



RESEARCH REPORT

# Data Walks

## An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities

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# Introduction

Much applied public policy research is intended to inform policies and practices that aim to help address problems and improve the quality of life for low-income families. But although researchers—and policymakers—value dissemination, their focus is generally on publishing results in policy reports or academic journals and sharing them in professional meetings and conferences. News media and technology have added blogs, webinars, and other dissemination tools, but it is still rare for researchers to share even applied research findings with the community stakeholders who are intended to benefit. Researchers, program administrators, and policymakers are accustomed to presentations full of technical jargon and graphics that community residents and practitioners may perceive as intimidating, confusing, and patronizing. But not engaging with service providers and clients means missing the opportunity to gain their insights about the results and what those results might mean for their communities. Engaging with stakeholders is particularly important in community-based and collective-impact initiatives, which are intended to involve residents and local stakeholders in developing and implementing solutions. Developing new and innovative strategies to demystify research and enable neighborhood residents and practitioners to use data to effect community change has the potential to strengthen the “rigor, relevance and reach” of research and policy with contextualized information from the field (Balazs and Morello-Frosch. 2013).

Engaging the community as a research partner is something the public health field has been championing for years through its community-based participatory research model, which often involves residents in defining research agendas, research design, data collection, and developing and testing interventions for their own communities. We have developed a tool we call a Data Walk as a means of sharing data and research findings with stakeholders. This guidebook draws on our experiences with two place-based projects where we have seen Data Walks spur dialogue between community stakeholders who used data as the anchor to ground conversations around solving neighborhood problems.

During a Data Walk, program participants, community residents, and service providers jointly review data presentations in small groups, interpret what the data mean, and collaborate to use their individual expertise to improve policies, programs, and other factors of community change. A Data Walk focuses solely on data sharing as the platform for collaboration and can be used whether or not the community has been engaged from the beginning. A Data Walk has several objectives:

- To share key data and findings with community residents and program participants;

- To ensure a more robust analysis and understanding of the data;
- To help inform better programming and policies to address both the strengths and the needs of a particular community or population; and
- To inspire individual and collective action among community agents.

# What Is a Data Walk?

A Data Walk is an interactive way for community stakeholders, including residents, researchers, program administrators, local government officials, and service providers, to engage in dialogue around research findings about their community. The idea comes from a pedagogical technique that exposes small groups of students to large amounts of information in a variety of media posted on classroom walls for the students to tour, similar to attending a museum exhibit (Francek 2006). Students share ideas and responses to targeted questions in small groups as they view the material, and afterward, they synthesize the information they have just encountered through a facilitated discussion with the teacher. Similarly, in Data Walks in community settings participants rotate through “stations” where data is displayed visually and textually to tell a story for participants to interpret, discuss, and reflect on in small groups.

The Data Walk offers researchers and/or community organizations an accessible and meaningful way to analyze data in partnership with community residents and other stakeholders. Thinking aloud through graphs and statistics with a cross-sector representation of people offers multiple benefits by

- Building the capacity of individuals who may not commonly approach community problems quantitatively to read and interpret data, apply it to real life, and assess and discuss how the data align with their personal experience;
- Empowering residents through exploring shared struggles and achievements among neighbors to promote individual and collective problem solving and civic engagement;
- Creating dialogue between different stakeholders in a community, including service providers, teachers and principals, researchers, community members, health professionals, business leaders, and local government officials. Participants are able to combine specific data points and personal experience to better explain where and why programs and services are falling short. This feedback can inform changes in programs, services, and policy to better address the community’s assets and areas for improvement;
- Providing residents the tools to ground their own personal experiences and observations in data from the larger community and to take action in partnership with other stakeholders (mentioned above) uniquely poised to enact change;
- Providing residents a better understanding of ongoing research in their community and an opportunity to define what role they can play within that effort; and

- Providing researchers a more robust analysis of the data by contextualizing the findings to include input from varied stakeholders who may offer new or different interpretations of the research findings. This engagement should ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of research findings, higher-quality research, and eventually, more informed policies and programs.

# Background

## Building Capacity while Enriching Researchers' Analysis

The Urban Institute has used our Data Walk methodology both as a tool for program planning and for informing data analysis with our community-based participatory research project, Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS; see box 1). We engaged our steering committee, the leadership and decision-making body driving the project, in designing a sexual health and safety curriculum for youth and adults living in Benning Terrace, a public housing development in Washington, DC. The steering committee included researchers, community residents, community leaders, DC housing authority staff, and representatives from organizations that provide services to the community. We used the Data Walk to share and discuss findings that prepared the team to make critical program recommendations.

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### BOX 1

#### **Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS)**

The University of California at San Diego and the Urban Institute are implementing the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) project, a collaboration with the DC Housing Authority and public housing residents at Benning Terrace to develop an evidence-based service model addressing the chronic sexual threats and pressures experienced by youth in neighborhoods with a “coercive sexual environment” (CSE). CSE is a neighborhood-level threat that appears to play a critical role in the lives of adolescent girls in poor communities. The ultimate goal of the PASS project is to improve the lives of vulnerable adolescents living in high-poverty communities by developing a community-level intervention that addresses CSE and decreases the associated negative outcomes.

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The data came from a survey of adults and youth in Benning Terrace and included indicators around health, substance abuse, risky behaviors, and neighborhood dynamics such as crime and victimization, among other topics. The nature of community-based participatory research required us to be transparent about the sensitive survey results; however, we were concerned that handing the steering committee a hard copy of the somber statistics would be overwhelming and might perpetuate negative

stereotypes. Instead, we opted to cluster poster-sized graphs with bulleted descriptions on the walls of a community facility and facilitate a session in which small, interdisciplinary groups, made up of an even representation of all sectors present, rotated through the information stations to collectively interpret and discuss the findings. Researchers were intentional about sharing their own limitations, encouraged community participants to bring their expertise to the discussion, and talked through the data visuals so everyone would have a shared understanding of how to read and interpret the graphs. Afterward, we brought the steering committee back together to debrief, and participants had a nuanced conversation around statistics that validated or challenged their perceptions of the community, while making considerations for the validity of certain data points.

The collaboration leveled the playing field by giving all participants the platform to be the analysts. Data Walk participants critiqued the wording of the survey items, suggesting that some questions could be misleading for youth who are used to certain language and terminology when referring to sensitive topics. Some steering committee members questioned the types of conclusions we could draw, in some instances, when there was a low response rate. They suggested ways to improve the survey, such as adjusting questions that made assumptions about respondents being heterosexual. There were even data points they felt were underestimates because they had witnessed the events at greater rates than the numbers showed. Including researchers in groups with community members created a synergy in which we could combine our collective expertise and learn from each other while valuing everyone's perspective.

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*Using the Data Walk to discuss topics related to a coercive sexual environment in the community also helped to level the power dynamics between researchers and the community by not only allowing access to the data, but ownership of the data through individualized interpretation.*

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The collaborative nature of the Data Walk allowed our team to think through all aspects and implications of the data to adjust programming, outreach, and other components of our PASS project. Using the Data Walk to discuss such topics also helped to level the power dynamics between researchers and the community by not only allowing access to the data, but ownership of the data through individualized interpretation. The Data Walk allowed the steering committee to create a

narrative of the data based on their personal, on-the-ground experiences while simultaneously making programmatic recommendations more intentional and enriching the researchers' understanding and analysis of the survey data and the community-based participatory research process. Additionally, the inclusivity of our team equipped us with a deeper and broader understanding of the interplay of issues plaguing the community. Participants were further motivated to advocate for the program and its cause, and researchers were better prepared to engage with the community moving forward.

## Empowering Neighborhood Residents while Shaping Social Services

We have also used Data Walks as part of our Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST; see box 2) demonstration implemented in low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, IL, and Portland, OR. As part of the final evaluation, we conducted focus groups to gauge both residents' and service providers' feelings about the wraparound services and programs provided to help connect residents to employment and educational opportunities. Before the focus groups began, we facilitated Data Walks to share community survey data around employment, food security, and mental health, as well as ongoing program data such as participation and engagement. The Data Walks were followed by separate focus groups with residents and service providers to discuss the data and residents' experiences with the HOST service model in greater detail. Our team found that participants were able to give more informed responses than in typical focus groups because they were using specific data points and larger context from the Data Walks to drive conversation.

The Data Walks and the discussions that followed allowed residents to share information with service providers to improve programming. During the Data Walk held in Altgeld Gardens, a HOST site in Chicago, a resident shared her personal connection to the findings about food insecurity in her community, noting that she did not understand why the percentage of residents reporting not being able to afford food was not higher than we had found, because she herself (and many of her neighbors) were going hungry. Because her HOST case manager was present, she was able to connect with her service provider about how specific needs in her household were not being addressed and how the service provider could help her meet her goals.

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BOX 2

### **Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST)**

The Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST) project of the Urban Institute, launched with the support of the Open Society Foundations, is a multisite demonstration that tests innovative, wraparound services and programs for youth and adults living in a range of public and mixed-income housing. The initiative is evaluating how public housing and human services can be coordinated in different settings to maximize positive outcomes for residents and their children. The results are informing the future of how the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, local housing agencies, and service providers develop place-based, supportive environments for low-income populations. The demonstration leverages private, state, and federal funding nationwide to support and strengthen low-income populations.

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# Designing a Data Walk

Hosting a Data Walk takes time and thoughtful planning. We began our process by outlining the purpose and goals of the exercise and making key decisions about logistics, data points to highlight, and discussion questions only after working through the following big picture design issues.

## Objectives and Research Questions

It is important to consider your goals for the event and what you want to learn:

- Are you trying to gain a more robust understanding of existing quantitative data?
- Do you want to build consensus around a particular phenomenon being observed in the community?
- Do you want to empower community stakeholders to organize around a community issue?
- How will you debrief the group and help its members synthesize the information after the Data Walk?
- Will the Data Walk be paired with a formal research activity like interviews or focus groups? Or will an informal discussion follow?

## Target Participants

Think critically about who shares the neighborhood space and who needs to be in the room. Consider what each party will bring to and take from the Data Walk. How will you accommodate the variety of needs and interests of families, youth, adults, service providers, local officials, and researchers? When working with youth or low-income families, consider accessibility and transportation. When working with adults, consider providing child care so parents can fully participate in the Data Walk and accompanying activities. Quality child care requires finding appropriate space, ensuring there are enough activities and materials for the children's use, and hiring experienced child care professionals.

Are you working with communities of a certain faith or strong cultural norms and cultures? What kind of language barriers might be present? In Chicago and DC, the majority of HOST and PASS Data

Walk participants were African American. In contrast, the Portland groups were diverse and included Hispanics, African Americans, Caucasians, Asians, and recent African immigrants. Many participants spoke very little English. The diversity in Portland made the facilitation and discussion planning more challenging, but as we describe below, far from impossible.

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP; see box 3) offers another example of a model that strives to empower communities to use data to understand and develop strategies for addressing local problems. Children’s Optimal Health (CoH), NNIP’s local partner in Austin, puts particular focus on mapping as a way of communicating the meaning of data to diverse audiences. In outreach for CoH’s community “summits,” or interdisciplinary conferences to strategize around specific community issues, organizers take special care to ensure a broad range of community voices is represented. Specifically, when targeting community organizations, service providers, and local business partners, they invite personnel from “up and down the chains of command” (Pettit 2014). This strategy can help bridge internal gaps within organizations, not just among external partners. NNIP cites an example from a youth substance abuse summit in which an organization realized its health department staff was not in regular communication with its staff on the front lines, and was easily able to address this problem.

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### BOX 3

#### **National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP)**

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a network of organizations in more than 30 cities that maintains recurrently updated, multitopic neighborhood-level information systems. The local partners share a mission to help community stakeholders use data for better decisionmaking, with a focus on assisting organizations and residents in underserved communities. NNIP organizations organize and transform data, share expertise in a range of issues, and connect sectors across topical silos. The Urban Institute coordinates the NNIP network to promote peer learning and disseminate lessons from the local experiences.

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## Maintaining Integrity

What are the consequences of presenting certain data to the community? What are the potential risks of combining various groups of people to have an honest conversation about the subject matter? Discovering potential risks or challenges does not mean you should forego a Data Walk, but instead offers you an opportunity to brainstorm ways to mitigate, bypass, or be transparent about any potential negative consequences. For example, with the HOST Data Walks in Chicago and Portland, we were concerned that residents would not be able to share honestly about their experiences in the program while in the same groups with service providers. To mitigate case manager insecurity and resident inhibition, we recommended that the service providers introduce the Data Walk by inviting open and honest feedback from residents to help them improve programs, services, and outreach (figures 1 and 2). Setting the stage for the event in this way helped all participants feel more comfortable giving and receiving criticism. We also conducted separate focus groups with service providers and residents to allow participants to make comments they did not want to share with the other party. This strategy allowed a more productive conversation between participants who were coming from similar perspectives.

FIGURE 1

### Sample “Goals for Tonight” Slide

#### Goals for Tonight

- Share information gathered from HOST families in Portland, Chicago, and Washington, DC
- Enjoy a meal together
- Listen to you and learn how to make services for families better.

FIGURE 2

“Tonight’s Purpose” Slide from the HOST Data Walk in Altgeld Gardens in Chicago

## Tonight’s Purpose

### Data Walk:

- To share data collected about HOST participation in Altgeld Gardens and discuss the information with residents and UCAN staff.

### Focus Groups:

- To learn how residents and staff feel about the HOST program and if HOST has helped families address any challenges.
- To improve future services and programs.

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# Planning a Data Walk: Logistics to Consider

## Time and Setting

It is important to schedule the Data Walk when most participants are available. Consider your target audience and determine when they would most likely be free and willing to attend—ask service providers and/or residents directly to guide your decision. Setting plays a key role in the success of your Data Walk. The location should be a familiar, neutral community space where people feel comfortable engaging with their neighbors. The distance from the venue to residents' homes should be walkable to encourage participation, as some participants may not have access to a vehicle, and safety issues may be a concern later in the evening. From their experience with community summits in Austin, staff members at the NNIP partner Children's Optimal Health recommend keeping costs down by having space, and even catering, donated by local community partners who might have representatives present. They also suggest reserving the room for extra time to allow people to network and continue planning while they are energized about the topic.

Make sure the interior of the building is structurally conducive to this sort of event. Ensure there is adequate wall space available to hang the posters in groups and enough room for people to move around comfortably between data stations. Consider the space required to conduct the post-Data Walk activities. Will participants be able to reference the posters during the debriefing discussion? Will different types of participants need to be separated for the follow-up discussion? If so, make sure the venue allows for privacy within the various breakout groups.

## Recruitment and Incentives

The entity that knows the community residents best should be responsible for their recruitment because that method often leads to a better turnout. In the case of HOST, case managers reached out to families personally by house visits or by phone to encourage participation. They also put up flyers (figure 3) throughout the community to get the word out. In our work with the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative, we witnessed successful community outreach through hiring liaisons from the

community to canvass the neighborhood. Having people with strong relationships with families do the recruiting was helpful in encouraging a good turnout. However, this approach also makes it more difficult to anticipate the actual number of people who will attend. It also means the majority of participants will be individuals who are more highly engaged, and the perspectives of an important subset of residents may be lacking. Depending on the goals of your Data Walk, this issue may be a factor to consider.

FIGURE 3

### Recruitment Flyer for HOST Data Walk at New Columbia in Portland, Oregon



To provide an incentive for participation that reflected the uncertain number of participants, HOST used a raffle and dinner rather than individual cash incentives. We raffled off four \$50 gift cards to Wal-Mart. The most attractive incentive for participation was providing dinner, and we made sure to provide ample food for people to take home afterward (figure 4). Another critical component to ensuring high turnout and focused participation was providing child care, both to make it easier for adults to attend

the event and to ensure the discussions were relatively free of interruptions. We provided plenty of coloring books, crayons, and books to keep children occupied. Dinner and child care were particularly critical elements in Portland, where many households include up to 9 or 10 family members (many children) and where we knew food insecurity was a key challenge. Selecting culturally appropriate refreshments, ordering an abundance of food, and offering to-go boxes were all key decision points we considered.

FIGURE 4

### Ample Food—Enough for Dinner and a To-Go Box—Is an Attractive Incentive for Data Walk Participation



Although the HOST Data Walks in Chicago and Portland were more retrospective, the incentive for participation in the Washington, DC, PASS Data Walk was more about having an opportunity to shape the start of a new project and a program that would better serve their adolescent youth. By reviewing the survey and administrative data, the DC group was able to identify the strengths and challenges of their own community alongside the researchers prior to launching the program. For a community long

used to being studied, receiving sporadic handouts, and seeing supportive services and programs come and go, serving as the lead organizer for change in the community was an encouraging experience.

## Planning for Station Rotation

When planning for the number and flow of your stations, begin with anticipating the number of people expected to attend. Ideally, your groups should have no more than four or five people to encourage participation from all group members, although larger groups are possible. We facilitated several Data Walks with groups of about 10 due to limited staff to lead each group. These larger groups were more difficult to manage, but allowing a bit more time per station ensured that individuals from each group had a chance to ask questions and fully review all the information.

Consider your Data Walk design when deciding how you will systematically group people. For example, if you want to encourage residents to mingle with neighbors who may not know each other, counting off would be the best way to assign groups. For HOST's purposes, we made sure all community residents were in groups with a service provider staff member and a research team member so we were available to explain the graphs and to include a variety of perspectives for a richer dialogue. For PASS, the researchers had previously developed relationships with steering committee members, so we tried to make sure more talkative participants were spread throughout groups to keep a healthy conversation going.

It is important to strategically plan the length of time allowed at each station. First, consider the length of time you have for your entire event, the number of stations, and what proportion of time you would like to allot to station rotations. Give participants enough time to discuss the material, but try not to let people become disengaged. We found that five stations at about six minutes per station was ideal for our purposes in Chicago, but far too short in Portland. Portland participants, because of the language barriers, needed more time to digest the data and graphs they were viewing and likely would have been more comfortable discussing each station in their smaller Data Walk group, rather than the larger discussion groups that followed. In retrospect, it would have been better in Portland to make a real-time adjustment to provide more time at each station and to cut back on the group discussions afterward.

# Planning a Data Walk: Content to Consider

## Including the Right Data

We began by selecting possible data points that would best encourage dialogue around the objectives of our event. After compiling all data to present, we grouped certain data points to create robust discussion topics while making sure the amount of information at each station was digestible. We have found that Data Walks are more effective when dialogue is focused around a few interesting and pertinent data points rather than providing an exhaustive data profile of the community. Participants should leave with a nuanced understanding of a handful of priority issues. Less is more when having to make hard decisions about what to include.

Data presented can include the following:

- **Survey data:** Residents' responses about housing, health, employment, the neighborhood, income, and youth behavior;
- **Program data:** Data from service providers about adult and youth participation in services, meetings with case managers, lease violations, and employment;
- **Neighborhood information:** Publicly available, administrative data that describe conditions of life in a community (e.g., graduation rates, unemployment); and
- **Demographic data:** Characteristics of target populations such as race, income, percentage of English language learners, or number of free/reduced lunch participants.

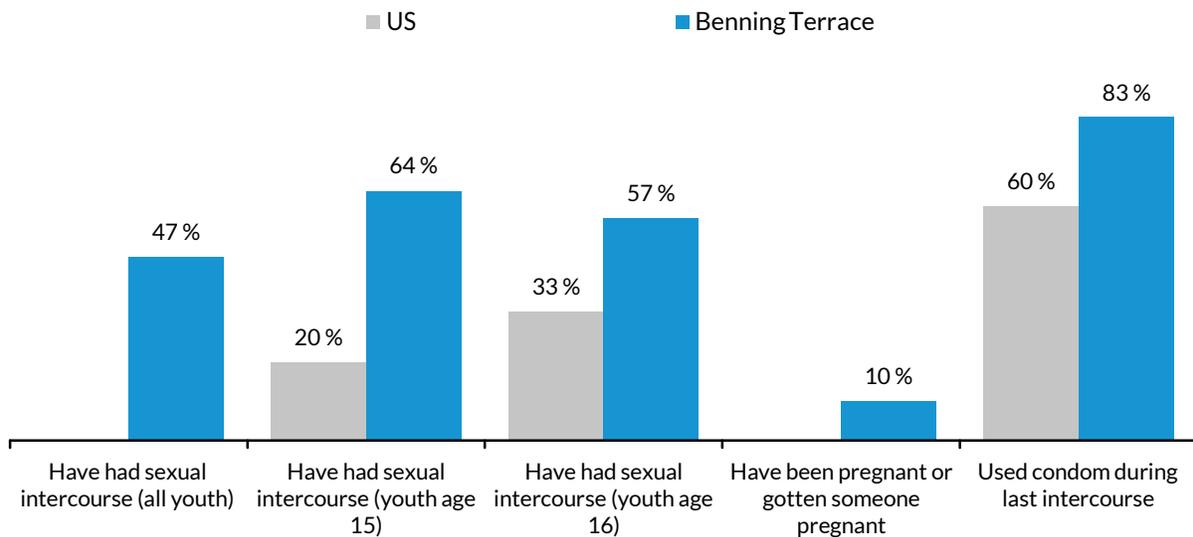
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*KEY: Include national, state, or city data benchmarks to help provide context and put community-level data in perspective. Many data points are difficult to evaluate in isolation.*

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For example, figure 5 shows the slide used to convey community survey results of youth sexual activity in Benning Terrace. Sixty-four percent of youth in the neighborhood had initiated sexual intercourse by the age of 15. Taken at face value, 64 percent seems high, but it resonates even more strongly when shown alongside the national average of 20 percent. Showing the disparities between the focal community and the US average helped the PASS steering committee members hone in on what outcomes were most important.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Youth Sexual Health**

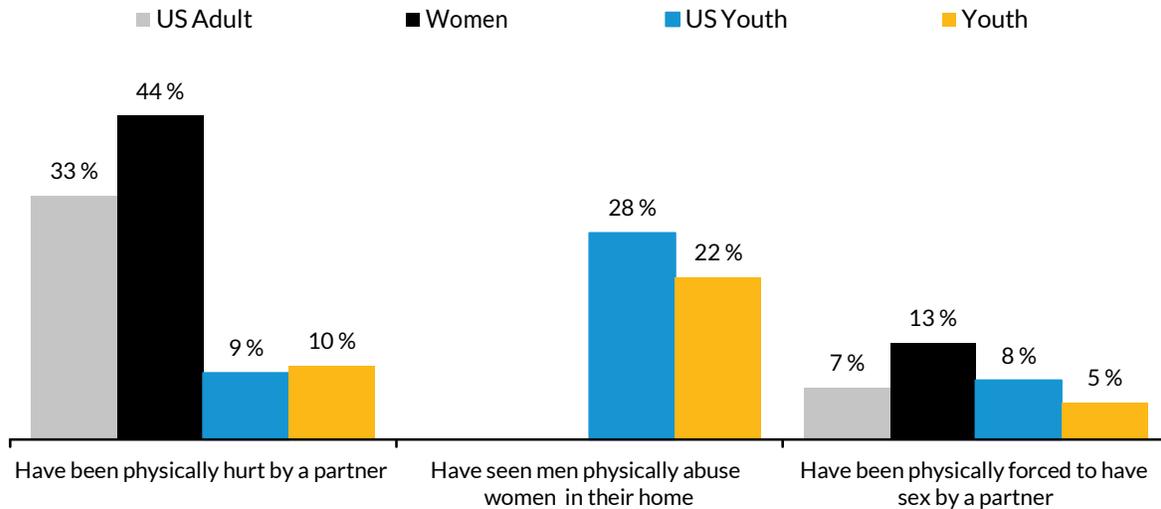


**Sources:** National rates calculated from Lawrence and Philbin (2013) and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (2011).

Figure 5 gives a grim insight into the experiences of youth living in Benning Terrace. We feared that sharing too many bleak statistics around risky youth behaviors would only reinforce negative messages and stereotypes, disempowering residents even further. We attempted to mitigate those consequences by strategically using national- and city-level comparisons when possible to appropriately contextualize information and demonstrate how other communities or the city as a whole were facing certain issues. For example, as figure 6 shows, although 22 percent of youth in Benning Terrace had seen men physically abuse women in their home, researchers explained to participants that this figure was below the national average for youth by 6 percentage points.

FIGURE 6

### Benning Terrace Women and Youth Experiences and Exposure to Relationship Abuse



Source: National rates calculated from National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010); National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (2008).

We exercised caution when displaying potentially distressing data points as people may make sweeping assumptions or further stigmatize the community. Although it is important to be honest about what the data suggest, it was helpful for us to provide extra context around survey limitations that could have magnified the statistic and to cut the data to more accurately explain the phenomenon, if possible. We did not attempt to dilute data that negatively portrayed the community; we provided a complete narrative so participants walked away with an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the issues.

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*KEY: Create a more balanced picture of the community by highlighting strengths alongside areas for improvement.*

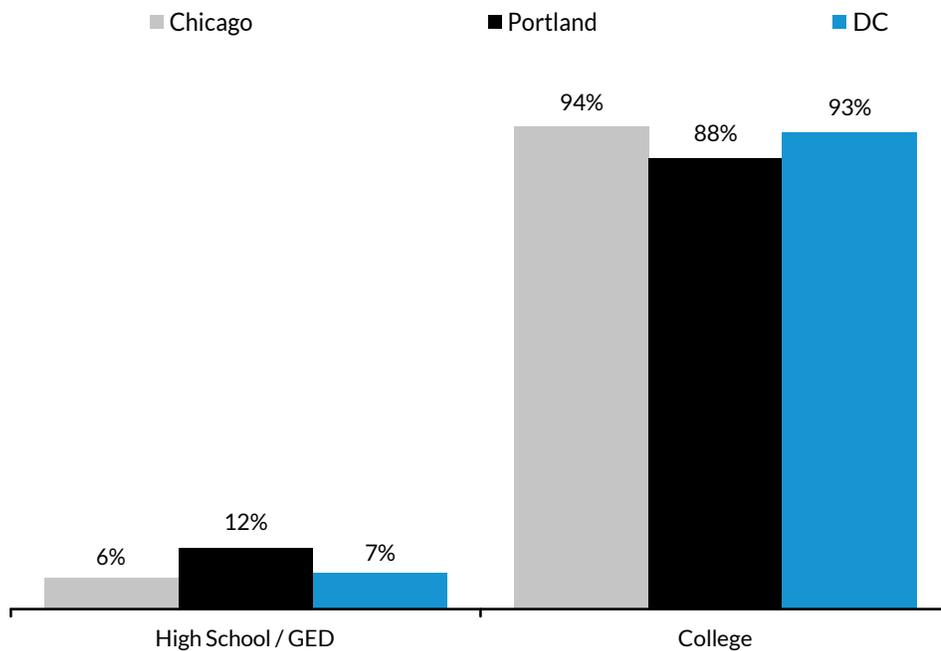
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By providing a balance of the community's strengths and weaknesses, participants feel empowered to build on strengths and improve on weaknesses and not be dejected from the Data Walk experience.

One example of this balance is the set of graphs that demonstrated youths' expectations for how far they would go in school (a strength) (figure 7) paired with data on high school graduation rates in their neighborhood (a weakness). In Portland, one father who recently emigrated from Ethiopia noted that although many youth in the Portland HOST sites wanted to finish high school and attend college, very few actually did. Although the data on youth goals prompted hope, he found the statistics on actual attendance troubling because they suggested that applying to and affording college were two extremely difficult tasks for most families in his community.

FIGURE 7

### Youth Expectations for How Far They Will Go in School



For the Data Walk in Chicago, an important data point was the measure around community cohesion, which demonstrates how willing neighbors are to help one another, their shared values, whether neighbors generally get along with one another, and how likely they are to trust one another. The survey found that Chicago had a particularly low level of community cohesion. This finding was unsurprising to most of the Altgeld Gardens participants at the Data Walk, and seeing this aspect of their community concretely through data confirmed the harsh reality residents and service providers faced on a daily basis. On a more positive note, the survey also found that although community cohesion was low, more than half the Altgeld residents were willing to help one another with a problem. The discrepancy between these two findings not only balanced positive with negative information, it also led

Data Walk participants and researchers to consider the survey questions and what the survey was truly capturing or missing.

## Language and User-Friendly Charts

Data points should be displayed on large posters in both text and graphic form to make the information more accessible for auditory and visual learners. Choose appropriate charts for various types of information to synthesize the data effectively. Make language accessible for a variety of reading levels and languages that may be present in the community.

Figures 8 and 9 show how the same information was presented in multiple ways to ensure all participants could easily access the data.

FIGURE 8

### Comparison of Hunger Issues in Chicago, Portland, and Washington, DC

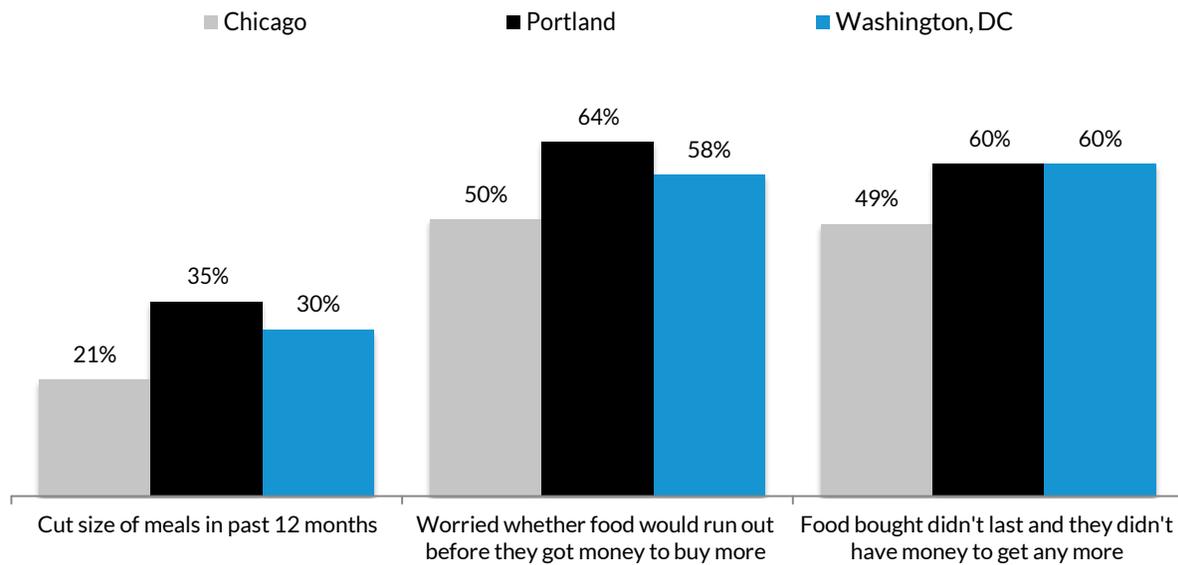


FIGURE 9

## Discussion of Hunger Issues in Chicago, Portland, and Washington, DC

### Food & Hunger

Fewer residents at Altgeld (Chicago) (21%) have cut the size of their meals in the past 12 months than in Portland (35%) and in DC (30%).

Half of Altgeld (Chicago) residents (50%) worried about food running out before they got money to buy more – less than both Portland at 64% and DC at 58%.

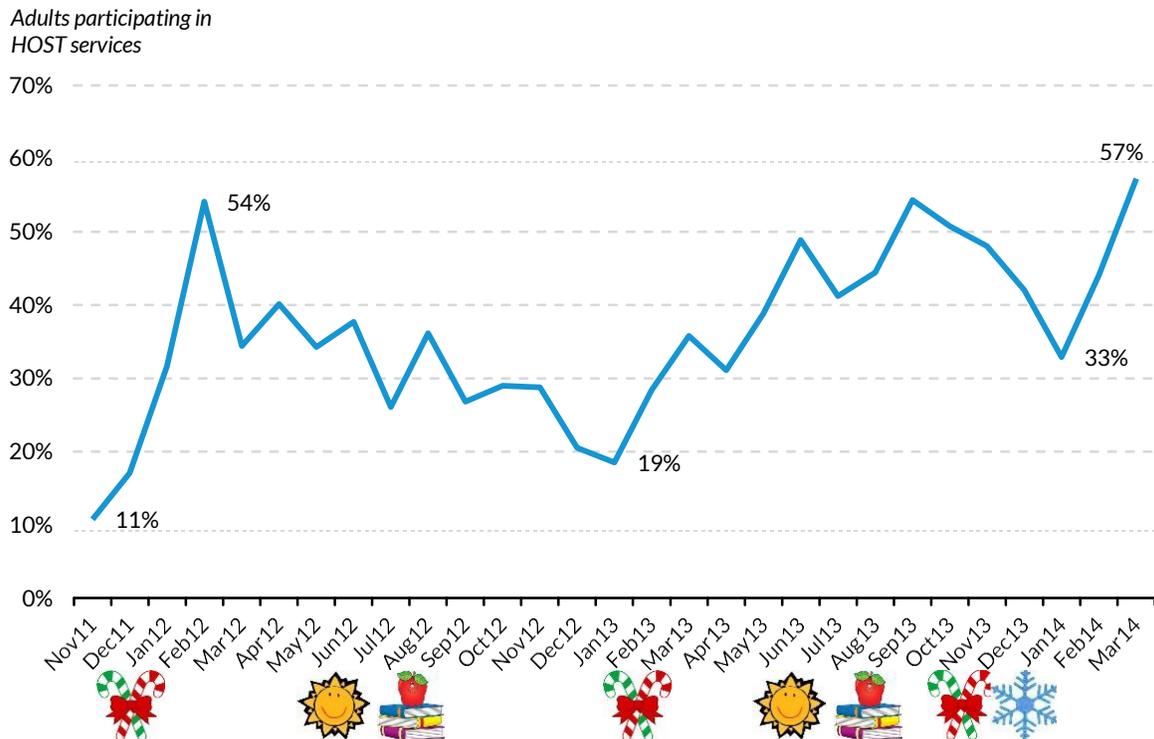
60% of both Portland and DC residents reported that sometimes food purchased didn't last and they didn't have money to get more. Both sites are higher than Altgeld (Chicago) which reported 49%.

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Include illustrations for clarification whenever possible. For example, with HOST we used illustrations of seasons and major events such as “back to school” or “major snow storm” to help trigger memories of what was happening in the community at the time the data were reported (figure 10). Pairing graphs and charts with photos, videos, or other qualitative information would also help bring the data to life for participants. This pairing of graphics, images, and text was particularly effective in Portland, where the diversity in cultures and languages was more prevalent.

FIGURE 10

### Calendar Graphics to Help Remind Data Walk Participants of Community Events during Periods of Data Collection



Maps are also useful tools to help participants from a certain community spatially connect with the information being presented. The interactions at the Children’s Optimal Health Community Summits have demonstrated how maps “transcend language barriers” and appeal to people’s natural ability to relate to their neighborhood space.

Figures 11 and 12 show maps used by Children’s Optimal Health to demonstrate changes in the concentration of middle school students who failed cardiovascular tests in specific communities in Austin, TX, over a two-year time frame. In 2007–08, more than 70 percent of middle school students in the areas indicated by blue squares had poor cardiovascular health (figure 11). By 2009–10, this share had dropped to less than 50 percent for the majority of the area (figure 12). Sharing these findings visually with community stakeholders, including school district staff, supported the effort to expand the physical activity program piloted in the affected neighborhoods to include all the middle schools in the entire district.

FIGURE 11

### NNIP Map Showing Concentration of Austin, TX, Middle School Students Who Failed Cardiovascular Tests, 2007-08

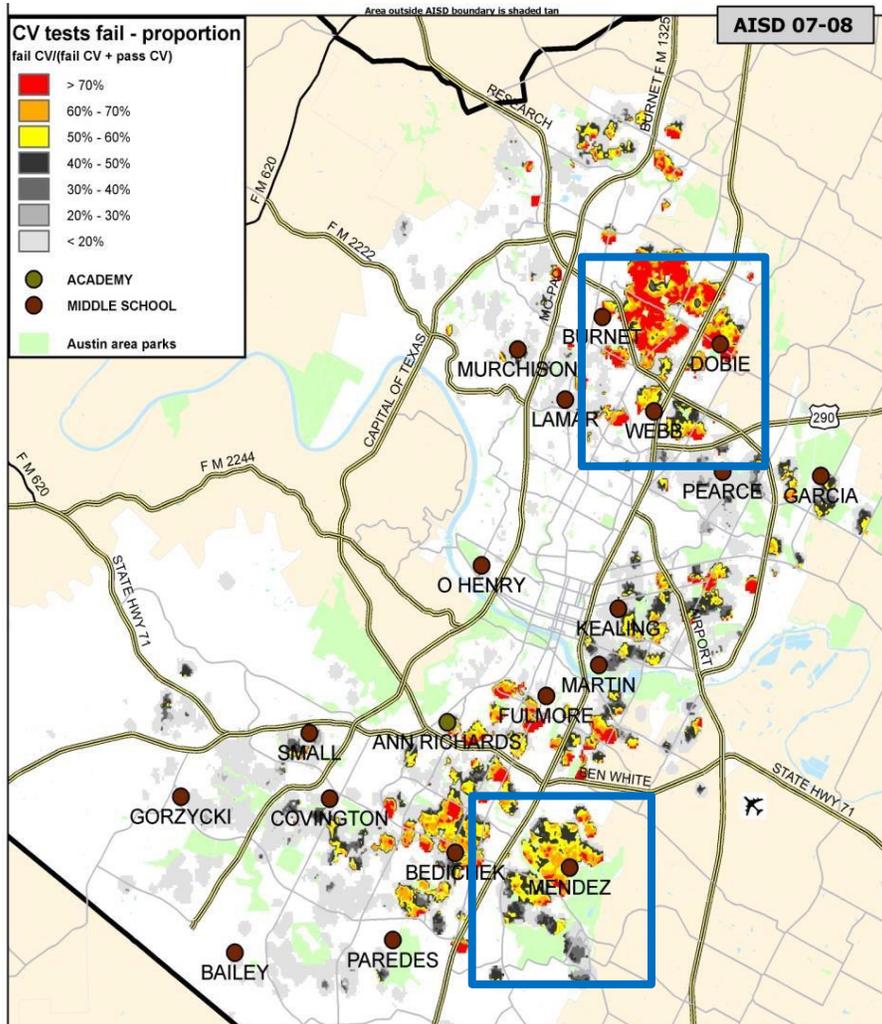
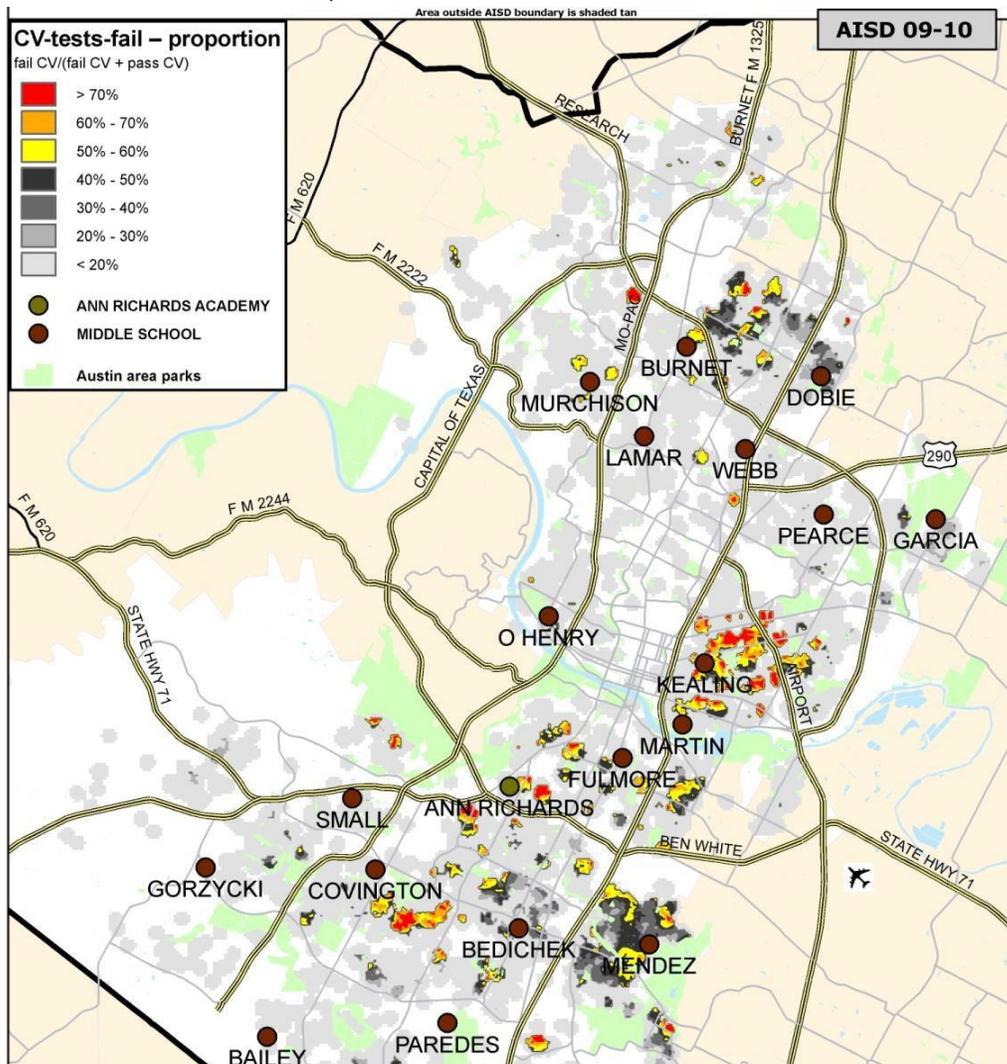


FIGURE 12

### NNIP Map Showing Concentration of Austin, TX, Middle School Students Who Failed Cardiovascular Tests, 2009–10



Although textual and visual aids make reading the charts easier, make sure the text does not over explain the charts or draw conclusions for participants. It is important for people to come to their own conclusions about what the data indicate. Data Walks draw a variety of participants who have different perspectives and different assumptions about what constitutes “good” and “bad” data. It is valuable to hear all participants’ initial reactions.

## Planning for Discussion and Engagement

Another key component to a successful Data Walk is planning for how participants will engage with each other throughout the walk. Plan to include one or two broad discussion questions, such as the questions shown in figure 13, that participants can refer back to at each station as they review and discuss the data. These general discussion questions should be presented to the group before the Data Walk begins.

FIGURE 13

### Broad Discussion Questions Presented at the Beginning of the Data Walk Guide Participants at Each Station as They Consider the Data

#### Discussion Questions

While you walk around and look at the posters, ask yourself the following questions...

1. What surprises you about the information? Anything?
2. What is the good news and the bad news?

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Including one or two discussion questions that probe for deeper discussion on the topics at each station may also be helpful. These additional questions should be posted and visible at that particular station, and participants should know to look for them before the walk begins. Figure 14 shows a data station with discussion questions and graphs. Figure 15 is an example of two station-specific discussion questions that were placed next to a graph depicting rates of youth participation in programs over two years of HOST in Chicago.

FIGURE 14

### Station 3, Youth Participation, with Discussion Questions and Graphs at a HOST Data Walk



FIGURE 15

### Discussion Questions Pertinent to Each Station's Data May Help Guide and Develop Participants' Discussion

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Why did youth participate more in some months than others?
2. Which youth participated in HOST the most?

A helpful tool to help keep participants organized was a notebook that included all materials for the event as well as copies of the posters with blank spaces so people could take notes as they rotated through the stations. This notebook helped participants record their responses throughout the Data Walk, served as a point of reference for their post-walk discussion, and was a parting token for them to take home for future reference. Leaving with the data in hand had an empowering effect, particularly on DC residents, who often feel like “lab experiments” from whom data and information are taken, but are rarely returned or shared.

However, the experience in Portland was quite different. As noted, Portland’s HOST site is extremely diverse, and residents speak many different languages. The notebooks were not as effective because the literacy and language barriers discouraged participants from reading and writing on their own. We made accommodations for those barriers by hiring translators to read through the posters and questions. Translators were older teenagers from the community who were paid a small amount for their time. Instead of taking notes, residents asked more questions about the data. Accommodating translation services for all languages was challenging, but extremely important. Participants were able to have more in-depth conversations to understand the data before the focus group discussions.

# Facilitating a Data Walk

## Introducing the Event

The introduction is critical to facilitating a successful Data Walk. Many participants will not have experienced this type of interactive activity since being in school, so setting the stage and making sure everyone understands what they are doing and why they are doing it is key for people to feel invested. Children’s Optimal Health lays down ground rules for their summits, encouraging participants to “leave titles at the door” and ignore any underlying hierarchy that might be present. The organizers also emphasize to participants the importance of listening to others’ ideas, regardless of agreement, and sharing their own perspectives.

For HOST, we began by introducing our organization and explaining our role in the community. We then explained the purpose and expected outcomes of the event and how each party involved had a unique and valued perspective. We provided context for the data that were presented during the walk, explaining the type of data, when the data were collected, what sample of people the data represented, and why they were collected (figure 16). It was helpful to describe data limitations and how the Data Walk was our attempt to fill in pieces of the puzzle that are missing with data alone. Although we did not have all the participants introduce themselves individually at the start of the Chicago and Portland Data Walks, doing so may have helped to shift the dynamic from researcher and provider to a more even-grounded event at which everyone felt like an equal participant.

FIGURE 16

## An Introductory Slide Describing Survey Data at the HOST Data Walk at Altgeld Gardens in Chicago

### 2012 Survey Data

In 2012, before HOST began, we asked Altgeld (Chicago) residents about housing, health, employment, the neighborhood, income, and youth behavior to get a baseline understanding of challenges facing the community.

192 adults participated in the survey.

Youth ages 12-16 were also asked about their education, friends, risky behavior, health, and relationships with adults.

113 youth participated in the survey.

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## Setting Clear Expectations

Before beginning the actual Data Walk, make sure all materials are prepared and give very clear instructions. We told participants how long they would be at each station, let them hear the chime that indicates rotation, and even practiced a rotation so everyone got a sense for the direction and flow of the walk. To avoid spending time during the event on re-explaining the directions, we tried to answer all questions before the walk began. See figure 17 for an example of how to present directions and expectations for your Data Walk.

FIGURE 17

## Sample Data Walk Directions

### Data Walk Directions

- We have printed posters with the data we want to share with you and hung them up in stations around the room.
- We will talk through the first poster station together.
- We will then break into small groups to view the rest of the poster stations.
- Each group will have 6 minutes at each poster station.
- Groups will move to the next poster station when the bell rings.
- While at each station, participants should look at the posters and think about them with their group.
- You can write down your thoughts in your notebooks if you'd like.

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Modeling the kind of conversation that should be happening at each station by doing a practice run on a poster with the whole group can be a helpful strategy. Ensure all participants know the discussion questions, where they can jot down any notes, and what they will be doing after the walk so they can prepare for the follow-up activity as they are going through the exercise.

## Facilitation

In addition to the activities described above for introducing the Data Walk and setting clear expectations (reviewing the procedures for rotating at the beginning of the event, letting participants hear the chime or indicator, conducting one or two practice rotations, and perhaps modeling conversations), we also had a Data Walk facilitator who was active during the event. The Data Walk facilitator circulates in the room to ensure groups are rotating on time (and in the right direction) and are on topic during discussions. This person can keep track of time; sound the chime; make game-time adjustments, such as lengthening the time at each station; and provide additional guidance and instructions when necessary. The Data Walk facilitator can also visit groups where the discussion appears to be lagging, probe to make sure everyone understands the posters, and gently prod along a

conversation when necessary. This person can take the pulse of the group to see if there are any common misconceptions about the data so he or she can make a note to rectify that issue once the whole group reconvenes.

If possible, meet with translators prior to the event to walk them through the posters and graphs so they, too, understand and are aware of what will be presented to participants.

# Discussion and Next Steps

We found it helpful to reconvene the full group after the station rotations for discussion. With HOST, we facilitated the discussion as a series of focus groups; with PASS, which had fewer participants, we immediately reconvened as a full group. When facilitating the full group discussion, we designated a lead person from each rotation group to select one key takeaway from each station to share with the full group. Depending on the purpose and goals of your Data Walk, you can simply compile the list of observations or allow for deeper conversation to build consensus around certain topics. You may even identify next steps and strategies to respond to new information and understanding of the community's needs and strengths. Children's Optimal Health closes with an informal summary of everyone's comments and targets for change and barriers to achieving those targets.

It is generally a best practice in any meeting to identify your next steps as a group and/or action items individuals can take on their own after and as a result of the event. The Data Walk should be an empowering experience that generates a better understanding of a particular issue or community and that compels people to take action, whether this action is participating in a project, building a coalition, advocating for change in their community, engaging in direct service, or contributing to more nuanced research findings. Providing a few concrete examples or opportunities for participants to stay engaged and asking participants for their ideas and suggestions are good ways to end the event on a positive note and one that is likely to have an impact for the community, the services, and future public policies and programs.

# Conclusion

Data Walks have proven to be a useful and effective tool for the Urban Institute, one that we continue to refine and reframe for various projects, audiences, and communities. We have presented the data-sharing model to various conferences, funders, and other nonprofit organizations. All agree that Data Walks are an excellent way to get extra mileage out of existing data, make data more accessible to non-data or research experts, and improve the analysis and understanding of what the data tell us. Data Walks also serve as a launching point to improve policies and services while empowering communities and increasing resident engagement.

In 2015, we presented the Data Walk methodology at the Urban Affairs Association conference in Miami in April 2015; we will hold another Data Walk for our DC HOST site; and we will support the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative in designing a Data Walk for their community. We hope that our experience and guidance on conducting Data Walks will benefit other researchers, policy makers, service providers, community-based initiatives, and the people they serve.

# References

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