

Asset-Based Community Development Methodology Insures an Evidence-Based Initiative

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The asset-based research reported in "[Building Community From The Inside Out](#)" is an analysis based upon what may be the largest database ever collected of successful neighborhood improvement initiatives. Over 4 years, a research team at the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University collected reports of these initiatives in 20 North American cities. Over 2000 cases were documented based upon neighborhood residents' responses to the question, "Can you tell us what local residents have done together that has made things better."

Each of these cases was then analyzed to identify the basic resources used to achieve the neighborhood improvement. Based on this review, the data demonstrated that regardless of the goal of each initiative, five resources were variously used. The research team named these resources "assets." They are the neighborhood building blocks used in over 2000 successful neighborhood initiatives. A detailed description of these assets and their use is the subject of "[Building Communities From The Inside Out](#)."*

The analysis of the initiatives revealed a second finding. Every initiative involved the connection of local assets that had not been previously connected. And the data also demonstrated that these connections required an "activator"- an individual, association or institution that initiated the connection.

The ABCD research provides clear evidence that the basic ingredients of successful neighborhood initiatives involve the identification of local assets and their active connection. Therefore, an evidence-based proposal for a neighborhood initiative should show that it will identify local assets and activate their connection.

*A sixth asset, stories, was identified after the publication of this book. See "[The Four Essential Elements of an Asset-Based Community Development Process](#)," page 5.

A workbook that guides local project initiators through an asset-based planning's process that assures evidence-based methods is ["Discovering Community Power."](#)

Two other invaluable resources regarding the evidence-based question are:

1. ABCD Faculty member Tom Dewar's ABCD publication titled ["A Guide To Evaluating Asset-Based Community Development,"](#) available on our website under publications.
2. The ABCD Institute has been unique among groups fostering community development because of its special focus on the first two assets - capacities of individuals and their means of empowering that asset, local associations. As we support the work of the associational world, we are enhancing the production of "social capital." This "capital" is the result of the very act of associating as citizens, no matter what the associational purpose. The concept is that in working together voluntarily we produce all kinds of wellbeing, independent of the stated purpose of our group because we produce social capital.

The best evidence for this proposition is in Robert Putnam's groundbreaking study, "Bowling Alone." Putnam had over 100 assistants combing the research literature to identify the benefits of associational life. This research produced strong evidence that associational activity improves education, child welfare, safety, neighborhood productivity, economic wellbeing, health and democracy (see Section 4). The documented research is cited throughout the book and is invaluable in showing how the ABCD focus on enhanced local associational activity has multiple outcomes that, in sum, may be more significant than the stated goal of a particular initiative, e.g., a group of children learning how to use local assets to create a garden will also have improved physical and mental health because of their new associational relationships.