

Interactive Mapping: A Method for Engaged Community Assessment

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Abstract

The Florida Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Impact Project focuses on improving the developmental health of infants and young children by supporting place-based community initiatives through a Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) approach. The CoIIN is a multidisciplinary team that fosters collaboration and coordination among agencies and community residents. A team at the University of South Florida conducted an independent evaluation of the ECCS Impact Project in Liberty City (LC), Miami, Florida, starting with a community assessment to gain a better understanding of local assets, needs and priorities. This community assessment was completed in collaboration with LC ECCS. Across the first two years of the initiative, the community assessment included methods such as geographic information system mapping; attending and planning meetings; conducting focus groups with parents, residents, and community providers; engaging in virtual and walking tours; and hosting interactive mapping workshops. The multimethod approach contributed to a community assessment that was comprehensive and holistic and that encompassed multiple perspectives. Results of the process included authentic engagement across community sectors and levels of influence and learning and reflection on community strengths, resources, and priorities to facilitate organization for positive change.

The 5-year Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Impact Project was launched by the Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions in 2016 with funding from the Health Services and Resources Administration. Florida ECCS seeks to improve the developmental health of young children in Florida place-based communities using a Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) approach. The CoIIN approach fosters collaboration and coordination among residents and local agencies by identifying common and measurable goals within the network, utilizing evidence-based strategies, and collecting concise metrics and data to track progress for evaluation. An evaluation team at the University of South Florida College of Public Health conducted an independent evaluation of the Florida ECCS Impact Project that included a community assessment of a place-based initiative in Liberty City (LC), Miami, Florida (University of South Florida, n.d.).

At the heart of the Florida ECCS initiative is the local CoIIN team, which continuously reflects upon the state of the community through review and discussion. A representative from an early childhood-focused community agency based in LC served as the LC ECCS lead and brought partners

together for this initiative (also a coauthor of this paper). The ECCS evaluation process began with community assessment. A community assessment is a valuable evaluation tool because it identifies the targeted community's needs as well as their resources or assets. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) developed an asset-based community development model—that is, a community assessment that identifies the community's current assets. This model provides important insights about the community's needs and requirements and helps to determine its strengths and limitations.

This approach has also been developed in Florida through the work of Allison Pinto, Tim Dutton, and fellow residents in the Seminole Heights and West Tampa, Central-Cocoanut, and Lake Maggiore neighborhoods of Tampa, Sarasota, and St. Petersburg, respectively (Pinto, 2014). The resident-led work of Pinto and fellow resident-colleagues has combined community building, geographic information system (GIS) mapping of U.S. census data and aggregate data sets, resident-generated data and asset mapping, walking surveys, storytelling, community convening for collective sensemaking and decision-making, and active changemaking (Sarasota Community Studio, 2013). Broad community-led development

efforts to promote protective factors and minimize adverse experiences have been underway in East Tampa for over 20 years through REACHUP, Inc., and other coalition partners (Salinas-Miranda et al., 2020). These efforts often include intentional activities focused on community preservation against gentrification (Smith, 2020).

A community assessment also serves as a useful strategy for community engagement and marketing (Maurer, 2002). Sharpe et al. (2000) noted that there are advantages to conducting an asset-based community assessment rather than a “problem or need-based” community assessment. A problem or need-based assessment is described as a “deficiency-based” approach because it focuses on a community’s shortcomings, whereas an asset-based assessment identifies the existing community resources that can be supported and mobilized for sustainability and community growth (Sharpe et al., 2000, p.205). Additionally, asset-based community assessments are useful in helping the community determine priorities for change and brainstorm corresponding solutions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). An asset-based community assessment can be used to foster self-sufficiency and empowerment.

The first stage of the Florida ECCS Impact Project evaluation was to conduct a spatial community assessment (formative evaluation) of the LC community. This assessment utilized multiple strategies to gain a better understanding of the assets and needs of families in the community. Spatial community assessments can be conducted virtually or physically; the most common methods are virtual touring, physical touring, and GIS mapping (Sharpe et al., 2000). GIS mapping is an important tool utilized in public health research and community assessments to spatially analyze, assess, record, and evaluate a specific geographic area and the population within it (Martindale, n.d.). Thus, one facet of GIS mapping necessary for evaluating a community is attribute data—that is, specific information that goes beyond location to better define the community’s resources (Nykiforuk & Flaman, 2011). Examples of attribute data are facilities (such as churches, schools, day cares, and grocery stores), the functionality of a community’s infrastructure (such as the cleanliness of streets and aesthetic of the community), and the accessibility of community assets, such as outdoor recreation centers (i.e., the distance and time required to travel to these assets for those who do not have personal transportation).

Furthermore, GIS mapping has been used for public health analysis in a multitude of ways, including ensuring that the context of the community is considered (Kazda, et al., 2009), confirming that participants in focus groups are informed of their surrounding environments (Detres et al., 2013), mapping internal and surrounding community changes (Martindale, n.d.), and developing population-spatial solutions using other statistical software (Scotch, et al., 2006). GIS mapping is useful for community assessments because it provides a visualization of the spatial assets within a community and the characteristics (e.g., density, locales, comparative context, etc.) of those assets.

Virtual touring of communities has been made more accessible through Google Maps. This type of touring allows one to view a neighborhood as if in person, providing a cost-effective and quick way to observe a community’s infrastructure, aesthetics, social and commercial activity, sidewalk amenities, and overall physical condition (Rundle et al., 2011). The information gathered through virtual touring can be enriched through a windshield or walking tour. A walking tour involves physically walking around the community—often with a local guide—while taking photos or noting observations. Walking and windshield (driving) tours allow participants to obtain a cursory, up-close view of the environmental conditions in the neighborhood while watching the residents live their everyday lives (Kruger et al., 2013). Furthermore, the conversations that occur during the data collection and reflection processes (i.e., the walking or windshield tour) are the relationship-building elements, the “sensemaking” (Weick et al., 2005), that builds trust, will, and capacities among visitors and community members.

This paper explains how data were collected for a community assessment using mapping, virtual, and physical tours—a combination that supported an in-depth, asset-based community assessment of the LC community. In this case, “assets” were locations or services deemed beneficial to children and families. The results of this project were continuously shared with the Florida ECCS Impact Project’s state and local CoIIN teams, community members, and LC community stakeholders, who engage in a reflective planning process to build upon assets and organize to address community needs, with the goal of improving child health and development. The identified community strengths can be leveraged for community empowerment and mobilization—as residents use these strengths as a

source of motivation and nourishment for positive community outcomes such as child development and school readiness—and to further advocate for the community as a whole.

Evaluation team members for the statewide ECCS initiative consisted of the faculty lead evaluator and public health graduate students, all of whom shared a passion for community development, health equity, and public health research. Team members had diverse skills and backgrounds in medicine, social work, maternal child health, epidemiology, and health education. Over the project period, the team included members who identify as White, Black (three Haitian, one African American), Latinx (two members), Norwegian, and South Indian. Generally, research assistants who were from a particular region of Florida or who shared the race, ethnicity, or language of a particular community (e.g., from a nearby county, or spoke Spanish or Haitian-Creole) worked primarily with that community. As the evaluation team conducted walking and windshield tours in many communities across the state, members debriefed regularly, reflecting on their own perceptions, questions, conclusions, and potential biases. The evaluation activities described in this paper were conducted in partnership with the ECCS lead for the LC initiative (a community member who identifies as Black), which is centered in a primarily African American community. The community assessment process helped all evaluation team members better connect with and understand the LC community environment, dynamics, cultures, and priorities.

Methods

First, the parameters of the LC community were defined based on the zip codes and street boundaries outlined by the place-based community initiative (LC ECCS), and the evaluation team created a visual GIS map to illustrate the distribution of young children in the community by census tract. Next, the evaluation team conducted a virtual tour of the community to identify a cursory list of community assets.

Then, the evaluation team began an iterative and circular process of site visits, interviews, focus groups, an interactive mapping workshop, and guided windshield and walking tours. This process was helpful because it allowed the evaluation team to reflect with community members on the information they gathered; reflections in turn added to findings by providing a more detailed and nuanced description of

local needs and resources, the history behind them, and changes (challenges and successes) that were unfolding in the community. The LC community is 95% African American, and the majority of participants in the following activities were Black and/or Hispanic. However, as the evaluation team members were guests in the community meetings and activities, they did not ask LC participants to complete demographic questionnaires. In this section, we describe the assessment components in more detail roughly in the order that they occurred (with iterative cycles of interviews/focus groups, reflecting upon and updating maps, and community tours occurring throughout the project). These multiple reflective opportunities supported engagement of diverse stakeholders, including both longtime residents and those who were newer to the community or the ECCS initiative.

GIS Maps

A GIS map of the community was created using vital statistics birth records for children born beginning 4 years before the start of the Florida ECCS Impact Project (8/31/12 to 9/1/16). The GIS map was used to provide a geographical representation of the distribution of children in the community in terms of raw counts, further broken down by age group (0–11 months, 12–23 months, 24–35 months, and 36–47 months). This data was meant to inform the door-to-door or block-to-block efforts of the community organizers (Figure 1). While rates or percentages are typically used in population density maps, the raw counts were requested and provided in this particular instance.

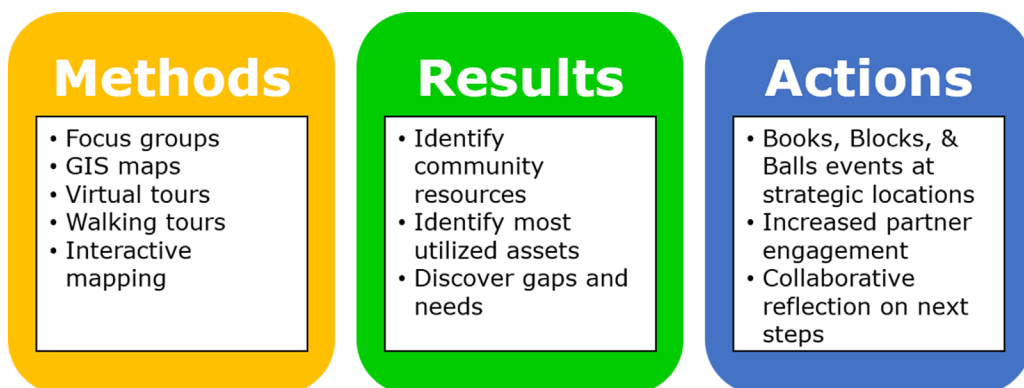
Virtual Tours

The virtual tour of LC was conducted using Google Maps/Google Earth. The objective of this part of the assessment was to identify various resources present in the neighborhood pertinent to children's health and development. Assets such as early childhood services, grocery stores, parks, medical centers, police/fire stations, food sources, places of worship, housing complexes, community recreational centers, and social services were catalogued and mapped. The virtual tour created a visual guide to the organization of the physical/spatial LC community infrastructure.

Interviews, Meetings, and Focus Groups

The evaluation team attended LC ECCS CoIIN meetings, during which representatives of the community (parents, residents) and partner

Figure 1. Methods, Results, and Actions



organizations (early care and education, home visiting, developmental screening, social services, health care, etc.) contributed to a conversation about the current state of the community. At one such meeting, the evaluation team presented their initial GIS and virtual tour findings. This meeting included a combined focus group/interactive mapping activity (described below) that helped to expand on these findings. The moderator asked participants about additional formal and informal resources, gathering places, and other assets relevant to children and families in the community that did not appear on the evaluation team's initial map. An individual interview was also conducted with a lifelong resident and child advocate to learn more about the history, networks, challenges, and aspirations of the broader LC community and the specific LC ECCS neighborhood. Subsequent ECCS meetings, formal focus groups, and individual interviews were conducted by the evaluation team across the years to ensure that findings were up to date and grounded in the community's perspectives.

Interactive Mapping

The evaluation team printed out the map created to represent the virtual tour into a poster size and engaged in an interactive mapping session with the local ECCS CoIIN team at one of their monthly meetings. While noting key assets on the map of the community and neighboring communities (using stickers and permanent markers), residents and representatives of partner organizations contributed to a conversation about the current state of the community. The intention of this activity, which can be incorporated into a focus group, was to develop a holistic

representation of the community that included the assets most important to community members. Twenty-two participants of various backgrounds and occupations, ranging from residents of LC to public health professionals, highlighted locations in the community that were the most meaningful to them and the families they serve. Thereafter, the CoIIN team met monthly, with periodic participation from the evaluation team.

Walking and Windshield Tours

The evaluation team also met with the LC ECCS lead and a community organizer who worked in the resource center—both of whom were embedded within the LC community—for a walking tour. The ECCS lead and community organizer provided thorough descriptions of the resources, establishments, community leaders, and meaningful places in the neighborhood. Additionally, they shared rich anecdotal information regarding the history of the area, the social climate, and other important aspects of the community that were not visually apparent. While on the tour, the evaluation team asked questions, took pictures (with permission), and spoke informally with other locals (residents, recreational sports coach, job training program facilitator, etc.). Conversations were digitally audio recorded (with permission) as well.

Results

This community assessment produced three main outcomes: a broad understanding of (a) the age demographics of children in specific geographical areas, (b) needs and assets in the LC community, and (c) the importance of community participation in asset mapping. The use of GIS

maps, virtual tours, walking tours, a focus group, and interactive mapping supported evaluation team efforts to compile assets for the LC place-based community to use in their efforts to improve childhood developmental health.

GIS Maps

As shown in Figure 2, the evaluation team created GIS maps of estimated distributions of children by census tract and age group using 4 years of vital statistics data to map births over a 3-year period (within census tracts of the LC ECCS catchment area). These maps showed that most children below the age of 4 years old, irrespective of age breakdown, resided in the 10.04 census tract. This information was informative to LC ECCS for block-by-block outreach planning and for identifying locations for child- and family-focused events.

Virtual Tours

The evaluation team catalogued and mapped assets within the catchment area relevant to children and families using Google Street View

and Google Maps (Figure 3). LC is an asset-rich community with childcare centers and family childcare homes, food markets, parks, preschools, a community garden, and more (Table 1). According to the information gleaned in the virtual tour of the LC neighborhood, the total number of resources included 13 places of worship, eight parks, seven early childhood service centers, 14 food resources, three medical service providers, three housing complexes, six community resource centers, one police/fire station, and five social service locations (Figure 3).

Interactive Mapping

This exercise engaged residents and community leaders in identifying places within and outside the community boundaries that the evaluation team might not have previously marked as assets (Table 1). During this activity, participants noted schools, places of worship, and community centers (Figures 3 and 4). Community leaders also identified a few assets outside the LC boundaries; for instance, they identified two faith-based resources located south of the NW 54th Street boundary of LC. These assets,

Figure 2. GIS Maps of Child Count in Community Census Tracts by Age Group (Data From Florida Vital Statistics Birth Records, 2012–2016)

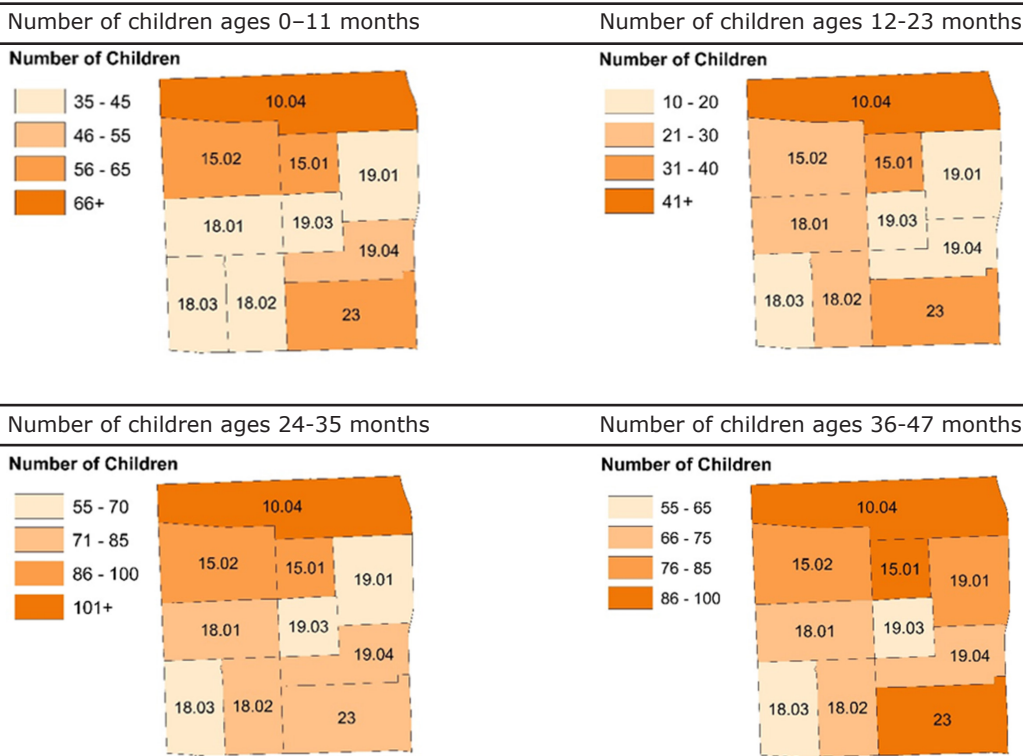


Table 1. Liberty City, Miami: Community Characteristics and Assets Identified via Virtual and Walking Tours



Street view, virtual tour



Street view, virtual tour



Heat Food Market, windshield tour



Simonoff Park, windshield tour



Mural, windshield tour



Memorial and mural, windshield tour



Liberty City community garden, walking tour



Liberty City park, walking tour

Table 1 (continued). Liberty City, Miami: Community Characteristics and Assets Identified via Virtual and Walking Tours



Local residence, walking tour



Public gym, walking tour

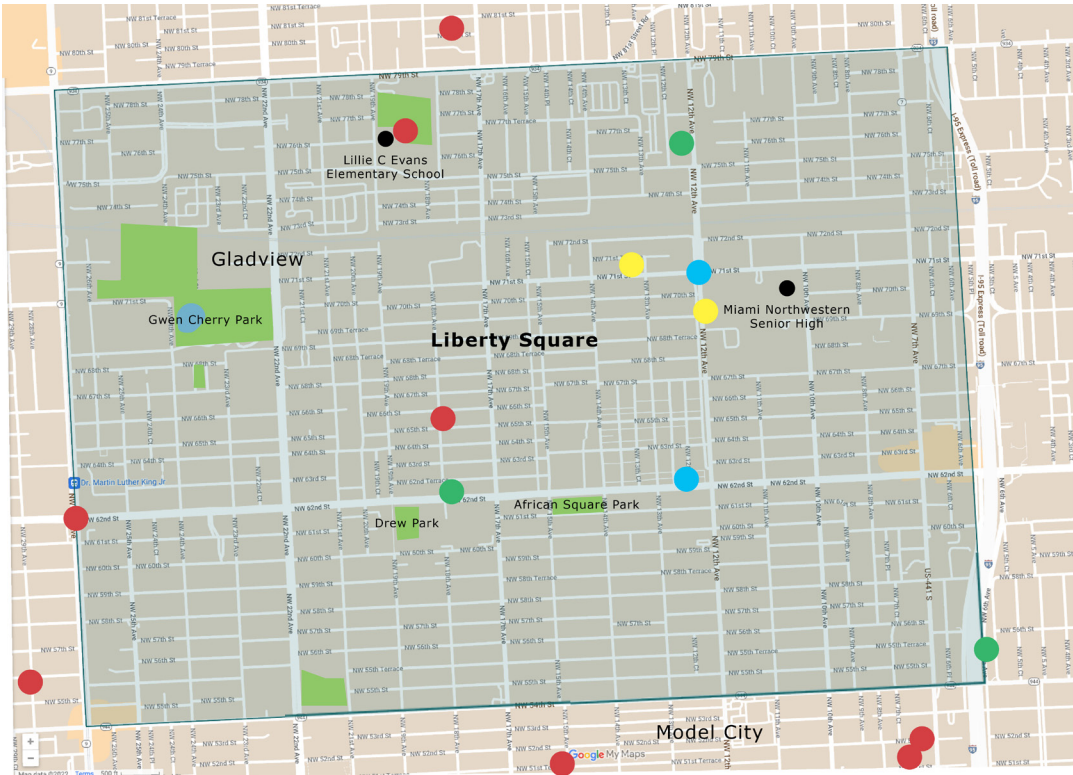


After-school program, walking tour



Memorial garden, walking tour

Figure 3. Interactive Map With Additions to Virtual Tour Results



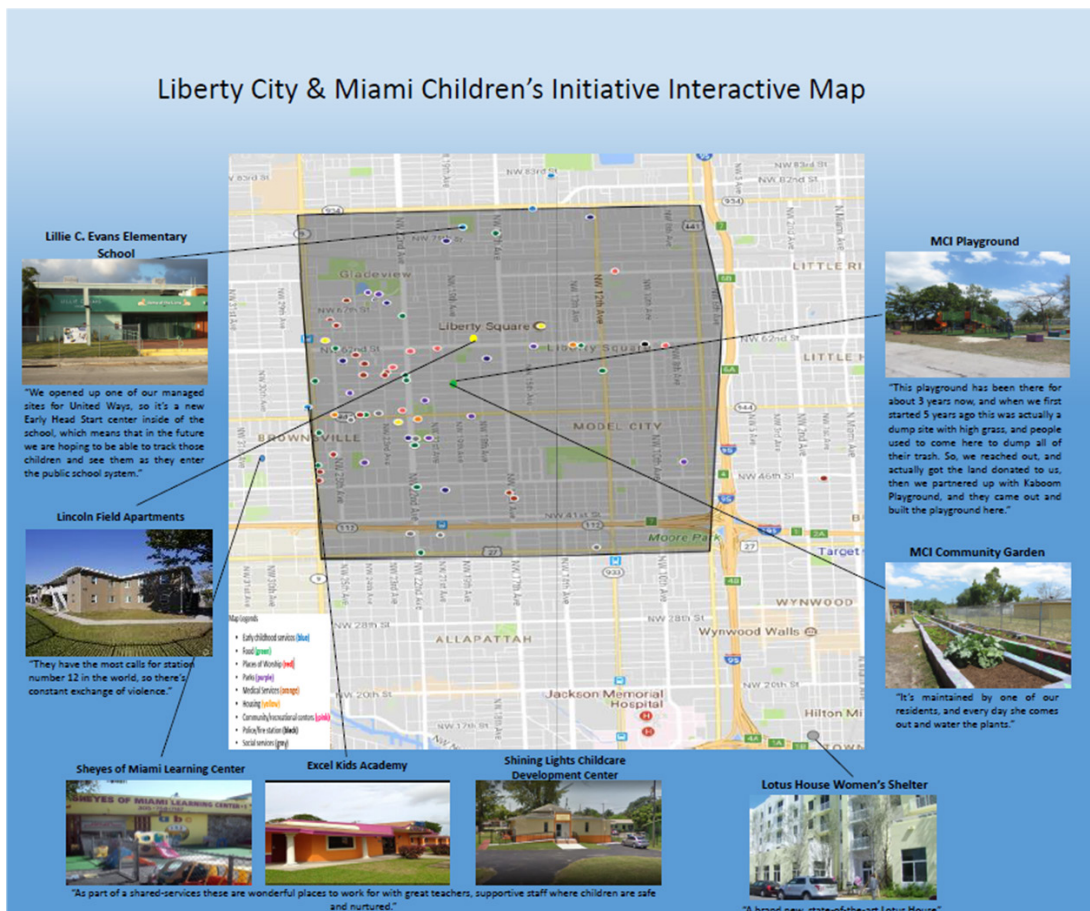
as well as several childcare centers and family childcare homes, had not been noted during the virtual tour (Figure 4). Furthermore, discussions during this exercise about the distance of resources for residents without personal transportation, the history and politics associated with community dynamics, and conditions and resources in relation to neighboring communities and Miami-Dade as a whole were enlightening and energizing for the group. As one example, the LC CoIIN team reflected on the interactive mapping activity and noted that there were small food markets but no grocery stores in the community—qualifying the area as a food desert. They then partnered with a local initiative to distribute \$5 co-op grocery/produce boxes for residents and arranged for EBT payments. Therefore, if community members had not participated in the interactive mapping activity, the community assessment would have been missing key assets that contribute to the full

scope of the LC community. Assets that lie outside the LC boundaries but that are utilized by LC residents are important because they may represent partnership opportunities that can further the goal of improving the developmental health of infants and young children. In fact, the LC ECCS project approach was eventually expanded to Overtown, a neighboring community initiative that operates in collaboration with LC ECCS changemakers.

Walking and Windshield Tours

Prominent community members (the ECCS lead and community organizer/staff) served as guides for windshield and walking tours. On a windshield tour of the LC ECCS neighborhood, including its boundaries and surrounding areas, the community guides and evaluation team noted which assets were plentiful (childcare, corner stores) and which were missing (Black-owned restaurants, grocery stores). On the walking tour,

Figure 4. Completed Map After Interactive Mapping Session



Note: Color-coded markers denote early childhood services (blue), food (green), places of worship (red), parks (purple), medical services (orange), housing (yellow), community/ recreational centers (pink), public safety (black), and social services (grey).

participants saw resources offered by the LC office as well as a number of neighborhood assets. The LC office is located within a unit of a public housing community, which improves the accessibility of its services for residents. The office coordinates an after-school program called Grower's Learning Program; a computer lab; a college and career department that allows residents to search for jobs, apply for college, and print useful information; as well as a career closet that provides residents with clothes they may need for job interviews.

The walking tour also permitted the evaluation team to observe the current conditions of the LC ECCS neighborhood and the ongoing efforts to improve the environment. For example, we noted programs housed at Charles Drew Middle School, a community park and garden, a small gym, a memorial garden honoring lives lost to gun violence, and several other projects that contribute to "cleaning up the look of the neighborhood," as one local resident stated (Table 1). The tour guide also described challenges associated with maintaining these efforts, such as finding staff or volunteers to open and supervise the gym each day. The tour guide noted one place where a shooting had occurred in the past week and discussed the emotional stress and trauma experienced by residents. Strong leaders and programs (such the coach of a youth athletic club and the site of a thriving after-school program) were also pointed out.

Residents who participate in LC child development activities have the option of painting their front doors a bright and cheerful color of their choice (Table 1). This was significant to community members as the public housing complexes prohibit any modifications to the units—painting the front door of their home created a small but meaningful outlet of self-expression. The brightly colored front doors also provided a visual reminder of community engagement. Residents also have access to a local park and playground, which were advocated for by community members and partners. A thriving community garden (tended by a local resident with a passion for gardening) added to the aesthetic of the community and offered residents an opportunity to actively participate in its beauty by adding their own flowers and plants (Table 1).

Interviews, Meetings, and Focus Groups

The combined methods of a focus group, mapping, and touring produced robust data (Figures 1 and 4), and community feedback was

fundamental to achieving these results. Feedback allowed the evaluation team to recognize assets that are to some extent hidden gems within the community, and the opportunity to share their views was refreshing and motivating for the community team. Soliciting community members' involvement in a community assessment provides relevant information for a place-based, community-driven effort and inspires deep conversations about equity and opportunity. The LC CoIIN team used this information in turn to create action plans for improving developmental health in a constructive and positive way, including the development of Books, Blocks, & Balls—a large family event that focuses on engaging and educating parents on child development, strategically held at locations dense with children or arranged at locations identified by residents and leaders as places that are frequently visited by parents and children (Figure 1).

Discussion

Through the use of several community assessment strategies, the evaluation team was introduced to the community's perspective, its infrastructure, and its many assets. The GIS maps helped the evaluation team and community partners better understand the scope of the ECCS Impact Project in the broader context of the LC community, as they were able to see a defined outline of the focus neighborhood as well as the number of children residing in specific areas. The GIS maps that were shared with the LC ECCS lead and the community partners also provided technical assistance for programming and outreach efforts; the maps helped community leaders identify the location of the bulk of the target age population in their neighborhood, which helped them more efficiently use their resources and plan their initiatives. Community groups may request additional maps that can help with visualizing any number of neighborhood characteristics. In addition, conducting a virtual tour via Google Maps gave the evaluation team a sense of familiarity with the neighborhood and an initial visual representation that they used as a foundation to execute the interactive mapping activity. Following the virtual tour, the evaluation team further built connections within the community through guided windshield and walking tours, which identified assets, history, needs, and aspirations that were not readily visible through virtual or spatial information.

Building rapport with community members is of utmost importance for researchers because

it enhances trust, engagement, and impact from the point at which knowledge is obtained through the evaluation. Touring and mapping to inform community improvement efforts is not helpful without the expressed interest, permission, and guidance of the community. Therefore, interviews, focus groups, meetings, and guided tours must take place in a sensitive and respectful manner throughout the process—before, during, and after mapping occurs—to member-check and interpret results and to inform next steps.

Interactive mapping also gave community leaders the chance to surface essential community assets that were unseen or overlooked by the evaluation team. While the LC community has a number of challenges and concerns, the asset-based spatial community assessment process provided an opportunity for the ECCS partners to identify potential resources and strengths that they can draw upon when addressing community problems (e.g., food access, violence, blight) that are detrimental to child and family well-being. Community members provide crucial perspectives that enable researchers to compile accurate and all-encompassing information about the community of interest. In fact, the real magic in the ECCS initiative is civic engagement—that is, connecting residents with one another and with decision-makers. The interactive mapping process developed by the evaluation team and utilized by the CoIIN partners provided the backdrop for discovery, communication, and, ultimately, action. This method allowed diverse stakeholders—community members, agency and program representatives, and university faculty and students—to gather and reflect on social data in a spatial format. It was through those reflective conversations that collaborations were built or strengthened.

Furthermore, over the years, the LC team has built resident leaders who now present their results to state- and national-level stakeholders. Naturally, the residents of a community are the experts in their neighborhoods. Through a variety of activities, including the community assessment process, these residents can connect social and physical community attributes to local and state policy, as the examples of playgrounds, housing, childcare, and community gardens in this paper demonstrate.

There were some limitations associated with conducting an asset-based spatial community assessment. First, ideally, the number of children in a community would be mapped in real time at the smallest possible scale (i.e., census block);

however, birth data were available only by census tract, with a lag in availability, so estimates were generated. This strategy was sufficient for this community because the population is relatively stable. Other methods for establishing population estimates may be required in more transient neighborhoods. Second, certain locations visited on the virtual tour were not up to date, and many of the community-identified resources were not found on Google Maps. The input gathered at the focus group/interactive mapping session was also limited to the views of participants involved. Thus, multiple iterations over time and with diverse stakeholders are recommended. GIS mapping and virtual tours allow researchers to gain a better scope of the community's built environment, such as its available resources (e.g., grocery stores, schools, parks, and sidewalks) and infrastructure (e.g., condition of buildings, parks, and roads), and conversations held during tours, interviews, focus groups, and meetings add context, history, and insight into community dynamics. Combining these strategies results in a detailed assessment of the community's assets and strengths.

Conclusion

The ECCS Impact Project strives to implement effective evidence-based strategies to improve childhood development as well as family health and well-being. The LC ECCS initiative offers one example of how asset-based spatial community assessment can analyze the core strengths and assets of a community and harness the potential for community change. The results from the assessment are used to target effective ways of improving child and family health within the LC community.

Based on the findings of the community assessment, the LC community's core strengths are that (a) community members are actively involved and (b) community projects unite residents around beautifying and improving their built environment. The LC community assessment also highlighted the effectiveness of using GIS mapping, virtual tours, and physical tours to determine the distribution of the target population (children) in specific areas of the community and to identify what assets or resources are valued within the community and surrounding communities. This method, described in Sandy and Franco (2004) in the context of service-learning, has tremendous potential to be scaled up and implemented as part of other place-based community initiatives.

In fact, the initiative has spread to a neighboring community, Overtown, which is now beginning the process.

The LC community values their early childhood services, parks and recreational facilities, faith-based organizations for worship, learning institutions, career building resources, community centers, medical and health services, food resources, and social services. The compiled list of the LC community's valued and trusted assets enabled LC community members, stakeholders, and the Florida ECCS Impact Project state team to better collaborate and communicate around specific assets (e.g., childcare networks) in order to better translate relevant services and supports into improved child and family health. Discovering more ways to utilize their internal assets will allow LC to be a healthier, more self-sustaining community.

While community ownership of the assessment process is essential, advocacy is equally important, as the LC community has been under-resourced for decades. Weick et al. (2005) have explained that sensemaking is action-oriented. It also involves labeling—that is, giving voice to lived experiences that may not previously have been expressed. The knowledge gained through community assessment and reflection/sensemaking is thus communicated upward to decision-makers at county, state, and national levels through the ECCS CoIIN process in order to drive policy priorities. As resident leaders describe their community in a holistic and comprehensive way, public and political biases against the community due to a historically limited media focus on poverty and crime are reduced, and asset-building is more supported. Furthermore, this engagement sheds light on how inequities impact the lived experiences of children and families, which builds the political will for change. Future evaluations can assess the interconnectivity among community services and residents as well as the association between program implementation and engagement over time to further understand how the community assessment findings have contributed to organization and mobilization.

The methods used to assess this particular community are cost-effective, simple, and relatively easy for others to adopt. These methods also offer excellent opportunities for service-learning in a university setting. Asset mapping can reduce biases among program staff, stakeholders, and researchers by replacing a deficit lens with empathy (Ammerman & Parks, 1998; Everhart, 2016) and by building skills in collaborative relationships

with community members (Donaldson & Daughtery, 2011). Future community-engaged scholars and researchers can use this method to better understand community layouts, attributes, dynamics, and sociopolitical contexts and their subsequent connection to health.

The strategies used for this evaluation can help community residents systematically describe, reflect on, and convey the strengths that their community already offers. As explained by the ECCS lead, LC residents “stand at the intersection between blessing and burden ... though the public narrative about Liberty City centers on the burden.” Through the identification of assets, organizers can utilize these community assessment tools and results to facilitate understanding of what is still needed to propel their community to thrive. Furthermore, the information gathered with the community assessment can be used to show other residents what is possible, enabling advocacy and community engagement to ignite, spread, and sustain.

Epilogue

This article describes engaged community assessment with a focus on asset mapping as part of a community development initiative. Indeed, this initiative identified many assets as well as a methodology for partnering with communities to learn about and build upon their strengths and resources. However, there is an epilogue to this particular example, shared here by LC residents who participated in follow-up discussions. The community development effort was truly magical, conducted in partnership with parents and families, “leveled up” and transformative for all who were involved. But community building was not enough; community preservation, too, must be central to the conversation. The tremendous resources in this community—entrepreneurs and small business owners, homeowners, built environment enhancements, a unified cultural heritage, and strong social ties—were not enough to protect the residents from being forcibly relocated due to gentrification.

One resident describes 50 years of history, elders caring for young children, and adults now caring for elders within “the nest” of LC, while another explains the unmeasurable value of belongingness within a community culture, a Southern Black rural Georgian, Alabaman, and Bahamian blend, that she's accustomed to and can't find elsewhere. Many, including young children, embraced a strong sense of identity within a caring

community, epitomized in the motto “I am Liberty City.” What happened next was “heartbreaking.” Using gun violence as a justification, plans that had been in place to tear down and redevelop this neighborhood were fast-tracked. Of all the residents in this community, including over 200 families engaged in early childhood efforts (with their brightly painted doors, as shown in Table 1) only three remain.

As one resident put it, “There was a lot of how our community was starting to reclaim. . . . That effort was squashed.” Over the past few years, residents noticed signs that something was happening—a new veterinary clinic (“People weren’t even allowed to have animals in their units!”), rent increases 2–3 times per year, an increase in police presence, and cameras installed in condemned buildings—yet no public discussions about what was planned or how to prepare. Homeowners noticed the houses next to them being sold while receiving constant invitations to sell their own homes. All the while, a subtext persisted about crime and a community not worth saving. Yet there was so much to preserve, so much uniquely special about this community. For example, a resident shared:

So, you know, the garden, I mean I’ve never seen okra grow like it grew in the garden. I’ve never seen a lot of things that were happening amongst individuals that were nurturing. They were nurturing themselves. They were nurturing the community.

How do we avoid this—communities blown apart, residents separated from one another and from the neighborhoods that they and their parents grew up in—happening in the future? One resident remarked:

Being a resident in the community, what could I do or what could I say when I don’t have access to funders like that? My voice is not really being heard. . . . [I] wasn’t consulted about the changes that were brought to us.

Residents were moved to public housing in other areas where they don’t feel safe or connected. One former resident returns each day to visit an elderly neighbor who wonders where her neighbors have gone. LC residents describe growing up in a place where “it took a village” and where everyone knew everyone, a place that was “a very beautiful place, a good place” except

for “those who came into the neighborhood from outside” to commit crimes.

LC residents want to be able to come back home. “It’s not where you live, it’s how you live,” they say. Unfortunately, only a fraction of subsidized housing will exist in the new development, and those who asked were told that there was a 5–10 year waiting list. It is well known that LC is one of the few areas in the region that doesn’t flood (Nathan, 2019; WLRN, 2019). “I think the politics of how things play out; it just goes against the grain of what we’re trying to create,” said one resident. “That’s why for me, it’s so important to remain in Liberty City.”

So, how might residents harness the often-untapped power of neighbors to self-organize in order to halt these activities or to change the way they are carried out? As noted by Krings and Schusler (2020), capacity building in any community includes raising financial, housing, and climate change literacy among residents so that they are aware of the broader political and economic forces that lead to gentrification (e.g., housing markets and financing; public housing policies and procedures; preservation of historic homes, buildings, and institutions). This knowledge can help residents block, negotiate with, or plan with gentrifiers. Thurber et al. (2021) recognized the historical racism and classism underpinning political, social, and cultural displacements, and they assert that social action, community organizing, community development, and participatory research and planning may help residents to understand, resist, and respond to gentrification.

How might other communities in LC—or throughout Florida and across the nation—engage with policy makers, decision makers, and planning councils to prevent the violent dissolution of communities? One resident noted:

I’m on a gold mine. No flood zone, and now they’re changing the demographic because of climate change. Now they’re trying to use my zip code. . . . The people [current residents] never studied, the people don’t even know. Even when families have left to inherit the property to hold on to it.

This resident’s observations parallel the findings of a study modeling climate gentrification in Miami-Dade County (Keenan et al., 2018).

Asset mapping is a way to unite communities and to engage stakeholders, to communicate value within and beyond the boundaries of a

community. In fact, a group in Chicago conducted community-led communication asset mapping that include designing an “anti-displacement map” and walking tour to convey broadly the value of a neighborhood slated for gentrification (Villanueva, 2021). The extent to which those efforts will change the decisions and actions of private developers and city governments remains to be seen. As observed by longtime resident of Tampa, Florida:

The difference between gentrification and regular community development is the people. . . . What makes it gentrification is when people develop the community but price out the residents from moving them out and not making it feasible to come back. (in Smith, 2020)

We hope that the “rebuilding” of LC will include the historic, cultural, physical, and—above all—human treasures that make it home.

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