

COMING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

A Qualitative Study of Social Connectedness Outcomes Produced by the Love Your Block Program

INTRODUCTION

Cities of Service commissioned this study by Urban Institute to better understand how the social connectedness of residents and communities was affected by their involvement in Cities of Service Love Your Block projects and how the effects of Love Your Block projects relate to social connectedness. The study also assesses how residents' relationships with city officials change because of Love Your Block and how these relationships improve social connectedness and measurable outcomes. The study focused on three cities implementing Love Your Block programs: Boston, Lansing, and Phoenix.

WHY SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS IS IMPORTANT

Social connectedness can benefit communities in times of need and increase their capacity to be efficacious. Literature on resiliency and natural-disaster preparedness shows that communities with stronger social network support and higher levels of cohesion are more likely to experience positive outcomes. In addition, formal methods for building social cohesion and social capital can help low-income residents mitigate the harmful effects of living in concentrated poverty. Community programs that foster social cohesion can lead to better city government performance and increased collective efficacy.

HOW WE CONDUCTED THE STUDY

The study identified one completed Love Your Block mini-grant project in each city with a project period between fall 2015 and spring 2016. The researchers collected data through one-on-one interviews and focus groups with residents and interviews with city officials. Researchers analyzed numerous documents, including Love Your Block project applications from various neighborhoods in each city. They also created maps of residents' social networks to further refine the analysis.

WHAT WE FOUND

The study found that the connection that Love Your Block forges between city leaders and citizens at the neighborhood level can be one of the most important catalysts for collective action by neighborhood residents. This connection between city officials and citizens boosts the social capital exercised by citizens who plan and implement Love Your Block projects and strengthen social cohesion.

Love Your Block volunteers believe their efforts also positively influence public safety and community ownership of public spaces. In Phoenix, the Love Your Block project was the impetus for forming the Triangle Neighborhood Association and its direct connections to city officials

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Phoenix Love Your Block Participant

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Social connectedness is created by a combination of the following three elements:

1

Social Cohesion: Emotional and social investment in a neighborhood and a sense of shared purpose among residents.

2

Social Capital: A community's perception of trust and norms of cooperation that facilitate collective actions.

3

Collective Action: The social action taken by a community to meet common goals and preserve shared values because of shared ownership of their local community.

and local businesses. And in Lansing, city officials and citizen volunteers believe that the connections they nurtured through Love Your Block have expanded their capability to address long-standing issues of disinvestment in the target neighborhood. In Boston, neighborhood residents believe that receiving the Love Your Block mini-grant gave them credibility with other neighborhood residents and entities, motivating them to activate their considerable social capital with government officials in deeper ways.

HOW LOVE YOUR BLOCK IMPROVES SOCIAL COHESION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Connections

In all three locations, participants noted the importance of the Love Your Block projects for connecting them to their neighbors. In Lansing, a neighborhood participant said, “People feel more comfortable talking about what is going on in the neighborhood. It makes people feel more comfortable in the neighborhood when people know each other. There wasn’t that ‘neighborhood feel’ type of thing before the garden. We have kids that ride bikes in the middle of the [neighborhood now] and that’s exciting!”

The leader of a project component in Phoenix described what she perceives as intergenerational social cohesion effects: “The project was a chance to bring together young and old people in the neighborhood and both new and longtime neighbors. It was an opportunity for people to get know each other, paint a mural, and do work, not just chitchat, and I think that’s a really strong way to come together.”



INCREASED PUBLIC SAFETY

Love Your Block neighborhood participants in all three projects believe that crime has decreased in the neighborhoods and credit Love Your Block projects as one of the reasons. They say that more people were engaged in positive activities at the revitalized spaces. One participant from Boston said that the project put “more eyes on the street,” a term made famous by journalist and urban activist Jane Jacobs, referring to the presence of community members looking after public space as a part of their routine and ensuring the safety of neighbors and strangers who pass through the neighborhood. Several participants also noted new and positive connections to police officers through their work on a Love Your Block project.

One city official in Lansing mentioned that Love Your Block has allowed the neighborhood association to build capacity in ways that galvanize residents not involved in Love Your Block to come out for other projects.

Love Your Block projects can also help bridge the gap between those who frequently volunteer and those who do not and between people of different socioeconomic classes. In Lansing, one neighbor said, “If you took the [neighborhood leaders’] demographics and drew a straight line, I’d be much lower in those demographics. But it means so much to me to have friends who are from a whole different world than I am. To be given a level of trust and respect. We wouldn’t have met if it weren’t for the garden.”

City Hall-to-Neighbor Connections

Love Your Block helps participants feel as if their neighborhood is important to high-level decision-makers in the city. Numerous Love Your Block team members felt empowered because of the connection of the Love Your Block program with city hall, and they felt that taking action is possible and can effect change. Resident participants reported that receiving the grant itself made them feel empowered in ways they hadn’t previously thought possible: “That made a big difference to us. It felt like we were building up our neighborhood and seeing changes in the things we do.” Through Love Your Block projects, the city is not only engaging residents, but emboldening and connecting them.

City officials noted the significance of the mayor’s office role in empowering community residents and directly supporting volunteerism in target

neighborhoods. One Phoenix city official said, “Each city is a big maze, and people want to know if they’re getting to the right person. Love Your Block has created those connections.” Love Your Block gives the city something tangible and positive that makes city hall and its staff seem more approachable. Another Phoenix city official described how Love Your Block forges “a bridge to the communities” from the mayor’s office, which adds an important dimension of social capital in the target neighborhoods.

Love Your Block is just the start. Social capital developed by Love Your Block can continue to grow and have impact after the Love Your Block projects conclude. In Phoenix, a neighborhood leader brought neighborhood concerns about the danger of crossing the main neighborhood thoroughfare to the attention of mayoral staff, after which a new crossing alert system was installed — an outcome they attribute to the connections made through Love Your Block. “It’s a two-way relationship. I don’t feel like we’re bugging the city; they’re coming to us, as well, to create solutions directly related to services.” This open line of communication is key to building trust and accomplishing goals.

Lansing’s Holmes Street School Neighborhood Association is exercising the social capital it cultivated under the Love Your Block project to enlist support from Lansing officials for their ongoing neighborhood beautification efforts. City officials believe the success of Love Your Block has given the residents more credibility and social and political capital to help define other challenges and participate in discussions around solutions.