Citizen Participation in Neighborhoods:
Social Capital, Sense of Community, and
Government in Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Flint

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Urban Collaborators

Working to help revitalize Michigan's cities.

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DO PEOPLE CARE ENOUGH TO BE ACTIVE IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS?

A Summary of an MSU Research Project on Neighborhoods

Background

In 2001, MSU Urban Collaborators (a cross-disciplinary initiative) determined that the topic of "citizen participation" in urban areas offered a significant opportunity to match cutting-edge research with practical needs. Neighborhood associations and other community-based organizations have always been interested in how to increase the number of citizens involved in community activities.

The group selected two research proposals to be conducted in three cities: Flint, Grand Rapids, and Lansing. The project was done in cooperation with three neighborhood associations in each of the three cities.

Social Capital Research

Dr. John Schweitzer led the project that explored the question, *"Is the Level of Social Capital and Sense of Community Among Immediate Neighborhood Residents Related to Participation in Neighborhood Organizations?"* Selected residents in three neighborhoods in each of the three cities were given a survey administered by trained neighborhood residents. Analysis pointed to a major conclusion: participation in neighborhood activities was significantly associated with bonds of friendship with immediate neighbors. In other words, **those who participated in an active social life at the block level were much more willing to participate in wider organized activities than were those who were did not have social ties.**

This finding has great applicability concerning what organizing activities neighborhood associations may want to undertake. Clearly, it indicates the need to re-examine the kind of activity occurring at the block level.

The Role of Local Government Research

Dr. June Thomas led the project that examined *"Local Government's Role in Community Development and Neighborhood Participation."* Interviews were conducted with city officials and community leaders in the three cities. Some of the key findings:

- City government in all three cities were making an effort to link with citizens, neighborhoods, and community-based organizations. **Police in all three cities were in the forefront of these efforts.**
- Grand Rapids put more direct funding into community-based groups than does Lansing, but Lansing had a successful record of building relations between government staff and citizens.
- Citizens viewed city departments very differently in regards to their willingness to work with citizens, and certain features characterized successful relationship builders.

This research provides an analysis of how citizens and city government view each other, which can provide a basis for improving communication and interactions. It illustrated the potential of building a stronger working relationship between the two.

These two studies sought to better understand and compare citizen participation in three cities. Each study asked questions to understand a different dimension of participation. One study looked at how sense of community affects participation in neighborhood associations and organizations. The other study considered the relationship between city government and the community, especially neighborhood associations. The cities studied were in Michigan: Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Flint. All three cities are mid-sized in terms of population; Grand Rapids is the largest with a population of just under 200,000 in 2000, while Lansing and Flint had populations in 2000 of about 114,000 and 125,000 respectively.   Like other cities in the Midwest, all three cities have experienced urban problems in the last few decades but they have weathered the changes differently. Flint has been devastated by deindustrialization which has resulted in the loss of population, and within the last few years the city has been in political upheaval following a mayoral recall and receivership of the State of Michigan. Lansing, the state capitol, made efforts to retain the automotive industry and is also it is also close to a major university. Compared to these cities, Grand Rapids is stable both in terms of population and economically.

This project worked with MSU Extension agents and community partners to identify neighborhoods and interview subjects in each of the cities for study. For the sense of community study, neighborhoods had to have an existing neighborhood association with geographic boundaries and an interest in increasing participation of residents. The neighborhoods were: in Lansing, Baker/Donora, Wexford, and Knollwood; in Grand Rapids, Creston, SWAN, and West Grand; and in Flint, North Point, Northwest and Eldridge Street. The three cities have varying levels of interaction with organized neighborhood. Much of Grand Rapids is organized into neighborhoods and most of these have neighborhood associations of varying levels of activity. In Lansing, neighborhood associations represent more than half the city and some funds are

granted to neighborhoods. Flint has few organized neighborhood associations and boundaries sometimes overlap. The community interview subjects for the local government study were chosen from the study neighborhoods whenever possible the government interview subjects were chosen because of their department assignment.

Sense of Community and Citizen Participation

For this study, three neighborhoods were chosen in each city (hereafter referred to as target neighborhoods). Fifty residents were selected through systematic sampling and surveyed in each target neighborhood.

Neighborhood association leaders and the Urban Collaborators research team collaborated to develop the survey. The survey had three parts: the first section gauged the respondents' knowledge of and involvement in the neighborhood they live in, the second section asked about the respondents' relationship with their immediate neighbors and their sense of community, and the third section asked about the respondents' civic involvement and demographic information. In measuring participation we looked at three dimensions: 1) current knowledge of the neighborhood association, its leaders and activities; 2) prior actions and involvement in neighborhood and community organizations; and 3) future willingness to share talents and skills in neighborhood improvement. Questions used to measure current knowledge were:

- Do you know if this neighborhood has a name?
- Do you know if a neighborhood association represents this neighborhood?
- Does this association have regular meetings?
- Do you know any of the association leaders?
- Do you know any of your neighbors who participate in the neighborhood association?

In measuring prior actions, we asked:

- Have you or any members of your household ever attended a neighborhood association meeting?
- Have you been a member of a local club or organization?
- Have you attended a community meeting?
- Have you participated in a block watch group?
- Have you work on a neighborhood project?

To measure future willingness, the following questions were asked:

- Are you willing to be actively involved in any issue in the neighborhood?

- To assist the neighborhood, would you be interested in sharing your time or talents?

The demographic variables that we considered were: gender, race, age, presence of children under 18, home ownership, years in home, volunteer activity, perception of neighborhood issues, and connection with immediate neighbors. We also asked the respondents about the sense of community among immediate neighbors and their perception of the collective efficacy of the entire neighborhood. There are six aspects to sense of community: connection—the feeling that people on the block know each other; support—people on the block care for each other's plants, kids, pets; belonging—people on the block feel that they belong here; participation—people on this block participate in community improvement activities; empowerment—when faced with a problem on this bloc, residents can create a solution; and safety—it is fairly safe to walk on this block at night. The surveying revealed that sense of community can vary greatly from block to block in the same neighborhood. On some blocks people feel like a family, while on other blocks people don't know their next-door neighbors. This was evident from items that had 100 percent agreement on some blocks but 0 percent agreement on others; these included: "people on this block know each other," "people on this block talk to each other about community problems," "people on this block feel connected to each other," and "people on this block get things done to improve the block." Collective efficacy can be thought of as the degree to which people in the neighborhood take action on issues. In our survey, respondents reported on the likelihood that people in the neighborhood would get involved if a fight broke out in front of their house or a school was going to be closed, and their agreement on whether people in the neighborhood generally got along with each other, whether they socialized with each other, and felt the neighborhood to be close-knit.

A majority of the respondents, 66 percent, owned their home compared to 34 percent who were renters. Sixty percent of the respondents were female and forty percent were male. Overall, the respondents were well balanced racially, 51 percent were non-white and 49 percent were white. By neighborhood, race was a bit different. In Flint, the respondents in our survey were primarily African-American (99 percent); the respondents in Grand Rapids were mostly white (94 percent). In Lansing, the respondents were racially diverse with 55 percent white and 45 percent non-white; each of the neighborhoods had a percentage of both white and non-white respondents.

Table 1 displays the correlation coefficients between different variables in the survey. A correlation coefficient represents the relationship between two or more different variables. If two items in the survey vary or relate similarly, they are correlated. For example, if you were studying people's weight data and also collected for each subject's height, you might not be surprised that height and weight are related—that is, that the taller a person is, the more they weigh. It is not always true, but most people who are taller weigh more. Therefore, weight correlates with height.

In analyzing the surveys of the target neighborhoods, we entered data into a statistical package computer program and then requested correlation coefficients so we could examine the relationship between the participation variables (past actions, current knowledge, and future willingness) and the demographic variables (age, gender, etc.) and the neighborhood variables (sense of community, connection with neighbors, etc.). The computer program calculates the correlation coefficient and also reports the probability that the correlation is statistically significant, that is not just a function of random chance. For example, if in the hypothetical study of people's weight, we might have found a correlation between where a person lives and their weight but it was just because of chance or sampling error. In Table 1, the correlation

coefficients that have an asterisk (* or **) after them are statistically significant.   Positive

correlations tell us that as the one variable increases, so does the other. Negative correlations tell

us that as one variable increases, the other decreases. For example, "years in home" is positively

correlated with "prior action". That means that people who have lived in their homes longer are

more likely to have engaged in some neighborhood activities and it also means that those who

have lived in their home a short time are less likely to have been involved in their new

neighborhood. It seems to follow logically then, that "year in home" negatively correlates with

"future willingness" because new people in the neighborhood maybe looking to get more

involved while long-term residents, most likely would be older, may be looking toward

relocation, retirement communities, or reduced involvement.

Table 1: Correlations between demographic and neighborhood variables with participation variables

	Prior Action	Current Knowledge	Future Willingness
Years in home	.185**	.166**	-.176**
Own home	-.193**	-.178**	.014
Age	.226**	.111*	-.128*
Gender	.091	.059	.060
Have children	-.156**	.028	.124*
Single family home	.078	.013	-.057
Race (%white)	-.104*	.261**	-.022
Volunteer activities	.481**	.176**	.339**
Connection with Immediate Neighbors	.295**	.275**	.300**
Sense of Community of Immediate Neighbors	.400**	.245**	.300**
Collective Efficacy of Entire Neighborhood	.198**	.141**	.249**
Perception of Neighborhood Issues	.143**	.141**	.013

From this we concluded that it is possible to predict knowledge, prior involvement, and

willingness to be involved in neighborhood associations from the demographics of the

respondents. However, sense of community of immediate neighbors is the best predictor of past,

current and future participation. We found that sense of community can be predicted by education, homeownership, income, length of residence, and low crime. But when all these factors are controlled for the best predictor of sense of community is socializing. We also found that newcomers to neighborhoods are more willing to get involved in neighborhood improvement activities. Increasing sense of community among neighbors can be achieved by working with small clusters of immediate neighbors.

These findings could be used to promote block clubs or associations, to sponsor block social activities, to recognize friendly blocks, to create block map directories, or to reward active blocks in a neighborhood.

<u>Local Government and Citizen Participation</u>

The study involved three cities, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Flint, chosen by the Urban Collaborators research committee because of their comparable size yet identifiable efforts to build city-community relations. Each city had an advisory committee which helped to pick specific departments in the city to be interviewed for this research, recommendations which were confirmed by the Community and Economic Development agent for that city. Interviews involved eleven community and government people in Lansing, four community and seven government people in Grand Rapids, six community and five government people in Flint. Data was collected in 2002, and so these results reflect conditions at that time. Since then, all cities have experienced some change in administration.

The interviews were qualitative in nature and involved a list of questions that were predetermined yet flexible, and interviews lasted anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. All community respondents were widely recognized city leaders, leaders in their neighborhood associations, and government respondents who held positions of great responsibility. We transcribed interviews and analyzed them by selecting their major themes using qualitative software NUD*IST, and then we drew conclusions from this analysis.

Background conditions included a strong history of neighborhood infrastructure in Grand Rapids, with several community-based organizations funded in part by the city, and strong personal identity with specific neighborhoods. In Lansing, a strong tradition of neighborhood activism also existed, but the overall organization of neighborhoods was less formal and without City funding. Flint was characterized by block clubs and larger umbrella organizations, but severe problems of fiscal decline in that city affected several levels of performance.

Opinions About City Departments

Most respondents felt that city departments were largely responsive to the needs of

community-based organizations and neighborhood people. As is apparent from Figure 1, very

few departments received negative ratings, although one City office did in Grand Rapids. In

general, the perspective of Flint residents was extremely mixed, a fact that may have been

influenced by the turmoil in that city. As is apparent in Figure 2, opinions about departments

concerned with planning were mixed in Grand Rapids, fairly positive in Lansing, and not

available for Flint. In Grand Rapids, opinion was fairly high concerning the Planning

Department, with mixed opinions about the Community Development Department and the

Neighborhood Improvement Department. In Lansing, the Mayor's Office was highly rated, and

also the Planning and Development and Police Departments. In Flint, several departments were

named as good but no favorite emerged; what seemed the most notable in that city was the

difficulty that arose when the Building Inspection Department was closed down because of

financial hardship.

Figure 1: Opinions about various city departments from community

City Departments	Grand Rapids	Lansing	Flint
Overview of City Government	+ -	+	+ -
Mayor	O	+	+*
City Manager	-	O	O
City Council	O	+	+ -
Police	+	+	+
Parks and Recreation	+	+	+ -
Human Relations	O	+ -/N	+ -

Key to Figure 1
+   Comments were generally positive   -   Comments were generally negative
+ - Comments were mixed   O   Data were not collected
N   Comments were neutral   *   Mayor of Flint was recalled in 2002

Figure 2: Opinions about departments concerned with planning from community

GRAND RAPIDS	General Comments
Planning Department	+
Community Development Department	+ -
Neighborhood Improvement Department	+ -
Housing Division	-
LANSING	
Department of Planning and Neighborhood Development	+
Code Compliance Office	+/+ -
Development Office	+
Traffic Division	+
Planning Department	+
FLINT	
Community and Economic Development	N

Key to Figure2
+   Comments were generally positive   **-**   Comments were generally negative
+ - Comments were mixed   **N**   Comments were neutral

Neighborhood Challenges and Assets

Respondents in all three cities were able to list both challenges and assets. In Grand Rapids community respondents focused on neighborhood capacity and funding, while government respondents offered more diffuse comments. Government leaders in Lansing were much more focused on physical challenges and community respondents, but both recognized that neighborhood participation and involvement were challenges. Four respondents were virtually overwhelmed by challenges. Concerning assets, Grand Rapids respondents were just as focused on assets as they were on challenges. In Lansing, respondents were less detailed about assets compared to Grand Rapids. And Flint, responses about assets were very short and unadorned compared to elaborate statements of challenges. Turmoil in Flint over economic problems and the political recall of their mayor overshadowed the discussion.

<u>Government-Community Relations</u>

<u>Government Agencies</u>

One of the things that varied between the cities was whether or not staff members were available to meet with or to be assigned to neighborhood associations. In both Grand Rapids and Lansing, duties for several departments or offices included meeting with neighborhood associations. This was especially true for Grand Rapids and much less apparent in Flint. In Lansing, at the time of the interviews, the code enforcement section did summer work with extra officers to help with the workload. Government respondents in all three cities noted that interaction was difficult because of overtime and other budget constraints.

Several structural factors seemed important when understanding the relationship between city and neighborhoods, in addition to staff assignments, including communication, structure, formal citizen participation systems, and attitudes as well as skills of staff. Respondents in all cities indicated that communication was the key element in cooperation between government and neighborhoods. However, in Grand Rapids, two units that did put forth a great effort in communication were not necessarily considered to be good collaborators with neighborhoods by community respondents. Another important factor was the structure of the agency. The most ambitious structure among those studied was the community-oriented government in Grand Rapids, which helped resolve some neighborhood-based issues but did not resolve some problems in implementation. In Lansing, the police moved to a team approach but still seemed to be focused on the goals of community-oriented policing. In terms of geographic assignment, the code compliance section of the Department of Planning and Development had geographic assignments but other divisions were not able to deploy staff in this way. Continuing staff declines in that city has probably aggravated this situation. The only evidence in Flint of such divisions were the City Council wards and the Police Department.

In terms of formal citizen participation, the best example encountered in all three cities was the master plan initiative for Grand Rapids, which solicited ideas from the community and engaged community-based organizations in helping to ensure participation. In Lansing, neighborhood networks centers provided some structure but no strong city-sponsored vehicle for general citizen participation existed, besides the normal commissions. Citizen district councils were playing an increasingly important role in Flint at the time of the interviews. In all the communities, formal structures for participation existed but showed evidence of varying levels of success. Several respondents made very specific suggestions for enhancing citizen participation.

Funding varied greatly among the three cities. Grand Rapids invested a lot of Community Development Block Grant money directly into neighborhood associations, but community representatives did not see that as sufficient for collaboration. Grand Rapids investment in, and participatory approach to, the master plan was very well received. Lansing provides executive assistance for the community development corporations, but relatively little money to regular neighborhood associations. For the year 2001-2002, it appeared that Grand Rapids made available over $500,000 in grants directly to neighborhood associations. Lansing's neighborhood Grants Program had $120,000 for neighborhood Grants, $30,000 of which was for a healthy communities initiative.

In terms of staff attitudes and effectiveness, Grand Rapids lost credit for some of its innovations because of staff or leader attitudes. Lansing gained credit in spite of lower funding because of city staff attitudes, according to the community. We should note that the situation may have since changed because of staff reductions in Lansing. Respondents also noted that poor or ineffective staff caused major problems, as with two Grand Rapids departments.

Government/Community Relations

The above comments affect government/community relations, but we should also note that several other comments related to this issue. For example, respondents in Flint mentioned lack of access as a major problem, in part because of the decline in services, and in part because the City Council is difficult to influence. Occasionally, people referred to relationships within Grand Rapids or failure to empower the community, while negative aspects mentioned in Lansing included the need for greater funding and staff. Respondents in all three cities saw a need for community groups to be both cooperative and representative of their neighborhoods. On the other hand, both government and community respondents were able to list several positive aspects of city-community relations. A lot of these appear to hinge upon whether or not personal relationships have been formed with the specific staff.

Community-Based Organizations

The three cities vary greatly in terms of the nature of their organizations. In Grand Rapids, almost the entire city is represented by neighborhood associations; in 2002 there were 37 such groups and 24 are considered active. Fourteen or fifteen of these had offices and staff. Community development corporations (CDCs) were less visible. Grand Rapids Alliance for Neighborhood Development (GRAND) and the Neighborhood Coalition provided some coordination. Lansing had approximately 48 neighborhood associations organized around issues of crime and quality of life. Lansing Neighborhood Council had 35 member organizations and there were 119 neighborhood watch groups working with the Lansing Police Department. There were three active CDCs. Flint had a high number of block clubs. Some of these were organized by the Police Department. There were also associations of associations, umbrella groups, such as Neighborhood Roundtable and Weed and Seed. A government request for proposals revealed 60 different non-profit organizations in Flint.

Much of the effort in **Grand Rapids** was commendable. Although community representatives reported some negative experiences, it is also true that this city was the most highly organized in terms of neighborhood organizations and City support for those neighborhood organizations. It was also true that the master plan process helped to create a good reservoir of positive feelings of cooperation. One thing that might be helpful in Grand Rapids is to ensure that all City staff that have frequent interaction with neighborhood residents and with leaders of community-based organizations have some training in how to manage communications in a positive fashion. The government may also wish to look at ways to further empower residents and collaborate with community groups. One approach would be to recognize and respond to community leaders expertise and special knowledge of their neighborhood and community

In **Flint,** the City faced a lot of challenges, which were related to political turmoil as well as the situation of receivership. Under these circumstances, it will require concerted effort to continue to build good relationship with community-based organizations. It was very much evident that the citizens that have come to rely upon the Police Department here, even more so than in other cities, as a face for a city that had lost staff in a lot of different areas. The Flint city government should continue to try reach out to citizens and to the community as much as possible, using such initiatives as the highly rated neighborhood walkabouts, as well as other initiatives as opportunities arise. Citizens will need to continue their efforts to organize and to become more informed about city governments.

At the time of the study, **Lansing** had created an excellent relationship between city government and neighborhood organizations. The loss of Mayor Hollister and Planning Director Dennis Sykes may have influenced the conditions within city government that neighborhood

residents found attractive. It will be important for the city to retain good relationships even in the face of increasing staff cuts and reorganization. The city may wish to consider such innovations as liaison or area assignments for city staff, and enhancing citywide or agency-specific citizen participation. In a time of budget constraints, it will not be easy to direct more money to neighborhood organizations, but whenever this is possible that should be considered. It may also be a wise move for citizen leaders to enhance efforts to train neighborhood leaders in order to create a bigger pool of capable voices for neighborhoods.