

What Counts?

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It's useful to conceptualize what counts as a means of evaluation. Counting is a limited tool. It doesn't really help much in determining whether there are new friendships and a web of mutual support creating a culture of interdependence, the goal of asset-based neighborhood organizing. Nonetheless, in understanding whether door-to-door asset-based organizing is fruitful, there are ways of counting things that provide useful, if limited, feedback that is satisfying to people who know by numbers. For of these numeric methods are:

1. Connections and Social Capital

The first step in utilizing the information from neighborhood questionnaires or community conversations is to establish connections. These could be:

- One to one relationships.
- More than two people being connected in a new association.
- Individuals being connected to an existing association.
- Individuals being connected to local institutions.

Each of these types of relationships can be counted and this information used to demonstrate "social capital." Social capital is widely recognized as a major factor in all forms of well-being — health, security, knowledge, economy, etc. Robert Putnam, in his famous book called *Bowling Alone* spells out the many benefits of social capital. It's worth looking at his chapters.

2. Action Outcomes

Many institutional and funding leaders are more interested in "outcomes" than they are in the increase in social capital. They want to know what happened as a direct result of the connections. In order to document these outcomes, it's necessary to follow-up on each outcome so that the actions can be identified and quantified. For example, if the action of five relationships could be classified as promoting health, then we reach the level of generalization that is of greatest interest to most institutional people. We can say that the connections in the neighborhood show evidence of actions that produce health and it is "evidence based" activity.

3. Attitude Change

Connections and actions may result in a change in attitude by participants and neighbors regarding the significance of the neighborhood. It is possible to measure attitude change by asking a series of questions at the beginning of an initiative and then following up within a year or so, asking the same questions to determine whether there has been a change. One measure of attitude change is

called the “Sense of Community Index.” The responses to its questions can be counted up demonstrating the amount of change in attitude and the nature of that change.

4. Community Participation

One result of the connective process has been greater attendance at the meetings of the local neighborhood associations as well as greater presence at the meetings of city council or its committees. This increase may be difficult to count, but the observation of the officials chairing these meetings can be useful in demonstrating more participation in local democracy.