

## 4 steps to deepen your impact with community data

As mission-driven organizations—whether a nonprofit, community organization, or local government—we’re doing our best with what we have. Most importantly, we strive to leverage every resource to ensure that the people we serve are better off.

**To maximize program efficiency and effectiveness, a little bit of data can go a long way to help align your programs to community needs.**

We know data (or the idea of data) can feel daunting. But these four simple steps will help alleviate any overwhelming anxieties or stresses about deciding which data to use, where to find it, and how to put it to work.



***At Neighborhood Nexus, we get a lot of questions like: “We’re kicking off our strategic planning—what data do y’all have?”***

Well, we have all the data. And the world wide web has even more. For us and for you, starting with such a wide purview (or none at all) is often why data feels like...a lot.

A better starting point is to spend some time reflecting on specific questions, problems, or decisions you need to make.

For example:

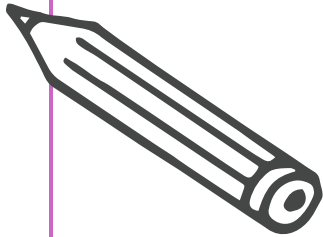
- We provide adult basic education and case management programming. What communities could use this the most?
- We have several service sites across the region. How might we cater our services to address the varying community needs and contexts at each location?
- Where are we seeing the biggest gains in education outcomes so we can figure out what they’re doing right?
- Where might we strategically make investments to create impact?

Each of these has a **specific, answerable question** that will also influence the way that programmatic, operational, and/or investment decisions are made.

Whether you’re designing a new program or better aligning an existing service to local needs, strategic planning or developing an investment strategy, knowing what question(s) you’re trying to answer will help you know what data to use.

## 2

### USE THE RIGHT DATA



**So, what data do we use?** How do we know it's reliable? And how much time is this going to take?

First, let's look at what counts as data:

- **Community data** tells you about people in a particular place—census tracts, neighborhood, zip codes, cities, counties, states, etc. That data usually comes from local, state, and federal agencies like the Census Bureau, Departments of Education, and Departments of Public Health
- **Program data** describes the people you serve. It includes outputs like the number of people you serve and their demographics, but also outcomes like percent that gained a skill or employment (or whatever goals your program is helping people achieve).
- Data is often **quantitative**—counts and percentages like population, median income, and poverty. But **qualitative** data is essential too. Don't forget to talk to people and partners!

If you're trying to answer the first question above—"Where might adult basic education be needed most?"—you may want to look at indicators like high school graduation, median income, even households with private health insurance (an indicator of job quality). Just these three indicators will get you close to your answer.

You don't have to get too fancy with it. In fact, the more standard the measure, the more likely other organizations are using the same data. That creates consistency across the sector, which is especially helpful for funders to understand need and guide investments.

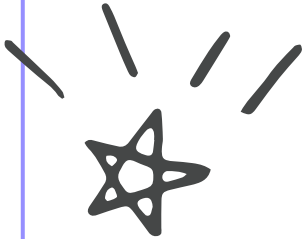
Once you start to zero in on a place, data point, or disparity, go talk to people. This is where you'll start to understand the why which will help you design a more impactful program.

#### ***So where do you find the data?***

Rather than spending all your time trying to find this data online, we've already aggregated the information you need at [neighborhoodnexus.org](https://neighborhoodnexus.org) (and it's free). Now you can spend your time visualizing, analyzing, and making decisions on the data. This central repository adds clarity (the data is searchable and the sources are clearly labeled), consistency (more organizations using the same data makes for stronger cases and more valid insights), and reliability (the data has been collected by the most authoritative sources).

### 3

## TELL A COMPELLING STORY



**Data alone isn't enough.** We've probably all made the mistake of showing someone an "interesting" table of numbers as we watch their eyes glaze over.

To communicate data, we need to:

1. Identify the insights
2. Determine the best way to visualize it
3. Understand our audience, their values, and their influence
4. And wrap it in a story

Looking at a spreadsheet of education and workforce data by neighborhood if you're the one who created it and knows what you're looking for. But it won't be an effective communication tool and it certainly won't impress your boss.

First, look for outliers and patterns. Sometimes you can't do that in a table. That's why we love looking at maps(!) here at Neighborhood Nexus. Often, you'll notice that three indicators is all you need to spot patterns across a city or region. That's an insight!

If you started with a map, you're practically done with your visualization (just make sure the colors and legend are clear). If you're comparing demographic groups, a clean table, bar chart, or scatter plot that emphasizes the take-aways might be best. If you're tracking data over time, a simple line graph may be all you need.

But still, we need a story! What does this data tell us and how can we make it actionable?

If you're using your insights to convince someone of something, you'll have to do more than show them a snazzy chart. You'll have to explain why it's important and what you want them to do about it (a call to action).

***Knowing your audience and their values will determine how you tell this story.***

- An elected official may want to know how this is going to save tax-payers' dollars. So explain the ROI for the government.
- A partner organization or funder will likely want to know the community impact. So explain how strategic interventions or investments can "turn the curve" in a particular community.
- Volunteers may want to know how their time is changing families' lives.
- Most importantly, to get authentic buy-in from the community or you serve, how does this information align to their goals?



## MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS



If you've done the first three steps well, this should be the easy part...in theory.

The concept is straight-forward: we've identified a need in this community, so we will invest or develop a local program to close the gap.

But even with the best data and intentions, decision-making still has to balance critical and sometimes unintended ethical and civic implications.

This is where equity-driven decision-making can be a helpful tool. This approach necessarily values:

- Data-informed methods
- Lived experience as expertise
- Explicitly closing disparities
- Transparency and accountability

Remember, data is a tool, not the answer. Use it like a flashlight to guide you in the right direction. From there, work with the community and local partners to develop interventions that support self-determination and maximize impact.

### About Neighborhood Nexus

Neighborhood Nexus is building a culture of data-informed decision-making among Georgia's social sector. By helping organizations ask the right questions, use the best data, tell compelling stories, and make informed decisions, we believe our communities will be more equitable and livable.

Nexus makes thousands of indicators from more than a dozen sources available for free online via [mapping and visualizations tools](#). Existing stories and insights can be found on [our blog](#). If your organization is interested in custom maps, dashboards, analysis, or training, we offer [custom insights](#) projects.

Our work is made possible by our four core partners: the Atlanta Regional Commission, Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and United Way of Greater Atlanta.

20230524