



# Social Indicators for NYS Local Governments

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## ABSTRACT

As New York State localities face fiscal stress, they must be careful that efforts to cut budgets to ensure fiscal solvency do not cause a decline in services. **Social indicators are an important tool that enables local governments to assess the economic and social impacts of budget and service decisions.** This report explores how to best design social indicators to identify community needs and aid local government in effectively providing services. Our full report provides the history of social indicators and gives examples of social indicators used by international and domestic local governments. We hope these examples will open a dialogue about the potential for collaborative indicator design among unions, municipalities, and citizens in New York State (NYS).

## INNOVATIVE CASES

### Durham Neighborhood Compass:

#### North Carolina (<http://compass.durhamnc.gov>)

Two of Durham's block groups have the second highest poverty rate in the county, where little investment is occurring. In 2014, as part of an initiative to alleviate poverty, the City of Durham launched its Neighborhood Compass, a public web GIS application that tracks quality of life and provision of services. Its over forty measures fall under the following categories: demographic, infrastructure and amenities, economy, housing, environment, and safety.

These measures were identified through local strategic planning and resident input. Data are open access and will be updated annually.<sup>1</sup> Government can use the data to provide services where needed and enforce building codes. The public can use data to lobby for underserved communities.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the Durham Neighborhood Compass won Honorable Mention for the annual Technology Service Award from the Public Technology Institute.

### Queensland, Australia

#### (<http://www.communityindicatorsqld.org.au>)

Queensland, Australia, has suffered multiple natural disasters. One notable case was the series of floods that occurred from December 2010 through January 2011, which resulted in 38 deaths and 9 missing. To promote recovery and resilience efforts for future disasters, Community Indicators Queensland (CIQ) developed a set of indicators that addresses resilience domains and community wellbeing. Community Indicators Victoria (CIV), the first social indicator project in Australia, inspired CIQ's framework.

CIV has been successful in helping city councils make decisions on budgets and future investments related to health and wellbeing. The indicator survey explores the relationship between disadvantaged communities and available resources for recovery. It was created through collaboration between the government, non-profit sector, Queensland University researchers, and residents. The indicators are currently in their pilot stages in three communities and will have a database, web interface, and information portal feature for public access. CIQ hopes to inspire other communities worldwide to create their own resilience indicator systems.

### Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance:

#### Maryland (<http://bniajfi.org/>)

Baltimore is a partner of the National Neighborhood Indicators Project (NNIP) — a collaboration between the Urban Institute and cities across the United States.<sup>3</sup> Baltimore's indicator research connects economic conditions with social impacts. Its findings showed that while one-third of Baltimore neighborhoods grew between 2000 and 2010, neighborhoods with four percent or greater vacancy rates experienced population declines.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing this tipping point, the city has focused its code enforcement on these neighborhoods and now has a 10-year plan to demolish approximately 4,000 distressed



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## INNOVATIVE CASES (CONTINUED)

structures. The findings caused the city to push for increased code enforcement and receivership efforts, in which an outside entity is appointed to rehabilitate vacant properties.<sup>5</sup>

### ACT Rochester:

#### New York (<http://www.actrochester.org>)

Rochester is the 5th poorest city in the country and has the 3rd highest concentration of extremely poor neighborhoods among major US cities. ACT Rochester is an indicator project that focuses on the greater Rochester region and has produced an interactive and open source data website. Its indicators were selected in citizen focus groups and its mission is to improve community problem-solving through indicator use. It recently released a report that profiles poverty in Rochester. Although ACT Rochester is cautious in making policy recommendations, its report profiles two strategies that may help reduce the concentration of poor communities: investing in the urban core and dispersing the poor by expanding low-income housing in the suburbs.<sup>6</sup>

**The above examples emphasize citizen participation in identifying community indicators.** Each includes components from the 'triple bottom line' — the social, economic, and environmental factors that affect people's wellbeing. Resources for local government include the NYS comptroller's environmental indicators, which monitor local social health, as well as the NNIP, which develops tools to democratize data, strengthen communities, and inform policymaking.<sup>7,8</sup> Although all social indicators have common elements, each community develops a framework that reflects its unique needs and aims.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Killeen, J. (2014, May 2). [Durham INC] Durham's Neighborhood Compass Now Available! <http://rtpnet.org/pipermail/inc-list/2014/009648.html>
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4. Iyer, S., & Gondol, S. (2012, October 15). How Baltimore grows. [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2012-10-15/news/bs-ed-neighborhoods-20121012\\_1\\_crime-rate-neighborhoods-historic-lows](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2012-10-15/news/bs-ed-neighborhoods-20121012_1_crime-rate-neighborhoods-historic-lows)
5. Gallagher, M. (2013, October 6). Baltimore demolition of vacant property. [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-10-06/news/bs-ed-vacant-prop-](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-10-06/news/bs-ed-vacant-prop-erty-20131006_1_population-loss-vacant-properties-vacant-buildings)

## DESIGN CRITERIA

While designing social indicators may seem like a daunting task, scholars have proposed criteria for creating good indices:<sup>9</sup>

1. **Validity:** well-grounded in data and accurately depicting a real situation
2. **Relevance:** appropriate for priority issues, meaningful to stakeholders
3. **Consistency and reliability:** can be researched reliably over a period of time
4. **Cost-effective:** affordable, relevant, and accessible data sources for a community
5. **Clarity:** unambiguous and understandable by a diverse audience
6. **Comprehensive:** represents many aspects of an issue
7. **Comparable:** sufficiently general to be compared with other communities
8. **Attractiveness to the media:** likely to be embraced by the press

## CONCLUSION

The shift of responsibility for service provision from the state to local level has both economic and social impacts. An emphasis on wellbeing is needed to inform local policy and program design to address these challenges. Social indicators are a useful tool that enables local governments to measure the quality of life of their communities. In our full report, we outline the history, precedents, components, uses, and limitations of social indicators and argue for their use in New York State as localities attempt to balance fiscal austerity with social and economic wellbeing.

6. Doherty, Edward. (2013). Poverty and the Concentration of Poverty in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area. <http://www.actrochester.org/sites/default/files/Poverty%20Report%20for%20Web.pdf>
7. DiNapoli, Thomas. (2014, September). Fiscal Stress Monitoring System. <http://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/fiscalmonitoring/pdf/fiscalstressmonitoring.pdf>
8. NNIP. (2014, January 1). NNIP Concept. <http://www.neighborhood-indicators.org/about-nnip/nnip-concept>
9. Phillips, R. (2003). 'Community Indicators', American Planning Association Planning Advisory Service Report Number 517, Chicago: APA. <http://www.planning.state.ri.us/documents/comp/CommunityIndicators.pdf>