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Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing & Neighborhood Vitality

University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project

Reinvestment Fund

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The Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City project was undertaken by SIAP in collaboration with Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution, with support by the Surdna Foundation, the NYC Cultural Agenda Fund in the New York Community Trust, and the University of Pennsylvania. The research was conducted between 2014 and 2017.

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Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing & Neighborhood Vitality

Abstract

In the fall of 2014, building on their work in Philadelphia, Penn's Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) and Reinvestment Fund began to develop a policy tool to assess how culture contributes to social wellbeing in New York City neighborhoods. This brief is a summary of the project rationale--that is, why and how to measure social wellbeing--and its potential to guide policy toward more equitable and livable communities.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Public Policy | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing & Neighborhood Vitality

Over the past 20 years, Penn's Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) has developed ways to document the cultural assets of Philadelphia's neighborhoods and their contribution to the quality of life of the residents. Since 2011 SIAP has collaborated with Reinvestment Fund to develop other measures of social wellbeing for Philadelphia's neighborhoods. In 2014 the team began to expand this work to other U.S. cities including New York.

Why measure social wellbeing?

The SIAP/Reinvestment Fund collaboration is part of an international movement to move beyond economic productivity as the only measure of a society's welfare. The team used as its starting point a European commission report on the measurement of wellbeing but has built on that work by incorporating culture as a dimension and by developing measures at the neighborhood level.

Dimensions of Social Wellbeing

Economic wellbeing

Economic & ethnic diversity

Institutional connection

Face-to-face connection

Cultural assets

Housing burden

School effectiveness

Security

Environmental amenities

Personal health

Health care access

Social stress

Political voice

A multi-dimensional measure of social wellbeing takes into consideration not only economic status but also the role of health, the environment, schooling, social connection, and other factors that contribute to what Nobel laureate Amartya Sen describes as *the freedom of people to lead lives they have reason to value.*

For the arts, this approach reframes the debate over the intrinsic or instrumental value of the arts. The question is no longer whether or not

the arts promote wellbeing. Rather, opportunities for cultural engagement and creative expression are *integral* to social wellbeing. Just as we couldn't imagine talking about wellbeing without discussing health or adequate food, housing, income or the opportunity to pursue meaningful activities, we can't talk about wellbeing without the arts and culture. At the same time, a multi-dimensional tool allows us to assess whether a vital cultural community contributes to other aspects of social wellbeing and neighborhood vitality.

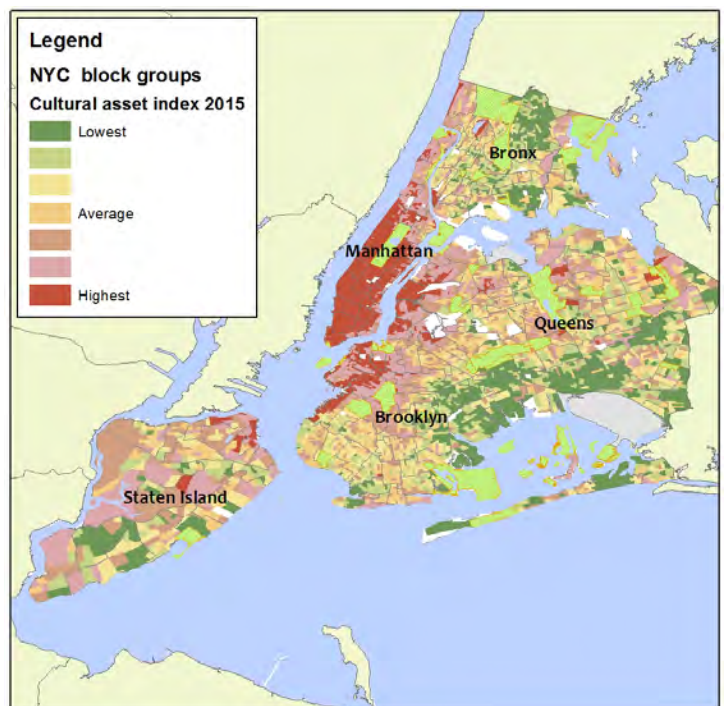
What is a social wellbeing index and how does it work?

The foundation of our approach is documentation of the cultural ecology of a city's neighborhoods. We develop a fine-grained measure of cultural assets with a focus on four types of resources:

- Nonprofit cultural programs—ranging from the opera and ballet to community theater, art centers, and youth media-making
- Commercial cultural enterprises—from design firms and galleries to music and book stores to dance academies
- Resident artists as a percent of labor force
- Cultural patrons and participants.

Our evidence for cultural assets comes from a variety of sources: IRS data on nonprofits; proprietary data on businesses; census data on artist occupations; grant programs for informal groups and artist collectives; and organizational lists of members, subscribers, registrants, and attendees. We *geocode* the data to locate each resource on a map and compute the number of each type of resource within and near every neighborhood. Lastly, we combine these data statistically to develop a single *cultural asset index* for every block group in the city.

The preliminary cultural asset index for New York combines evidence for nonprofit & for profit cultural organizations and resident artists.



We use a similar method to develop measures for the other 12 dimensions of social wellbeing. The data sources, of course, are more extensive ranging from the census bureau to sources to which we gain access through agreements with government and nongovernmental agencies. As with the cultural assets, we geocode each type of data, aggregate indices by neighborhood, and use statistical techniques to create a single measure for each dimension of wellbeing.

What's a social wellbeing tool good for?

First and foremost, our social wellbeing tool illuminates the distribution of opportunity across an entire city. If Amartya Sen is right—that poverty is the lack of freedom—then knowing what opportunities are available to residents is our best measure of freedom and scarcity.

In addition, the data allow us to see where different assets are concentrated, weak, or missing. The concepts of *concentrated advantage* and *concentrated disadvantage* are important to understanding how processes of *inclusion* and *exclusion* operate across

communities—and how cultural assets reinforce or crosscut these processes. Just as important, the tool identifies neighborhoods comprised of a mix of assets and deficits and points to where gaps and strengths are.

For cultural policy, the social wellbeing tool allows us to answer questions about the social and civic value of the arts that have been difficult to address in the past. Does an active cultural life help neighborhoods improve educational opportunities, personal health, or environmental quality for local residents? How might cultural engagement stimulate social connectedness and build more equitable and livable communities?

Most importantly, this approach allows us to move beyond a narrow focus on the economic impact of the arts. If the arts and culture are to make a contribution to urban vitality, we need to look beyond shiny destination facilities and hip places where “creatives” live and work and see cultural spaces and opportunities as a right for all residents, regardless of income, education, race or ethnicity. A neighborhood-based social wellbeing index allows us to judge our successes and shortcomings in realizing this ideal.

