

Measuring Cultural

A growing body of research suggests that arts and culture activity is a catalyst for economic development.¹ That is one reason that civic leaders interested in urban revitalization have been giving it more attention in recent years.² Another reason is that arts and culture activity can strengthen community identity—boosting a community’s mental and physical health and its quality of life.³

But what do people mean when they speak of “arts and culture”?

Defining Culture

For many years, the default definition tied arts and culture to large institutions—symphonies, opera houses, established theaters, ballet companies, and museums. Today another interpretation is gaining currency. The emerging interpretation looks at *cultural vitality*—evidence of creating, disseminating, validating, and supporting arts and culture as a dimension of everyday life.

A cultural-vitality lens includes large institutions but only as part of a much bigger picture that encompasses amateur arts and arts education in schools and other institutions. It focuses not just on the artis-

tic product but also on the creative process. It holds that a community’s cultural vitality involves not only opera houses, traveling art exhibits, and culture brought from the outside, but also what comes out of the community.

How does one measure cultural vitality? Since the mid 1990s, researchers at the Urban Institute have been seeking the answer through the Arts and Culture Indicators Project (ACIP).⁴ The project, which has worked with practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in urban planning, community development, and arts-related fields, has created national cultural-vitality measures and has recommended adding locally generated data for a more granular understanding.

Specifically, understanding cultural vitality relies on multiple measures in three areas: presence of opportunities for cultural participation, participation itself, and support for arts and cultural activity.



Developing the Measures

Urban Institute researchers have spent several years in U.S. communities—including low- and moderate-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities—studying arts and culture activity. They have looked at activity in the non-profit, commercial, and public sectors, and to the extent possible, informal arts-related activity. Both professional and amateur practice, and active and passive participa-

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by Maria Rosario Jackson, Ph.D., The Urban Institute

tion have been included. The field research reveals that arts, culture, and creative expression are important determinants of how communities fare and that, by extension, a full understanding of U.S. communities is not possible without their inclusion.

Progress

Documenting the various aspects of cultural vitality—sufficiently, reliably, and repeatedly—calls for more data than are currently available. However, ACIP and other researchers have made progress in developing relevant measures and data to tell important pieces of the story. These measures are grouped under the three broad categories that ACIP has identified: presence of opportunities, participation, and support. (See “A Three-Part Framework.”)

ACIP has identified seven nationally comparable measures of cultural vitality. The measures are derived from national data sources that meet the following criteria: they are (1) publicly available, (2) reliable and recurrent annually, (3) able to be disaggregated to at least the metropolitan statistical area level, and (4) free or inexpensive.

Such data are most suitable for integration with quality-of-life measurement systems that track aspects of communities over

The Three Domains of Cultural Vitality

Presence

of opportunities for cultural participation

Participation

cultural participation itself

Support

for cultural participation

comprehensive picture of a community's cultural vitality

time. The measures provide an indication of several priorities in the presence and support domains. (National data meeting the four criteria are unavailable for traditional definitions of participation—attendance at formal venues—or for the more comprehensive ACIP definition described in the sidebar.)

Measuring

For the presence domain, ACIP recommends the following four measures:

1. arts establishments per thousand population, including both nonprofit and commercial entities (use County Zip Business Patterns data).⁵
2. percentage of employment in nonprofit and commercial arts establishments as a proportion of all employment (CZBP).
3. nonprofit arts organizations per thousand population (National Center for

Charitable Statistics).

4. nonprofit community celebrations, festivals, fairs, and parades per thousand population (NCCS).

Measures 1, 3, and 4 show the incidence and density of arts and culture-related venues that, according to field research, are significant opportunities for cultural participation. Measure 2 provides an indication of the robustness of those venues.

Measures 5, 6, and 7 relate to the support domain:

5. nonprofit art expenses per capita (NCCS).
6. nonprofit arts contributions per capita (NCCS).
7. percentage of artist jobs relative to all jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics and Non-Employer Statistics).



A Three-Part Framework

The Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators Project recommends monitoring and measuring three broad aspects of cultural vitality over time as a way to understand and encourage arts and cultural activity and its often positive impacts on communities.

1. Presence of Opportunities for Cultural Participation

- Nonprofit, commercial, and public sector arts-related organizations
- Retail arts venues—book stores, music stores, film theaters, craft and art supply stores
- Art schools
- Non-arts venues with arts and cultural programming—parks, libraries, community centers, ethnic associations, churches
- Festivals, parades, arts and crafts marketplaces
- Formal and informal cultural districts; neighborhoods where artists congregate
- Web-based opportunities for cultural engagement specific to the place in question

2. Participation in Arts and Cultural Activity

- Amateur art making
- Collective and community art making
- K-12 arts education
- After-school arts programs
- Audience participation
- Purchase of artistic goods (materials for making; final arts products)
- Discourse about arts and culture in print and electronic media (television, radio, web)
- Membership in professional arts associations or unions

3. Support for Arts and Cultural Activity

- Public expenditures in support of arts and cultural activities in the nonprofit, commercial, and public sectors
- Explicit public policies about arts and culture
- Foundation expenditures in support of arts and culture in all sectors
- Volunteering and personal support of arts and cultural activity
- Integration of arts and culture into other policy areas; corresponding allocation of resources (community development, education, parks, recreation, and the like)
- Working artists

ACIP's cultural-support indicators include the relative amounts of financial resources received and spent by nonprofit arts organizations. More so than governmental or commercial arts organizations, nonprofit arts organizations depend on community financial and participatory support. Another indication of a community's support for cultural activity is the number of resident artists.

"Artist jobs" refers to the proportion of a region's workforce employed in artist occupations. Jobs reflect support because, as the research shows, most artists depend upon numerous formal and informal resources—training, employment, grants, awards, gifts, materials, workspace, and validation.⁶ Communities with more people earning money as artists also may have more such resources.

The relative standing of a city's cultural vitality can change substantially depending on which element of cultural vitality is being compared. So, for example, a place might have a high incidence of commercial arts establishments or festivals and parades, but a much lower incidence of nonprofit arts organizations. That evidence argues strongly for including a wide range of measures in assessments, whether to monitor trends in a

single community or to make comparisons across different communities for a single point in time.

Local Details

The recommended measures are nationally comparable—something that has not existed before. However, they alone cannot paint the full picture of arts and culture in a community.

Researchers must also tap locally generated data for more detail. The drawback of local data is that they are not nationally comparable, but there are three categories of data worth noting: (a) administrative data housed in agencies such as regional and local arts councils, school districts, library sys-

tems, police departments, and other municipal agencies, (b) survey data from annual quality-of-life and arts-specific surveys, and (c) directories and lists from various kinds of agencies. However, care must be taken to ensure that the methodology for collecting and updating lists and directories is reliable and transparent.

Although barriers to fully capturing cultural vitality in communities still exist, there is room for optimism. Already the data are beginning to inform decisions about community and economic development, public health, transportation, and education, among other areas. Measures such as ACIP's should make it easier for cultural vitality to be integrated into decision

making on an even broader scale. This is an important step forward for urban planners, community developers, and anyone concerned with improving American communities. The new data make possible a more adequate and nuanced understanding of communities, their conditions, how they work, and how they might be strengthened

Maria Rosario Jackson, Ph.D., is a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Center at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

Endnotes

¹ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

² This article draws heavily from Maria Rosario Jackson, Florence Kabwasa-Green, and Joaquin Herranz, *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2006).

³ See Alaka Wali, Rebecca Severson, and Mario Longoni, *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* (Chicago: Center for Arts Policy, Columbia College, 2002); *Communities Count: Social and Health Indicators Across King County* (Seattle: 2005), <http://www.communitiescount.org>; Metropolitan Chicago Information Center, <http://info.mcfol.org/www/index.aspx>; *Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project Report* (Philadelphia: 2005), www.temple.edu/mpip; and Boston Foundation, *Cultural Life and the Arts Report*, www.bostonfoundation.org/indicators2004/culturallife/grid.asp.

⁴ Launched in the 1990s with Rockefeller Foundation support, ACIP provides information about the presence and role of arts and culture in communities.

⁵ The recommended national measures come from County Zip Business Patterns (CZBP), the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), the Occupational Employment Survey of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and the U.S. Census Bureau's Non-Employer Statistics (NES).

⁶ Maria-Rosario Jackson, Florence Kabwasa-Green, Daniel Swenson, Joaquin Herranz, Kadja Ferryman, Caron Atlas, Eric Wallner, and Carole E. Rosenstein, *Investing in Creativity: A Study of Support Structures for Individual Artists* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2003).

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