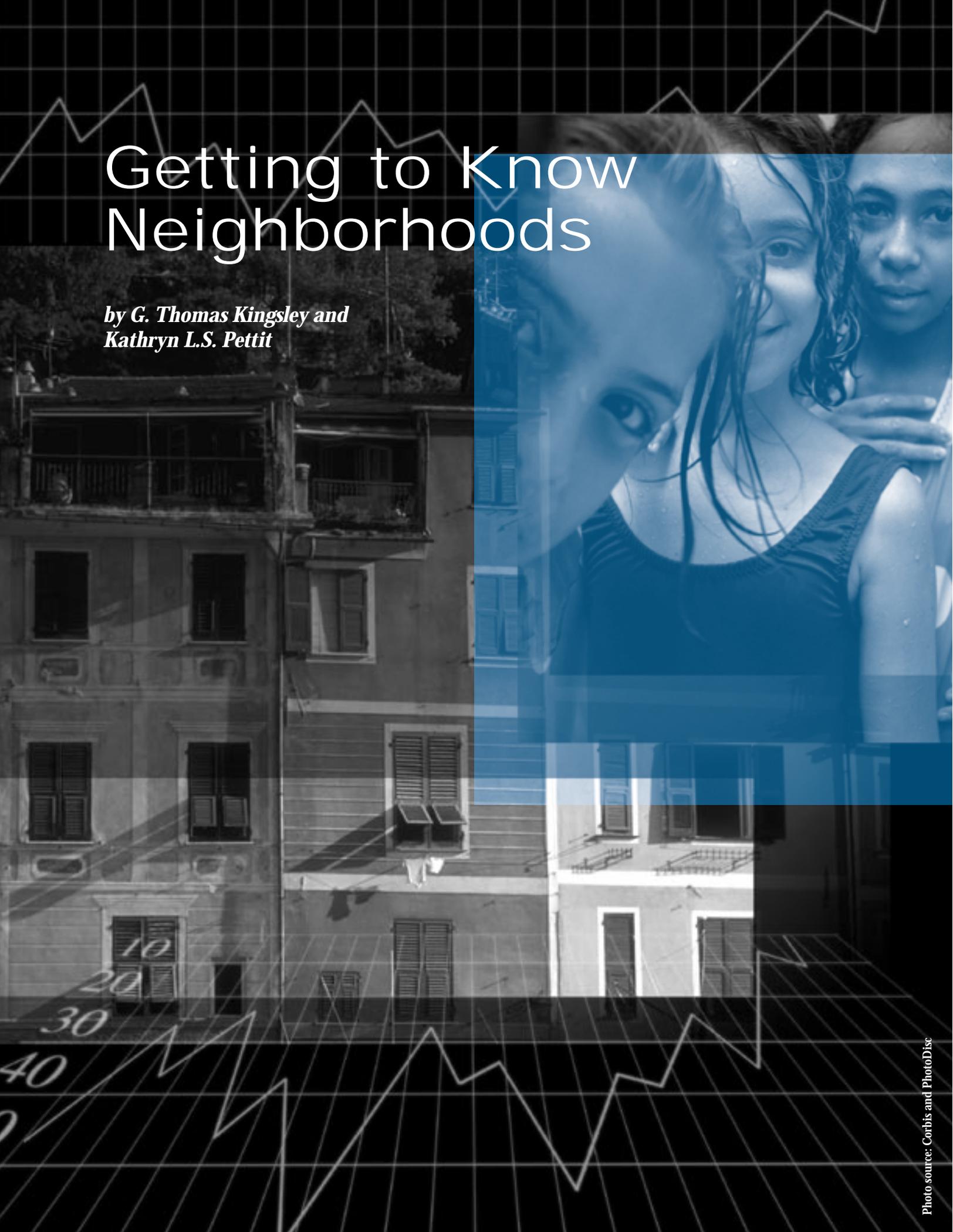


# Getting to Know Neighborhoods

*by G. Thomas Kingsley and  
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## about the authors

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What if you were a community leader and you could receive regular reports that assembled the facts and figures about a specific neighborhood and its level of crime, public health, education, and housing? And you could get it within days and without committing a dozen people to the task?

In the 1990's, nonprofit institutions in several cities started a project to achieve this goal. They began constructing computer-based information systems that would give them data on a variety of conditions and trends at the neighborhood level so they could identify on-the-ground patterns of problems and opportunities, plan well-targeted responses, and, ultimately, track results.

By 1995, six cities (Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Oakland, and Providence) had built advanced information systems with integrated and periodically updated information on neighborhood conditions. They had overcome the resistance of public agencies to sharing administrative data, and because of the steep decline in the cost of new information tools and technologies, they had shown that such systems could be locally self-sustaining.

These databanks cover an extensive array of social welfare issues, including births, deaths, crime, health sta-

tus, educational performance, public assistance, and property conditions.

In 1995, the six nonprofits joined the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., to establish the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) with the aim of further coordinating the use of such systems in local policymaking and community building. Today, 13 organizations comprise the NNIP. The partners are listed at the end of this article in the "For More Information" section.

### Goals of the Project

The NNIP partners work to *democratize* information rather than prepare reports for their own research purposes. They provide information to community leaders so that institutions and residents can build their capacity to enhance decision making by using data.

The partners work to use information as a bridge to encourage collaboration in local policymaking, especially between neighborhood groups and the citywide establishment.

NNIP's long-term agenda (now mainly funded by the Annie E. Casey and Rockefeller Foundations) has four parts:

- **Advance the use of information in community capacity building** by developing and field testing a variety of tools, such as databases, how-to handbooks, training curriculums, Web sites, and reports.
- **Use information to support better local policymaking** by mounting well-focused analyses of spatial data.
- **Incorporate partners' data and information from other sources** to create a national database that will shed light on how inner-city neighborhoods are changing across the country.
- **Help other cities build the capacity to develop neighborhood indicators** by sharing data, knowledge, and experience.

The NNIP partners concentrate on neighborhood data because conditions are not uniform within a city or county, especially when it comes to poverty and its attendant effects. Citywide data can disguise major differences among neighborhoods. Clearly, knowledge of the characteristics of neighborhoods and their inhabitants is critical to many programs, such as health services, code enforcement, fire prevention, and community policing.

### Defining "Neighborhood"

Agreeing on a neighborhood's boundary can be extremely difficult, so NNIP has not adopted a single definition of "neighborhood." Instead, the partners store all data on a small area basis (e.g., single

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address, block, and block group) so the data can be displayed at different levels to serve the varying needs of users. In other words, the neighborhood is whatever a particular user defines it to be.

This flexibility permits service agencies to obtain data for their own service districts (for example, a police beat or a neighborhood school's boundaries), city planners to use comprehensive data for any standard set of neighborhoods they have defined, and community groups to set any boundaries they want for their projects.

### Impartial Information Requests Increase

Early on, most of the NNIP partners prepared analyses of their communities across a range of social factors associated with neighborhood change: Boston's *In the Midst of Plenty*,<sup>1</sup> Cleveland's *Analysis of Poverty and Related Conditions in*

*Cleveland Area Neighborhoods*,<sup>2</sup> Denver's *Poverty in Denver—Facing the Facts*,<sup>3</sup> and Oakland's *A Chance for Every Child*.<sup>4</sup>

These and other early applications soon proved their worth, and the partners have had more requests for information than they can handle. For example, Cleveland's system was accessed by 373 separate users during an 8-month period in 1995.

All six NNIP cities used their data as the primary basis for applying to participate in the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. All six cities won funding.

The NNIP partners have developed a reputation for impartiality, as providers of reliable information not beholden to any interests. While they work to bring important issues to the attention of decision makers and seek funding for analyses of those issues, they are not advocates of particular institutional approach-

es or programs. None represents the government or works exclusively for any one faction in their communities.

Although some now receive funds from government entities for analysis they perform under contract, all receive their core funding from a mix of national and local foundations and private businesses that represent longer term community interests.

NNIP partners have become a one-stop shop for a variety of data users who no longer need to call several different agencies and piece together information. For example, when the police department gives its full data file to NNIP, it can then simply refer all requests for police data to the NNIP partner. The benefits—in time as well as money—multiply for those who need neighborhood data from multiple sources.

Why not set up such a data provider within a local government agency? This could be made to work in some circumstances, but generally, NNIP does not advise it. The problem is that the types of information that are useful in understanding neighborhood change come from separate local governments (i.e., from counties and special agencies as well as the city itself). In interviews, several local officials said they would prefer to obtain the neighborhood data they need from a broadly accountable source like an NNIP partner rather than rely on an agency in a sister government.

### Types of Access and Requests

NNIP data are accessible in three ways. The easiest and quickest for both parties occurs when requesters can simply access and manipulate the database directly (as is possible with the Boston, Cleveland, and Providence systems) and the systems staff are not involved.



Photo source: PhotoDisc

*NNIP cities used their data as the primary basis for applying to participate in the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. All six cities won funding.*

## Oakland Integrates Social Services Around Schools

Schools have long recognized that students' difficulties often emanate from problems at home, but the efforts of the schools and other agencies to help are sometimes fragmented and contradictory. Schools and social service agencies too often become involved only in times of crisis rather than working to address root causes.

Oakland was able to do something about this situation. NNIP's local partner, the Urban Strategies Council (USC), with its advanced data processing capabilities and a large amount of relevant information already on hand, was able to secure, process, and link data from school and social agencies for the students and families of one elementary school.

The resulting report revealed a striking overlap in services and prompted a similar study for a much larger population—students at eight schools. The study

showed that almost two out of three students used public services and more than a third used at least two different services. The report also documented that the system was investing much more in crisis services than prevention and that there were important differences in the service needs of different racial groups and the types of services provided for them.

The final outcome: new and improved working relationships between representatives of different agencies who recognized they faced a common challenge. They had to "acquaint themselves with agencies outside of their normal scope of work" in defining the questions they hoped the data would answer, and then, after the results were in, "discuss the kinds of joint action they might undertake, patterns of service use, relationships among agencies, and the ultimate effectiveness of existing programs."<sup>1</sup>

The group came up with the idea of redeploying staff from different agencies to form a "family support team" around individual schools. The team would "develop new collaborative strategies for working with troubled families, taking on the crisis situations most taxing for schools, and leaving school resources to be focused on prevention, on establishing more positive activities, and on outreach to parents."<sup>2</sup>

This concept has been tested in several schools since, and wider implementation is underway. USC continues to monitor performance and provide guidance and support.

Visit the Urban Strategies Council at <http://www.urbanstrategies.org>.

1. Casey, Maria Campbell, "Using Data as an Advocacy Tool: What It Takes," *Georgia Academy Journal* (Summer 1995): 7–15.

2. Ibid.

At the next level, the requester asks for tables, maps, or other data that require a fairly limited time commitment from the systems staff.

At the most challenging level, the requester asks for not only a print-out of information in the existing database, but also a professional analysis of the data by the research partner and/or hands-on work with stakeholders to help them analyze and understand the implications of the data. These assignments take much more time. Partners normally charge a fee for studies they conduct for agencies or businesses, but their work with community groups is always performed for free.

In all sites, the range of requesters, types of requests, and applications has been tremendous. An analysis of the 116 requests received by the Piton Foundation in Denver between 1991 and 1995 shows this breakdown: 26 percent were from nonprofit health and social service providers, 20 percent were from local government agencies, 14 percent were from neighborhood organizations, 13 percent were from boards of education and individual schools, 8 percent were from foundations and interest groups, 7 percent were from State and Federal agencies, 7 percent were from newspapers and other media, and the remaining 5 percent were from church-based programs.

The types of requests and their uses fall into several categories:

**Strategic planning.** It is in this area that several NNIP partners have made their most noteworthy contributions—by providing data to and working with city-level leadership coalitions in strategic planning on social issues. One example is the Oakland Urban Strategies Council's collaboration with the local school system and social service agencies to develop new ways to integrate services around children in needy families. (See "Oakland Integrates Social Services Around Schools.")

**Building awareness and dialogue.** NNIP partners issue frequent reports on special topics that, over time, build greater public understanding of policy topics with which they are concerned. An example is the collaboration of the Piton Foundation, neighborhood groups, and Denver newspapers to cover newsworthy events in neighborhoods proactively, avoiding the negative distortion that accompanies selective reporting on evening newscasts. (See “Denver’s Westside Neighborhood Leadership Program.”)

**Accurately identifying low-income neighborhoods.** NNIP has helped avoid misallocations of resources. One example occurred in Georgia when the General Assembly created a job tax credit program. Forty of the State’s 159 counties qualified for the program, but a

number of observers saw serious inequities in the county-based scheme: Several counties that had not qualified according to the “least developed” criteria actually contained pockets of poverty that were among the most economically distressed areas in the State.

To remedy the situation, Atlanta’s Data and Policy Analysis Center analyzed census tract data and identified 236 tracts in nonqualifying counties that had economic conditions worse than those in qualifying counties. In 1993, the General Assembly passed legislation to extend the tax credits to residents of these zones.

**Program monitoring and evaluation.** Neighborhood indicators offer a good deal of promise as an aid to quantifying performance measures for some government and

nonprofit programs. Suppose, for example, that trends in the rates of child maltreatment, structural fires, and student test scores vary substantially in two neighborhoods. It is impossible to pinpoint the reason for the variances and the effects of public programs unless data can be assembled that show trends in neighborhood social, economic, and physical conditions and how those conditions relate to programmatic activities.

Formal program evaluations can benefit in the same way. Governments and foundations have spent a great deal of money on evaluations that prove inconclusive, mainly because the evaluators could not collect sufficiently complete and accurate data on changes in the neighborhood to properly interpret a program’s effects. Realistically, the only way an

## Denver’s Westside Neighborhood Leadership Program

The Westside Neighborhood Leadership Program is a grassroots effort operating in five of Denver’s poorest, largely Latino neighborhoods. Program founders believed that among their residents were latent leaders, the next generation of activists who had the drive but lacked the skills to assert themselves. They developed a leadership curriculum, negotiated approvals, and obtained funding for the program, which now boasts 59 graduates, most of whom have gone on to assume key leadership roles in the community.

Struck by disparaging news reports about their neighborhoods, community leaders asked the Piton

Data Initiative to develop a component of the leadership curriculum to teach people how to obtain and use neighborhood data effectively. The Piton Data Initiative now trains each new class of leaders on what data are available, how to obtain and interpret them, how to develop their own data, and how to use data in policy initiatives.

The program has yielded concrete results. One parent used school-specific special education data from Piton to successfully argue for more effective screening for behavioral and emotional disabilities to avoid the disproportionate tracking of children of color into special education programs.

Another parent, concerned about the extremely high turnover among children in her school, used Piton data to create special programs to identify children at risk of being repeatedly uprooted, to work with the parents to stabilize them, and to work with the children to ensure continuity of education when they did have to change schools. Another graduate founded a youth arts recognition program and used the data to encourage local businesses to support the group’s efforts by making donations and opening their facilities to display artwork.

Visit The Piton Foundation at <http://www.piton.org>.



*The databanks in the NNIP cities contain information on an extensive array of neighborhood issues, including births, deaths, crime, health status, educational performance, public assistance, and property conditions.*

adequate range of information on changing neighborhood circumstances can be provided is through the development in each city of the kind of ongoing data assembly now provided by the NNIP partners.

**Community building.** Most NNIP partners give their highest priority to providing data to community groups who are designing their own performance and monitoring measures. In so doing, they are endorsing the principles of comprehensive, community-led collaboration. NNIP partners encourage residents to learn about their neighborhoods—and their comparative advantages and disadvantages—as they design action programs and build a tradition of collaboration.

NNIP partners also recognize the value of other vital information besides their own and all endorse “asset mapping”—interviews and

surveys to discover neighborhood strengths, such as home-based businesses and cultural resources, that administrative recordkeeping may never capture.

**Meeting private-sector needs.** The private sector also is a potential user of NNIP data, particularly as private interests (especially retailers) consider investment in inner-city neighborhoods. A number of retailers, including Woolworth’s and Pathmark, have found that some of their urban locations are more profitable than their suburban ones.

Neighborhood indicator data could be useful in several ways to private concerns. First, data on the location, tax status, and other characteristics of vacant parcels could help investors select good locations for investment.

Second, spatial data on consumer characteristics and preferences in inner-city communities could guide private firms in deciding how best to market their products or services in these areas.

Third, information on the characteristics of local institutions could reveal attractive partnering opportunities for joint ventures in local development.

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## For More Information

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### NIJ-supported projects with aspects similar to NNIP:

- SACSI (Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative) is a new way of solving a community's crime problems. It relies on data and information analysis, boosts the U.S. Attorney's role as a key community problem solver, and asks researchers to serve as navigators—observing, analyzing, and recommending changes in direction. It has been operational in Indianapolis, Memphis, New Haven, Portland (Oregon), and Winston-Salem for two years and will become operational in five more sites in 2000: Detroit, St. Louis, Atlanta, Rochester, and Albuquerque.
- COMPASS (Community Mapping, Planning, and Analysis for Safety Strategies) builds on the SACSI model and starts by developing a broad data infrastructure to identify the nature of local crime problems, develop strategies to reduce crime, and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. It is currently operational in Seattle and will be operational in at least one additional site in 2001.

For more information about SACSI and COMPASS, contact Erin Dalton at 202-514-5752, [daltona@ojp.usdoj.gov](mailto:daltona@ojp.usdoj.gov).

### Organizations in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership:

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Atlanta</b>          | The Atlanta Project: <a href="http://www.arch.gatech.edu/~dapa">http://www.arch.gatech.edu/~dapa</a>   |
| <b>Baltimore</b>        | Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance<br>Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers: <a href="http://www.rag.org/abag">http://www.rag.org/abag</a>   |
| <b>Boston</b>           | Boston Foundation Boston Community-Building Network: <a href="http://www.tbf.org">http://www.tbf.org</a>   |
| <b>Cleveland</b>        | Center for Urban Poverty and Social Change<br>Mandel School for Applied Social Science<br>Case Western Reserve University: <a href="http://povertycenter.cwru.edu">http://povertycenter.cwru.edu</a> |
| <b>Denver</b>           | Piton Foundation: <a href="http://www.piton.org">http://www.piton.org</a>  |
| <b>Indianapolis</b>     | United Way Community Service Council, Indianapolis: <a href="http://www.savi.org">http://www.savi.org</a>  |
| <b>Miami</b>            | Community Services Planning Center<br>Florida Department of Children and Families: <a href="http://www.state.fl.us/cf_web/district11">http://www.state.fl.us/cf_web/district11</a>                   |
| <b>Milwaukee</b>        | Nonprofit Center of Milwaukee<br>Neighborhood Data Center: <a href="http://www.uwm.edu/people/mbarndt/mindex.htm">http://www.uwm.edu/people/mbarndt/mindex.htm</a>                                   |
| <b>Oakland</b>          | Urban Strategies Council: <a href="http://www.urbanstrategies.org">http://www.urbanstrategies.org</a>  |
| <b>Philadelphia</b>     | Reinvestment Fund, Philadelphia: <a href="http://www.trfund.com">http://www.trfund.com</a>   |
| <b>Providence</b>       | The Providence Plan: <a href="http://www.providenceplan.org">http://www.providenceplan.org</a>   |
| <b>Washington, D.C.</b> | DC Agenda: <a href="http://www.dcagenda.org">http://www.dcagenda.org</a>   |
| <b>NNIP</b>             | Urban Institute: <a href="http://www.urban.org/nnip">http://www.urban.org/nnip</a>   |

## The System's Costs

The cost of developing a neighborhood indicator system should be affordable for mid-sized and larger metropolitan areas. Purchasing both data from the Census Bureau and other sources and the required computer hardware and software is inexpensive. In fact, staffing costs are by far the most expensive element of a system. In general, minimum costs for the first 2 years are likely to be around \$125,000 per year, although annual outlays for most NNIP partners are two to three times that amount.

In the start-up period, the bulk of the money would have to be raised in the form of general support from national and local foundations and the local business community. In-kind contributions (office space, clerical help, and so forth) could reduce the cash component substantially.

During the second year, it should be possible to start bringing in income from fees charged for data services.

Because the fundamental mission of NNIP systems is to further local public purposes, however, the philanthropic and business sectors in a metropolitan area should be willing to cover a reasonable part of the long-term operating costs.

## Directions

NNIP local institutions and the partnership as a whole have made great strides in moving the field of neighborhood indicators forward.

Toward the first goal (advancing the use of information in community capacity building), NNIP cosponsored a conference with the National Community Building Network (NCBN) in the fall of 1998 to further the use of information in community capacity building.

Toward the second goal (using information to support better local policymaking), NNIP has supported

reports, such as *Exploring Welfare-to-Work Challenges in Five Metropolitan Regions*, that illustrate the use of cross-site neighborhood data to reveal both the patterns within a region and the differences among regional patterns.

To advance the third goal (incorporating partners' data and information from other sources), NNIP plans to incorporate local and national data to profile and illuminate the changes in inner-city neighborhoods for Annie E. Casey's Making Connections cities.

And for the fourth goal (helping other cities build the capacity to develop neighborhood indicators), NNIP partners have hosted site visits and produced technical and community-building guidebooks.

NNIP launched its Web site (<http://www.urban.org/nnip>) in the fall of 1999 to enable more cities to learn about neighborhood indicators systems as well as provide easy access to NNIP publications.

The NNIP partners are looking now toward the future of neighborhood indicators systems and the use of data for community change. In December 1999, NNIP expanded to include institutions in five new cities: Baltimore, Indianapolis, Miami, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. The addition of their insight and experience has both broadened and strengthened the partnership's ability to progress in its main goals.

With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, NNIP gathered local practitioners and national experts at the *Neighborhood Indicators 2000* conference in July 2000. The panels and discussions explored how we can best take advantage of new developments in technology, data availability, and policy analysis in building and using neighborhood indicators capacity. With rapidly advancing technology and an increased recognition of the importance of neighborhood-level indica-

tors, the partnership expects the next 5 years to be even more productive than the first five.

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## Notes

1. Boston Persistent Poverty Project, *In the Midst of Plenty*, Boston: Boston Foundation, 1989.
2. Coulton, Claudia J., Julian Chow, and Shanta Pandey, *Analysis of Poverty and Related Conditions in Cleveland Area Neighborhoods*, Cleveland: Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, 1990.
3. Bailey, Terri J., *Poverty in Denver—Facing the Facts*, Denver: Piton Foundation, 1991.
4. Urban Strategies Council, *A Chance for Every Child: Prospects for Oakland's Infants, Children, and Youth in the 1990's and Beyond*, Oakland: Urban Strategies Council, July 1991.