

Advancing Holistic Well-Being Measures

IN ATLANTA AND IN CITIES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing racial and health disparities that jeopardize the well-being of Americans and the economic prospects and stability of cities.

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Background

With more than 80% of United States residents living in urban areas, developing comparable measures of well-being for American cities is a critical step to advance policy changes and investments that improve health and equity. Accordingly, the National League of Cities (NLC) in partnership with the Well-being Research Centre at The University of Oxford, sought to establish city-level well-being data to support a mindset shift from singular economic measures to a broader understanding of all the factors that influence well-being. Our aim is to support the development of a 'north star' that will guide cities currently engaged in equitable and comprehensive policy and systems change efforts towards a holistic framework. Our vision is to improve the lives of city residents by collecting the highest-quality data grounded in residents' views and to engage local officials and community stakeholders to make evidence-based decisions informed by data.

To this end, NLC and Oxford embarked on a dual effort aimed at a pilot in metropolitan Atlanta, while also considering a broader set of emerging models spurred by cities and national thought leaders to understand the potential for spread and scale. What follows includes our key learnings from this effort, along with recommendations to support future well-being measurement in cities throughout the United States.

Key Takeaways

We know that not all cities use the term ‘well-being’ or define it in the same way. Well-being approaches often begin with a definition of the desired end state—whether that’s called well-being, equity, dignity, opportunity, or something else depending on community priorities. What follows is the identification of indicators and measures that allow city leaders and other stakeholders to assess strengths, define needs, craft strategies and budgets, take action, measure success and ensure accountability. Making the case for this new approach, as well as the data needed to inform it, requires a strong case for support and a robust set of partnerships to build a strategy that includes many perspectives.

Looking across a range of US cities, with a deeper look at the Atlanta Metropolitan area, and with input from national subject matter experts, we learned more about why and how cities measure well-being, what gets measured and how it’s used, and explored challenges and opportunities associated with these efforts. What follows are the key take-aways learned from this effort.

Why & How to Measure Well-being?

IMPETUS FOR EFFORTS

In most cases, initiatives were often spurred out of a precipitating event or goal. These precursors could be negative – such as a string of adolescent suicides, or the identification of significant health disparities among different portions of the city. Other cities saw shifts in their workforce or economic structure as motivation.

LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING MEASURES

Several city leaders noted limitations of conventional measures of public health. For example, some remarked that existing national data sets do not necessarily provide city-specific information. In addition, these data sets come with significant lags, making it difficult to get “real-time” assessments of well-being. The use of GDP or other measures of economic productivity, meanwhile, can offer an overall economic view but little insight into the lived well-being, and unique experiences, of individuals and communities.

Notably, national experts largely agreed that traditional public health measures – with a focus on health outcomes, and little attention to systemic factors – miss opportunities to meaningfully measure and improve well-being. They noted that while well-being data typically do focus on physical health, they should expand across sectors to encompass the social and structural determinants of health, including a focus on civic engagement.

And in Atlanta, given the availability of [United Way’s Child Well-being Index](#) and [Metro Atlanta Speaks](#), most stakeholders stated the problem was not a lack of data but instead the gap in using existing data for decision-making. Many spoke to the need for a pathway to use the data – making it relevant to key audiences, while ensuring accountability for changing outcomes.

As such, even when data exists, it is not necessarily actionable. Ideally, well-being data can advance achievable change across key domains including economic, social, work, community, and physical environments.

PARTNERSHIPS & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Most cities interviewed reported that they established strategic outreach and partnerships to involve the community early in the process of assessing and measuring well-being. Multiple participants noted that this process was important not only for community buy-in, but to truly inform what the city decided to measure.

Additionally, in Atlanta, community members are considered key stakeholders, and many spoke about the importance of obtaining community input. While there are differences in how influential the voice of community stakeholders can be perceived to be, many spoke to negative consequences associated with decision making without community voice and input.

IMPORTANT ROLE OF CITY GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

City engagement has been critical to the success of well-being index initiatives. In most cases among those cities interviewed, well-being measurement is specifically housed within city government, creating inherent buy-in. Alternatively, well-being work can be hosted by a civic partner, but participants noted that city support is still crucial. And like with any community health improvement efforts, multi-sector partnerships, including with employers, are fundamental for improving community well-being.

What Gets Measured and How It's Used?

VARIABILITY IN CITY APPROACHES TO MEASURE WELL-BEING

The cities that participated in interviews apply a broad range of definitions and approaches to measuring well-being. Measurement ranges from a focus on a single guiding measure, such as life satisfaction to developing a dashboard approach or index based on a set of measures including health and socio-economic factors. Some participants use surveys related to well-being. Cities can also draw on existing data at the state or national level.

Subject matter experts noted that tools exist for U.S. cities to track a range of indicators. Our interviewees included experts who developed, or work with, a range of existing resources including the City Health Dashboard, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, and the Wellbeing in the Nation (WIN) Network. Particularly for small-to-medium cities with less staff and resources, these existing resources could be important options or starting points for measuring well-being. Overall, they appear to be underutilized by cities for a variety of reasons. Use of these existing resources may be challenging for cities because they may need technical support to analyze and use the data. In addition, the data may not be granular enough to be meaningful in some circumstances. The data may be drawn from national data sets that may not be timely. As a result, small and medium cities may benefit from more support and resources to address well-being, including strengthening capacity to use these tools.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE MEASURES OF WELL-BEING

Discussions made it clear that there remains considerable reticence at this time to prioritize “subjective” (i.e., self-reported) measures of well-being. A frequently used measure of subjective well-being consists of asking respondents to rate their satisfaction with life on a scale of 0 to 10. Such self-reported items are increasingly used in academic and national policy circles (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), UK Office of National Statistics, World Happiness Report). However, it remains a difficult proposition for local policymakers and community leaders despite these items representing the direct ‘voice’ of their constituents on how they ultimately rate the quality of their lives, in other words their well-being.

Local policymakers are familiar with working ‘top-down’ by employing indices or dashboard approaches that integrate multiple (mostly objective) dimensions that matter for well-being such as health, employment, income, education, housing, mobility, and so on. The notion that the choice of these dimensions—as well as which relative weight to give each of them in an index—is an arbitrary process (and thus subjective) that has not penetrated their thinking broadly. The same is the case for the notion that a subjective well-being item (such as life satisfaction) can act as a “north star” to analyze the relative importance of the objective drivers of well-being and as such, usefully guide policymaking and budget prioritization to effectively improve the well-being of local constituents.

WELL-BEING DATA ACTIVELY INFORMS POLICYMAKING

City leaders interviewed for this effort regularly use their well-being data to inform policymaking. A commonly cited example is the use of well-being data to inform budget decisions, allocating resources where needed to improve well-being or determinants of well-being. Cities also offered examples of the data informing specific policy decisions to promote community well-being. Both city participants and expert interviewees agreed that well-being data can and should be used to inform policy. They echoed the importance of including measures of determinants of health, rather than just outcomes, to meaningfully improve well-being. Well-being data can be used to inform policy, particularly if determinants of well-being are integrated. Furthermore, determinants of health may change more quickly than outcomes, allowing cities an earlier view of how effective their policies and investments have been.

WELL-BEING AND EQUITY

For most city interviewees, measuring well-being is central to efforts to advance health equity and justice. Participants noted the importance of measuring not only disparities but also community assets. Multiple participants specified that measuring social determinants of health, and not only outcomes, is crucial to being able to address inequities caused by those systemic factors.

Like city participants, subject matter experts agreed that well-being frameworks can support equity when applied thoughtfully. They noted that while many cities already have efforts addressing equity, the term can mean different things to different people. Overall, different indices can promote equity to different degrees, depending how much they reflect structural inequalities.

Challenges and Opportunities of Well-being Measures

INITIAL MEASURE DEVELOPMENT

City-level participants reported a range of challenges and insights that arose while they were initially developing their well-being indices. Identification of relevant measures was a common challenge, including determining how much to focus on outcomes vs. determinants. Participants also cited staff capacity and agency culture as early challenges.

Subject matter experts consistently noted that city well-being indices should be small and targeted. A defined set of measures can allow for more focus both on the measurement side and in integrating results into policymaking.

Atlanta area stakeholders value incorporating community voice, highlighting the impact of systemic racism on community well-being, and having flexibility to tailor the model to their community's context.

As mentioned before, globally there is growing interest in the collection of subjective (or self-reported) data on well-being and optimism (e.g., the Cantril scale or 'life satisfaction'). There has been limited application of these measures in the U.S. context. Subject matter expert participants had mixed views on the importance of this kind of data for city-level well-being indices, noting that it is important to better understand the relevance of political climate, religion, and other factors to better inform how to use this data in policymaking. Accordingly, some noted that it is important for such data to be considered only in conjunction with "objective" well-being data.

And in NLC's broader work with cities, we know that even when cities are clear about what they want to measure, developing validated measures that are easily understood by respondents across socio-economic levels can be challenging. The ability to pull from established measures that perform well and are valid is helpful in tracking changes over time.

FUNDING FOR WELL-BEING MEASUREMENT

Participants fund their well-being initiatives in a variety of ways. Some rely on grants or public-private partnerships. Most expressed concern that without a sustainable funding source, it would be challenging to continue to measure well-being over time.

MESSAGING WELL-BEING

Participating cities use a range of themes and framings in support of their well-being measurement work. Some cities evaluate their well-being efforts using return-on-investment analyses. In addition to the fact that well-being approaches can save cities money, participants noted that more integrated approaches to measuring and addressing well-being can be more effective. Messaging is important across a range of audiences, from community residents to policymakers to community partners.

Subject matter experts agreed that framing and messaging around well-being measures may need to vary depending on the city/audience to reflect local priorities and community input. This is consistent with the broad variation in language and framing used by the cities participating in the project. For cities that are not yet measuring well-being, “well-being” may have particular associations, e.g., with coastal or blue states. Therefore, other language, such as equity and opportunity, may be more compelling. Experts also noted that non-U.S. examples of well-being measurement may not be persuasive to U.S. cities. However, identifying benefits to change, and recognizing and rewarding progress, are important motivators.

TOPLINE MESSAGES THAT EMERGED FROM THIS EFFORT

- ◆ A number of cities across the country are shifting the way they think about progress, broadening from economic measures alone to a comprehensive idea of well-being for all people. Shaped with the community, this approach has the potential to help cities more effectively allocate resources where they are most needed and inform policy decisions that promote well-being.
- ◆ We can use this approach here to improve equity, dignity, and opportunity for every person. We can better prioritize our actions and resources—and hold leaders accountable—when we work with the community to define what well-being looks like, use data to help us see what we need and how we’re doing, and commit to working in an intersectional way.
- ◆ We have an opportunity to work together, with communities and across organizations and sectors, to redefine progress as well-being for all people, and to design investments, policies and practices that get us there.

Recommendations

Survey Cities for Additional Information and Insights

While many cities appear to have strong interest in well-being measurement, a comprehensive survey of cities would help gather information and data about a number of factors, including:

- ◆ the level of interest in well-being measurement from cities
- ◆ the size of cities interested in well-being measurement
- ◆ whether cities would prefer to use existing measurement tools or build their own
- ◆ and related, an effort to compile existing measurement tools to understand what is currently available, most useful and relevant in guiding actionable outcomes
- ◆ gauge interest in objective and subjective measures and how these can usefully interact to help guide policymaking
- ◆ and related, how well-being, equity, opportunity, dignity, and other terms are defined by cities to begin to understand similarities and differences
- ◆ how to advance an asset frame (to avoid framing communities by deficits and rankings)
- ◆ whether cities would have interest in a “best practices” workshop or meeting on well-being measurement

These answers, particularly stratified by region and city size, could help inform NLC’s next steps in this area and how best to support a wider array of cities in these efforts.

Identify Key Policy Areas That Could Be Informed by Well-being Data

In order to give cities concrete examples, NLC could work to identify specific areas of city-level policymaking where such data would be most pertinent. In part, this area of questioning could be incorporated into the survey suggested above and qualitative interviews. In addition, NLC could have a convening or focus group with relevant experts to identify these policy areas. Identifying these areas in advance could allow NLC, and cities, to “work backward” to determine the most important well-being data to collect.

ATLANTA, GA

Through community conversations and systems mapping efforts, Atlanta area community members reported that they place a high importance on the factors of work and employment, community, access to healthcare, and personal finances due to their impact due to their impact on an individual’s ability to meet their own needs and address concerns when they arise.

CITY INTERVIEWS (VERBATIM EXAMPLE)

“It’s been clear to many cities that in order to improve health, they have to deal with housing or they need to really think about some of the education gaps, etc. So, we have seen sites using measures of the physical environment to really guide their obesity policy; we’ve seen cities, using the social determinants of health, to determine where to put community health workers; we’ve seen hospitals using the data in order to determine where their community needs dollars spent.”

Further Consider the Role of Equity and Community Voice

As discussed in the findings section, experts noted that in some cities, well-being work is integrated in equity efforts; in other cities, the initiatives are distinct. There is no single correct answer to how well-being data should be applied to promote equity. However, a key theme that emerged from the interviews is that unless well-being measurement gets at the underlying structural and systemic determinants of health and well-being, it will not meaningfully address equity.

Therefore, the need exists to more deeply explore work with cities advancing equity through a variety of frameworks/efforts to better understand what is needed to move this work forward more comprehensively. In addition to cities implementing these efforts, it may be appropriate to consult with equity data experts to identify how to most meaningfully incorporate equity.

At the same time, community voice is central to ensuring representation of community members in decisions and program implementation. To promote active engagement, NLC seeks to understand the ways cities effectively engage community members, including mechanisms that may exist to ensure lived experience informs and guides the ability of residents to use metrics/data to advocate to their local leaders.

Pursue Exploratory Conversations with Potential Partners and Strengthen Capacity in Cities

A number of experts expressed strong interest in potentially partnering with NLC to further city efforts around well-being measurement. Issues that could be explored include:

- ◆ Whether efforts to support well-being initiatives would use existing measures or whether new measures could be developed based upon city interest? Consider needs and opportunities for objective and subjective well-being measures as well as an asset-based frame.
- ◆ What level of support would be needed to engage a cohort of cities in well-being measurement?
- ◆ What business model would be used to support efforts around measurement development and technical assistance? What can be learned from existing city ROI efforts that could inform the business model?

- ◆ Supporting a small-to-mid size city pilot to understand differences in subjective vs. objective measurement efforts for policy change and/or community of practice to engage folks across a broader continuum of efforts to learn and work with each other to improve upon existing efforts.

Explore Federal Policy Options to Support City Efforts to Measure Well-being

One key finding documented the on-going challenges cities have supporting their well-being measurement work. For example, several cities commented about the expense related to measurement development and well-being implementation. NLC could begin to explore future routes to more sustainable well-being measurement. For example, a new federal grant program could be developed to support city efforts in well-being measurement and implementation, either through CDC to local jurisdictions in collaboration with health departments; as a component of existing Community Health Needs Assessments; or as part of another existing or new federal program.

The current work, as well as future survey findings and other NLC efforts, could serve as important tools in advocacy to fund well-being initiatives.

Methodology

NLC and Oxford embarked on a dual effort aimed at a pilot in metropolitan Atlanta, while also considering a broader set of emerging models spurred by cities and national thought leaders to understand the potential for spread and scale.

Atlanta

Specifically, Atlanta-based efforts included two primary components including a scan and risk assessment, followed by community conversations and systems mapping. These efforts were ungirded and supported by The State of Well-being in Atlanta (see Appendix A) analysis informed by data from the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index from 2009-2018. In partnering with Gallup, NLC and Oxford were able to provide maps and zip code rankings to inform differences in what drives well-being for residents.

In partnership with the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) at George State University, the Atlanta Regional Collaborative for Health Improvement (ARCHI), and Georgia Municipal Association (GMA), a scan and risk assessment were completed along with a set of community conversations and systems mapping. (see Appendix B and C)

SCAN/RISK ASSESSMENT

Between March and May 2021, ARCHI staff conducted thirteen one-on-one and two group key informant interviews via Zoom. Interviewed stakeholders represented community-based and social service organizations across the metro Atlanta area. Their organizations served a variety of specific populations, including the LGBTQ+ and underrepresented racial ethnic communities, and their work focused on various aspects of well-being, including workforce development, housing, and education. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to gather insights from stakeholders on organizational partnerships, the influence of community voice, examples of local leaders' decisions with positive and negative impacts, and potential uses for a composite well-being metric. (see Appendix B)

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS AND MAPPING

In May and June 2021, ARCHI staff partnered with Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) to identify three metro Atlanta communities for community conversations: East Point, Chamblee, and the City of Atlanta. Similar to the key informant interview guide, a conversation guide was developed to gather insight from community members on their perception of the influence of community voice on decision-making, examples of local decisions with positive and negative impacts on well-being, and their critique of Atlanta Gallup data findings. (see Appendix C)

National Spread and Scale

A series of key informant interviews were led by Katie Horton and Naomi Seiler at the George Washington University (GWU). These interviews took place from March through June 2021, with city leaders and national subject matter experts to better understand efforts underway to measure well-being and to use data to inform policymaking in various communities. Interviews were conducted with city officials or civic leaders in five cities that are using a range of approaches to measure well-being and to incorporate well-being indices into the policymaking process: Green Bay, WI; Louisville, KY; Tacoma, WA; Santa Monica, CA; and Kansas City, MO. Interviews were also conducted with 9 subject matter experts working in the well-being or city health measurement fields. (see Appendix D and Appendix E)

Message Scan and Focus Groups

At the start of this effort, the Metropolitan Group led a message scan that began to shed light on the ways well-being efforts are framed in US cities – while also applying learnings from a global scan. Additionally, two focus groups were held in July 2021 to further inform this work – including one in Atlanta with stakeholders not previously engaged in this effort; and a second focus group with stakeholders from different cities across the United States. These findings are the basis of a new message guide (to be released in fall 2021) that NLC will provide to cities engaged in more holistic efforts to advance well-being and equity.

Conclusion

Based on this exploration of city-level efforts to measure well-being, a number of municipalities across the country are shifting the way they think about progress, broadening from economic measures alone to a comprehensive idea of well-being for all people. Shaped with the community, this approach helps cities more effectively allocate resources where they are most needed and inform policy decisions that promote well-being. Local leaders are in a position to enact real change with their community, with both immediate and long-term direct impacts. Our opportunity is to redefine progress as well-being for all people, and to design investments, policies and practices that get us there.

Appendices

Appendix A: Gallup, Oxford & NLC Atlanta Well-being Analysis - [*The State of Wellbeing in Atlanta*](#), April 21, 2021

Appendix B: GHPC/ARCHI [*Atlanta Pilot: Scan and Risk Assessment Report*](#), June 18, 2021

Appendix C: GHPC/ARCHI [*Atlanta Pilot: Systems Mapping Report*](#), July 23, 2021

Appendix D: GWU Report: [*Measuring Well-being in American Cities: Perspectives from Cities and Subject Matter Experts*](#), August 6, 2021

Appendix E: GWU Executive Summary: [*Measuring Well-being in American Cities: Perspectives from Cities and Subject Matter Experts*](#), July 29, 2021

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