

# Background Information from Community Indicators Research

“As communities and local governments have become increasingly concerned about quality-of-life issues, community indicators have become a widely used tool to measure the status of the quality of life and progress being made toward improving or sustaining it. Indicators provide a vehicle to understand and address community issues from a holistic and outcomes-oriented perspective. They are useful, within the context of an overall community improvement process, both as a planning tool, based on a community’s vision, and as an evaluation tool to measure progress on steps taken toward improvement. Their usefulness is maximized when the community feels a sense of ownership of the indicators through direct citizen involvement with them.”

*David Swain, “Measuring Progress: Community Indicators and the Quality of Life”*

## Major Approaches to Indicators

- 1. Quality-of-Life Indicators:** *Pioneered by the Jacksonville, Florida Community Council, Inc. in 1985, with the help of a large citizen-volunteer task force and the partnership of the Chamber of Commerce, and influenced by a well-known futurist, Hazel Henderson. (See [www.rprogress.org](http://www.rprogress.org))*
- 2. Sustainability Indicators:** *Pioneered by Sustainable Seattle, a non-profit, community-based group, in 1993. This approach starts with an environmental perspective and identifies linkages among environmental, social and economic measures & monitors these linkages over time. (See [www.sustainablemeasures.com](http://www.sustainablemeasures.com))*
- 3. Healthy-Community Indicators:** *Growing from the public health sector, this approach expands upon the scope of personal physical, emotional and mental health to include economic, social and other elements of collective health within a community. (Coalition for Healthy Communities and Cities (CHCC) connects healthy community projects across the country. (See [www.healthycommunities.org](http://www.healthycommunities.org))*
- 4. Benchmarking/Government Performance Measures:** *This approach emerged in the U.S. during the 1990s – with the State of Oregon taking the lead. It caught on in a number of local jurisdictions, such as Portland, Austin, and Santa Monica. It links “Managing for Results” measures of efficiency, productivity and customer service outcomes of diverse governmental services with larger, more holistic outcomes of public policies and services impacts over time. (See [www.p-m-benchmarks.org](http://www.p-m-benchmarks.org))*

***Quality of Life*** projects have tended to:

- Select a broadly defined and balanced set of indicators;
- Be sponsored by non-governmental groups, such as chambers of commerce, or community based organizations; and
- Focus advocacy on improvements or issues that the community views as important and upon which some degree of consensus has already been established.

***Sustainability*** projects have tended to:

- Select a set of indicators with great emphasis on environmental measures;
- Be sponsored by community-based or other non-governmental organizations; and
- Advocate for improvements consistent with the principles of sustainability – and seek to promote consensus on the desirability/necessity of these goals.

***Healthy Community*** projects have tended to:

- Select a set of indicators with greater emphasis on health issues;
- Be sponsored by health care institutions, public health agencies, sometimes in partnership with community based organizations; and
- Focus advocacy on improvements with community support and consensus.

***Benchmarking/Performance Measures*** projects have tended to:

- Select a set of indicators that measure extended outcomes related to public services and public policies;
- Be sponsored by governmental entities at the State or local level; and
- Focus advocacy toward guiding public policy and budgetary decisions that determine or influence public service outcomes.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and there is much overlap in actual practice. A review of indicator sets for various projects shows a good deal of overlap in specific indicators selected and tracked over time by different types of projects.

## **Issues**

### **Sponsorship**

“A project with community-based sponsorship has the potential advantage of being perceived as representing “the voice of the people.” If the sponsoring organization’s process has been open and broadly participatory, the resulting indicators may gain credibility through community “buy-in” and ownership. This can be very important in moving successfully from indicators through planning to advocacy and action.”

“On the other hand, a project with local government sponsorship has the potential advantage of being directly plugged into the community’s formal public decision-making

process. This may facilitate planning and short-cut the advocacy process, leading more directly toward the allocation of resources and action.”

(Swain, page 8)

## **Research**

“An indicators project also requires the staff capacity to do research. Without research information to guide thinking and decision making, the citizen involvement process cannot succeed. Initial research needs may be broad and conceptual, as project participants seek to define the values and aspects of wellbeing that they believe are important to measure in their particular community. As the process moves along, research may focus on identifying potential measures for indicators that can effectively articulate the desired value or conceptual content...*after indicators have been identified, research zeros in on collecting data for the specific measures adopted.*”

(Swain, page 12)

## **Data Difficulties**

Most indicator projects seem to have experienced difficulties with data. Data problems include:

- Defining and obtaining data for the appropriate geographic scale – especially for smaller cities or communities, for which many relevant measures are not typically broken out.
- Changes in data collection methodologies – or glitches or anomalies in the data – which make comparisons over time difficult.
- Lack of available data for some key indicators – particularly those that require measures of opinion, perception or individual behavior not tracked by existing “objective” data sources. Reliable and sound citizen opinion/behavioral polling can be a costly undertaking.
- Lack of timely data: Many relevant measures (e.g. demographic data) are undertaken only at wide intervals, such as the U.S. Census. Other measures may be taken or estimated more frequently but change only very slowly over time. Still other measures may go up and down during the course of a year. A project that attempts to measure all indicators annually may fail to yield meaningful comparisons on a year-to-year basis.
- Interpreting and responding to data: Projects sometimes have difficulty assessing the causes or implications of changes in leading indicators. Also the direction in which a body of indicators are moving may be influenced by one or more underlying trends that are beyond the control of the local community – resulting in a sense of hopelessness over time in making progress toward or sustaining key values.

## Selecting Effective Indicators

The sustainable measures website suggests they are certain characteristics that effective indicators have in common. Effective indicators are:

- **Relevant:** They show you something about conditions that you need to know and fit the purpose for which you are measuring.
- **Easy to Understand:** Even people who are not experts must be able to “get” what is being measured and understand the implications of increases or decreases in the indicator.
- **Reliable:** You must be able to trust what the indicator shows and believe it can be measured with reliability over time.
- **Accessible:** The indicator should be based on accessible data and provide timely information that is meaningful and up-to-date within the desired timeframe.

([www.sustainablemeasures.com](http://www.sustainablemeasures.com): “Characteristics of effective indicators”)

Jacksonville, Florida has its own criteria for selecting indicators. These criteria include some of the following considerations:

- **Importance:** The indicator measures an aspect of the community’s quality of life which a diverse group of people would agree is important in relation to the community’s vision or values.
- **Policy relevance:** Positive change on what the indicator measures can be achieved through public decision making and policies and actions at the community level.
- **Responsiveness:** The indicator responds relatively quickly and noticeably to real changes in the quality of life, as revealed by changes in direction or slope of the indicator’s trend line.
- **Validity:** If the indicator’s trend line moves either up or downward, a diverse group of people in the community would agree on whether that represented an improvement or decline in wellbeing or quality of life.
- **Understandability:** The indicator measures an aspect of the community’s quality of life in a way that most citizens can easily understand and interpret in relation to their own lives.
- **Clarity:** The indicator uses clear measures that filter out extraneous factors. For instance, dollar indicator is report in deflated, constant dollars; per-person rates are used where appropriate to factor out population growth; and raw numbers are used where total magnitudes are important.
- **Asset orientation:** Where possible, the indicator measures a positive aspect of the community’s quality of life so that an increase in the indicator trend line denotes an improvement (e.g. graduation rate rather than dropout rate.)
- **Outcome orientation:** Where possible the indicator focuses on a community *outcome* or impact rather than an *input* (e.g. Percentage of students involved in supervised after-school activities or programs rather than dollars spent on after-school activities.

- **Data Availability, timeliness, stability and reliability:** Data for the indicator are readily available and affordably accessible at least annually from a credible public or private source. If the data come from multiple sources/measures staff can readily compile and calculate the indicator numbers. Data are consistently collected, compiled and calculated in the same way each year (Swain, pp. 13-14)

## **Sample Indicators**

(A) The following are example of indicators from a website that includes indicators from a wide array of projects across the country. ([www.sustainablemeasures.com](http://www.sustainablemeasures.com)). The indicators selected below are ones with some relationship to the factors that are being cited as important by community participants in the Bainbridge Healthy Communities research.

### **Connectedness Indicators:**

- *People feeling they can rely on others in the community for help.*
- *Percent who say most people can be trusted.*
- *Neighborhood livability as rated by residents.*
- *Number of community gardens.*
- *Citizen participation in community projects.*

### **Community Contribution Indicators:**

- *Percent of people who volunteer at least 50 hours per year.*
- *Youth involvement in community service*
- *Charitable contributions: amount per capita*

### **Population Mix/Diversity Indicators:**

- *Population mix by age group/income levels/racial & ethnic group*
- *Population migration/loss by key group (age/income/etc.)*
- *Discrimination complaints filed*
- *Ethnic diversity of teaching staff*
- *Perception of racism/discrimination*

### **Education:**

- *Student/teacher ratio*
- *Achievement test scores*
- *Percent of H.S. graduates pursuing post-secondary education/training*
- *H.S. graduation rate compared to State average*
- *Percent of students in vocational/job preparation programs*
- *Volunteer involvement in schools*
- *Ethnic diversity of teaching staff.*

### **Family/Individual Well-Being Indicators:**

- *Percent of children/families in poverty – or in lower income quartiles.*

- *Percent of people who say they have “enough”*
- *Childcare arrangement satisfaction*
- *Children involved in divorce per 1,000 children*

**Transportation/Mobility Indicators:**

- *Number or percent of pedestrian-friendly streets*
- *Ratio of bike paths to streets*
- *Total miles of bike routes*
- *Ratio of sidewalks/walking paths to streets*
- *Total miles of sidewalks/walking trails*
- *Miles of fixed route bus services*
- *Hours of bus service availability*

**Culture/Recreation Indicators:**

- *Number of people using recreation facilities each month*
- *Number people served by local museums/arts events*
- *Event days of bookings at City facilities*
- *Attendance at major events*
- *Public library items circulated per person*
- *Opportunities to participate in arts and cultural activities/performances*

**Housing Indicators:**

- *Housing price to income ratio*
- *Distribution of affordable housing through the City*
- *Waiting time for subsidized housing*
- *Affordability of single family homes*
- *Low-income renters paying more than 30% of income on rent*
- *Housing affordability to rent prices ratio*

(B) The following indicator examples come from a list of community health indicators compiled by Maureen Newby, which shows what indicators are being used by other small towns in the Pacific Northwest.

**Population Indicators:**

- *Growth rates – by age*
- *Diversity*

**Basic Needs:**

- *Ratio of child care slots available to need*
- *Ratio of low-income housing units available to need*
- *Number of requests for help – from specific service providers*
- *Availability/accessibility of mental health/health care services*

**Youth/Family/Individual Well-being:**

- *Alcohol abuse – program and school survey data*
- *Drug abuse – program and school survey data*
- *Number of child abuse/neglect cases reported*
- *Domestic violence rates*

**Community Connection/Contribution:**

- *Giving as a percent of income*
- *Average amount of contributions per capita*
- *Percent who know their neighbors*
- *Number of community blogs*
- *Number of faith-based organizations/volunteers*
- *Number of volunteers at major non-profits*

**Culture/Recreation:**

- *Library use numbers*
- *Public use of facilities/programs*
- *Organized sports*
- *Youth/senior recreation venues/opportunities/numbers participating*
- *Growth of community institutions/programs*

**Mobility/Transportation:**

- *# of buses/# of riders*
- *Number of miles of walkable streets*
- *Transportation/mobility opportunities for seniors/students*
- *Access to downtown*
- *Special needs transportation opportunities.*
- *# of cross-walks and traffic calming devices*

**Political Involvement:**

- *Percent of eligibles registered to vote*
- *Percent/number voted in last election*
- *Participation at city council or other city meetings*