

# Developing Local Knowledge to Inform Action

**BUILDING NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITY PROGRAM PRACTICE BRIEF**



Building Neighborhood  
Capacity Program

[buildingcommunitycapacity.org](http://buildingcommunitycapacity.org)



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## What is the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program?

The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) catalyzes community-driven change in neighborhoods that have historically faced barriers to revitalization. Recognizing the power of place to influence access to opportunity, BNCP is part of the Obama Administration's place-based programming efforts, which includes the Promise Zones and Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative.

BNCP focuses on building community capacity: the knowledge, skills, relationships, processes and resources that neighborhood residents, partner organizations and city-level stakeholders need to work together to achieve better results in public safety, education, housing, employment and other key areas. BNCP was launched in 2012 in eight neighborhoods in four cities – Flint, MI; Fresno, CA; Memphis, TN; and Milwaukee, WI. In 2014, the program was extended, providing each city with two years of additional support to expand to a third neighborhood.

BNCP represents a federal interagency partnership, with funding from the U.S. Departments of Justice, Education, Housing and Urban Development; additional partnership from the Department of Health and Human Services; and technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy. For more information about BNCP, visit <http://www.buildingcommunitycapacity.org>.

# About this Guide

**T**he Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) mobilizes people who care about their neighborhoods to work toward making them places of opportunity for everyone. In their desire to achieve better results for their neighborhoods, the people who make up BNCP sites are not alone. Across the country, groups of residents and partners are devoting their time and talents to improving the places where they live and work. This practice brief shares guidance and examples from BNCP sites about how community members can learn about their neighborhoods as a key building block to achieving what they want for the future.

In this brief, developing local knowledge means creating a shared understanding of the neighborhood by looking at questions like: Who lives here? What do we want for our community? Where are we now? It also means digging beyond the present day to understand how the past helps explain the present.

When coming together to make a difference, team members can find it tempting to jump straight to action. But taking the time to engage many different types of people in understanding the neighborhood is critical. Figuring out what people want to achieve together requires identifying a collective destination that residents and partners can aim toward reaching. People will only be motivated to work together if action responds to what is wanted and needed.

The brief will discuss three stages of developing local knowledge to inform action:



**Getting to know who lives in your neighborhood and what you want to achieve together**



**Gathering and using data to understand neighborhood conditions—past and present**



**Applying learning to inform action that produces results**

# Getting to Know Who Lives in Your Neighborhood and What You Want to Achieve Together

Determining what community members want for the future and how to get there requires developing a deep understanding of your community. The starting point is to learn more about who lives in the neighborhood, where and how people come together and what issues community members care about. Reaching out to people who live and work in the neighborhood helps you learn more about local strengths and challenges.

To develop an accurate picture of what is happening, it is important to talk to people who reflect the diversity of your community. Make sure that your outreach efforts engage people who look like the neighborhood as a whole—not just one group. Connect with residents in existing groups, while reaching out to those who are isolated or excluded. What can you learn about the relationships between different residents in the neighborhood, as well as between residents and people who work in the neighborhood (for example, service providers, employers and government representatives)?

## ➔ Questions to Consider



**What institutions and established neighborhood organizations exist and what are their goals?**



**What are the chief disagreements or conflicts in the neighborhood, and how do they get resolved?**



**What informal groups and associations bring people together?**



**Are there already ongoing efforts in the neighborhood focused on improving results?**



**What community spaces allow people to gather?**



**Are there residents taking leadership roles in this work?**



**What forums exist for residents to express their hopes and concerns?**

# ➔ Voices that Need to Be Heard

- People who represent the racial, ethnic and religious heritages and cultural backgrounds of the entire community.
- People who reflect the income levels of all residents.
- Men, women and those who identify as another gender.
- All kinds of families, including single-parent families, teenage parents and multi-generation households.
- Both longtime residents who have tried to make changes in the past and newcomers who can view the community with fresh eyes.
- People who don't normally participate in organized community activities and those who are very active.
- People with a variety of experiences in work – residents who own and work in local businesses, who work outside the community and who are unemployed.
- Residents with different life experiences, such as youth, elders, individuals with disabilities and immigrants.
- People with a range of experiences in the community, such as people who live on different blocks, as well as renters, homeowners and those who live in shelters, public housing and assisted living facilities.

As you engage people in dialogue about their hopes and dreams for the neighborhood's future, you will also learn more about their daily experiences. Try to find out what residents believe are neighborhood strengths—from individual knowledge, skills and relationships to community assets like block clubs, schools, places of worship, parks, etc. Ask people who and where they turn to for help. What is not available in the neighborhood that people would use if it were? As you engage different members of the community, inquire about daily challenges they face on a day-by-day basis.

From these conversations, patterns will emerge, helping you understand what areas to focus on and what type of community your neighbors envision. Neighborhood meetings and forums that allow for in-depth conversations with diverse groups of residents can be combined with surveys that engage broader participation in identifying what people most want for their community. The resulting vision will become the foundation for your neighborhood's work and will drive decisions—including who you want to work with and what projects and strategies you want to pursue.





# Understanding Neighborhood Priorities in Flint, Michigan

Flint's BNCP neighborhoods, which are next to each other on the north side of the city, formed a single Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) to bring together residents and partners to work together and provide leadership for BNCP. Resident engagement, however, did not stop with this core group. Rather, outreach efforts extended to learn more about the experiences and interests of diverse community members.

For instance, in Ward 3, BNCP formed a neighborhood networking team comprised of residents from public and supported housing residences. Work with that team and partnership with the Flint Housing Commission helped team members better understand conditions in specific housing developments. That work also identified the supports that public housing residents felt could help them address personal barriers, including resources on parenting and relationships, financial literacy and career development. In another area of Ward 3 where mostly homeowners lived, BNCP partner organizations, including Foss Avenue Baptist Church and Habitat for Humanity, had a long history of working with residents on issues of concern in that area, including neighborhood economic development and beautification.

Learning about different areas of focus within the neighborhoods provided insight into the need for actions targeted to specific areas. At the same time, through a partnership with the University of Michigan-Flint, the BNCP team used a survey to solicit input from residents on a diverse array of community issues. The information collected demonstrated an overarching concern about safety in the BNCP neighborhoods, indicating an opportunity for collaborative efforts spanning all the areas that made up the Flint BNCP.

# Visioning in Memphis, Tennessee

## Frayser

The Frayser neighborhood launched the “Frayser Visioning Survey” as one way to help identify the community’s priorities. The Frayser Neighborhood Council (FNC) and other stakeholders partnered to design a neighborhood survey that captured information about the priorities, concerns, needs and assets of the community. The survey asked several questions to determine whether the respondent lived, worked, worshipped, studied or shopped in Frayser, as well as the respondent’s major concerns. The survey was completed by more than 4,000 stakeholders through an effort that lasted 12 weeks and included various forms of outreach. Outreach methods included surveying door-to-door at homes and apartments, at large community events, near neighborhood shopping centers, at high schools, at community meetings, through church congregations and online via the FNC blog.

Several community members were trained to assist in either administering the survey or entering the results into an electronic spreadsheet so that they could be compiled and analyzed. One of the major findings of the survey was that 55 percent of respondents said that crime or public safety was an issue, with a particular concern about youth violence and crime. The survey data, combined with information gathered from other sources, such as town hall style visioning sessions, led the FNC to



declare its number one priority as, “We live in a neighborhood that is, feels, and is perceived as safe.” The team used this priority to focus their next step to developing local knowledge: analyzing public safety data to determine the most frequent types of crime in the community, with an emphasis on youth involvement.

## The Heights

To understand resident priorities in the Heights neighborhood, the local BNCP team developed the “Cards for Community” initiative and distributed 5,000 opinion cards to neighbors. The data-gathering project was conducted in multiple stages to learn about the residents’ most pressing needs. Eventually, an additional 5,000 cards were distributed to collect information about residents’ future vision. Questions on the cards included “What is your number one neighborhood concern?” and “How would you like to help the community?” The Cards for Community project allowed for the development of a database of engaged community members who wanted to be involved in future efforts, as well as a clear picture of concerns over issues of safety, housing and blight (areas of

the community that were abandoned, neglected and decaying). Just as important, the Cards project aroused an unfamiliar feeling among residents: that someone cares and wants to hear their concerns and that there are others who want to find strategies to respond to some of the most pressing issues facing the neighborhood.



# Gathering and Using Data to Understand Neighborhood Conditions—Past and Present

**D**etermining resident priorities for the future helps to focus your approach to learning more about the community. The next step to developing local knowledge is to gather data about neighborhood conditions—past and present—and use it to forge a shared understanding of the factors that have contributed to current realities. The goal is to create a common language and understanding that residents and partners can use to make decisions.

Sources of data can and should come from a variety of sources and in different forms, including residents. Neighborhood surveys and group discussions provide information about resident knowledge, experiences and opinions, all of which can be combined and compared with data from government agencies, universities and policy groups.

For instance, imagine that residents highlight the number of abandoned and vacant homes as an important problem to address. What can you find out from city government (the local housing agency or community development department), the police department and neighborhood groups about the scope and scale of the problem? For example: How many vacant homes are there? Is the number increasing or decreasing? How long have the various properties been vacant? Who owns them?

Whether from community or technical sources, data can come in quantitative or qualitative form. Quantitative data answers the question “how much or how many”—for instance, how many abandoned properties are the site of drug activity in the neighborhood? Qualitative data provides detailed information, observations, opinions and beliefs—for instance, what are the experiences of residents who live next to or near vacant buildings?

When reviewing the diverse forms of data you want to use, look for alignment between facts/figures and perceptions/beliefs. Compare data from technical sources to what families living in the area have to say about their needs, assets and dreams. When all sources of information—whether statistics, surveys, interviews or focus groups—point to the same issue, then alignment exists.

Sometimes, however, the information you collect does not align. For example, certain demographic groups may experience something that is not present in the larger community—like a focus group of senior citizens bringing up concerns about long-term care that are not experienced by the larger population. Disaggregating data—or breaking data down into smaller segments—can help you understand how factors such as race, ethnicity, gender and age impact the well-being of residents.

Information specific to your neighborhood is not always available from existing sources. Sometimes you may need to create new data that is specific to your geography. This information will help you avoid “one size fits all” projects and strategies and help you determine how to take action that meets the needs of everyone in your neighborhood. Whenever possible, try to compare the information you gather or create to what is happening in other places, such as other neighborhoods, your city/county, the state or even the country as a whole. You should also compare current conditions with your own neighborhood at different points of time. Have things gotten better, worse or stayed the same? What do you think will happen in the future if nothing else changes?

# Reviewing Data: Questions to Consider



**What does this information tell you about resident experiences in your neighborhood?**



**How does your neighborhood compare with other places?**



**Are some groups more impacted than others? In other words, are there differences by race and ethnicity, gender, age, income-level, etc.?**



**What does your data tell you about how conditions have changed over time?**

Also be alert to the quality of the data you want to use, particularly when data from “official sources,” such as a government agency, are not in alignment with what you are hearing from neighbors. Keep in mind certain red flags. For example, the number of people surveyed may be too small to draw a solid conclusion about the information gathered. Conditions may have changed since data was collected. Make sure to find out when information was collected. Surveys can also vary in terms of how a question is posed so that results, even on the same topic, cannot always be fairly compared. Pay attention to whether data is being communicated in a way that emphasizes particular points for political or personal reasons. Always take time to understand the data methods used and determine whether they are objective and neutral.

Examining data related to neighborhood priorities helps to explain what is happening in your community, while analyzing the story behind the data helps to explain why. Every neighborhood has been shaped by numerous factors that influence the experiences and opportunities available to residents. These factors, both positive and negative, have an underlying story that may not be clear initially. Your task is to uncover what causes and forces have produced current conditions, providing insight into what issues must be tackled to make progress. To do so effectively requires expanding your inquiry past neighborhood boundaries to understand the impact of past city initiatives, investments and policies, as well as broader regional, state and national trends.

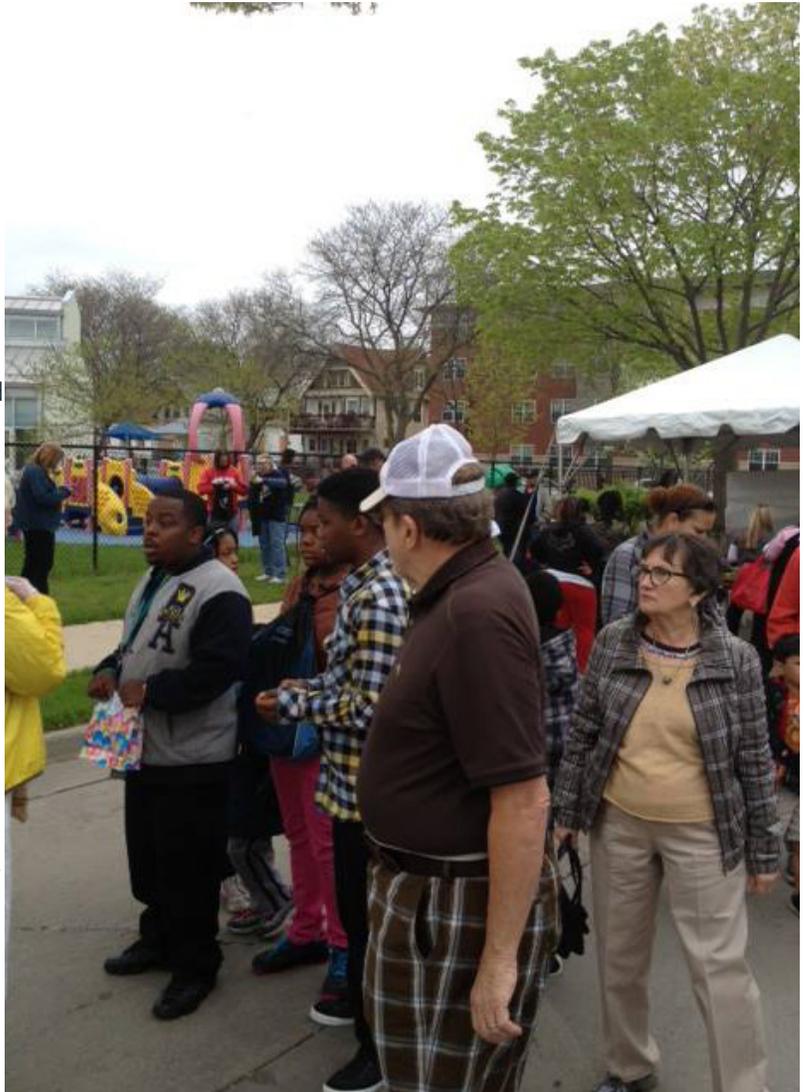


# Understanding the Data and Story Behind the Data in Metcalfe Park

Residents of Milwaukee's Metcalfe Park neighborhood started the process of developing local knowledge by gathering quantitative data through hundreds of neighborhood surveys. Beginning to uncover a concern around young people and safety, the BNCP team gathered additional data from several sources, including the Milwaukee Police Department and the U.S. Census Bureau. As team members began to piece together a snapshot of the neighborhood, they engaged in conversations with residents and organizations to gain a deeper sense of the "story behind the data."

For example, the team spoke with senior residents (age 70 and older) who have lived in Metcalfe Park for 30 to 40 years. These residents gave accounts of a racially mixed neighborhood that boasted factory jobs that paid livable wages for people of varying education and skill levels—a reality that no longer exists. As they began to explore what led to high rates of poverty and crime, the BNCP team learned that the loss of several businesses along the 30th Street Corridor resulted in the neighborhood's economic decline, leaving people in the neighborhood without opportunities for advancement.

In conversations with residents of all ages, the BNCP team heard residents describe the community as encased within an invisible net—a structural barrier that has resulted in limited job opportunities, poor quality schools and mass incarceration—that was preventing young people from achieving success. To learn more about young people's challenges, BNCP convened focus groups with a total of 30 residents between the ages of 18 to 24 to identify the barriers they face in Metcalfe Park, as well as their hopes for the future. Understanding the perspective of residents drove the BNCP team to focus their efforts on how the neighborhood could improve access to opportunities for young people.



# Applying Learning to Inform Action that Produces Results

Identifying actions, whether short-term projects or longer-term strategies, that will help realize residents' priorities for the future takes collective thinking about what can make a difference based on what has been learned about the neighborhood.

Action can take many forms, from working with neighborhood residents and partners to create community-based supports to working with city-level stakeholders to develop or modify policies, programs or services.

Analyzing the local knowledge you have developed thus far and thinking how it can be applied to inform action is a critical next step. How can the local knowledge you have developed be shared with partners and used to inform changes in stakeholder priorities, policies or practices? What initiatives or existing efforts can be built upon and strengthened, influenced by the information you have generated on what would be most effective in your neighborhood?

## Using Local Knowledge to Propel City Action in Fresno, California

Through a series of community conversations, the Southwest Fresno neighborhood of Kirk identified safety as one of its priorities. In particular, residents were concerned about the physical environment, including the cleanliness of alleys and the use of streetlights and how this environment impacted the neighborhood's sense of safety.

Applying what they learned to action, residents and several partners, including Mayor Ashley Swearingin's office and the Local Conservation Corporation, collaborated on a day-long "Neighbors Helping Neighbors Clean-Up." In advance of the event, residents identified target zones for attention, including alleys and sidewalks that were perceived as unsafe due to lack of lighting, illegal dumping and the accumulation of trash. On the day of the event, city truck drivers used resident data to coordinate routes throughout the neighborhood to pick up and dispose of trash at no expense to the neighborhood. City truck drivers picked up 2,203 tires that had been discarded in alleyways. In addition, City of Fresno Code Enforcement Specialists were on hand to answer questions from residents and gather information about improvements that residents wanted to see.

The City of Fresno was also engaged in a Street Light Initiative. Data from the city indicated that approximately 2,880 of its 42,000 streetlights needed repair. Kirk residents wanted to ensure that their neighborhood would be a priority. To further this goal, they collected data to show the disparity between the number of streetlights functioning in their neighborhood compared with other neighborhoods in Fresno. Working with staff and consultants, residents created and implemented their own survey of streetlights, which was shared with the City of Fresno as it targeted streetlight repairs. As a low-cost solution for the neighborhood itself, residents used data from their streetlight survey to identify high-priority streetlight repairs for the city. Ultimately, the streetlights in Kirk were repaired.

Your data may have also demonstrated gaps that need to be filled: challenges that are not currently being addressed or populations in your neighborhood who are disconnected or underserved. When proposing the creation of new programs or supports, take the time to identify who you are trying to reach or impact. For instance, talking to school officials might help you to learn that students with low attendance rates are most likely to drop out of school, supplying a critical piece of the story behind your high school's low graduation rate. This information will help you to design strategies that target specific populations within your neighborhood. In this case, you might target strategies for students who have low attendance rates in an effort to increase high school graduation.

Identifying the assets and opportunities in your neighborhood is just as important as identifying challenges. For example, suppose you learn that older residents in your neighborhood are eager to mentor youth. When you talk to a nonprofit tutoring program in your neighborhood, they share that students find tutors from their own community to be most effective. As a result, rather than simply funding an external tutoring program to come to your neighborhood school, you could invest in training neighborhood volunteers to deliver a tutoring curriculum that has demonstrated effectiveness with your target population of students.

As you talk to residents and stakeholders about actions that can make a difference, look into what strategies have been implemented in your neighborhood in the past and what efforts are currently underway. There is a lot to learn about why certain efforts have succeeded, and why others have failed to achieve results. Both can help you plan future action. What challenges and successes have been observed or experienced? What can be built upon and improved? In addition to learning from your own neighborhood, look into what can be gained from experience and research in other places. What strategies have achieved results in similar communities? Does research suggest that particular types of approaches are likely to make a difference?

Remember, however, that as you learn about what has been implemented in other neighborhoods, it is important to always consider how your neighborhood is similar and different. Factors like the age, culture and language of the residents can affect the way a strategy is implemented. Similarly, the geographic location of the neighborhood and the kinds of resources available can also change the way a project is selected or implemented. Always return to the question of whether potential actions match what residents say they want or need. Alignment with neighborhood values and circumstances will help your action take root.

## Planning for Implementation

- **Stay focused on what your neighborhood is seeking to achieve and make sure your actions target your neighborhood's vision for the future.**
- **Ensure you have the capacities and resources needed to effectively plan and implement desired action, from relevant skills and knowledge to financial support, volunteers, materials and meeting space.**
- **Develop timetables based on what can be implemented in the short-term and what is likely to require more planning and resources.**

No matter how thorough and carefully developed your projects and strategies may be, one thing is certain: things change. You will need to continue to engage with residents and stakeholders to determine what is working. With local knowledge, you will have to make adjustments – eliminate projects and strategies, add new ones, adjust timelines and adapt to changing conditions. Progress rarely occurs all at once or without shifts along the way. Achieving results is an ongoing learning process!

# Selected References

## **Building Neighborhood Capacity Resource Center**

This resource from the Center for the Study of Social Policy includes information on the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program sites, as well as a variety of [tools and templates](#) on community capacity—including resident engagement and useable data.

## **Bureau of Justice Assistance National Training and Technical Assistance Center**

This resource from the U.S. Department of Justice provides information on a wide-variety of criminal justice topics, ranging from crime prevention to mental health to adjudication.

## **Community Toolbox**

This resource from the Kansas University Work Group for Community Health and Development provides practical tools to help people work together to build healthier communities, including [assessing community needs and resources](#) and [analyzing community problems and solutions](#).

## **Crime Solutions.Gov**

This resource from the National Institute on Justice provides research on what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice and crime victim services.

## **HUD Exchange**

This resource from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provides HUD resources, updates and information, including a [place-based data inventory](#).

## **LISC Institute for Comprehensive Community Development**

This resource from LISC includes a variety of articles and practical tools focused on community development, including both process (e.g., [engagement](#) and [planning](#)) and specific issue areas. Additional information about safety can be accessed at the [LISC Community Safety Initiative](#), which includes information about the [Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Network](#).

## **National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership**

This resource from the Urban Institute provides information about the development and use of neighborhood information systems in local policy making and community building.

## **Office of Community Services of the Administration for Children and Families**

This resource from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides information on the department's social services and community development programs, including tools on how to [analyze data and communicate results](#).

## **Promise Neighborhoods**

This resource from the Department of Education provides training and technical assistance resources to help communities build pipelines of programs, service and supports so that children and youth can succeed in school and beyond—including a [data-sharing tool kit](#).

## **Youth.Gov**

This resource from the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs provides tools and other resources to help youth-serving organizations and community partnerships plan, implement and participate in effective programs for youth.



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