



## Using the HCAT to Improve Community Health

Using HUD's Healthy Communities Index (HCI) indicators, the Healthy Communities Assessment Tool (HCAT) gives cities a powerful tool to rank neighborhoods on a broad set of neighborhood conditions that impact community health. HCAT users are able to identify the relative quality of a neighborhood's health assets, such as parks, schools, public transit, and other services, as well as hazards such as air pollution and traffic dangers. Neighborhood indicators have diverse institutional, civil society, and business applications, including informing inclusive planning processes and public decisions, prioritizing public investments, tracking progress on social goals, and analyzing or evaluating projects, program, and policy decisions.

This document is intended to help communities consider how to best utilize the HCAT to its fullest potential by providing clear examples of real world applications from other neighborhood-level indicator projects. As feasible, links to the applications are embedded in the document. In developing the document, the focus was on projects with documented applications and observable changes in policy or community action, but it is important to note that this list is not exhaustive nor is it intended to limit how communities use the HCAT. The following applications are merely intended to provide solid examples and suggested uses. By all means – be creative and innovative - and definitely share new ways of exploring and applying the HCAT.

### Strategic Planning and Policy Development

Cities and counties adopt General/Comprehensive Plans to guide growth and land development patterns according to establish goals, purposes, and activities intended to improve the well-being of residents. Neighborhood indicators can inform and support planning goals and activities and local policy development. For example, the City of Richmond, California made extensive use of neighborhood health indicators to develop a [community health and wellness element](#) for their general plan. Individual indicators inform domain specific policy efforts, for example, efforts to improve housing affordability or school quality.

Many communities use neighborhood indicators to inform and support goals and activities in their sustainability, livability, or resiliency plans. Health is essential to discussions of sustainability and resilience, and indicators such as distance to local parks, access to healthy food and even social capital are increasingly included in these types of focused plans as communities recognize the importance of measuring progress.

### Land Use Regulation

Zoning and land use regulations can address environmental hazards by ensuring safe buffers between risks and sensitive uses or requiring health-sensitive neighborhood or building design. In 2008, San Francisco adopted [Article 38 of the Health Code \(HC\)](#) which requires that new residential development near high-polluting roadways include mechanical ventilation and filtration to improve indoor air quality; neighborhood indicators of air pollution informed the laws application to specific city areas. Similarly, indicators can guide other regulatory, engineering and design solutions to protect residents from noise impacts and pedestrian safety hazards.



The Metropolitan Area Planning Council in Boston is working with the Town of Marshfield's Housing Partnership and Planning Board to estimate the potential build out of commercial and residential properties. Their model estimates impacts of alternative scenarios against a variety of indicators, including housing choice and affordability, municipal tax revenue, transportation demand, and greenhouse gas emissions. It helped the Board determine [targets for their Housing Production Plan](#).

### Public Infrastructure and Program Investments

Indicators can help planners assess which neighborhoods are well-served by public assets such as parks and which could benefit from more investments in these assets. Both public and private community investment funders could use improvement of indicators as a criterion for funding decisions, potentially reducing inequities in neighborhood quality. For example, localities could use indicators to target and prioritize expenditures using [Community Development Block Grant](#) funds.

City transit and housing agencies, and even private developers can use indicator data to prioritize housing, transport facility and transit service investments. Similarly, continuous monitoring of neighborhood traffic safety indicators could target investments and activities to disproportionately hazardous areas. The San Francisco Metropolitan Transportation Agency combined indicators of walkability and pedestrian injuries to create the [San Francisco Pedestrian Strategy](#) guide, which targets the deployment of police enforcement personnel and expenditures on pedestrian safety countermeasures.

The [Charlotte-Mecklenberg County Quality of Life Study](#) includes a collection of social, crime, physical, economic and environmental indicators that provide a snapshot of the health of the neighborhoods. The county library system used the study data to identify three locations for a pilot program addressing early literacy skills, the data is also informing development of the Mecklenburg Livable Communities Plan currently underway.

Indicators can also drive policy discussions and action. In [Minneapolis](#), the City Council approved 10-year targets for [sustainability indicators](#) that serve as a numeric goal and focus for what is measured. Progress towards meeting the goals of the 25 indicators is communicated to City Council in an annual report, which states whether the indicators have improved, not improved or stayed the same as compared to the previous year. One of the indicators tracked by the city is the [tree canopy coverage](#). The tree canopy is analyzed by neighborhood and the Urban Tree Canopy interactive map is utilized for analysis on a parcel by parcel basis.

### Plan and Program Performance Monitoring

Tracking and monitoring indicators provides an effective way to oversee policy and the impact of policy actions. For example, cities can use HCAT indicators to establish targets or benchmarks for performance, and, as necessary, adapt programs, projects, and activities to achieve targets. New York City recently used traffic safety indicators to establish long-term road and pedestrian policy targets.

Several cities use housing and transportation affordability metrics as the basis of policy targets and goals. The U.S. Department of Education [Promise Neighborhoods Initiative](#) identified a set of fifteen indicators that all grantees must track to evaluate how well their program is improving the lives of



children in the neighborhood. The Urban Institute provided written guidance on [data collection](#) and [target setting](#).

### **Civic Engagement**

Citizens frequently engage in public decisions affecting neighborhood conditions and investments to improve or protect conditions. Indicator data can both inform citizens and their organized representatives as well as provide evidence to support citizen demands and concerns. Indicator data can support demands for more parks or recreational centers, or justify a community benefits agreement or impact fee that funds such assets. In Travis County, TX Children's Optimal Health presents indicators on child injury and fatalities related to motor and pedestrian accidents at their community summit on [Transportation-Related Child Injury](#). Local experts and community members review the data together to plan how to improve safety for child passengers, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

### **Education**

Indicators serve as tools for education and learning: they can be integrated into curriculum to teach students how to understand the health of their environment; into coursework in disciplines ranging from geography, to journalism, to computer programming. In Oakland, CA, the Urban Strategies Council joined the Youth UpRising and Mayor's Summer Jobs Program to conduct a [Community Mapping Project](#) that collected indicator data related to healthy food, housing conditions, and park facilities to assess community health.

### **Research and Evaluation**

Improved understanding of how neighborhood conditions impact health could identify new prevention opportunities or justify greater resources for available prevention investments. Limited neighborhood level data is an important obstacle to neighborhood and health research. Widespread collection of neighborhood indicators would enable and facilitate this research. The HCAT could serve data needs in plan or program evaluation.

### **Philanthropy**

Philanthropic organizations, especially those who focus on a limited geographical area, must consider how to best target resources and investments. Neighborhood indicators provide information for this purpose and is complementary to other sources of community priorities.

### **Business and Residential Site Selection**

New business are often looking for information to help guide investment and siting decisions. A new business may want to locate near a walkable and transit served neighborhoods with quality schools. Neighborhood indicators can provide information that helps businesses with such decision-making. Similarly, developers building residential properties may want to choose locations with relatively lower environmental hazards. HCAT indicators and rankings can provide the information essential for this type of decision-making.



### More Information about the Application of Neighborhood Indicators

- The [National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership](#) (NNIP) is a collaboration of the Urban Institute and local partners in 37 cities to further the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems for community building and local decision-making.
- For ten years, the [Boston Indicators Project](#) has been a data resource for the Greater Boston community. The data tools have been used to inform collective goal setting in processes such as [Greater Boston's Civic Agenda](#).
- Developed in 2007, the [Sustainable Communities Index](#) (SCI) is a system of neighborhood indicators that has been applied to plans, projects, and policies in San Francisco as well as other cities. Case studies of the applications and adaptations are available [here](#).
- Since 2002, [Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance](#) has used their neighborhood indicator project, Vital Signs, to track over 100 indicators that show how Baltimore neighborhoods have changed and helping people make more informed decisions to improve the quality of life in the city.
- Although not specifically targeted to the use of indicator data, [The Built Environment and Health: 11 Profiles of Neighborhood Transformation](#) (written by the Prevention Institute) highlights projects which show how health practitioners, community members and many others worked together to improve community well-being by making changes to the built environment. The majority of these projects would benefit from the use of indicator data to monitor the impact of the neighborhood transformations and promote future action.
- Developed by the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), the Housing and Transit Affordability Index (H+T Index<sup>®</sup>) has public and private application for performance management, scenario evaluation, funding decision-making and site selection. [CNT enumerates the varied ways the tool is being used by jurisdiction across the country](#). Recently, HUD developed a similar tool: the [Location Affordability Index \(LAI\)](#) that offers [suggested uses for families and organizations](#).
- Numerous jurisdictions across the country have launched community indicator projects over the past twenty years. The [Community Indicators Consortium \(CIC\)](#) features resources for those launching indicator projects and how many of its members use indicator data. CIC also features an annual conference to provide an opportunity to highlight specific projects and offer practitioners an opportunity to learn from their peers.

