S. Census Bureau maintains the American FactFinder website, which provides access to several federal census and survey products. Users can search and download data by geographical level (state, county, city or census tract) depending on user experience level or need. It is a good source for population demographics, employment and income, and housing characteristics.

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1 Full La Porte County scan located at https://www.ten2030.org/content/sites/laporte/Community_Scan_-_La_Porte_IN.pdf

The Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council (FFIEC) maintains the FFIEC Census and Demographic Data website, which can be used with Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data to examine financial institutions for Community Reinvestment Act compliance. Data is disaggregated to the census tract level and includes information on race and ethnicity, family and household income, housing stock and tenancy.

In addition to information about the race, gender, age and family structure of community residents, data about what residents do for a living, the industries that employ them and changes in wages and prices can provide another dimension to community scans. Data on these aspects of the community (typically at the county level) can be found at the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics website.

Other information that contributes to the understanding of social conditions in a community includes crime statistics, health, nutrition, education, birth rates and mortality rates. In some cases, this type of data is available through projects of foundations, not-for-profit organizations, state and local governments and universities.

One such example is the national KIDS COUNT project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation has combined data from national and state sources as well as not-for-profits to provide information on the well-being of children and families. Much of the data can be accessed through the KIDS COUNT Data Center.

A collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps website provides an annual snapshot of a community's health as compared to other counties in the state. The rankings are based on various factors like the availability of healthcare, the prevalence of smoking and excessive alcohol use, high school graduation rates, family structure and crime.

Data on violent crimes can be obtained directly from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics website. Data on mortality and cause of deaths at the county level can be found from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention at CDC WONDER. While these sources provide aggregate statistics, local law enforcement agencies may be able to provide additional details about specific violent crimes that can facilitate the creation of maps of crime activities. In some cases, they may be able to provide maps already prepared. State or county health agencies may also have more detailed or more up-to-date data available.

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In conjunction with other data, the location of anchor institutions in a community may help provide indications of gaps in service and the potential for serious issues. For example, lack of employers in neighborhoods with high unemployment may indicate that transportation is a factor explaining unemployment; or high violent crime incidence near an elementary school may explain low performance and absenteeism. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics website provides locations and statistics on individual schools. This information can also be obtained from local school districts and state agencies. Data on local employers is less consistently available. For some counties, a Google search on "largest employers in City X" may lead to a list on a local economic development website. Researchers can obtain lists of not-for-profits in a county, city or ZIP code from GuideStar, a not-for-profit that provides research on charitable organizations.

A community scan is more than a series of tables and graphs for a community or geography. A comprehensive community scan should provide insight into the needs and potential issues of a community, help identify the existing institutions and resources that may be used more effectively and identify gaps in services. An effective community scan requires organizing and screening data to reveal a community's specific story.

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