

TOOLKIT: HOW TO MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARD DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION AND ENGAGING PUBLIC SPACES

JULY 2020



**KNIGHT
FOUNDATION**



As communities across the country work to revitalize downtowns and neighborhoods, which metrics indicate progress or success?

Knight commissioned Community Science to review existing research on downtown revitalization, equitable economic development and public space activation to investigate this question. While this work was commissioned before the COVID-19 pandemic and before the reenergized dialogue about addressing racial inequities in the United States, the question is vital as cities reopen and recover as vibrant, equitable hubs of social, economic and civic life. City leaders across the nation are simultaneously confronting two questions: how to recover and how to do so equitably. This report shares learnings about ways to measure success in both of those aims.^A

The following conclusions about measurement strategies emerged from the review of the literature:

- **Measure the movement of residents, employees and visitors.** Successful revitalization includes measuring the flow of people in and around key focus areas. Post COVID-19, preference for dense communities or amenities may decrease but understanding how movement across a community is changing will be critical to understanding recovery.
- **Be comprehensive and also evaluate equitable access.** This includes measuring trends in employment, poverty, demographics, cost of doing business, the resident experience and the health of the business and housing markets. Progress measures should reflect a city's unique strategies and goals. Analyses of these measures should assess equitable access to the benefits of revitalization, such as the number of minority-led and minority-run businesses and how that changes over time.
- **Measure the quality of civic space and how much it is used.** These kinds of metrics include diversity of

users, potential for interacting with the space and with others, design features that support all users' safety and comfort, users' immediate perceptions of the space, the presence and strength of cultural assets in or near the space, the diversity of the surrounding business mix and how often the space is used. For spaces to feel inclusive for all races, their design, including perceived safety features such as police presence and other surveillance, need to be carefully considered and balanced.

- **Measure indicators of people's attachment to the place.** People must want to be in and draw benefit from being in an area for revitalization to occur. This can be understood by measuring progress toward increased place attachment. Tangible evidence of place attachment includes employment, property ownership and whether the respondent has family members living in the targeted neighborhoods. Psychological indicators of attachment are positive memories and emotions, sense of belonging, positive self-esteem and positive health and well-being.

These findings are based on U.S. cities' experiences over the last 20 to 30 years.^B As noted above, this review includes literature from the comparatively new field of equitable economic development. Under normal circumstances, these experiences serve as a valuable road map for future revitalization work. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to cities that were not accounted for in the literature. Nevertheless, there is value in looking to the past and adapting those lessons to the current reality.

Cities have been at the center of public health crises in the past and have found ways to adjust and thrive once more. With strategic and coordinated action by business and government leaders, this can again be possible. As leading global experts recently explained,

A The complete report, "Measuring Progress Toward Downtown Revitalization and Engaging Public Spaces: A Review of Existing Research," includes extensive citations and can be found at <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/downtown-revitalization>

B This time frame was selected because it includes most of the literature related to revitalization and public spaces.

“if the world’s cities find ways to adjust, as they always have in the past, their greatest era may yet lie before them.”^C And, with city leaders focused on addressing racial inequities, there is hope that this great era will include pathways for access and prosperity for all residents.

Downtown Revitalization

Community Science documented the strategies that researchers and practitioners have long found to be the most effective at fostering downtown development (see graphic below). These contributors were complemented by an emerging body of literature about the importance of equitable economic development. The strategies shared a focus on regenerating city centers to make them accessible to all residents and local business owners, and attractive places for people to live, work and play at different times of the day and week.

Leading Effective Downtown Development Strategies



Metrics of downtown revitalization can help cities understand their downtown’s starting point, before revitalization has taken place, to measure progress of chosen strategies, and to understand whether strategies are being applied equitably for all residents and guide any needed adjustments. Specifically, monitoring trends in indicators such as employment, poverty, demographics, costs of doing business and costs of owning a home in the designated downtown area and the larger area will provide general insights about progress over time (see table on page 4).

Instead of every community measuring the same things, the literature advises that measures should match the strategies. Communities will need to find the best ways to measure processes and their own intended outcomes. However, below are the metrics most commonly used across the literature.

Metrics and strategies should be implemented with a focus on achieving equitable outcomes, including community representation in planning and decision-making, equitable access to the benefits of revitalization and strategies designed to limit displacement of longtime residents and businesses because of revitalization.

^C Richard Florida et al., “How Life in Our Cities Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic, Foreign Policy, May 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/01/future-of-cities-urban-life-after-coronavirus-pandemic>.

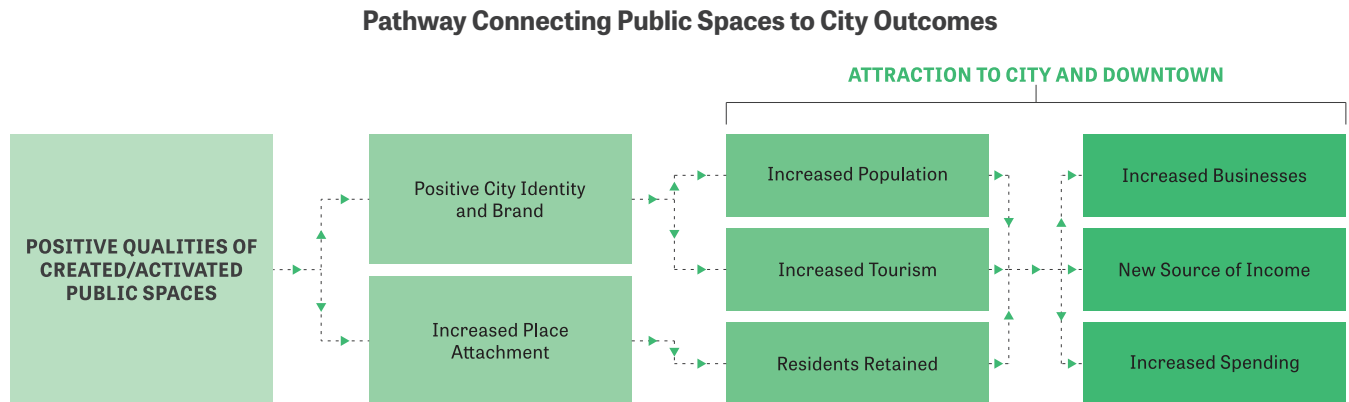
Strategies and Metrics of Downtown Revitalization

In the Strength of Evidence column, green represents metrics that share consistent findings across two or more studies and yellow indicates metrics that are extrapolated from promising or successful strategies to downtown revitalization.

REVITALIZATION STRATEGY	METRIC	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE
Create and sustain a business improvement district	Number of businesses located downtown	●
	Growth in retail sales	●
	Longevity of small businesses	●
	Increase in property values	●
	Resident representation in the business improvement district advisory board or governance	●
	Racial and ethnic composition of the business improvement district	●
	Citizen attitudes toward downtown	●
	Crime rates	●
Promote downtown through branding and marketing efforts	Positive media mentions of downtown	●
	Brand identity and positive image	●
	Visibility of downtown marketing (publicity, social media and peer reviews)	●
	Number of and attendees at special events	●
	Number of hotel and motel rooms per 1,000 in central city residents	●
Invest in diversity of mixed-use development, including housing, and in filling vacant property (disaggregate population by race and ethnicity)	Percent of city's residential population living downtown (threshold: 5%)	●
	Growth in the number of housing units downtown	●
	Population growth (+/- change over time)	●
	Percent of city's housing units located downtown	●
	Diversity of resident tenure	●
	Percent of civic and cultural facilities located downtown	●
	Percent of city's historic property located downtown (threshold: 20%)	●
	Existence of a gathering place or point of arrival	●
	Vacancy rates (commercial, residential, etc.) and vacant lots	●
	Diverse mix of uses of buildings and spaces (e.g., commercial, residential or civic)	●
Attract and keep businesses downtown (disaggregate ownership and turnover by race and ethnicity)	Percent of retail businesses in city located downtown (threshold: 8%)	●
	Diverse business mix/store types	●
	Storefront occupancy rate (threshold: 97%)	●
	Business turnover per year (threshold: <5%)	●
	Growth in retail sales	●
Expand employment opportunities in the city and downtown or in city center (disaggregate employment measures by race and ethnicity)	Percent of city residents working in the city	●
	Unemployment rate	●
	Labor force participation rate	●
	Net new jobs	●
	Median household income	●
	Poverty rate	●
	College degree attainment	●
	Foreign-born population	●
Proportion of jobs in finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE), healthcare and/or education industries	●	
Implement tax credit programs and incentives	Amount of private investment leveraged as a result of public funding	●
	Amount of redevelopment funds invested to enhance downtown's public spaces/attractiveness	●

Public Space Activation

Creating and activating public spaces is a strategy that many U.S. communities have chosen to pursue. Communities invest in public spaces to connect people to the places where they live and to the public life of the community; to increase resident commitment to the downtown, neighborhood or overall city and, in turn; to increase population size and facilitate revitalization. These various objectives of engaging community are illustrated in the pathway presented in the graphic below. Our review of the literature suggests that this pathway is valid, including the indirect connections between public spaces, positive place attachment and revitalization.



The first step in measuring whether public spaces are helping to meet community goals is whether the space is a “good” public space. Our review of the literature highlighted four qualities that are important for all public spaces: multifunctional, safe and inclusive, attractive and comfortable, and proximity to nature. To measure these, cities should focus on nine dimensions (see the first column of the table below). As the matrix below notes, a space needs to strike a balance between safety features and the open and inclusiveness of the space. The below recommendations are largely based on the Public Space Index^D with additional dimensions from the literature. Details on these indicators can be found in Appendix A.

Measuring the Qualities of Good Public Spaces

METRICS FOR MEASURING THE QUALITIES OF GOOD PUBLIC SPACES	QUALITIES OF GOOD PUBLIC SPACES			
	MULTIFUNCTIONAL	SAFE AND INCLUSIVE	ATTRACTIVE AND COMFORTABLE	NEARNESS TO NATURE
Inclusiveness		◦	◦	
Pleasurability			◦	
Meaningful activities	◦			
Safety		◦		
Comfort			◦	◦
Likability			◦	
Health of cultural sector via Cultural Assets Index	◦			
Business mix	◦			
Use of public space	◦	◦	◦	◦

D. V. Mehta, “Evaluating Public Space,” *Journal of Urban Design*, January 1, 2014, 19(1): 53–88.

In addition to measuring the quality of public spaces, cities will want to measure place attachment among residents and visitors if they are investing in public spaces for revitalization or to foster community engagement (see table below). This is because people must want to be in and draw benefit from being in an area for revitalization for deeper engagement to occur. Past studies show that the best way to measure attachment is to use tangible and psychological indicators. Tangible indicators might include employment or property ownership in the district and family members who also reside in the area. Common psychological indicators of attachment are positive memories and emotions, sense of belonging to a place, positive self-esteem, and positive health and well-being. You might want to include metrics that track relationship building, particularly when strategies are focused on engaging community members in new or improved public spaces. In addition to measuring place attachment, understanding the brand and media presence that a city has is vital to constructing a positive narrative of a city or downtown area. Appendix B presents specific measures that can be used to track or evaluate each of the pathway elements.

Measuring Place Attachment and Brand

PATHWAY ELEMENT	METRIC
Place attachment	Place identity
	Length of residence
	Ties to place
	Sense of belonging
	Trust of others
Place attachment outcomes	Quality of life
	Civic engagement
Brand	Image valence (i.e., respondents perceptions of space, partially in response to pictorial branding)
	Uniqueness

CONCLUSION

Embarking upon revitalization is an important step, and measuring progress will help show your community that you are making progress, that needed adjustments surface early in implementation, and that your strategies, both through implementation and outcomes, further equity among residents.

The metrics highlighted in this report are a good place to start when designing your measurement strategy. You then can refine and narrow the recommendations based on your local priorities and strategies. In all cases, though, it is important to disaggregate data whenever possible to capture the way outcomes and progress are affecting individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as age and potentially length of tenure in the community. While some metric recommendations may need to adjust in light of economic or physical constraints post COVID-19, we anticipate that the majority will continue to be valuable given their past importance for recovery efforts.

Appendix A: Detailed Qualities of Public Spaces

In the Strength of Evidence column, green represents metrics that were used in two or more studies and are generally seen as the best way to measure the construct. Yellow indicates metrics that are commonly used in the field but where there is no researcher consensus on the “best” measure.

METRIC	MEASURES	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE
Inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of people of diverse ages, genders, classes, races, physical abilities and family size and type • Opening hours of the space • Control of entrance to the public space • Reactions to the presence of cameras and security • Sense of freedom to behave without fear of judgment 	●
Pleasurability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and variety of architecture • Presence of art installation • Density of elements (e.g., sidewalks and streets) • Perceived attractiveness of the space • Presence of advertising in the space (less is better) 	●
Meaningful activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of community gathering “third” places (i.e., social surroundings that are not a home or a workplace) • Range of activities and behaviors in space • Availability of food, retail and other amenities • Variety of reasons or motivations to use or be in the space • Likelihood of interactions with other people • Proportion of employees working in arts- and entertainment-related establishments 	●
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of connection to adjacent streets or spaces • Lighting quality after dark • Presence of surveillance cameras, security guards or similar patrol units • Perceived safety from traffic • Sense of safety during the day and/or night 	●
Comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of free places to sit • Presence of shade or shelter against weather • Presence of nuisance noise (e.g., traffic) • Presence of design elements that discourage use of the space • Ease and safety of walking in and around the space • Availability of restrooms (gender neutral or gendered) 	●
Likability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings toward the space (e.g., unique or generic, exciting or boring, pleasant or distasteful, welcoming or intimidating, comforting or distressing) • Variety and number of reasons for liking or not liking the place 	●
Health of cultural sector via Cultural Assets Index	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geolocating the number of cultural participants, nonprofit cultural providers, commercial cultural firms and residents artists • Type of municipal involvement in cultural facilities and activities in the last ten years • Variety of cultural activities, programs and facilities annually funded from public funds • Percent of public funding for cultural activities, programs and facilities annually 	●
Business mix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception that “enough different businesses are downtown” • Perception that “the mix of business in downtown is optimal for attracting consumers” • Perception that “downtown has a very diverse mix of businesses” • Perception that “downtown business owners welcome new businesses” 	●
Use of public space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • * Pedestrian counts in key locations (including demographic characteristics of who is using the space) • * Use of space over a 24-hour period (including demographic characteristics of who is using the space) • Number of new residential units in designated area(s) • Percent of commercial and/or residential vacancies in designated area(s) • * Number of tourists frequenting the city or downtown area (including demographic characteristics of who is visiting the space) 	●

Note: Measures marked with an asterisk are recommended for their ability to assess equitable processes or outcomes.

Appendix B: Details for Measuring Place Attachment and Brand

In the Strength of Evidence column, green represents metrics that were used in two or more studies and are generally seen as the best way to measure the construct. Yellow indicates metrics that are commonly used in the field but where there is no researcher consensus on the “best” measure.

PATHWAY ELEMENT	METRIC	MEASURE	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE
Place attachment	Place identity	<p>Place identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel this place is part of who I am (self-extension) • If this place no longer existed, I would feel I had lost a part of myself (self-extension) • I feel this is the place where I fit (environmental fit) • This place allows me to “connect with myself” (environmental fit) • This place reflects the type of person I am (place-self congruity) • This place reflects my personal values (place-self congruity) <p>Place identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel this place is a part of me • This place is very special to me • I identify strongly with this place • I am very attached to this place • Visiting this place says a lot about who I am • This place means a lot to me <p>Place dependence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This place is the best place for what I like to do • No other place can compare to this place • I get more satisfaction out of visiting this place than any other • Doing what I do at this place is more important to me than doing it in any other • I wouldn't substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do at this place 	●
	Length of residence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time spent in the place (years) • Length of residence (median length) • Proportion of housing units occupied • Proportion of housing units owner-occupied 	●
	Ties to place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This place makes me feel positively about myself (self-esteem) • This place gives me a sense of “meaning” in my life (meaning) • This place has spiritual significance to me (spiritual significance) • My origins are in this place (genealogical links) • There is a sense of “loss” when I think of this place (sense of loss/dislocation) 	●
	Sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This place gives me a sense of continuity between past, present and future in my life (continuity) • This place makes me feel close to, or accepted by, other people (belongingness) • This place gives me a sense of security (security) 	●
	Trust of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? • How much do you trust people in your neighborhood? • How about white people? (same as neighborhood) • What about African Americans or Black people? (same as neighborhood) • What about Asian people? (same as neighborhood) • How about Hispanics or Latinos? (same as neighborhood) 	●

PATHWAY ELEMENT	METRIC	MEASURE	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE
Place attachment outcomes	Quality of life	The ability of residents to access necessary amenities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate housing • Healthcare • Child care • Education • Public safety • Violent crime rate • Property crime rate • Median commute time • Retail and service establishments (per 1,000) • Net migration 	•
	Civic engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Election turnout rate • Civic engagement establishments (per 1,000) 	•
Brand	Image valence	Physical appearance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I find this place beautiful (aesthetic satisfaction) Perceived image <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our downtown has a negative image • Our downtown has an established image • Our downtown has a positive image • Downtown business owners and local government present a consistent image of the downtown • Downtown business owners have a consistent view of the downtown's image 	•
	Uniqueness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being linked to this place distinguishes me from other people (distinctiveness) • Our downtown has a symbol or symbols readily recognized by consumers • Our symbol or symbols are distinct from other downtowns that are our competitors • Our symbol or symbols are supported by downtown business owners • Downtown business owners and local government endorse and support the same symbol(s) 	•

Acknowledgements

This publication was developed by Community Science staff Amy Minzner, Daniel Pagán, Ji Won Shon and Amber Trout. Community Science is an internationally renowned research and development organization whose mission is to strengthen the science and practice of community and systems change to build healthy, just and equitable communities.

The authors would like to thank those who contributed ideas and literature suggestions for this review: Linda Goodman (Goodman Williams Group) and Bridget Marquis (Reimagining the Civic Commons Learning Network). We would also like to thank our reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions: Ashley Zohn, Lilly Weinberg and Sam Gill (Knight Foundation) and David Chavis (Community Science).

For the full report, go to: <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/downtown-revitalization>