

THE BOSTON INDICATORS PROJECT

Democratizing Data and Building Partnerships for Change

INTRODUCTION

The Boston Indicators Project (the Project), initiated in 1997 with its first formal report released in 2000, issues biennial indicator reports with measures of progress in ten specific and diverse sectors:

- Civic Health
- Cultural Life and the Arts
- the Economy
- Education
- the Environment
- Housing
- Public Health
- Public Safety
- Technology
- Transportation

All of the sectors are directly related to social determinants of health and conditions in Boston's communities that either promote or detract from the health of residents. The sectors are interdependent and deficits in one area can undermine other sectors and ultimately the health of the community. The Project offers new ways to understand the interplay of the sectors and to see Boston in a regional context. Its goals are to: democratize access to data and information; foster informed public discourse; and track progress on shared civic goals.

The Project is coordinated by the Boston Foundation in partnership with the City of Boston and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. It relies on the expertise of hundreds of stakeholders gathered in multiple convenings to frame its conclusions, and draws data from the region's public agencies, academic

research institutions, think tanks, civic institutions, and community-based organizations. Through its ongoing interactions with the broad civic community, the Project also advances a shared civic agenda reflecting the discourse at convenings that have involved thousands of participants over the life of the Project—from school children and engaged residents to academic and community-based experts and policymakers. The Project's information also supports forums bringing together civic, business, and community leaders for dialogue on the region's key challenges and opportunities to address the social conditions that are shaping the health of communities. The Project has been recognized for its commitment to civic engagement, for the comprehensiveness of its indicators framework, and for its efforts to provide nested, fine-grained, and metropolitan-scale data.



An attendee at a Boston Foundation inter-sectoral collaboration meeting

THE PLACE: BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Incorporated as a town in 1630 and as a city in 1822, Boston is one of America's oldest cities containing some of the nation's oldest and most prominent educational, medical, cultural, and civic institutions. The capital and economic and cultural hub of Massachusetts, Boston is home to more than 590,000 residents, and is the largest city in the six-state New England region. Its population can spike to about 1.2 million in the daytime due to suburban residents traveling to the city for work, education, medical care, and special events. Geographically compact, Boston has a total land area of 47 square miles with another 43 square miles of water. With more than 12,000 people per square mile, only New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago have a greater population density than Boston among large US cities. Boston is also among the most ethnically and racially diverse American cities with a population in 2006 that was 54% Caucasian, 25% African American, 14% Latino, 8% Asian American, 1% Native American, 4% from other races, and 3% from two or more races. Boston's youngest cohort is also its most racially diverse: 75% of the city's children are of color.

THE PROBLEM

The Project was initiated by the City of Boston's *Sustainable Boston* initiative to address a lack of inter-departmental data sharing and a need for sustainability indicators for the city. It quickly evolved into a partnership with the Boston Foundation's Community Building Network which, in the mid-1990s, had developed a purely statistical warehouse of administrative data, geo-coded to census geography and difficult for anyone but trained researchers and skilled community-based staff and residents to use.

In addition, administrative data was found to be deficit-oriented and insufficient to address the fundamental and often qualitative questions posed by residents and policy makers about how Boston, its neighborhoods, and the region were really doing. The new partnership was committed to "democratize access to

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data" and to provide residents and people working at the community level with consistent access to high-quality data and information in a comprehensible and easy-to-use format. In addition, the group wanted to respond to the diminishing accuracy of census data toward the end of the decade, to the difficulty in identifying trends and making programmatic and policy linkages within and across sectors, and to the great distance between academic research findings and their application in community-based settings. The group also wanted to address a lack of opportunities for informed, sustained civic discourse that could catalyze a shared understanding and broadly supported civic agenda.

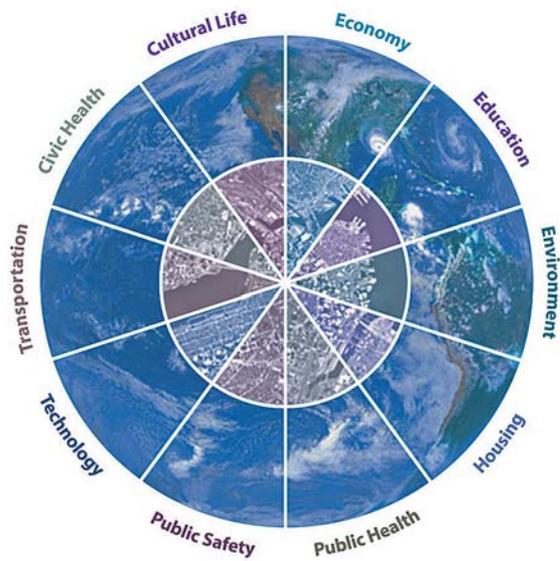
THE PROJECT

During the initial meetings of the Project, a snowballing number of participants were encouraged to become "Bostonians first and experts, advocates, or residents of a particular neighborhood second." Participants at meetings were asked to count off to form small groups and eventually, a wish list of more than 1,500 measures of progress was generated with input from about 300 participants from diverse sectors, neighborhoods, community-based organizations, racial/ethnic groups, and levels of city, state, and federal government. Project staff, in consultation with public sector staff, and academic researchers (including "data crunchers"), worked to reduce the wish list to about 75 broad goals, with one to three indicators each, organized within ten proposed sectors (listed in the introduction).

Following a year-long process in which a draft report was issued to approximately 1,000 residents, agency staff, academics, and civic and community leaders for review and comment, the first Boston Indicators Report, *The Wisdom of Our Choices: Indicators of Change, Progress and Sustainability*, was released in October 2000 as a hard-copy, 300-page document. Since 2004, the biennial reports have also featured an “emerging civic agenda” section reflecting trends of participants over the life of the project as well as a confluence of recent research.

Today, the Project operates on two distinct but interrelated tracks: an indicator data track and a deliberative, civic-agenda track. While functionally distinct, each track plays a greater or lesser role during various phases within the two-year cycle leading up to and following the release of a report. About a year prior to the release of each report, key stakeholders are convened within each of the ten sectors tracked. Charlotte Kahn, Director of the Project, describes the convenings as “qualitative sounding boards” in which participants are able to refine the original indicators framework and explore key trends and short-term changes, recent accomplishments, and remaining challenges in each of the ten sectors. During the same time period, Project staff focus intensively on data collection, analysis, updates, and interpretation. Data is gathered from city, state, regional, and federal government sources, as well as from non-profit organizations, universities, and newspapers. The geographic level of the indicators varies from the neighborhood level to the city, regional, and state levels depending on data quality and availability. The biennial report is released at a major civic event and following the report’s release, briefings of key constituencies and smaller civic convenings are held to allow for deeper deliberation and discussion about its key findings.

Going forward, the Project is working with a team from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to create an open-source, internet-based platform for data sharing, mapping and visual analysis. This platform will be shaped through the participation of a 7- to 9-member consortium of indicators initiatives of various sizes from



“The Hub of Innovation”—Breakthrough programs, products, and practices are tracked in ten sectors.

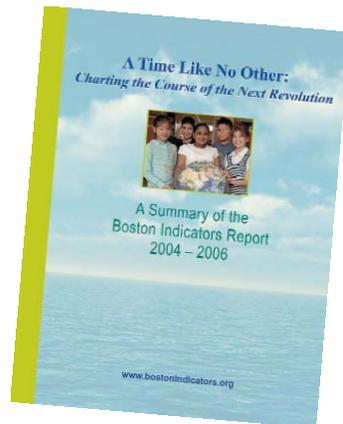
across the US with the intent, ultimately, to build a “universalizable” open source tool to track and analyze change at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

THE PRODUCT

Since 2002, the biennial Boston Indicators Report has been released in two parts:

1. A comprehensive, multi-dimensional website (www.bostonindicators.org): The website tracks and reports on indicators and measures and includes a variety of special interactive features such as the Hub of Innovation and the MetroBoston DataCommon data mapping feature, a partnership with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The web-based version also includes a set of “cross-cut filters” pulling measures from across the ten sectors tracked for inclusion in six cross-cutting categories: Boston Neighborhoods, Children and Youth, Race and Ethnicity, Sustainable Development, Competitive Edge, and Fiscal Health. The filters were added to express linkages across sectors and encourage users to think about the data holistically and with a more systemic approach to key trends and challenges.

2. A summary report that “tells a story” based on systemic analysis and a synthesis of sector convenings, research findings, and indicators data: The report is the result of both objective analysis and presentation of data and a more conceptual synthesis derived from recent academic research, the Project’s convenings, and media articles. The summary report’s focus usually has significant implications for the sustainability of the city. For instance, the most recent summary report, *A Time Like No Other: Charting the Course of the Next Revolution*, focused on how macro forces (global population growth, global warming, and global competitiveness) are deeply affecting Boston today. The report is always released at a high-profile forum complemented by splashy media and communications activities intended to highlight the report’s findings and to reinvigorate participant interest and engagement.



THE PEOPLE AND PARTNERS

The Project is a special initiative of the Boston Foundation, from which it receives the majority of its funding. The Project is also a partnership among the Foundation, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, and the City of Boston. Its long-time relationships with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston Department of Neighborhood Development, Boston Public Health Commission, Massachusetts Public Health Department, Boston School Department, Boston Police Department, and many other academic and community-based institutions and researchers afford the Project access to valuable sources of data and staff capacity.

THE RESULTS

One of the primary results of the Project is that organizations and individuals have come to expect the data in a number of diverse sectors that represent or are related to the social determinants of health. As Charlotte Kahn says, “I feel the best when people say they use our data all the time, and often it’s for purposes that we didn’t even know about.” Journalists use the reports as background for stories, community-based programs use the data in grant-writing and evaluation, and the data and indicators have framed issues for policy makers. For instance, the Housing Report Card, issued as part of the report, frames housing as both a moral and economic issue and demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of limited affordable housing.

The Project also has had direct effects on the Boston Foundation itself. After a report demonstrated that the Boston area was losing young people to other US regions, the Foundation partnered with the Chamber of Commerce on a follow-up study detailing the factors involved. A key finding was that the high cost of housing drove away talented young workers.

Overall, the project has inspired numerous intersectoral partnerships, helped connect staff from different government agencies and individuals working on related issues, and fostered a unified dialogue about the direction of the city. As Charlotte Kahn put it, “People look forward to the sector convenings now to get a sense of what’s going on overall, identify ways to work together, and they look forward to having access

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to new data. While our data has helped to instigate and support particular policy initiatives, the Project’s most important impact is perhaps that it has helped leaders and policy makers at all levels to have one conversation about the future, using a shared frame of reference.”

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

The Project has brought groups and individuals together to discuss issues, create partnerships, and change perceptions—all of which can inform efforts to use indicators to address the social determinants of health. Part of its success is due to the following approaches:

An asset orientation

Rather than utilizing broad goals such as “Child Illnesses,” the Project uses positive language such as “Healthy Children” designed to express and stimulate action in attaining valued community goals. This was a reaction to the measurement frameworks that have been used to describe urban communities, most of which included measures that focused on community deficits such as unemployment, school dropouts, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and crime. These deficit-oriented frameworks have the potential to stigmatize communities as “troubled” and do not acknowledge a community’s unique strengths or assets. Even a community doing well would be painted in negative tones (“juvenile crime was reduced from x to y”). As a result, community improvement focused on a reduction in deficits is often not an inspiring or empowering goal for individuals and communities. Using indicators that focus on community assets rather than deficits can place the focus on solutions rather than problems and remind the community of its own values and vision. Asset-oriented indicators need to be selected and applied carefully so as to avoid sugar-coating situations and obscuring conditions that detract from health in a community.

The value of systemic analysis

Reflecting on the first indicators report, Project staff recognized the need to move beyond examining the ten sectors in discrete silos. Turning to systems thinking for help, the Project worked with two gradu-



Leadership Forums provide civic and business leaders with an opportunity to discuss data and key trends

ate students from MIT to better understand systems dynamics and then to create a series of workshops for participants on the linkages across sectors and the ways in which the sectors interact in people’s lives. They worked with a national foundation to co-sponsor a scenario-planning workshop for participants, and by the next report were able to use data more effectively to tell a story that better represented the holistic experience in communities. The systemic nature of the Project is also captured on its website through the “cross-cut filter” feature described earlier.

The power of “both/and”

The Project reflects a strong “both/and” orientation, which is an explicit recognition that certain issues are cross-cutting and do not fit in just one of the ten sectors. Thus the Project’s framework includes a set of broad categories (the filters described earlier), such as “Sustainable Development,” that by their nature cannot “live” within a particular sector but rather draw from a number of sectors and help to highlight the

importance of cross-sectoral thinking, policies, and action. Essentially, such cross-cutting categories encompass elements of *both* sector x *and* sector y (or various other combinations) and reflect the Project’s “both/and” orientation. Along with the Project’s concept that one cannot understand what is happening on one block without understanding the wider community and city-wide context, this “both/and” approach serves to highlight linkages, also furthering the goal of systemic analysis.

A commitment to broad, diverse, cross-sectoral participation

Each stage of the Project has involved large numbers of participants. To frame and follow up on its biennial findings, the Project engages residents; civic, business, and community leaders; government officials; and academics in dialogue about the city and region’s key challenges and opportunities. This dialogue occurs within and across sectors through small working sessions as well as during major civic events. The Project works specifically to attract a diverse constituency, and to build an inter-generational network of emerging and established leaders. The Project working sessions are often the only venue in which representatives from different sectors come together to explore long-term trends, recent accomplishments, key challenges going forward, or to explore issues across sectors, where the most powerful solutions are often located.

CONCLUSION

The Boston Indicators Project collects and manages a significant amount of data. The Project goes to great lengths to

- select and manage data in ways that make it as user-friendly as possible;
- encourage the recognition of trends;
- approach a comprehensive picture of the status of the social determinants of health in the region; and
- allow for interactive discussions among professionals from different sectors, community members, and policymakers.

The data creates a focal point around which diverse interested parties can engage in a dialogue about the direction of the city and region. The result is a source of information and tools that support local advocacy and a process that shapes the local agenda and informs local priorities.