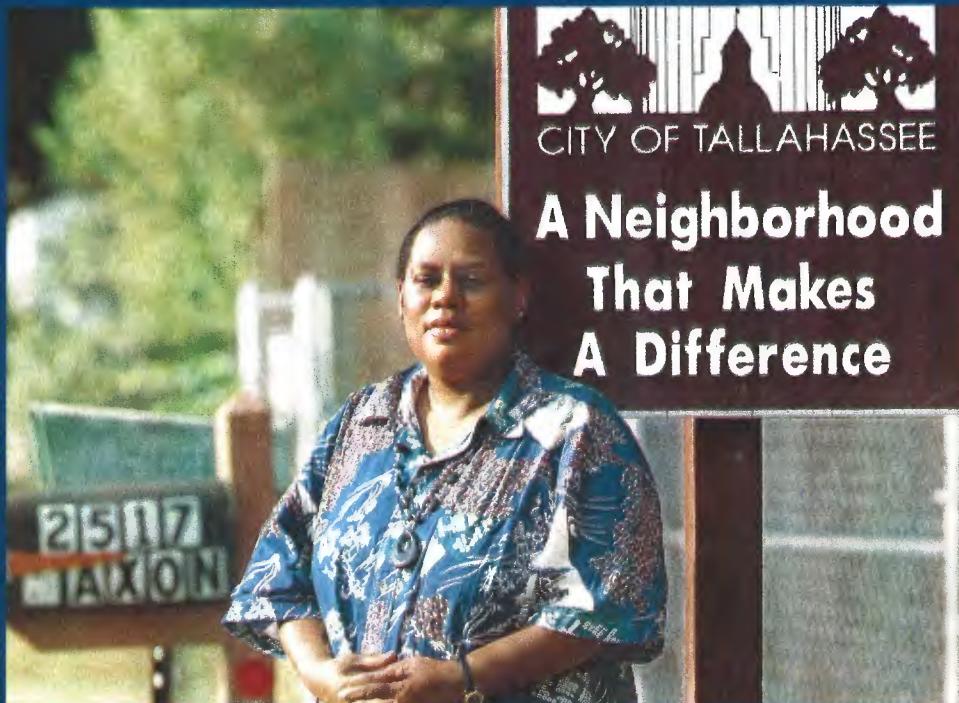


LISTENING AND LEARNING

COMMUNITY INDICATOR PROFILES OF KNIGHT FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES AND THE NATION



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LISTENING AND LEARNING

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DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITIES

For the past three years, we at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation have been listening and learning. We've spoken with more than 16,000 people in the 26 U.S. communities where we have an enduring commitment to support nonprofit efforts to improve the quality of life. We've reviewed thousands of pages from existing reports on education, housing, arts and other aspects of civic life. Millions of pieces of data emerged. Through what we call our Community Indicators project, we have harvested and organized the most compelling items to help us deepen our knowledge of our communities and, ultimately, to improve our grant making. We need to be aware of the setting to be a good local partner.

Through a variety of reports and presentations, we are sharing the material with grant recipients, local decision-makers, residents of our communities and researchers. Here, we've packaged a summary of the key findings from across communities.

In interviews, adults in our communities have told us about their fear of crime, their firm belief that they can make an impact on their community and their opinion of the performance of their local government. They've pointed to problems their community must overcome in order to move forward, problems such as too many unsupervised youth, too little affordable housing or not enough arts and cultural opportunities. They've distinguished big problems from small ones and told us about issues they believe do not amount to much of a problem at all. Further, the interviews have revealed that many families live in isolation, with little or no relationship with their nearest neighbors, and they have shown us how deeply race and ethnicity mark the boundaries of individuals' local experiences.

We have also heard lots about how adults in our communities spend their time. They've told us about trips to hear symphonies and visits to museums. They've told us about volunteering for charitable groups, attending services at a local house of worship, keeping up with the local news and surfing the Internet.

Some highlights from our conversations:

- Americans are generally happy with their local communities. Nationwide, eight in 10 people say that their community is an excellent or a good place to live. Such positive community ratings are also reported across the Knight communities, with one key exception. There is generally less satisfaction reported in urban areas.

- Despite the conventional wisdom that local governments are closer to the people and more responsive, many Americans put their local city or town governments at the low end of the list when they rate the performance of local institutions. Nationally, 55 percent say their local government does at least a good job, a figure much lower than the positive ratings for local fire departments, libraries, public schools and even the police. This pattern holds across many of the Knight communities with local governments always being among the two lowest rated local institutions.
- Ratings of local public schools, on the other hand, are volatile. Nationally, about six in 10 adults give positive ratings to their local public schools. But beneath that nationwide figure there is dramatic variation from one Knight community to the next. For example, in some communities, such as Grand Forks, nearly eight in 10 say the public schools are doing an excellent or a good job. That share drops to fewer than four in 10 in other communities such as Philadelphia.
- People from different racial or ethnic backgrounds – even those living within the same physical geography – have consistently different points of view about a number of community issues, including those related to crime, community development and education. The disparity in perceptions of arts and cultural activities is especially compelling.
- The surveys reveal that three background characteristics are consistently important to active citizenship, both nationwide and across the Knight communities: the belief that one can have an impact in making his or her community a better place to live, volunteerism for community organizations and regular attendance of religious services. Each of these “civic engines” is strongly related to positive involvement in community life.

To complement the interviews, we also reviewed existing reports that document local conditions. From these, we gained a deeper understanding of the economic and social context of the communities in which residents live, work and play. We know which communities benefited most from the nation’s record run of economic growth and which ones still are struggling to attract jobs. We know where child poverty has declined and where it continues to tamp down hope. We also have a clearer view of the state of local education, housing, literacy and children’s issues. We know

where arts organizations tend to be in financial trouble and where they are strongest. We know where third-grade reading performance is at crisis levels. We know where infant-mortality rates are rising.

In each case, we've relied upon the most current data available. We carried out the interviews in 1999. Many of the existing reports are based on data from the late 1990s. In a few cases, we relied on 1990 Census data. Already, we are updating this information as 2000 Census data is made available.

GROWTH OF COMMUNITY INDICATORS

In designing our effort, we benefited from the experiences of others. Since Jacksonville, Fla., initiated its local community indicators effort in 1985, hundreds of similar projects have emerged around the country. Redefining Progress, an Oakland, Calif., research organization, has identified more than 200 U.S. indicators projects. These vary in size, scope and topical focus. Some projects dig deep into one community. Others track common indicators across multiple communities, in some cases to serve an analytic or evaluation function related to a major social experiment such as welfare reform. Recently, Redefining Progress and the International Institute for Sustainable Development merged their database of indicators projects, which provides an annotated directory of projects around the world. See Appendix II for a bibliography of indicator projects and related resources Knight Foundation reviewed in preparing this work.

An "indicator" may be described as "a set of statistics that can serve as a proxy or metaphor for phenomena that are not directly measurable," according to a Redefining Progress report from Clifford Cobb. However, the term is often used less precisely to mean any "data pertaining to social conditions." Or, as Kate Beslme explains in another Redefining Progress paper: "Indicators are simply quantitative information, or data, tracked over time. In the context of community indicators projects, they are quantitative information about what has often been considered a qualitative subject: the well-being of communities."

Several leaders in the field describe this sweeping collection of projects as a movement, with one report arguing that it is driven by "grassroots leaders seeking better ways to measure progress, to engage community members in a dialogue about the future, and to change community outcomes." The effort grows out of the history of social reporting, as Marc Miringoff describes in *The Social Health of the Nation*, an effort

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to find ways to track the social health of the nation that would stand alongside established indicators – such as the GDP or the unemployment rate – used to measure the nation’s economic health.

In the United States, from about 1910 to 1940, there were several major social reporting efforts, including projects focused on the well-being of American children and projects examining several aspects of the American social condition, including the environment, arts, health and rural life. Some projects also focused on U.S. communities, such as E.L. Thorndike’s application of his “goodness scale” to 297 communities in his 1939 book, *Your City*.

In the 1960s, as Miringoff and others have documented, there was a renewed focus on social reporting in the United States; this is when the term “social indicators” was coined. Despite the recent energy at the local level, U.S. indicators efforts remain decentralized and highly project-specific. In contrast, nearly all other western nations have established standard, comprehensive reporting mechanisms to document and track cultural and social indicators.

MEASURE WHAT YOU VALUE MOST

Useful community indicators projects hinge on the ability of the intended user to understand and state its mission clearly. To narrow down an endless list of potential indicators, we worked to identify indicators most closely related to Knight Foundation’s mission: investing in the vitality of 26 communities.

For Knight Foundation, that meant focusing on information that deepens our understanding of the local context and shining light on the areas of civic life that represent our enduring interests: Education; Well-being of Children and Families; Housing and Community Development; Civic Engagement; and the Vitality of Cultural Life. This report is organized by chapters on these topics.

The strategic plan Knight Foundation trustees adopted late in 2000 affirmed our commitment to these areas of local grant making. Thus, the broad, generalist nature of these categories leaves us with a resource that will serve us now and into the future. Foundation trustees also identified a new local priority: Economic Development. As we update our work, we plan to add a corresponding module that will describe key indicators in this area.

As a tool for philanthropy, indicators projects must measure that which foundations hope to affect. The work requires more than an effort to produce a needs assessment, which may point to a general area of need but fail to identify specific factors the community must change in order to improve quality of life.

In contrast, indicators projects describe aspects of civic life in ways that enable communities to turn information into action. Stakeholders first can agree on which aspect of civic life they want to change. Next, they can decide how much they want to move the marker over time. Finally, they can craft strategies designed to help them reach intermediate benchmarks on their way to the ultimate target. Knight Foundation is using its indicators to help set funding priorities.

PUTTING THE INDICATORS TO USE

As part of our new approach to local grant making, we are crafting a top-down, bottom-up approach. From the top, the Foundation has identified the six broad targets we value. We realize that the grant strategies we employ will be as varied and complex as the communities themselves. Thus, in each Knight town and city, we want people to come together to identify priorities for Knight Foundation funding. The Foundation is coordinating meetings with our local advisory committees to have them recommend a few priority outcomes Knight's grant making should seek to produce for the next three to five years. The indicators have been one of the key information tools we use in the process of reviewing priorities.

This bottom-up feature allows communities to shape customized efforts that fit within Foundation targets. It also allows the Foundation to form long-term partnerships with organizations pursuing high-risk and experimental ventures. We are committed to share what we learn across our 26 local laboratories.

The approach combines traditional sources of local knowledge with findings from our community indicators. The indicators provide, for the first time, a reliable source of information about local conditions, citizen behaviors and attitudes within and across our communities.

In 2000, we experimented with this approach in a small number of Knight communities. Considering the critical changes that must occur to improve the quality of life in the community, each committee worked to define the specific accomplishments Knight Foundation should aim for in

“Indicators are simply quantitative information, or data, tracked over time.”

—Kate Beslme



Indicators are highly effective tools for stakeholders

partnership with nonprofits. From 2001-2003, we will bring all Knight communities into this new approach to grant making.

As a planning tool, we can blend data from our indicators work with other information tools to help stakeholders reach agreement on funding priorities for each Knight Foundation community.

As an analytic tool, indicators can help increase our understanding of complex social conditions. Researchers, for instance, have used indicators to disentangle the relationship between neighborhood affluence and the well-being of children.

More commonly, indicators are highly effective tools for enlightening stakeholders. Indicators projects contribute to – and do not displace – the value of other information tools. In many cases, indicators do not cause stakeholders to change course; instead, they help stakeholders improve and refine their ongoing work. For instance, indicators help Foundation staff prepare for site visits. Indicators help us ask sharper questions in the due diligence phase of grant making. Perhaps most important, indicators force us to question our own biases and conventional wisdom.

Further, indicators can serve as a neutral resource that all groups in the grant making process can use equally. With applicants having access to data the Foundation possesses, the playing field is leveled among various stakeholders.

There are, of course, cautions to using indicators in grant making. Staff and local leaders must not forget what they know when in the presence of data. They must not follow data blindly in setting priorities. Also, indicators data do not dictate what Knight stakeholders value. For our work in Knight communities, we want to identify grant-making priorities at the intersection of indicators information and local knowledge. Somewhere in the mix of data-driven priorities and stakeholder values, each Knight community will find a slipper that fits.

SHARING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

From 1990-99, Knight Foundation trustees approved 2,143 local grants totaling \$150 million to improve the quality of life in those 26 communities. Our commitment is growing. As we get to know our communities better, it follows that Knight Foundation can make grants with greater impact. We can also form more effective partnerships. That's why we're our own first audience for this work.

But the audience for this information extends beyond Knight Foundation's offices. Nonprofit organizations, community foundations, other foundations, researchers and writers are interested in using the information in a variety of ways. In response, we are sharing what we've compiled through our listening and learning.

In Chapter 2, we present information that describes the demographic, economic and social context of our 26 communities, otherwise known as community conditions. We gathered this information from existing reports. As always, we try to include U.S. data as benchmarks.

Chapter 3 describes what we learned from existing reports – again, community conditions – about civic engagement in our communities and around the nation, as well as a narrative summary of what we discovered through our interviews with thousands of adults. We follow this same format in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 as we present survey findings related to education, the well-being of children and families, housing and community development, and the vitality of cultural life.

In the technical appendix, we provide methodological documentation for the national survey, a copy of the results of that survey and an outline of the indicators measures we gathered from existing reports. The appendix materials also include highlights of each community's survey.

Here's a list of the 26 Knight Foundation communities and their corresponding home counties:

- Aberdeen, S.D. (Brown County)
- Akron, Ohio (Summit County)
- Biloxi, Miss. (Harrison County)
- Boca Raton, Fla. (Palm Beach County)
- Boulder, Colo. (Boulder County)
- Bradenton, Fla. (Manatee County)
- Charlotte, N.C. (Mecklenburg County)
- Columbia, S.C. (Richland County)
- Columbus, Ga. (Muscogee County)
- Detroit, Mich. (Wayne County)

Duluth, Minn. (St. Louis County)
Fort Wayne, Ind. (Allen County)
Gary, Ind. (Lake County)
Grand Forks, N.D. (Grand Forks County)
Lexington, Ky. (Fayette County)
Long Beach, Calif. (Los Angeles County)
Macon, Ga. (Bibb County)
Miami, Fla. (Miami-Dade County)
Milledgeville, Ga. (Baldwin County)
Myrtle Beach, S.C. (Horry County)
Philadelphia, Pa. (Philadelphia County)
St. Paul, Minn. (Ramsey County)
San Jose, Calif. (Santa Clara County)
State College, Pa. (Centre County)
Tallahassee, Fla. (Leon County)
Wichita, Kan. (Sedgwick County)

In most cases, our inquiries focused on the home county of each community. Even in the few communities where we have broader geographic funding interests, most of our grant support is aimed at helping the home county. Further, data collection always requires choices; to launch the project, we had to put boundaries on our inquiries. In some cases, existing data were not always available for all possible jurisdictions. In future updates, we expect to be able to add a regional component in communities where this is relevant. Also, we are putting to use research and reports others have produced that will help fill gaps in our own work.

There are some notable exceptions to our practice of examining the home county. Because the municipalities of Gary and Long Beach are dramatically different from their home counties, we tried to focus on the central city. In South Florida, our relationship with Boca Raton and Miami have made Broward County – situated between those two communities – a natural area of interest for Knight Foundation. So our survey findings include information on Broward County, and we try to point out cases where Broward or Miami-Dade counties stand out from the crowd. In Columbia, we also surveyed two counties – Richland and Lexington – because the municipality draws citizens who live and work in both counties. When we describe results for Columbia, we are describing results from the two-county analysis.

To help readers, in the tables that present survey findings, we have tried to include specific descriptions of the geographic area surveyed along with the community name. In the narrative sections describing the survey findings, we tend to rely on the community name as a shorthand device. We tried not to get too bogged down in technical issues here. In the sections on community conditions, we have tried to specify whether the data describe the home county, the central city or another geographic area – such as a public school district, which often does not follow any logical community boundaries.

Despite our efforts to make documentation transparent, we are limited because this is actually a summary of dozens of detailed indicators reports. In a way, it's even a summary of many summaries. There is an enormous amount of supporting technical documentation we can provide to help researchers or others interested in replicating the work. Also, there are individual reports for every community that provide high levels of detail on each of the 26 Knight communities, so we have plenty to share with readers interested in digging deeper. Readers with questions should consult the Foundation's web site (www.knightfdn.org) for access to other reports or call us at the Foundation.

We also have made the original survey data available for scholars and researchers to use in secondary analysis. The data and documentation are archived with the Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Through its web site (http://www.irss.unc.edu/data_archive/), the Odum Institute makes the instruments, data and reports available for free.