

Learn About Your Neighborhood: Uncover the Strengths and Challenges

Learning about your neighborhood can help you figure out how to make it stronger. To achieve the results you want for your children and family, it's important to understand your neighborhood--the strengths as well as the problems, who all your neighbors are, and how they are doing. This information will help you and your neighbors figure out what must change if your neighborhood is to thrive.

This section will help you learn:

1. **How your neighborhood is doing** – the condition of people's lives, their successes and challenges.
2. **How things got to be the way they are** – the root causes of current conditions.
3. **What your neighborhood's treasures are** – the strengths and resources of your neighborhood, the assets you use everyday and the hidden treasures you need to uncover and use.
4. **How to use this information** to develop your action plan for achieving better results.

"Trouble is only opportunity in work clothes."

[Henry J. Kaiser](#)

1. How Is Your Neighborhood Doing?

Get the Facts and Figures

Collecting information about how your neighborhood is doing – the conditions of people’s lives, their concerns, neighborhood strengths and resources – helps you get at the underlying issues that must be tackled to make life better. You need information about all aspects of the neighborhood -- ***facts and figures as well as residents’ opinions.***

First, talk with others about the questions they have and the information they want. Here are some questions to get you started.

1. How are our children, families and other members of the neighborhood doing?

What are our problems? How serious are our problems?

What are our successes? What are we doing well?

You might discover some bad outcomes—perhaps there are too many children who don’t complete high school on time or too many elders hospitalized for injuries. At the same time, you may uncover some successes. For example, you may find signs that most of the young children in the neighborhood are healthy. They have all their immunizations and have very few serious injuries. Many start kindergarten ready to learn after participating in high-quality preschool and day care programs.

The residents of Mechanicsville, an Atlanta neighborhood, were alarmed to learn how many of their young people were sexually active -- almost half of 14- and 15-year-olds and 17 percent of 12-and 13-year-olds.

In the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego, residents reacted with “a profound sense of sorrow” when they found that many teenagers had abandoned traditional cultural beliefs about abstinence and marriage. Among their findings: 55 percent of sexually active girls became pregnant.

2. What do people who are experiencing positive results say about their lives and the neighborhood?

What is happening with people who are experiencing bad results?

How are folks who are doing well different from those who face serious challenges?

You might learn that most of the teens who drop out of high school are idle. They’re not employed or enrolled in an education program. At the same time, you may find that teens who complete high school on time are regular participants in organized neighborhood activities outside of school hours.

You might find that elders who have accidents and injuries are likely to live alone or that they don’t have anyone to call if they need help.

3. Are things getting better or worse?

Are there locations within the neighborhood where conditions are better or worse?
What are the trends?

Talking to elders and other people who have been around your neighborhood for a while can help you pinpoint recent and longer term changes. Schools, health care providers, and others who provide services to residents may also have information.

4. How are we doing compared to other neighborhoods?

Have other nearby neighborhoods experienced the same problems?
Have they achieved the results you want?

You may learn how a nearby neighborhood has been able to attract new businesses that bring better jobs for residents.

5. What are the root causes?

What is the story behind our neighborhood's current conditions?
What are the causes and forces at work?

You may learn that things were better before several longtime businesses closed or moved and that few neighborhood residents have the skills they need to get other jobs.

6. What are our neighborhood's assets and strengths?

Who and what resources do people turn to for help?
What resources could we use better?

You're likely to uncover a wealth of treasures. Don't overlook any positives aspects of your neighborhood.

Where to Look for the Information

You may want to start a list of people and organizations that might have the kinds of facts and figures you need. As you collect information from the sources you know, you may learn about other places that have information. Here's a source list to get you started:

- Neighborhood groups and organizations, such as faith groups, schools, law enforcement, the local Chamber of Commerce, the courts, local government.
- Reports or studies issued by United Way, community groups, government agencies, colleges or universities.
- Local newspaper, radio and television.

Don't be discouraged if some of the information you want is not available or if it's difficult to use. Make a list of the gaps--the information that you need to fully understand

what's going on in your neighborhood. You can use your list to figure out how to get the missing information. Ask the sources listed above for help.

Remember: Neighborhood members are the most important source for information.

Although talking to as many neighbors as possible can be time-consuming, it's important right from the start.

2. How Did Things Get This Way?

Especially as folks start talking with each other and identifying the worries and hopes they share, they get excited. This enthusiasm is crucial fuel for building a strong neighborhood! But sometimes, people try to solve neighborhood problems without completely understanding the neighborhood, the problems, or what might solve them.

Dig Deeply to Discover the Root Causes

The root causes of neighborhood problems and conditions are not always obvious. You need to know how things developed--how your neighborhood reached its present point--before you can make things better.

Many Opinions About the Same Problem: An Example

It may be clear to neighbors that too many young people are getting into trouble with the police. But the factors that contribute to the problem may not be easy to put a finger on.

- Some people may believe that the police are the cause – they are arresting kids without good reasons.
- Others may blame drugs – kids getting into drugs, turning to crime to buy drugs, and selling drugs because legal ways to make money aren't available.
- Still other residents may feel that outside gangs moving into the neighborhood are responsible.
- Folks may blame parents for failing to adequately supervise their youngsters, or schools and community programs for failing to offer after-school activities for teens, or local businesses for failing to hire teenagers.
- Some may believe that kids are just dangerous these days. They have no respect for people or laws, and punishment is the only thing they respond to.

In fact, many factors may be involved. Before you can reduce the number of teens getting into trouble, you must find the root causes and the forces at work. Only then can you develop a plan of action that will reduce the number of teen arrests.

Often, residents find that the root causes of neighborhood problems are complicated and that many problems are related. While this can seem overwhelming, the good news is that the results your neighborhood wants to accomplish also are inter-related. Reducing one problem often helps solve others. Improving one result can help to improve others.

Failing to examine the root causes and forces at work may lead you to try a quick fix – a band-aid solution that does little to solve the underlying problems or to achieve better results.

The deeper you dig for information, the more likely that you will be able to develop strategies for working together that will produce results -- actions that will make your neighborhood a better place to live.

3. What Are Your Neighborhood's Strengths and Treasures?

Discover What's Working in Your Neighborhood and What You Can Put to Work

Often facts, figures and neighborhood discussions focus on problems--what's missing and what is *not* working. This can make the neighborhood seem very needy and the problems seem overwhelming. But there are many positives in every neighborhood. *Every person and group has assets to build on – skills, talents and other resources.* Mobilizing the strengths of your neighborhood can contribute to better results for everybody. First, you must discover your neighborhood's true potential – its obvious and not-so-obvious treasures!

As you begin looking for your neighborhood's strengths, don't overlook any positives. There are unlimited treasures and ways to use them to achieve the results you and your neighbors want. *The priority is to look for **all** the potential within your neighborhood – even if it's not clear right now how to use it.*

Desired Result: Children completing high school on time.

Examples of neighborhood resources that may help children complete school on time:

- Parents and others who make sure children complete homework and provide quiet space and time for study.
- Parents active in school activities, e.g. parent-teacher conferences or volunteer work.
- An active Parent-Teacher-Student Association.
- A high school counselor and truant officer who kids credit with motivating them to stay in school.
- After-school tutoring program for 8th and 9th grades operated by the school.
- A church-sponsored mentoring program.
- Employment opportunities for teens at local businesses.
- Internships and apprenticeships for students with local artists, crafts people, professionals, and business people.
- Counseling services for elementary students and their families provided by the Department of Mental Health.
- A child care center that provides high quality care to 45 pre-school children.
- Life skills classes offered by a church youth group.
- Two outdoor basketball courts maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department.
- A public library with computers and other resources.
- Incentive scholarships offered by local service clubs or businesses.

Inventory Your Assets: Counting Your Blessings

Making a written inventory of your neighborhood strengths will help you put together a picture of the potential. As you find the strengths in your neighborhood, you and others will begin to see how they can be used. A written list helps by:

- Shifting your focus from problems to strengths and results,
- Recognizing the value of individuals to the neighborhood and making them visible to others,
- Getting residents interested and involved by recognizing their talents, skills and contributions,
- Identifying what's missing -- gaps that need to be filled.

Map Your Treasures

As you identify the positives of your neighborhood, you can plot them on a simple neighborhood map. Along with the location, short summaries describe individual skills and interests, services, facilities, programs and other resources. Some neighborhoods put the information in a computer database that people can use on-line.

What To Look For

1. Individual Treasures: Tapping Residents' Time and Talents

Everyone has something to offer. Interests, skills, knowledge, talents, and time are positive parts of your neighborhood. A person doesn't need education or money to make important contributions. In fact, positive attitude and interest in improving the neighborhood may be the most important resources people bring to the effort. For example, folks can provide informal childcare, check on an ill neighbor, read to others, cook meals, help with meetings, repair cars or homes, style the hair of elders or others who have difficulty leaving their homes, play music, create beautiful artwork, or organize activities. By thinking outside the box, neighbors can identify ways to help each other and to improve results for the neighborhood.

Ask folks what they like to do. One-on-one interviews, small group discussions, and surveys can help you discover the strengths of the people of your neighborhood.

Building on the Interests and Skills of People in the Neighborhood

In Charlotte, 20 people each reached out to interview 25 others about their neighborhood, its assets and things they would like to change. More than half the people interviewed agreed to become part of a "community resource guide." They are working to make the neighborhood stronger by pooling the skills, talents, and interests of community members and organizations.

2. Neighborhood Associations: Wealth in Every Neighborhood

Most resident-driven efforts to improve neighborhoods start with small groups of people who already get together for some purpose. And the good news is that every neighborhood has groups that are potential sources of support for residents.

Groups of people that get together within your neighborhood might include parents who chat in the park while their children play, folks who get together to play cards or watch televised sports, service clubs, softball teams, people who play pick-up games of basketball, self-help groups, neighborhood crime watch groups, senior citizen groups, garden clubs, scouts, church groups, political action groups, housing project councils, musical groups, and many others.

While you're finding these groups in your neighborhood, be sure you gather information from participants, including the reasons they get together, their activities, locations, and how many people can participate.

Treasures That Are Often Overlooked

Often, groups are stronger and more plentiful in established, older neighborhoods – even urban public housing projects -- than in suburban or highly mobile areas where people haven't had time to develop connections.

Members of Chicago's Grand Boulevard neighborhood – a 96 block area with a population of 40,000 and the second lowest personal income in the city — identified 319 associations. University students who were specially trained to find associations identified more than 1,000 groups in the neighborhood.

3. Local Institutions: Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Resources

Every neighborhood also has some established organizations and infrastructure. These institutions often use, control or influence a lot of resources such as buildings, paid staff, volunteers or members, equipment, furniture, supplies, transportation, utilities, experience, knowledge and skills. Some use taxpayers' money and other contributions of neighborhood residents.

The more obvious institutions include schools, faith groups, hospitals, parks, libraries, police, fire departments, grocery stores, and community colleges. Other institutions that residents use everyday may be taken for granted – doctors' offices, health clinics, banks that cash public assistance checks, laundromats, bus and rail transportation, and supermarkets that offer low prices.

Young People Drawing the Map

“Community Youth Mapping” is one way to gather information about neighborhood resources. Young people find and provide the information about assets that benefit them, and adults help by training the young mappers.

The youngsters collect information about local assets with interviews and surveys. Youth-friendly resources are people, activities, and places that help young people improve their lives. They might include places to study after school, the basketball court or baseball diamond, organized after-school activities, employment centers, drug and alcohol treatment centers, youth-friendly businesses and organizations. In addition to a paper map, youth mappers put information onto a computer so it's available to residents and to people who provide services in the neighborhood. Mappers describe the available resources and rate each asset on its youth friendliness, accessibility to individuals who are disabled, and languages that are spoken.

Other groups in your neighborhood – such as elders, single parents, or kin caring for children -- might want to draw their own maps or work together to make a complete neighborhood asset map.

4. How Can You Put This Information to Work?

By the time you collect all these facts, figures and opinions, you will have a lot of information about your neighborhood. You and your neighbors can use it to create a plan for improving results. Here are suggested steps for using the information you've collected to help you get ready to plan.

Take a Good, Hard Look at the Information.

- ❑ **Review the information you've collected.** Look for opportunities and ideas for improving neighborhood conditions. At the same time, note important concerns or difficult problems that you found.
- ❑ **Compare the facts and figures with neighbors' opinions. Find areas where all the information seems to "agree."** For example, residents might complain that there are few job opportunities in the neighborhood. You might find that in fact a number of businesses have moved outside the area, closed, down-sized, or hired people who are not neighborhood residents.
- ❑ **Look for possible connections.** The information you collect may help you see connections between concerns or problems that at first glance don't seem to be related. For example, schools may be reporting an increase in student tardiness and absences. At the same time, you may learn from the local workforce office that more single mothers are getting jobs.
- ❑ **Compare information about your neighborhood with the same information from similar neighborhoods.** This kind of comparison has many pay-offs. It can help you:
 - Identify areas where your neighborhood is doing well and results that are especially bad,
 - Confirm and back-up resident's concerns,
 - Show where your neighborhood may be heading, and
 - Set priorities for neighborhood planning.
- ❑ **Look for gaps.** Look at the difference between current conditions and the results your neighborhood wants. Look at the difference between neighborhood resources that you can identify and what you want to accomplish. How do the assets match up with neighborhood conditions? What assets need to be developed?

Set Priorities: Use the Information to Fine-Tune Your Focus.

Next, you need to work together to figure out the neighborhood priorities – what you want to tackle first, second and third.

- ❑ **Cross-check what you've learned with folks in the neighborhood.** Double check to see if people's concerns match with what the facts and figures tell about the neighborhood. A neighborhood summit is one way to get more discussion.
- ❑ **Try grouping issues and concerns.** This can help people see connections and similarities and make decisions about what's most important. Here are some categories you may want to use:
 - Issues that have a lot of energy behind them.
Concerns that affect a lot of community members and that people are eager to address.
 - Low-hanging fruit.
Priorities likely to give you some initial success.
Issues that the neighborhood already has some resources to address and that are not the most difficult challenges you face.
 - Tough nuts to crack.
Conditions that the neighborhood lacks resources to improve or that have other barriers making immediate action difficult.
- ❑ **Most importantly, be sure that neighborhood members are passionate** about the priorities. Issues that get lukewarm reactions from people are not priorities.

Tell the Neighborhood What You've Learned.

- ❑ **Use many ways to get out the word.**
 - Talk with your neighbors. Find others who are willing to talk to residents they know.
 - Have one-on-one conversations as well as meetings with neighborhood groups.
 - Provide the information at meetings of existing groups, such as faith groups, clubs, and others.
 - Get residents together in small groups such as family circles and large groups like neighborhood summits.
 - Distribute handouts at places where neighbors gather for daily activities.
 - Use local media. Ask local radio stations and newspapers to do a story or make a public service announcement.

- ❑ **Keep reports short** – whether they are written or verbal. You can have back-up information available for people who want more details.
- ❑ **Have a paper hand-out when you talk with people.** A lot of people want written information they can look at later, discuss with others, and pass along.
- ❑ **Use eye appeal.** Put the information into a form that is easy for folks to read and understand.