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Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing

University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)

Reinvestment Fund

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SIAP undertook a multi-city study of social wellbeing, neighborhood transformation, and the arts in collaboration with Reinvestment Fund and with support by the Surdna Foundation.

Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing

Abstract

This brief presents the research team's rationale for the measurement of social wellbeing and its approach to documenting the cultural ecology and assessing the vitality of Philadelphia neighborhoods.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Public Policy | Social Welfare | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

Culture's Contribution to Social Wellbeing

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 The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) to develop other measures of social wellbeing for Philadelphia's neighborhoods. During the next two years, the team will expand this work to several other U.S. cities.

Why measure social wellbeing?

The SIAP/TRF collaboration is part of an international movement to move beyond economic productivity as the only measure of society's welfare. The team used as its starting point an international report on the measurement of wellbeing but has expanded on this work by incorporating culture as a dimension and by developing measures at the neighborhood level (census tracts or block groups).

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 economic status but also considers 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 addresses the debate over the intrinsic or instrumental value of the arts. The question is no longer whether or not the arts promote social wellbeing. Rather, opportunities in and access to the arts are a part of 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.

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 providers—ranging from the symphony and opera to community theater and youth arts programs
- Commercial cultural enterprises—from design firms and galleries to music and book stores to dance academies
- Resident artists of all disciplines
- Cultural patrons and participants

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

The *cultural asset index combines evidence of nonprofit & for profit cultural organizations, resident artists, and cultural participants.*

Cultural Asset Index 2010-12
Census block groups
Low
Average
High
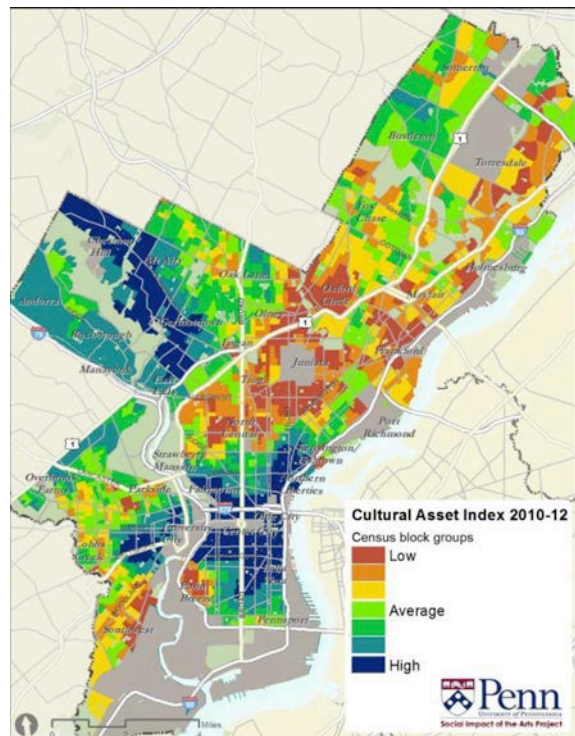
A similar method is used to develop measures for the other 12 dimensions of social wellbeing. The data sources, of course, are more extensive ranging from commonly available data like that from the census bureau to sources to which we gain access through agreements with government and nongovernmental 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

space. Just as important, the tool identifies neighborhoods comprised of a mix of assets and deficits and thereby points to where the gaps 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 the arts and culture stimulate social connection and contribute to a sense of community in a neighborhood?

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.

We can use data on the 13 dimensions of our social wellbeing index to cluster Philadelphia's neighborhoods into those with concentrated advantage, concentrated disadvantage, and mixed neighborhoods that were strong on some dimensions and weak on others.