

STORIES COMMUNITIES, COMMUNITY STORIES

DATA + METHODOLOGY BRIEF

thirdspace
ACTION LAB



MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE KRESGE FOUNDATION
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RESEARCH DESIGN

The overarching methodology for this project was designed by ThirdSpace Action Lab, in collaboration with the Community Opportunity Alliance + four literary artist researchers.

We utilized two primary research approaches – one-on-one, semi-structured stakeholder interviews and small, geographically focused focus groups. The project engaged a total of 56 residents in four target geographies (Detroit; Memphis; Richmond, California; and the Rio Grande Valley) between May 22, 2023 + August 11, 2023. ThirdSpace conducted interviews with four individuals per geography identified as resident leaders by our CBDO partners, but we turned to literary artists living in the four target geographies to seek out 10 additional residents per geography who were less engaged with their CBDOs, through their own informal networks + through engagement + outreach in settings removed from typical places of CBDO engagement (e.g. resident meetings, merchant meetings, etc.).

While we standardized data collection across both groups, we also worked with literary artist researchers to customize their outreach + engagement strategies, particularly around harnessing their own creative practices to increase engagement + make the research process more enjoyable + meaningful for participants. Literary artists are those who use written and spoken word as the foundation for their creative practice. We chose literary arts practices because they have relatively low barriers to access, which means that residents could participate in creative research processes beyond standard interviewing that could produce richer findings.

Our work went deep in four communities to make sure we were able to provide a really substantive understanding of resident experiences on the ground. At the same time, we wanted to do our best to make sure that the communities in which we conducted the research represented a cross-section of community development throughout the United States.



WHO WE
SOUGHT
TO REACH +
REPRESENT

Because community development is grounded in a very specific community context + very specific lived experience, it can be difficult to draw out universal findings with applicability to the entire sector, particularly when engaging a relatively small number of resident voices through the research process.

We attempted to address this by being very intentional about diversity of the geographies in which research was conducted + diversity of resident backgrounds with whom we engaged in those target geographies.

We began by identifying four geographic targets in different regions of the United States, with varying structures + volumes of local community development ecosystems, different regional racial + economic compositions, and with an attention to at least some representation of rural service delivery. From there, we established relationships with a lead community-based development organization (CBDO) in each of the four communities. We sought CBDO partners that represented a diversity of size (financial + staffing), population served, and primary sources of funding but also had a common set of characteristics – active participation in their local community development ecosystems; a demonstrated understanding of the role of resident voices in community development; and some demonstrated connection to local artists + culturebearers. CBDO partners helped us identify potential literary artist partners who lived + worked in their respective service areas.

We sought to engage a diversity of residents by age, race, and gender. We also felt it was important to hear from residents with varying degrees of proximity to, understanding of, and direct benefit from the community development sector. We used level of engagement with our CBDO partners as a proxy for this diversity; ThirdSpace conducted interviews with individuals identified as resident leaders (high-engagement) by our partner CBDOs, while literary artist researchers were encouraged to seek out residents who were less engaged (low- to medium-engagement) with CBDOs, through their own informal networks + through engagement + outreach in settings removed from typical places of CBDO engagement (e.g. resident meetings, merchant meetings, etc.).

ThirdSpace's previous research had identified the community development sector's evolution into a hyperprofessionalized field of practice as creating a range of barriers to resident participation. We attempted to model equitable approaches in the research to expand access as much as possible:

- + All residents were compensated for their time (as were CBDO + literary artist research partners).
- + Residents had the option to self-identify important information through pre-interview screeners, and we provided them with disclosures about what the research was attempting to do, how it would be shared, and safeguards around their individual privacy.
- + Translation + interpretation services were made available upon request to reduce barriers to participation for monolingual speakers of foreign language and individuals who speak English as a second language.
- + All documentation was reviewed to remove community development jargon and to make information as plain language as possible. This included invitations, screeners, disclosures, interview guides, and the research itself.
- + Final findings were shared with all participating residents, CBDO partners, and literary artist researchers.

WHAT WE EXPLORED

One of the most important parts of the project was identifying what kinds of questions we would ask the 56 residents who ultimately were interviewed by ThirdSpace + our artist research partners. We wanted to make sure that the questions we asked were ones that were relevant both to residents who were participating + would also be beneficial to the day-to-day efforts of CBDOs around the country, particularly in their efforts to engage + build up power among residents. We wanted to create a research methodology that could delve into the roles residents play in the missions, governance structures, business lines, and daily activities of community-based development organizations – but in practical, straightforward terms.

While the interview protocols differed somewhat between interviews conducted by ThirdSpace (with residents identified as very active with CBDOs) + those conducted by our artist research partners (with residents who were less engaged with CBDOs), they generally revolved around four major themes:

1.

How residents and other local stakeholders perceive the roles CBDOs play in their communities.

2.

How those roles have changed over time.

3.

How CBDOs embed equitable practices, strategies, governance, business lines and policies into their organizations.

4.

How CBDOs might continue to be responsive to community needs in the future.

ANTICIPATED HIGH ENGAGEMENT

- + Their relationship to the target community.
- + Their relationship to the relevant CBDO partner.
- + Any challenges they faced in getting involved with the CBDO.
- + The role they perceive the CBDO playing in their community + whether that role has evolved.
- + What equitable community development looks like to them + whether they've seen examples of it in their own community.
- + The role they see for the CBDO in their community in the future.
- + Challenges + opportunities they see in residents engaging with the CBDO.
- + Dominant narratives they hear about their community.
- + How they perceive power is distributed in their community.
- + Leading voices in equitable community development in their community.

ANTICIPATED LOW-TO-MODERATE ENGAGEMENT

- + Their relationship to the target community.
- + Their level of familiarity with the relevant CBDO partner.
- + The role they perceive the CBDO playing in the community + whether that role has evolved.
- + Whether they engage with the CBDO's programs.
- + What enables them to engage in (or prevents them from engaging in) CBDO programs + services.
- + What equitable community development looks like to them + whether they've seen examples of it in their own community.
- + The role they see for the CBDO in their community in the future.
- + Challenges + opportunities they see in residents engaging with the CBDO.
- + Dominant narratives they hear about their community.
- + How they perceive power is distributed in their community.
- + Leading voices in equitable community development in their community.

CODING + DATA SYNTHESIS

DATA

TSAL began the process by gathering public data from the selected CBDOs and geographies. We began cross-referencing distinct characteristics and areas of focus that differed among other selected CBDOs and appear underrepresented in community development (e.g. rural communities; Arab American communities; those disproportionately impacted by immigration, climate change, or English language barriers; etc.).

Audio transcripts and artist notes were primary sources of interview data. Both the literary artists + TSAL staff obtained audio recordings of several interviews, after obtaining permission from interviewees. The artists at times were not able to record and took notes instead. In an effort to obtain objective and candid responses, we reminded residents that what was shared is confidential and will not be identifiable. This anonymity gave residents greater freedom to discuss CBDOs transparently, without concern of being identified as someone who shared a specific critique. We also reminded them that we are not seeking to criticize the CBDOs and the focus of the data is on the voices of residents and their role + relationship to the CBDOs.

Because the data being shared is aggregated, findings will not be traceable to residents or CBDOs nor will they be framed in a way that could harm or vilify the partner CBDOs. TSAL stores the primary data internally with the artists having shared their data directly.

CODING

We used keywords from our lines of inquiry such as “roles of CBDO” or “equitable practices” for qualitative data coding + theme analysis. Many interviews were captured and transcribed via Otter so we were able to easily use the search and “Otter Chat” functions to mine data + analyze findings. Otter Chat has an artificial intelligence function that allows us to pull general information like “key findings from conversations” or theme specific data like “what did this person say about [name of CBDO] equitable practices?”. A combination of pulling data from Otter’s AI function, transcript searches, and reviewing audio transcripts formed the content for findings and the Issue Brief. From there we were able to differentiate data from TSAL interviews + literary artist interviews and do a cross-tab analysis to unearth similarities + differences between residents of varying engagement as well as any geographic + demographic distinctions.

Major findings + themes emerged from cross-referencing key words + phrases across all the interviews. Themes were primarily informed by the major lines of inquiry provided by the Community Opportunity Alliance but also by common phrases, subjects, and perspectives that were shared by multiple respondents. We used this data to organize + frame the Issue Brief.

WHAT WE FOUND

During the research process, we unearthed a variety of findings about the process itself, as well as the methodology.

+ Additional time was needed for identifying + selecting geographies + CBDOs. To achieve the goal of including a range of geographies, areas of focus, demographics, we had to stretch beyond our immediate networks. This took great time, effort, and care.

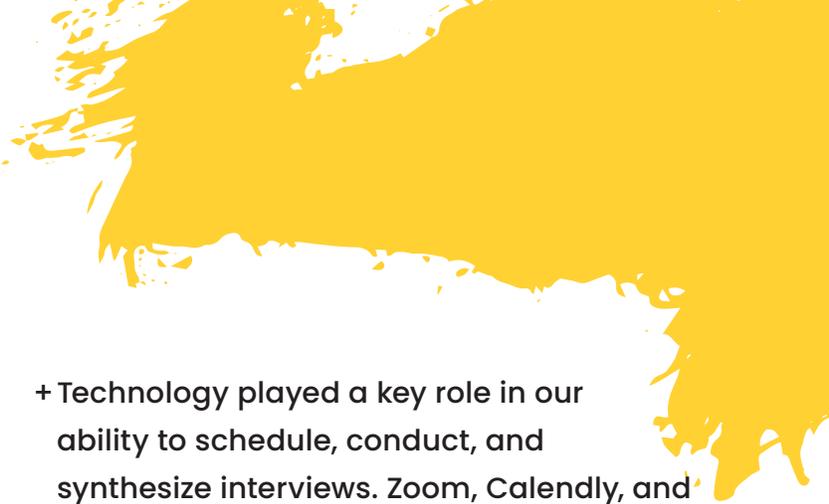
+ Resident leaders identified that CBDOs struggle with capacity issues related to funding. Capacity was a clear challenge in timely + consistent responses from points of contact. Each CBDO we engaged was visibly enthusiastic about the project and engaging in the topic, but it was clear they had competing priorities, as most do when working in CBDOs. This did not pose any threat to the project but simply meant we had to be flexible with our timeline and acknowledge that CBDOs are often juggling + addressing crucial day-to-day issues for both residents + the organization. This is especially true of senior leadership among CBDOs, which were our initial points of contact.

+ Residents also noted that in low-income communities of color, many people balance multiple jobs, serve as caretakers, and have other responsibilities that limit their availability. This, too, had to be taken into account when designing + updating the

timeline. Residents were eager to engage and share their reflections, but finding time was difficult for some. Also, we found it was critical to offer timing options outside of typical work hours so we made ourselves available between 8am – 8pm Eastern, with additional flexibility for stakeholders on the West Coast.

+ Anonymizing data was important to ensuring residents felt comfortable sharing their authentic responses to the lines of inquiry. While no one sought to disparage the CBDOs, some did have critical feedback, some of which was more of a critique on the challenges of CBDOs' nonprofit structure and seeking to engage in community-led, equitable processes, and some which was specific to that CBDO.

+ Framing public facing data regarding the CBDOs to “blame the system and not the individual”. When designing the proposal we discussed being mindful of the common challenges CBDOs face and not inadvertently making the Issue Brief a critique of CBDOs but rather conveying the linkage between identified areas for improvement + challenges within community development systems, structured, and entrenched racism.



+ Artists noted difficulty in some of the verbiage of the lines of inquiry and had to rephrase questions or provide support with defining terminology such as “equity”, “community development”, and “power”. One noted the difficulty in finding a conversational flow with an interviewee, and several people noted that some residents got stuck on questions because they had never been asked about their perspective on the community before.

+ It proved to be important to work with artists prior to beginning interviews to ensure they had all the information needed for residents but also so they understand the project goals. They were eager to employ their artistic practices as a means to lift up resident voices and to do it in their own way, e.g. story circles, lunches, etc. There could be more time + resources made available for artists to engage in more robust processes + conversations with residents.

+ Technology played a key role in our ability to schedule, conduct, and synthesize interviews. Zoom, Calendly, and Otter were key in our process and worked together seamlessly in our effort to capture + collate data.

+ Providing translation was critical in reducing barriers for residents and ensuring the research process was inclusive + equitable. One of the literary artists connected TSAL to a local translator in the Rio Grande Valley who provided interpretation for interviews with Spanish-speaking residents and provided support in setting up Zoom’s interpretation feature. We also believe translating the Issue Brief and other written materials is necessary for continuing to engage residents + CBDOs in the project and allow residents who did not participate to be able to access the findings.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

STRENGTHS OF APPROACH

- + Standardized data collection but a variety of creative approaches offering multiple pathways to engagement + to dissemination
- + Modeling of equitable research approaches
- + Ability to achieve considerable diversity of context + perspective within a very limited number of geographies

LIMITATIONS OF APPROACH

- + Low visibility of community development generally requires additional explanation work for residents who have not yet engaged in the sector or have done so only marginally
- + Lack of ability for long-term engagement of resident participants or to connect participants meaningfully across geographies
- + Lack of sufficient resources for literary artists to engage in creative processes

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

LONGER TIMEFRAME

- + To allow for time for relationship-building
 - + to facilitate demanding schedules of residents, CBDO staff, and artists
- + To allow for longitudinal research on how resident engagement shifts over time, particularly in response to CBDOS' own community-building initiatives
- + To allow for artist onboarding and establishing shared project goals
- + To allow for engagement of a greater number of residents, artists, and CBDOS
- + To allow for deeper analysis of similarities
 - + differences among findings across geographies + demographics

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + To allow for engagement of a wider range of residents + CBDOS
- + To allow for artists to creatively engage residents + collaborate on methodologies + findings
- + To engage other geographies (Northeast, Plains, Northwest, U.S. Territories)
- + To engage other specific community contexts (sovereign tribal lands, suburban part of ecosystem)



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