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Culture Builds Community Research Brief: The Power of Arts and Culture in Community Building

Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)

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Culture Builds Community Research Brief: The Power of Arts and Culture in Community Building

Abstract

This research brief was designed as a hand-out for broad circulation among community arts practitioners as well as advocates and funders of community-based cultural programs. SIAP research in Philadelphia demonstrates that community arts activity can be a driving force behind the revitalization of neighborhoods.

Culture Builds Community, an initiative of the William Penn Foundation, supported community arts programs in Greater Philadelphia from 1997–2001. Evaluation of this initiative, led by the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania (SIAP), focused on the ability of these organizations to build their own capacity while strengthening their community.

Disciplines

Art Practice | Civic and Community Engagement | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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Culture Builds Community

The Power of Arts and Culture in Community Building

Community art centers bustle with young people learning to dance or draw. Murals, public art and community gardens reclaim neglected spaces. Outdoor movies light up vacant lots on a summer night. Street fairs with theatre performances give voice to the issues of a community.

From New York's Lincoln Center to Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts, we all have seen how cities have utilized the arts as an economic development strategy. Large-scale institutions and cultural districts have had a documented economic impact on previously distressed neighborhoods.

But as you move off Broadway or Broad Street, community arts can also be a driving force behind the revitalization of neighborhoods. Culture Builds Community, an initiative of the William Penn Foundation, supported community arts programs in Greater Philadelphia from 1997–2001. The evaluation of this initiative, led by the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania (SIAP), focused on the ability of these organizations to build their own capacity while strengthening their community.

The research resulting from this evaluation and other work by SIAP shows that local cultural activity can have as dramatic an influence on a neighborhood as a planned cultural district or major arts institution. This influence is not primarily about tourists or jobs or even revenue. Nonetheless, clusters of small community

programs can have a substantial impact on the economic fortunes of their respective neighborhoods.

- **Cultural activity draws new residents into communities, reducing poverty and increasing population.**
- **Cultural participation and diverse communities are mutually reinforcing and tend to promote gradual growth rather than rapid gentrification.**
- **Culture creates a positive social environment resulting in greater civic participation, lower truancy rates and lower delinquency rates.**
- **Cultural participation builds bridges across neighborhood, ethnic and class divides in ways that many other forms of civic engagement do not.**

At their best, community cultural organizations are anchors among a network of institutional and personal relationships that contribute to strong communities. Partnerships among for profit and nonprofit organizations; arts, social service or religious institutions; artists, parents and neighbors have the potential to create a vital “ecosystem” where the arts and communities flourish.

Invest in Your Community.

Building on Cultural Assets

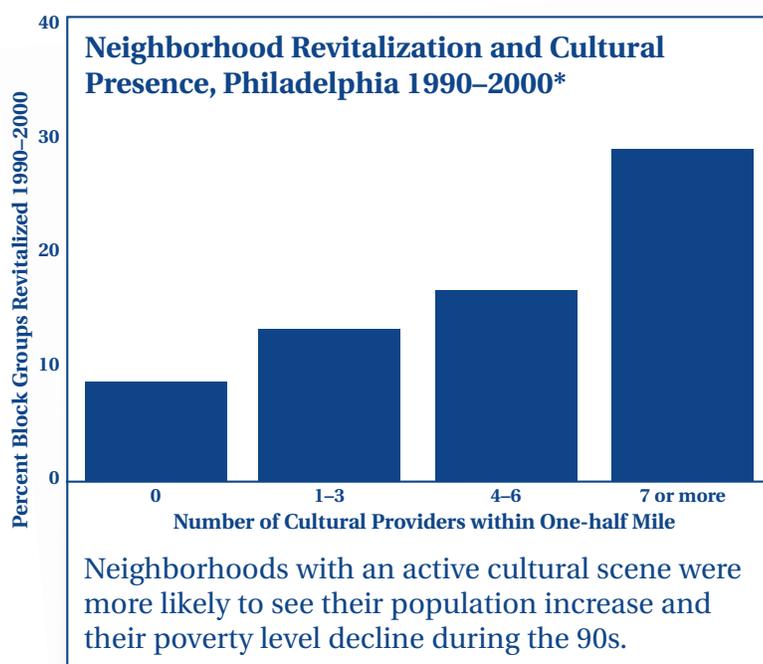
Strong neighborhoods must be built on a foundation of community assets. Policy makers, researchers and practitioners are no longer content just to catalogue a community's deficiencies — from drugs to illiteracy to vacant lots. Instead, cities can uncover the assets that are hidden in a neighborhood and put the full force of these assets to work.

Research by the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) points to participation in community-based arts programs as a very effective, yet often underutilized, tool to build communities. In Philadelphia, these organizations are usually small (with average budgets around \$250,000) employing only a few people. Although their direct economic impact may be small, the research indicates that community cultural programs can have a substantial impact on the quality and prosperity of their neighborhoods.

Cultural activity draws new residents into communities

During the 1980's, Philadelphia neighborhoods with an active arts scene (measured by the number of cultural providers within half a mile) were nearly three times more likely to see their poverty rates decline and their populations increase.

This connection between culture and community vitality continued into the 1990s. While Philadelphia lost a total of 65,000 people or about 37 residents per census city block group, this decline varied greatly from one neighborhood to another, and these variations were strongly linked to cultural participation. Among census block groups with higher-than-average cultural participation rates, these neighborhoods gained an average of nearly 20 people per block group.



The impact of culture on population change held true across all types of urban neighborhoods. Notably, a low-income neighborhood's chance of population growth more than doubled if it had a higher-than-average cultural participation rate. Older white ethnic neighborhoods, established African-American neighborhoods, and emerging Latino areas all use high levels of cultural engagement as one way of attracting new residents.

*Percent revitalized refers to percent of block groups that had their population increase and their poverty rate decline between 1990 and 2000. Cultural providers near block group refers to the number of cultural providers within one-half mile of block group. *Source:* SIAP 2002 inventory of cultural providers, 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census, Summary File 3.

Housing prices were also positively correlated with culture. Between 1995 and 2000, the average sale price of a home in Philadelphia increased by \$10,000. By comparison, neighborhoods with many cultural organizations saw an average price increase of nearly \$30,000.

Cultural participation and diverse communities are mutually reinforcing

Neighborhoods that have high levels of cultural engagement are the most likely to be economically and ethnically diverse...and vice versa...

In neighborhoods with strong cultural participation, these boosts in economic fortune generally occurred without substantial gentrification. Places with a lively cultural scene are more likely to experience slower, more gradual redevelopment and emerge as diverse areas with people of different economic and ethnic backgrounds living together as neighbors.

These neighborhoods also tend to stay diverse over time with cultural organizations acting as anchors that prevent diversity from becoming a transient state.

Culture creates a positive social environment

Culture and other forms of civic engagement increase “collective efficacy”—the willingness of neighbors to protect their local quality of life.

Even in neighborhoods in which poverty and unemployment are common, community involvement leads to a commitment to each other and to the strength of the neighborhood. People who participate

in cultural programs are also involved in a variety of activities in their communities from gardens to youth programs to religious organizations. This cross-participation is a critical connection between culture and overall levels of civic engagement in Philadelphia’s neighborhoods.

Among the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Philadelphia, communities with high levels of cultural participation have much lower rates of truancy and delinquency than other disadvantaged neighborhoods. Disadvantaged neighborhoods with high cultural participation were four times more likely than average to have low delinquency rates.

Cultural participation builds bridges across neighborhood, ethnic, and class divides

Approximately 80% of community cultural participants travel outside their own neighborhoods to attend cultural events.

Unlike other forms of civic engagement, like a town watch or home and school association, people participate in cultural activities outside of their own neighborhoods. This “regional audience for community arts” reduces social isolation and builds connections across historical divides of ethnicity and social class. Arts and cultural activities give disadvantaged neighborhoods a means to draw new people into their community and offer something positive to the region.

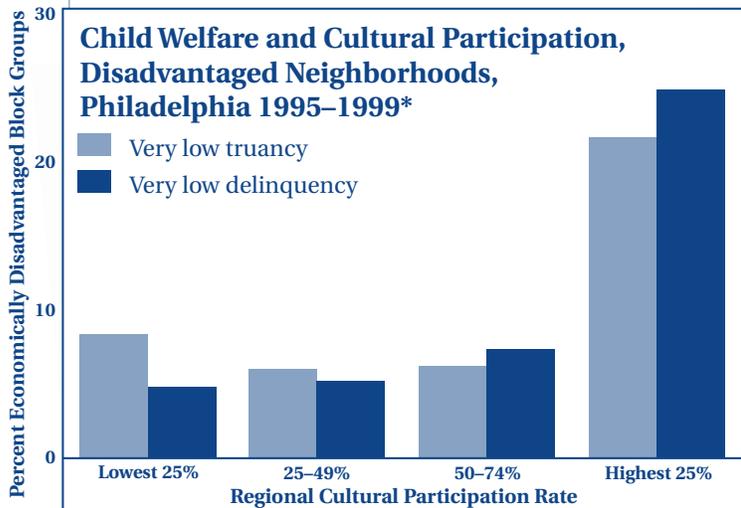
Who’s Who – What’s What

Philadelphia’s neighborhoods have been at the center of research and support to investigate the links between cultural participation and the quality of community life.

Community Arts: Arts and culture is not restricted to large, regional institutions like museums or orchestras. Community arts provide access to high quality arts experiences through local institutions (like community art centers), non-arts community centers (like recreation centers or Boy’s and Girl’s Clubs) and informal settings (like church choirs, ethnically-specific dance companies or street festivals.)

Culture Builds Community was a funding initiative of the William Penn Foundation from 1997–2001 that supported 38 organizations providing access to exceptional arts experiences in Philadelphia area neighborhoods. The multi-year grants were designed to support the programs and infrastructure of these organizations while building their connections to the surrounding neighborhood, demonstrating that “culture builds community.”

Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), led by researchers Mark Stern and Susan Seifert of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, conducted the evaluation of Culture Builds Community. By building and analyzing a regional database of cultural activity, the study assessed



Neighborhood cultural activity, by pulling residents into the life of the community, benefit local children — even those who never set foot in a community arts program.

*Cultural participation data (1996-97), truancy (1997), delinquency (1995-99). Bars represent percent of all economically disadvantaged block groups whose truancy and delinquency rates were in the lowest quartile citywide.

Strong communities with a sense of “collective efficacy” that are linked to one another through the regional audiences for community arts are the foundation of neighborhood revitalization.

statistical relationships between cultural opportunities, cultural participation, and other community outcomes. (Information: www.ssw.upenn.edu/SIAP.)

Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation supports arts and cultural organizations in the city of Philadelphia as it advocates for the role of arts in building strong communities. (Information: www.bartol.org)

The William Penn Foundation supports efforts to foster rich cultural expression, strengthen children’s futures, and deepen connections to nature and community. Founded in 1945, the Foundation is a Philadelphia-based regional grantmaker. (Information: www.williampennfoundation.org)

A Dynamic Sector: Why Culture Works

The collective impact of community cultural providers is far greater than their organizational capacity would suggest. In fact, many characteristics of the sector that are seen by funders and policymakers as deficiencies can in fact be viewed as assets.

- Community cultural organizations are effective at *servicing historically excluded people* in their communities. But, they also *draw people to the community* and contribute to a positive image of their neighborhood.
- These organizations often lack a bureaucratic structure that would make them look more like a traditional community service organization. But it is this *flexible, responsive structure* that is the envy of many businesses today. Community cultural organizations are fluid; they are able to hear and respond to community needs quickly.
- At the same time, these organizations are experienced planners who can do a lot with limited resources. They are *entrepreneurial and proactive* in identifying needs and building on assets.
- Cultural organizations have their lights on with programs running in the evenings and weekends when many other agencies are closed. Often the center is *a gathering place* for other community meetings and events.
- More and more, community cultural organizations are *unofficial technical assistance and content providers* to schools, social service agencies, recreation and after-school programs seeking quality programs with strong curriculum and outcomes.

The impact of the arts goes beyond even the economic or social values. The arts provide a means for learning and creative expression, allowing a community a constructive way to give voice to issues that may be controversial or divisive. Through the arts, citizens can engage these issues and emerge an even stronger community.

The SIAP research points to important lessons for investing in community culture and building partnerships with community cultural organizations.

Policy and Funding

Traditional views on cultural policy and funding do not always take into account what we now know about how the community cultural sector works. The SIAP research points to new ways of thinking about how best to support communities through culture.

- *Build on the resources of the full community cultural sector* by including artists and cultural workers, informal cultural organizations, for-profit cultural firms and non-traditional cultural providers.
- *View the cultural sector from the “bottom up”*. As new technologies, economic forces and changes in audiences force restructuring of the established cultural sector, small organizations and informal groups are likely to become the primary source of direct cultural and artistic experience.
- *Build social capital by funding networks and individuals, not just organizations*. We can learn from other comprehensive community initiatives that address all aspects of poor and disenfranchised communities. Building leadership and community organizing are strategies that can work for the community cultural sector as well.
- *Support intrinsic network building within the community “ecosystem”* rather than encouraging collaborations that chase funding.
- *Balance stability and innovation when pursuing cultural policy* by valuing the innovation and creativity that are the foundation of community arts. Invest in emerging groups as well as provide continuing support for existing institutions.
- *Build on the natural symbiosis of community arts and social diversity*.
- *Think broadly about who can add value to neighborhood initiatives* when designing funding strategies or policy.

Building Partnerships

Neighborhood institutions are already linked by the residents they serve. The next step is for these local agencies to become more conscious of how they can work together to support communities.

- *Identify all the people and institutions providing services in a community* and refer to those with the expertise to meet specific needs.
- *When embarking on a partnership, find where your missions overlap* to insure that you are advancing your organizations by working together, not diverting energy from your true work.
- *Build partnerships based on what each organization has to offer* in ways that are appropriate to the resources and needs of each partner. Share space, provide joint programs to community participants, or bring the arts to a range of neighborhood sites through satellite programs.
- *Commit to communication* even when it seems like you are speaking different languages. Most frustrations with partnerships come from a lack of information or understanding that can be resolved if people are talking to one another.
- *Make your neighborhood a “destination”* by supporting arts programs that draw people into your community, bringing visibility, dollars and excitement.

Partnerships among for profit and nonprofit organizations; arts, social service or religious institutions; artists, parents and neighbors have the potential to create a vital “ecosystem” where the arts and communities flourish.

Invest in Culture.

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