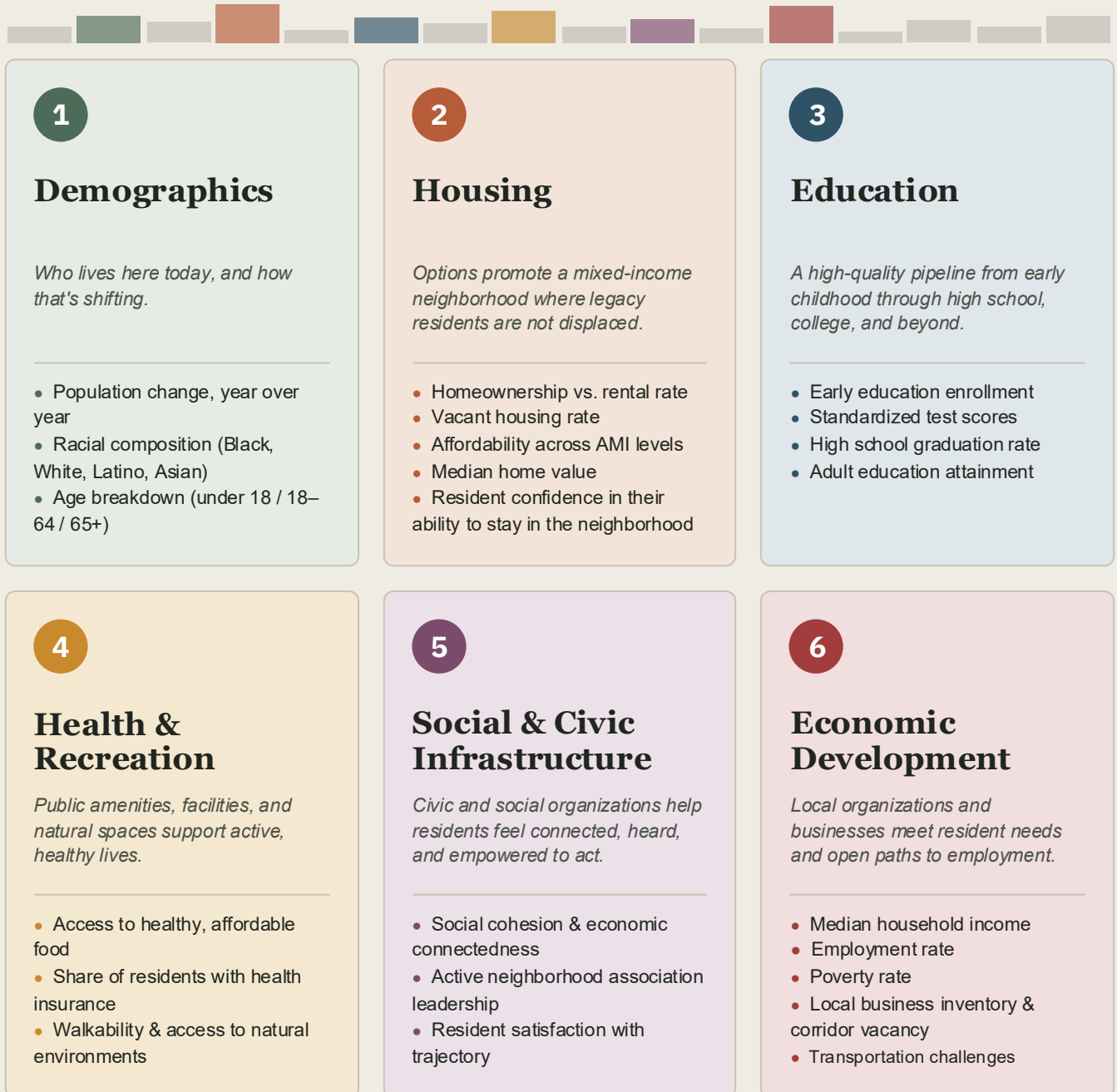


Measuring what Matters: A Framework to Evaluate Neighborhood Change

A practical guide for community quarterbacks to track impact.



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Introduction: Using Data to Drive Decision-Making

As a community quarterback, it can be hard to know what to do about data. Priorities and activities compete for attention, and data collection often takes a back seat. Even when you do have a lot of it, it can be hard to know what's important and why.

The result is often that organizations spend significant time and resources collecting data without a clear sense of why. A dashboard full of metrics that don't drive decisions isn't much better than not having a dashboard at all.

The framework in this paper offers a different starting point: a set of metrics grounded in research on what drives real outcomes for residents, each one tied to a specific, actionable response a community quarterback can take. The goal is not to measure everything. It's to measure the things that tell you whether the neighborhood is changing in a way that works for residents.

The framework covers six interconnected domains — Demographics, Housing, Education, Health & Recreation, Social & Civic Infrastructure, and Economic Development — each with its own goal statement and a set of research-backed metrics. Displacement measures are woven in; the metrics below allow you to understand when legacy residents are feeling price pressure, when affordable housing supply is low enough that the neighborhood is no longer accessible to low-income folks, and when the neighborhood is changing in ways that may not be welcoming to legacy residents. The full table below lists every metric, why it matters, and where to find the data.

The Metrics

Domain	Metric	Why It's Important	Source
Demographics <i>Who lives here today and how that's changing.</i>	Population	Tracks whether the neighborhood is stabilizing, growing, or losing residents.	5-Year ACS
	Race breakdown (% Black, White, Latino, Asian)	Shows how racial composition is shifting as revitalization takes place. This can be helpful context as you're understanding and telling the story of neighborhood change.	5-Year ACS
	Age breakdown (% under 18, 18–64, 65+)	Informs which services and amenities (schools, senior services, etc.) are most needed.	5-Year ACS
Housing <i>Housing options promote a mixed-income neighborhood where legacy residents are not displaced.</i>	% Homeowners / % Renters	Homeownership rate is an established measure of neighborhood stability and a primary vehicle for wealth generation (Killewald and Bryan, 2016). The inverse of the homeownership rate is the rental rate. Renters are more vulnerable to displacement as they are typically lower-income and feel rising home values more quickly through rent increases- it's thus important to understand who they are and how many there are.	5-Year ACS

Domain	Metric	Why It's Important	Source
	Vacant housing rate	Linked to perceptions of unsafety and increased crime; reducing vacancies improves safety and supports surrounding property values (Branas et al., 2018).	5-Year ACS
	% Residents able to stay in their housing as long as they'd like	A direct measure of displacement risk that helps identify at-risk households before displacement occurs.	Survey data
	Affordability for all AMIs (# of units by affordability/tenure)	Shows whether the housing stock is available to residents of all income levels and where the supply gaps are; this is particularly important to prevent the exclusion of low-income residents.	Survey data; PolicyMap
	Median home value	Rising home values build homeowner wealth and an increase in property taxes can be used to develop local amenities. While research has found that increasing home values does not usually impose a large enough tax burden to cause displacement for homeowners, it does signal parallel rent increases which can cause displacement for renters (Martin and Beck, 2018).	5-Year ACS
Education <i>There is a high-quality education pipeline starting in early childhood and continuing through high school, college, and beyond.</i>	% of 3–4-year-olds enrolled in early education	High-quality early childhood education has well-documented, long-term effects, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bailey et al., 2021).	5-Year ACS
	Standardized test scores (e.g. 3rd-grade reading, 8th-grade math)	Standardized test scores are a proxy for school quality (Chetty et al, 2014). For example, research has found that children living in neighborhoods that report higher test scores will tend to have higher income as adults (Chetty et al, 2018) and that attending schools with higher average test scores will boost an individual student's test scores as well (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008). However, a drop in standardized test scores is symptomatic of a larger drop in school quality and requires a holistic approach to improve school quality rather than a narrow focus on 3rd grade reading or 8th grade math test scores.	Stanford Education Data Archive; Georgia DOE
	High school graduation rate	Graduation is a critical step toward economic opportunity — in recent years, graduates have earned at least \$10,000 more annually than non-graduates on average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026) — and is linked to better health and longevity outcomes.	U.S. Dept. of Education, Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Strategy
	Adult education attainment (% with a bachelor's or higher)	An associate or bachelor's degree holder earns \$442,000–\$1,051,000 more over a 40-year career than a high school graduate (Carnevale et al., 2011); this metric also reflects local role models and educational norms (Crowder & South, 2003).	5-Year ACS
Health & Recreation <i>Public amenities, facilities, and natural environments provide</i>	% Residents with access to healthy, affordable food	A proxy for healthy eating in the absence of direct consumption data; linked to residents' overall health outcomes.	DataAxe; Invest Atlanta dashboard

Domain	Metric	Why It's Important	Source
<i>opportunity for residents to live active, healthy lives.</i>	% Residents with health insurance	A proxy for healthcare access; expanded coverage lowers costs and can improve the availability and quality of local care.	5-Year ACS
	Presence of hazardous waste dump sites	Proximity to hazardous sites is linked to contamination, adverse birth outcomes, and shortened life expectancy; remediation directly reduces harm to nearby residents (Kiaghadi et al., 2021).	EPA Superfund National Priorities List
	Walkability	Linked to improved physical health, greater social connectivity, and reduced cardiovascular risk (Leyden, 2003; Yang et al., 2021).	EPA & GSA Smart Location Database
	NatureScore (exposure to healthy natural environments)	Exposure to natural environments is linked to increased activity, reduced stress, and improved mental wellbeing (Sprague et al, 2022). NatureScore combines vegetation, water, and built-environment data into a single exposure measure.	NatureQuant
Social & Civic Infrastructure <i>Civic and social organizations help residents feel connected, heard, and empowered to enact change.</i>	Social cohesion	Strong cohesion among neighbors builds trust, lowers crime, and strengthens residents' collective ability to address neighborhood needs (Sampson, 2017).	Survey data
	Economic connectedness	Cross-class relationships help children rise out of poverty; low-income children with high-income friendships earn roughly \$500K more over their lifetime, and starting earlier compounds the benefit (Chetty et al., 2022).	Opportunity Insights
	Presence of a neighborhood association with active leadership	Active associations help residents' priorities shape decisions and support more effective neighborhood advocacy, combating cultural displacement.	Survey data
	Overall satisfaction with neighborhood trajectory	Captures whether residents feel the neighborhood is changing in ways consistent with their own needs — key to whether the neighborhoods stays welcoming to legacy residents, the absence of which is a marker of cultural displacement.	Survey data
	Non-profit organizations	A greater density of nonprofits is associated with reduced fear of crime and stronger social infrastructure (Sharkey et al., 2017).	National Center for Charitable Statistics
Economic Development <i>Local organizations and businesses meet residents' needs and provide opportunities for local employment and economic advancement.</i>	Median household income	This is one of the most widely utilized measures of neighborhood health and has been consistently identified as among the strongest predictors of children's outcomes (Chetty and Hendren, 2018). Neighborhoods where the median household income is below 80% AMI are characterized by HUD as low-income and are eligible for housing assistance eligibility, inclusionary zoning standards, and block grants. They are also less likely to attract private development and grocery stores.	5-Year ACS
	Employment rate	Access to employment is central to family economic wellbeing and self-sufficiency.	5-Year ACS

Domain	Metric	Why It's Important	Source
	Poverty rate	Poverty above 20% marks concentrated poverty, associated with compounding negative effects such as crime; tracking this threshold flags when intervention is needed (Galster, 2011).	5-Year ACS
	Local business inventory	Identifies gaps (grocery, childcare, financial services) and vacancies that could be filled to meet resident needs and create local jobs.	Survey data
	Transportation isn't a barrier to a quality job	Many disinvested neighborhoods were intentionally disconnected from the rest of the city; persistent poor connectivity isolates residents and limits economic opportunity.	Survey data

Using This Framework

Track trends, not snapshots

A single reading of any metric is not that helpful. Track each metric over time, and relative to the citywide average, so that you can see whether the neighborhood is closing gaps or falling further behind.

Measuring Displacement

Displacement is characterized by its *involuntary* nature- it is the relocation of residents from a home or neighborhood where residents would otherwise have remained if not for socioeconomic and environmental pressures (Cohen, 2018). We measure displacement pressure in three ways:

- Direct displacement: when residents are forced to move because their home is no longer affordable, no longer livable, or is being renovated.
- Exclusion: when housing choices for low-income residents are limited
- Cultural displacement: when legacy residents move because the neighborhood has changed in a manner such that they no longer feel a sense of belonging

Pair it with your own program data

This framework is a starting point, not the complete picture. It tells you what's happening in the neighborhood, not which initiatives have contributed to these changes. Combine this data with your own data about programs and initiatives to connect neighborhood-level changes to the programs that are driving it. Furthermore qualitative data, especially stories, can help you understand why and how programs are driving change.

A note on safety

This framework deliberately does not include metrics on crime. Research suggests the most effective levers for neighborhood safety run through social and civic infrastructure: more eyes on the street, strong social cohesion, trust between neighbors, and a willingness to look out for one another and act on each other's behalf all reduce crime more reliably than tracking incident counts alone (Sampson, 2017; Sharkey, Torratts-Espinosa, & Takyar, 2017). Investment in that pillar is, in effect, investment in safety.

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