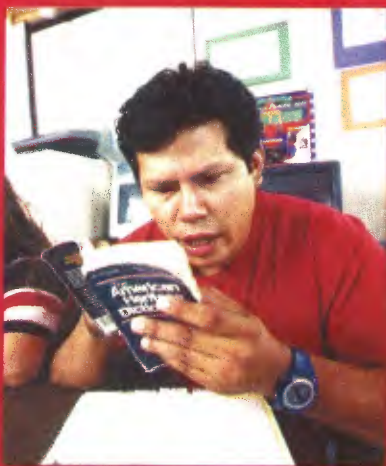


LISTENING AND LEARNING 2004

COMMUNITY INDICATOR PROFILES OF KNIGHT FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES AND THE NATION



Introduction

John Bare

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

November, 2003

If there is a birthplace for community indicators, you might find it at 800 S. Halsted St., in Chicago's downtown.

It's at this spot where Jane Addams, more than a century ago, founded Hull House, a neighborhood center that provided everything from child care to a job bank to citizenship training to music and art classes – exactly the type of silo-busting, interdisciplinary community-based strategy Knight Foundation and others try to create today.

Blossoming from her enterprise was the famed *Hull House Papers* indicators report in 1895, a set of maps commissioned by the Illinois Bureau of Labor. "Using color-coded maps, the volume breathed life into dry statistics," Ben Wattenberg says in his description of Addams's work for *The First American Century*, a PBS documentary, web and book project (<http://www.pbs.org/fmc/>). Families didn't earn enough for basic subsistence, Addams found, and Italians were at the bottom of the economic ladder, taking home less than \$260 a year.

Here at Knight Foundation, our Community Indicators Project is one way we are listening to and learning from our communities. From the Great Plains to both coasts, from old factory towns to college centers to a new banking capital, Knight communities represent almost every kind of patch in the American quilt, and our indicators are vivid evidence that national averages mask the variations across U.S. communities. Every place is competing against its own standards and, frankly, its own present and past.

For this update, Knight Foundation's second round of indicators, we talked with more than 20,000 people in Knight Foundation's 26 communities, and we sorted through hundreds of thousands of electronic and paper records. Taken together, the conversations with community residents and the 84 administrative measures

reveal individuals' impressions of their hometowns and trace actual changes over time. The indicators describe aspects of public life that are the focus of our grant making: well-being of children and families; vitality of cultural life; civic engagement and positive human relations; housing and community development; education; and economic development. This book provides a sweeping summary of highlights across our communities. From our web site (www.knightfdn.org), users can download or order copies of much more comprehensive reports on individual communities.

Yet the value of our indicators lies not in any analysis or methodological feat. The value manifests itself in the utility of the knowledge, in the role indicators play in helping assemblies of passionate, opinionated individuals agree to marshal their resources in the pursuit of a specific community result.

Confronting a dissatisfaction with the status quo, each Knight Foundation advisory committee has asked of itself: *What must change in order for us to become satisfied? What kind of community do we want to be? Given our assets and our challenges, what kind of community can we become? How can Knight Foundation investments make a difference? How will we mark progress along the way? What is the story we want to tell?*

That much of this work feels new to us is due in part to our authentically American inclination to consider everything as novel, to behave as if history began yesterday and to lock onto the horizon without recognizing lessons derived from those who went before us. In the end, what is remarkable is not Knight Foundation's innovation but the lineage out of which our practice grows.

Back on Halsted Street, Jane Addams used indicators to animate facts in ways that made it impossible for the community to avert its collective eye. This kind of usage of statistics, Walter Lippman said in 1922, made dying infants "visible, as visible as if the babies had elected an alderman to air their grievances." What Addams and her colleagues found, of course,

summed up the suffering that was routine in American life at the time. Babies frequently failed to see their first birthday. Families were starving. Wages were insufficient to cover basic needs.

But Addams did even more than report indicators. Her genius was her ability to integrate measurement into the very mission of her work: delivering programs and shaping policy to help individuals improve their lot in life. Addams relied on women who were children's advocates, not traditional scholars, to collect data door-to-door, making measurement inseparable from her programmatic outreach. By the 1920s, an Addams colleague was running the first federal Children's Bureau, under the Department of Labor, and her network had pushed through federal legislation that changed the way the nation would care for its poorest families. The model, familiar to all today, sent nurses out to deliver prenatal care, check up on new babies and educate new mothers.

Addams would go on to share the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize. Her legacy, as Ben Wattenberg explains, is nothing short of a turnaround in the human condition. Her work and the work of her colleagues revealed that "infant death was often caused by unsanitary conditions, contaminated water and by the lack of adequate health care. In homes without running water, infant deaths were 40 percent higher. And as the father's income fell by half, infant mortality doubled. ... In 1900, for every 1,000 births, 165 babies died. By 1930, that rate had dropped by more than half, and it kept going down. By the end of the century, only seven babies died for every 1,000 born. Over the course of the century, life expectancy at birth increased from 47 years to 76 years. A baby born at the end of the century will typically live 56 percent longer than an infant born in 1900. A similar trend was apparent among new mothers. In 1900, for every 100,000 births, about 850 mothers died from problems related to pregnancy and child birth. Today for every 100,000 births there are eight deaths."

Since then, indicators have fallen in and out of fashion. Some of the work has been quite creative. E.L. Thorndike, applying a set of indicators he called a

"goodness scale" to 239 communities in the 1939 book, *Your City*, suggested that a community's ratio of dentists to lawyers would reveal something about its quality of life. Today, communities regularly track and report indicators such as unemployment rates, arts funding, housing sales and influenza cases. A commitment to transparency – all of our indicators reports and datasets are freely available – honors the caution from Pat Moynihan, the late New York senator, who noted that everyone is entitled to his own opinions but not his own facts. Ready access to a common set of indicators helps balance the power relationship between foundations and communities, between community leaders and ordinary folk. The theory is that this improves the efficiency and effectiveness of public and private decision making.

When stakes get high and individuals get scared, we often see the corruption of indicators. Individuals cook the data to get the results they believe they have to produce. This was the story in Houston in 2003, when news broke that education officials had covered up student dropouts to improve their indicators. Principals, having lost the protection of tenure, believed they had to produce reports showing low or no dropouts or they'd be fired.

For Knight Foundation, community indicators are important for the same reasons that made them irresistible to Jane Addams. Using our indicators as a starting place, our partners are disaggregating the data to extend the reach of program strategies into the lives of individuals. Starting with countywide indicators on teen pregnancy, for instance, our Macon, Ga., advisory committee unrolled the layers of measurement to find 75 or so women who enter the community's Teen Pregnancy Center annually. As proof that everything old is new again, putting our strategic plan into operation led us to rediscover what Jane Addams showed the world so long ago. To serve these young women in Macon, Knight Foundation has invested in a strategy that sends nurses into their homes to improve prenatal care, ensure a healthy infant, improve parenting practices and delay second pregnancies.