

**ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES:  
A FRAMEWORK FOR MEASUREMENT**



**Policy Brief No.1 of the Culture, Creativity, and Communities Program**



**The Urban Institute, Washington DC**

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**2003**



## **ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF**

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This brief is a product of the Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project (ACIP) – the flagship initiative of the Urban Institute’s Culture, Creativity, and Communities (CCC) program. Launched in 1996 with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, ACIP seeks to integrate arts and culture-related measures into community quality-of-life indicator systems. ACIP is built on the premise that inclusion of arts, culture, and creativity is meaningful when it reflects the values and interests of a wide range of community stakeholders. This is the context in which the connection of arts, culture, and creativity to community building processes and other community dynamics can be fully understood.

The authors of this brief would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for support of this work. We are indebted to the many community building professionals, arts administrators, artists, community residents and our local ACIP affiliates for their contributions. Also, we would like to thank Felicity Skidmore for her editorial assistance.

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The Urban Institute is a nonprofit nonpartisan policy research and educational organization established to examine the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation. It provides information and analysis to public and private decision makers to help them address these challenges and strives to raise citizen understanding of these issues and tradeoffs in policy making.

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## **CULTURE, CREATIVITY, AND COMMUNITIES PROGRAM**

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The Culture, Creativity, and Communities (CCC) Program at the Urban Institute is a research and dissemination initiative that investigates the role of arts, culture, and creative expression in communities. It explores the intersections of arts, culture, and creative expression with various policy areas.

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## ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES

Neighborhoods and metropolitan regions across the country are seeking innovative strategies to address the promises, problems, and uneven prosperity associated with an increasingly technological economy combined with far-reaching demographic shifts. American identity has been enriched by the maturing of diverse racial and ethnic groups and by the arrival of new immigrants. But it has been complicated by the same processes. Furthermore, federal and state responses to urban issues continue devolving to the local level at the very moment when our ability to create social capital – the bonds that enable collective action – is being called into question.

In this context, more than ever, a wide range of stakeholders including residents, community and business leaders, and policymakers working to improve the quality of life in America's neighborhoods need appropriate, consistently and reliably collected information to do their best work. Local leaders and researchers have made great strides in collecting and using data

about various issues such as employment, health, housing, and land use as part of neighborhood indicator initiatives. With few exceptions, however, these efforts have ignored the presence and roles of arts, culture, and creativity – essential factors in community building processes.<sup>1</sup>

In working to help fill this gap, ACIP has had to confront basic questions about arts, culture, and creativity at the local level (see box). This brief summarizes the research and measurement framework we have developed to help answer such questions.

The field work and document review<sup>2</sup> on which this framework is based, along with our emerging conclusions, has been shared in workshops with ACIP affiliates<sup>3</sup> and also vetted in many professional conferences and meetings in various fields of research and policy. This process of idea development, debate, and application has helped us refine our initial thoughts about the theories, language, and methods needed to address the research and data deficiencies we have identified.

### Questions Guiding Development of the ACIP Framework

- \* How are arts, culture, and creativity defined, presented, and valued at the neighborhood level?
- \* What should be measured and why?
- \* What neighborhood-level data are already available for this purpose?
- \* What kinds of information need to be collected?



## PRINCIPLES GUIDING OUR WORK

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Development of our research and measurement framework for capturing the value of arts and culture in community building is informed by four guiding principles developed from insights gained in the early stages of our field work. These principles help us capture the assets related to creativity or artistic endeavor that people find valuable in their own communities and neighborhoods.

**\* Definitions of art, culture, and creativity depend on the cultural values, preferences, and realities of residents and other stakeholders in a given community.** Art, culture, and creativity at the neighborhood level include the cultural expressions of ethnic, racial, age, and special interest groups that may not be validated or adequately represented in mainstream cultural institutions. This principle opens the way to capturing the whole continuum of activities – amateur and professional, formal and informal, happening in arts-specific and non-arts-specific places – valued by community residents.

**\* The concept of participation includes a wide array of ways in which people engage in arts, culture, and creative expression.** Participation is not just attendance, observation, consumption, or even audience participation. It includes many other categories of action-making, doing, teaching, learning, presenting, promoting, judging, supporting-and spans the whole range of artistic disciplines.

**\* Arts, culture, and creative expression are infused with multiple meanings and purposes simultaneously.** At the neighborhood level, arts, cultural practices, and creativity are frequently valued for aesthetic and technical qualities. But they are also often embedded in or tied to other community processes.

**\* Opportunities for participation in arts, culture, and creative endeavor often rely on both arts-specific and non-arts-specific resources.** At the neighborhood level, arts, culture, and creativity have many stakeholders. Not surprisingly, given that such activities intersect with other community processes and priorities, many arts and artistic activities at the neighborhood level are made possible through the collective efforts of both arts-specific and other entities.

These guiding principles provide a way of *identifying* the multiple facets of a neighborhood's arts, culture, and creativity. But they need to be supplemented by a systematic process for *description*: qualitative description for conceptualization and theory building, and quantitative description for comparable measurement and indicator development. ACIP used its guiding principles in interpreting its field research to develop a framework for this purpose.

## FRAMEWORK FOR ARTS/CULTURE RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLES GUIDING OUR WORK

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Combining the guiding principles presented in the previous section with findings from our field research yields a framework that is useful for both theory building and practical measurement. This framework includes four parameters that serve as domains of conceptual inquiry – for theory building and information classification. These four parameters also serve as dimensions of quantitative measurement – for documentation, data gathering, and eventual indicator development.

### **1. Presence – the existence of whatever creative expressions a given community values as community assets.**

Since a cultural inventory is the usual form of chronicling a community's cultural assets, ACIP began its work in this domain with a review of such inventories. We found that they typically over-emphasize structures-mainstream cultural venues – and overlook the context in which these structures exist. They tend to ignore cultural activity that happens outside of these venues in places ranging from parks and churches to businesses and community centers. We term such locations *indigenous venues of validation*, because the fact that the cultural activity happens there indicates it is valued by the stewards of those places. As a result, typical cultural inventories tend to miss the indigenous venues of validation, as well as any reference to the context in which the resource currently exists or its possible historical significance.

### **2. Participation – the many ways in which people participate in creative expression (as creators, teachers, consumers, supporters, and so on).**

Unlike the other domains in our framework, cultural participation has been the subject of long debate, often cast in elitist-populist sets of dichotomies: formal-informal, high-low, professional-amateur, and the like. ACIP research supports the criticism of such dichotomies as overly simplifying the broad array of participation forms. Our research also confirms other evidence that broadening the definition of cultural engagement increases participation rates substantially – with many people from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds participating at both community and regional levels.

### **3. Impacts – the contribution of these creative expressions and participation in them to community building outcomes (e.g., community development, stewardship of place, neighborhood pride, improved public safety, etc.).**

The impacts of arts, culture, and creative expression on communities are not well documented or understood in the arts and community building related fields, as attested to by ACIP's literature review and field research. Our field work in cities around the country did reveal a long tradition of community arts practice, with many practitioners operating their programs with well-developed assumptions about the impacts of their efforts. But these efforts often go unarticulated and are omitted from the type of theory that can guide systematic research and data collection efforts.

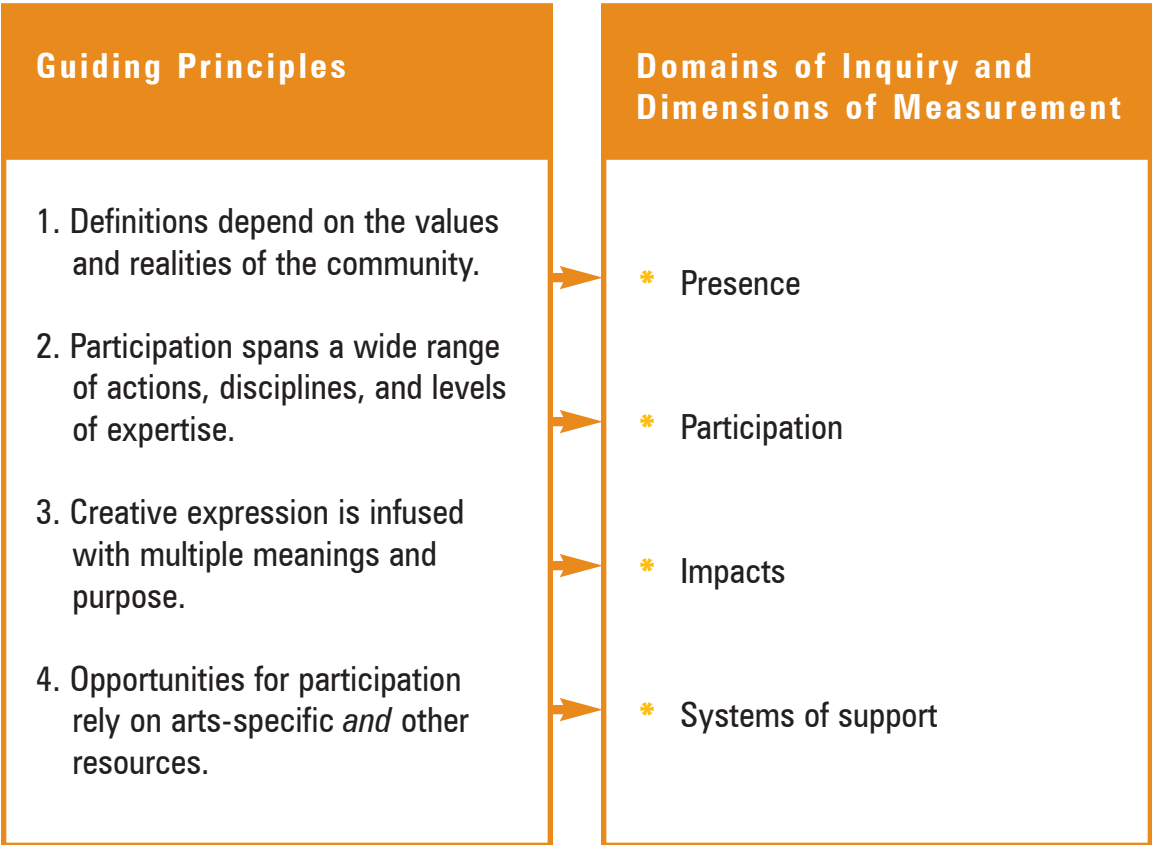
The fundamental challenge here is that the very broadness of ACIP's arts definition – combined with the fact that arts, culture, and creativity are operating in an

environment in which many other factors are operating simultaneously – vastly complicates the task of pinpointing the contribution of arts-related activities to the overall impacts observed. ACIP's impact domain addresses these challenges by proposing a middle-range approach. It acknowledges the complexity and interrelationships of arts, culture, and creativity in neighborhoods, but offers a bounded conception based on strong suggestive evidence of the relationship of arts, culture, and creativity to neighborhood quality of life characteristics.

**4. Systems of support – the resources (financial, in-kind, organizational, and human) required to bring opportunities for participation in these creative expressions to fruition.**

The production, dissemination, and validation of arts and culture at the neighborhood level are made possible through the contributions of many different kinds of stakeholders – both arts and non-arts entities. The networks of relationships among these entities constitute a system of support that is critical to a community's cultural vitality. Likewise, support systems

**ACIP's Framework for Arts/Culture Research and Measurement**



for other issues, such as neighborhood revitalization or crime prevention, are likely to have arts-focused players in them.

The best collaborations among arts and non-arts entities encountered by ACIP have specific purposes and involve relationships that enable individual as well as collective goals to be achieved. They come into being

and evolve based on mutually recognized strengths and needs, taking the form and intensity that best facilitates the work. Successful collaboration of this sort requires organizational flexibility, time, and patience. It can even involve mediation in situations where the participating organizations have different cultures of work and are beholden to different standards of excellence.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

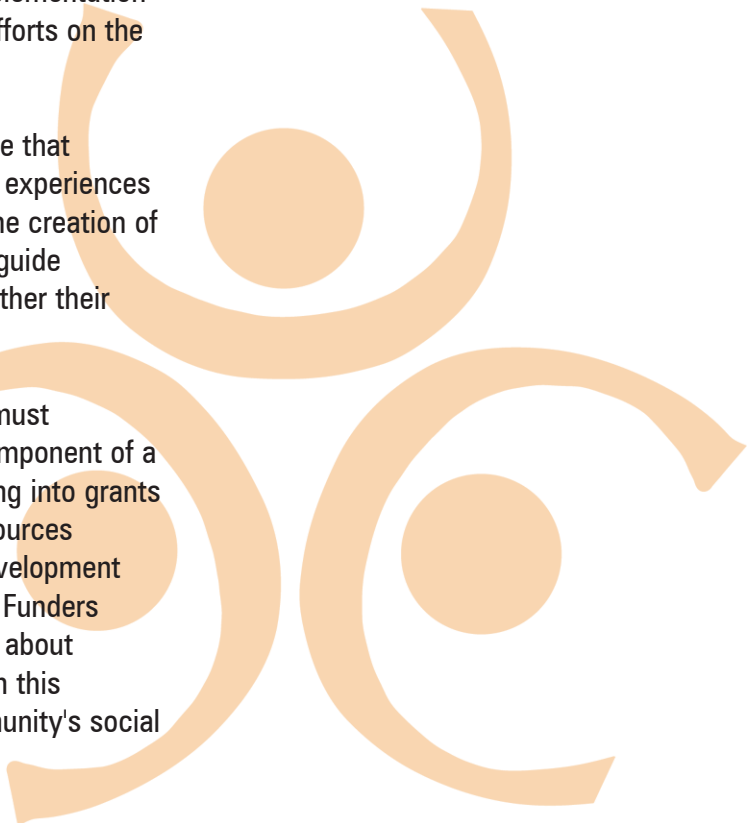
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The guiding principles and conceptual framework presented here are useful stepping stones toward the grounded inclusion of arts, culture, and creativity as important dimensions in measuring neighborhood well-being. Truly adhering to them, however, poses not only opportunities but also challenges.

\* **Analysts and Researchers** must recognize that community actors need to be partners in the creation and implementation of studies and data collection efforts on the ground.

\* **Practitioners** must recognize that harvesting their knowledge and experiences in a systematic way is key to the creation of solid grounded theory that can guide research and policy that will further their efforts.

\* **Policymakers** and funders must facilitate the methodological component of a practitioner's job by incorporating into grants and program guidelines the resources necessary to support theory development and systematic data collection. Funders must also expand their thinking about strategic points of investment in this important dimension of a community's social fabric.



## NOTES

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1. The definition of neighborhood indicators, as developed by Thomas Kingsley (“Democratizing Information,” Washington DC, The Urban Institute, 1996), is as follows: recurrently updated measures that allow one to describe societal conditions, track societal trends, and assess desired outcomes over time at the neighborhood level.
2. Data gathering included in-person interviews and focus group discussions with arts and community building professionals as well as community residents in nine cities, document review and telephone interviews with staff from arts and arts-related institutions, and on-site examination of community building initiatives at selected sites around the country.
3. ACIP works with local affiliates in seven places: Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, Philadelphia, Providence, and Washington DC. ACIP and affiliates work on a variety of projects, with foci ranging from city-wide to neighborhood-specific levels. Our aim with the affiliate work is to create tools and methods that can be adopted or adapted by other practitioners in the community arts and community building related fields.









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