



RESEARCH REPORT

# Coming Together for Change

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

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# Executive Summary

The Cities of Service Love Your Block (LYB) program connects mayor's offices with community residents to revitalize their neighborhoods one block at a time. City officials use LYB funding to encourage community groups to identify priority projects and develop volunteer-fueled solutions. Cities of Service has helped cities implement Love Your Block programs since 2009. In 2015, Cities of Service launched the Love Your Block AmeriCorps VISTA program, which awarded \$30,000 grants and two AmeriCorps VISTA members each to mayor's offices in Birmingham, Alabama; Boston, Massachusetts; Lansing, Michigan; Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; Richmond, California; and Seattle, Washington. This study examines three projects that were funded by LYB "mini-grants" and conducted in target neighborhoods in Boston, Lansing, and Phoenix during the program's first year.

Cities of Service commissioned this study to better understand how the LYB program affects the social connectedness of the residents and communities involved in LYB mini-grant projects, as well as how social connectedness outcomes might relate to impact outcomes, such as public safety. In addition, Cities of Service seeks to know more about how residents' relationships with city officials change because of LYB and how these relationships might help produce social connectedness and tangible impact outcomes.

This report begins by describing the Cities of Service's approach to civic engagement, providing an overview of the national LYB program across seven cities, and by defining the research questions and methodology which drove this study. The report goes on to describe each of the three study sites and the social networks attached to them. From there, the report presents data on social connectedness outcomes produced by the Love Your Block program. The report then describes how these shorter-term social connectedness outcomes may relate to short- and long-term impact on public safety as well as residents sense of community ownership and respect for public spaces. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for Cities of Service.

For residents who are members of LYB planning and implementation core teams in target neighborhoods, the Urban Institute research team found that LYB projects can strengthen social cohesion (i.e., the emotional and social investment neighbors have in their surroundings and in each other). Likewise, the links forged between city officials and neighborhood leaders because of LYB appear to boost the social capital exercised by the neighborhood core teams who plan and implement LYB projects. Love Your Block neighborhood core team members perceive that their efforts produce tangible impacts in public safety and community ownership of public spaces. These effects and

perceptions appear to motivate neighborhood core teams to leverage their enhanced social capital in pursuit of new neighborhood projects and additional neighborhood revitalization goals, even after the LYB project has ended. Except in the Lansing site, neighborhood residents who do not participate directly in LYB projects do not appear to experience social cohesion and social capital effects—at least not any that are discernable within this study’s constraints. But some data suggest that any resident who lives in an LYB target neighborhood can enjoy modest social connectedness, public safety, and community ownership benefits *over time* as the momentum and social capital gained by LYB neighborhood leaders motivates them to pursue new revitalization projects.

The connection the LYB program forges between city leaders and citizens at the neighborhood level appears to be one of the most important catalysts for collective action—the combination of social cohesion and social capital—by LYB neighborhood core teams and their networks. In Boston, core team members believe that receiving the LYB mini-grant conferred credibility upon them with other neighborhood residents and entities, motivating them to activate their considerable social capital with government officials in deeper ways. In Phoenix, the LYB project was the primary basis for forming the Triangle Neighborhood Association and its direct connections to city officials and local businesses. And in Lansing, city officials and neighborhood core team leaders believe that the connections they nurtured through LYB have expanded their capability to address long-standing issues of disinvestment in the target neighborhood.

Based on this study’s findings, the research team offers five recommendations for Cities of Service to consider as they develop next steps for the LYB program:

- Promote neighborhood leadership development strategies
- Ensure LYB project maintenance
- Experiment with connections between LYB core teams and other entities
- Foster intergenerational connections within LYB projects
- Explore outcome sustainability strategies

# Background

## What Is Love Your Block?

The Love Your Block (LYB) program connects mayor's offices with community residents to revitalize their neighborhoods one block at a time. City officials use LYB funding to encourage community groups to identify priority projects and develop volunteer-fueled solutions. Cities of Service has helped cities implement Love Your Block programs since 2009. Based on that experience, Cities of Service realized the most effective way to implement Love Your Block was to provide financial and human capital support. In 2015, it launched the Love Your Block AmeriCorps VISTA grant, which they have awarded to mayor's offices in Birmingham, Alabama; Boston, Massachusetts; Lansing, Michigan; Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; Richmond, California; and Seattle, Washington.

Cities of Service is a national nonprofit organization that helps mayors build stronger cities by changing the way local government and citizens work together. Cities of Service coalition cities tap into their citizens' knowledge, creativity, and service to identify and solve pressing local challenges. Founded in 2009 by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports more than 235 cities, representing nearly 55 million people in 45 states and more than 10 million people in the UK.

Cities that receive the three-year, \$30,000 LYB grants also receive two AmeriCorps VISTA members to help implement the initiative. Recipient cities use the funds to regrant competitive mini-grants to neighborhood groups that qualify. Mini-grants range from \$500 to \$5,000, and an average of about 12 projects per city were launched in the first year of grant funding. Implementing officials also coordinate city government services to support projects. Typically, the program is overseen by each city's chief service officer or equivalent.

In addition to providing funding and the AmeriCorps VISTA members, Cities of Service provides technical assistance and coaching to cities depending on their needs and commitment. Technical assistance includes regular check-ins and other remote support from expert staff, assistance in partnership identification, insights on evaluations, and access to tools and other materials. In addition, coalition cities may receive site visits from Cities of Service program staff, which enables cities to showcase their work and get on-the-ground problem-solving assistance from experts. Site visits also help city leads secure local buy-in, align local stakeholders, and bolster support from key city leaders.

In the grant application for LYB, Cities of Service asks applicants to identify the low-income neighborhoods they will target and to describe how they will use the LYB money to enhance neighborhood revitalization efforts, improve health and safety, and further the mayor's priorities. Common components of neighborhood-level LYB projects include vacant lot cleanup, litter and graffiti removal, tree planting, and community garden development. City government services commonly provided to support LYB projects include pothole repair, litter basket replacement, speed bump installation, water for community gardens, and trash or debris pickup.

## The Cities of Service Citizen Engagement Model

The Cities of Service citizen engagement model posits that tangible outcomes are produced through connecting city leaders with residents in a cycle of increasing trust and sustained engagement (figure 1). This model is, in effect, the theory of change for how Cities of Service-sponsored projects improve the neighborhoods and the cities in which they operate. Specific to LYB, Cities of Service articulates this cycle and its potential outcomes this way:

Experts consider well-tended public spaces essential to creating sustainable communities and a higher quality of life. Run-down, litter-strewn spaces, however, signal a lack of community engagement that can lead to crime and other negative behaviors. Engaged communities are far less likely to let their neighborhoods fall into poor conditions and can act as a powerful force in preventing crime. The city's chief executive—be it the mayor or city manager—is uniquely positioned to engage citizens to solve public problems. By providing small competitive grants and coordinating city services, the city chief executive can achieve measurable impact in local communities, build trust, and strengthen social capital at a low cost.<sup>1</sup>

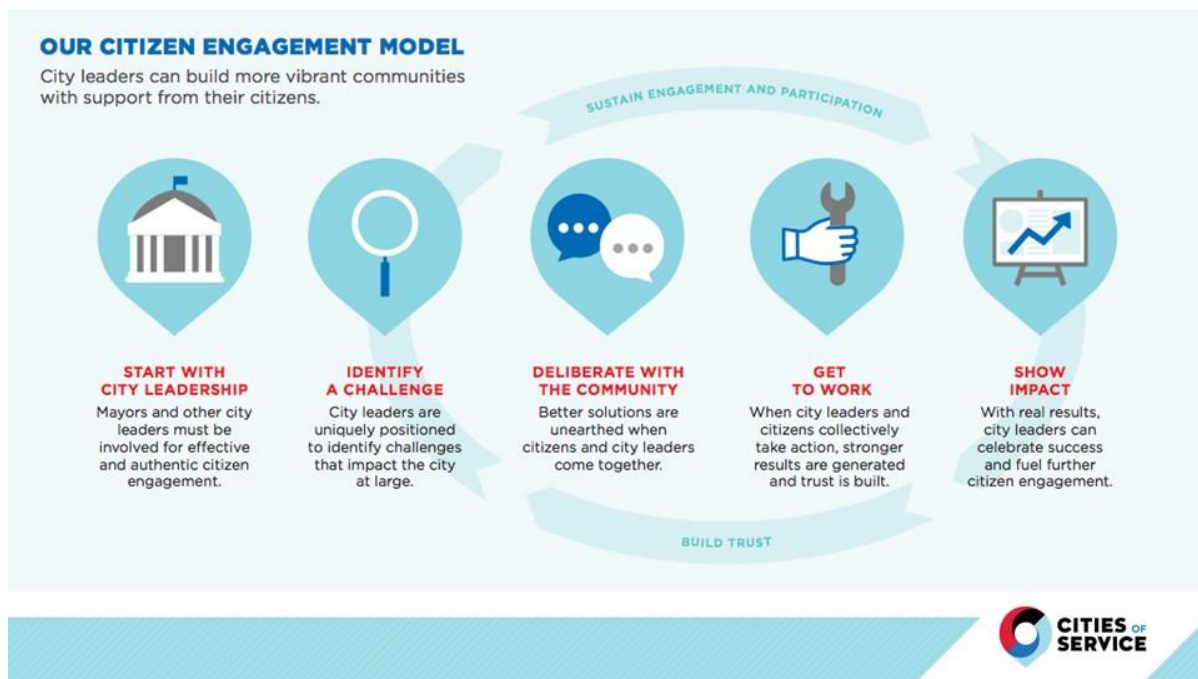
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<sup>1</sup> *Love Your Block: A Cities Of Service Blueprint*. Retrieved from [https://citiesofservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/COS\\_LoveYourBlock\\_Blueprint\\_0.pdf](https://citiesofservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/COS_LoveYourBlock_Blueprint_0.pdf)



FIGURE 1

### Cities of Service Citizen Engagement Model



Source: Cities of Service.

## Purpose of the Study

Cities of Service commissioned this study to better understand how LYB projects affect the social connectedness of the residents and communities involved, as well as how social connectedness outcomes might relate to impact outcomes, such as public safety. In addition, Cities of Service wants to know more about how residents' relationships with city officials change because of LYB and how these relationships might help produce social connectedness and tangible impact outcomes.

City officials and neighborhood teams measure project impact by reporting on pounds of litter collected, number of community events planned, number of art displays created, number of lot or park cleanups completed, mini-grant applications awarded, number of new and returning volunteers, and number of new systems put in place through the LYB process. Cities of Service believes capturing these metrics help demonstrate that the city is solving or ameliorating a public problem. In addition, Cities of Service encourages cities to track metrics tailored to their specific programs. Although these indicators measure the condition of public spaces, volunteerism, and community ownership of those spaces in the

target neighborhoods, they do not capture the effects the LYB program may have on social cohesion, social capital, and broader impact outcomes, such as safety in target neighborhoods.

## Research Questions and Methods

This qualitative study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are LYB residents' perceptions—before and after LYB—of social cohesion within their neighborhood as defined by such elements as shared values, close-knit relationships, and trust?
2. What are LYB residents' experiences—before and after LYB—of the informal social capital enjoyed by their group and residents of the neighborhood overall as defined by such elements as involvement in advocating for neighborhood improvements?
3. What are LYB community group members' perceptions of changes in city services, public safety, and other related policies since the program began or took place in their target neighborhood?
4. What do the social networks among residents and other LYB partners, which are formed by participation in LYB groups, look like? How might the nature of the connections in these networks be associated with perceived changes in city services, public safety, or other policies relevant to the LYB program? For example, do members of more robust networks have different perceptions of changes to city services?

The research team focused on one LYB project (the *focal project*) in one neighborhood (the *focal neighborhood*) in Phoenix, Lansing, and Boston to understand the perceived effects of LYB on social connectedness in neighborhoods that had completed one LYB mini-grant project. Each focal project received its mini-grant support during the Cities of Service LYB program's first year, and the project period for each mini-grant was from fall 2015 to spring 2016.

Before visiting each site, the research team interviewed the city's LYB leaders, AmeriCorps VISTA members, and one or two key neighborhood players. These interviews aimed to gather background data on each focal project and neighborhood and how city officials interacted with neighborhood leaders and other participants during their LYB projects. The research team then participated in on-site interviews with other key stakeholders involved in the project, including neighborhood residents, organizations, businesses, and city staff. On each site visit, the research team also conducted two focus groups: one with LYB participants and one with non-LYB participants from the focal neighborhood. During these focus groups, the research team asked questions related to social cohesion, social capital, and

perception of change in the neighborhood. The research team interviewed 23 people and conducted six focus groups, which included 30 people total. In addition to qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups, the research team reviewed LYB-related blueprints and educational information developed by Cities of Service, each city's LYB grant application, and other relevant sources, such as descriptive information found on city websites.

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## BOX 1

### Measuring Social Connectedness

Social cohesion, social capital, and collective efficacy are difficult to define and measure, and there is disagreement even among researchers as to the working definitions for these terms.<sup>a</sup> We define **social cohesion** as an emotional and social investment in a neighborhood and sense of shared destiny among residents. **Social capital** is a community stock of social trust and norms of reciprocity embedded in social networks that facilitates collective actions. This definition integrates the elements of several definitions of social capital provided by scholars.<sup>b</sup> **Collective efficacy** is a neighborhood-level concept whereby community members create a sense of agency<sup>c</sup> and assume ownership for the state of their local community, producing social action to meet common goals and preserve shared values. Scholars often link or overlap the three concepts. For example, social cohesion and trust, when high, help structure collective productive action, which becomes the cornerstone of collective efficacy.<sup>d</sup> Collective efficacy is a form of social organization that combines social cohesion and shared expectations for social control (i.e., a form of social capital by some definitions).<sup>e</sup>

Scholars agree that measuring community-level capital is valuable in program evaluation and development.<sup>f</sup> Most research about social capital and community efficacy uses survey tools to measure how well communities are socially connected and efficacious. Researchers also suggest that mapping resident representation and strategic network formation can be a useful way to assess social connectedness outcomes.<sup>g</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Sami Ansari, "Social Capital and Collective Efficacy: Resource and Operating Tools of Community Social Control," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology* 5, no. 2 (2013): 75–94.

<sup>b</sup>Yukiko Uchida, Yoshiaki Takahashi, and Kentaro Kawahara, "Changes in Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being after a Severe Nationwide Disaster: The Case of the Great East Japan Earthquake," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 207–21.

<sup>c</sup>Robert J. Sampson, Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Felton Earls, "Beyond Social Capital: Spatial Dynamics of Collective Efficacy for Children," *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 5 (1999): 633–60.

<sup>d</sup>Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Warner 2007

<sup>e</sup>Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earl 1997; Sampson 2006

<sup>f</sup>Steve Johnson, "Applying Social Capital Theory to Needs Assessment, Social Program Development, and Evaluation: A Practitioner's Perspective," *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 21, no. 1 (1999): 12–22.

<sup>g</sup>Scott Dempwolf, and L. Ward Lyles, "The Uses of Social Network Analysis in Planning: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Planning Literature* 27, no. 1 (2012): 3–21; Nilofer 2008

To analyze the interview and focus group data, the research team used NVivo software, which helps organize and synthesize key insights. To understand the social networks formed through the LYB program and the degree of connection established between the city players and neighborhood residents, the research team conducted social network analysis using Gephi software.

In the sections that follow, key city officials, resident project leaders and participants, and representatives from LYB-relevant nonprofit entities are identified by their titles and roles and are referred to by a standardized set of titles for all three sites:

- **City LYB leader.** The city staff member who reports to the mayor or city chief executive and coordinates the Cities of Service LYB grant across the city
- **AmeriCorps VISTA 1, 2.** The Cities of Service–sponsored AmeriCorps VISTA members who worked on the first year of the LYB project
- **City staff 1, 2, and so on.** The city staff members who work in departments or units that interface with the LYB project, including neighborhood services, community outreach, and community development departments
- **Neighborhood leader 1.** The resident who led the LYB grant application and implemented the LYB project
- **Neighborhood leader 2.** The resident who also played a major role implementing the LYB project (but did not initiate the grant)
- **Neighborhood core team member 1, 2, and so on.** Residents who were heavily involved in LYB project planning and play an ongoing role in the neighborhood organization that applied for the project mini-grant.
  - » We refer to the neighborhood leaders and core team members together as the **neighborhood core team**
- **Neighborhood participants 1, 2, and so on.** Residents who participated in the LYB event (if a single-day event) or provided peripheral support to the implementation of an ongoing LYB project
- **Nonprofit staff 1, 2, and so on.** Staff members of local nonprofits who provided resources and support for the LYB project

All other actors involved in LYB are noted by their job titles (e.g., police officer, firefighter, city council member). The standardized titles are introduced in the description of each study site and then used in the Gephi visualizations and throughout the report narrative to support reader understanding of the relationships that formed around LYB focal projects.

## Methodological Limitations

The qualitative data-collection methods used to conduct this study limit the strength of the findings. The research team focused on perceptions of social connectedness and other outcomes arising from the first-year mini-grants. We did not use quantitative data sources and more rigorous research methods. Therefore, the findings reflect *potential* change, rather than actual change related to the LYB program. Furthermore, our findings are limited to perceptions in only three LYB mini-grant project sites and should not be used to draw fixed conclusions about the LYB program as a whole or about any of the three sites under examination. Rather, these qualitative findings provide insights to LYB program planners and implementers at all levels—from Cities of Service to the grassroots—on how LYB projects might be maintained, improved, or altered to produce desired outcomes, such as increased public safety or greater social cohesion.

# Study Sites

Cities of Service chose three grantee cities to participate in this study and discussed which LYB project and neighborhood to focus on with city leaders at each site. The focal neighborhoods for this study—the Triangle neighborhood in Phoenix, the Holmes Street School neighborhood in Lansing, and the Roxbury neighborhood in Boston—vary in size and population demographics (table 1). Each city’s implementation of the LYB program was different, providing varied city-level contexts within which the social connectedness effects and other potential outcomes of LYB should be understood (table 2).

**TABLE 1**

## Neighborhood Demographics

	Census tract 1129: Phoenix, AZ	Census tract 21.01: Lansing, MI	Census tract 813: Boston, MA
<b>Population</b>	<b>5,005</b>	<b>2,152</b>	<b>5,428</b>
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>			
Black	6%	32%	38%
Hispanic	58%	17%	43%
White	29%	42%	12%
Other	5%	1%	4%
<b>Education (population over age 25)</b>			
No high school diploma	32%	15%	38%
High school diploma	17%	21%	20%
Bachelor’s degree or higher	21%	17%	16%
<b>Income characteristics</b>			
Unemployment rate	9%	19%	4%
Median household income	\$27,036	\$30,611	\$20,914
<b>Housing characteristics</b>			
Owner-occupied households	28%	52%	8%
Renter-occupied households	72%	48%	92%

**Source:** 2011–15 American Community Survey.

**Notes:** This table includes only select demographic information, not a comprehensive snapshot of each neighborhood. Therefore, not all demographic categories add up to 100 percent. Blacks and whites are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. In addition, these numbers reflect the census tracts where the neighborhoods are located, but in many cases the census tracts include areas beyond the neighborhood.

TABLE 2

**Cross-Study Site Comparison**

Project characteristics	Phoenix	Lansing	Boston
Primary project outputs	Mural, cleanup efforts in Hu-O-Te Park	Community garden improvements	Bench refurbishing and park cleanup
Preexisting neighborhood association	No	Yes	Yes
Preexisting project	No	Yes	No
Community-based organization involvement	No	Yes	Yes
Youth involvement	Yes	No	Yes
Culminating neighborhood event	Yes	No	Yes

**Source:** Interviews with key Love Your Block stakeholders.

## Phoenix

Love Your Block funding in Phoenix is used to advance Mayor Greg Stanton's goal to revitalize neighborhoods by, according to Phoenix's application to Cities of Service for LYB grant funding, "increasing the capacity and commitment of neighborhood residents to become organized" in the low-income census tracts of Phoenix's inner core. During interviews, city officials expressed the related hope that these mini-grants would help residents secure larger grants (e.g., funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant program) in the future. During the first year of grant funding from Cities of Service, Phoenix focused its LYB efforts on five projects in the 7th Avenue, Grant Park, Pasadena, Triangle, and Woodlea-Melrose neighborhoods. They also had two demonstration projects in year one, for a total of seven projects. Neighborhood groups received various forms of city support and mini-grants to implement their proposed activities from fall 2015 to spring 2016. Residents in the LYB target neighborhoods participated in 28 community meetings to plan their projects, removed 6.25 bins of litter (each of which is just under 2,600 pounds of trash) from LYB sites, created 24 art displays citywide, and improved 12 physical structures.

At the city level, the Phoenix chief service officer (city LYB leader) oversees the LYB program. During the first year, he worked with the two AmeriCorps VISTA members (AmeriCorps VISTA 1 and 2), who sit in the City Manager's Office, to launch and support the projects. In addition, two neighborhood specialists (city staff 1 and 2) in the Neighborhood Services Department provided important on-the-ground support for the LYB focal project in the first year of the grant.



## Phoenix Hu-O-Te Mural and Park Cleanup



**Source:** Devin Rankin, “The Triangle Neighborhood’s Community Mural,” Helping Phoenix Neighborhoods, November 18, 2016, <http://www.hpnphx.org/blog/2017/5/24/the-triangle-neighborhoods-community-mural-by-devin-rankin>.

## The Focal Neighborhood and Project

The Triangle neighborhood is in central Phoenix (figure 2). The census tract that includes the Triangle neighborhood is home to 5,005 people, 58 percent of whom are Hispanic and 29 percent of whom are white (table 1). The rest of the population is black or another race. The median household income is \$27,036, and 9 percent of people are unemployed.

The LYB-funded project in the Triangle neighborhood, the Hu-O-Te Park Mural and Park Cleanup, focused on revitalizing a small corner park that had been the site of frequent vandalism and loitering. Two Triangle residents (neighborhood leaders 1 and 2) formed a neighborhood association so they would be eligible to receive the LYB mini-grant from the city. During the planning phase of the LYB project, the neighborhood core team worked with the Cities of Service AmeriCorps VISTA members to get paint and other supplies. Some members of the neighborhood core team invited people to the park cleanup event and introduced them to the new neighborhood association. Other members focused on enlisting a local artist to work with youth in painting the mural during the event. On the day of the





completed preparation tasks, such as distributing flyers to invite people to the event, working with the AmeriCorps VISTA members to coordinate supplies, meeting with a local artist to plan the mural, and planning activities for the event.

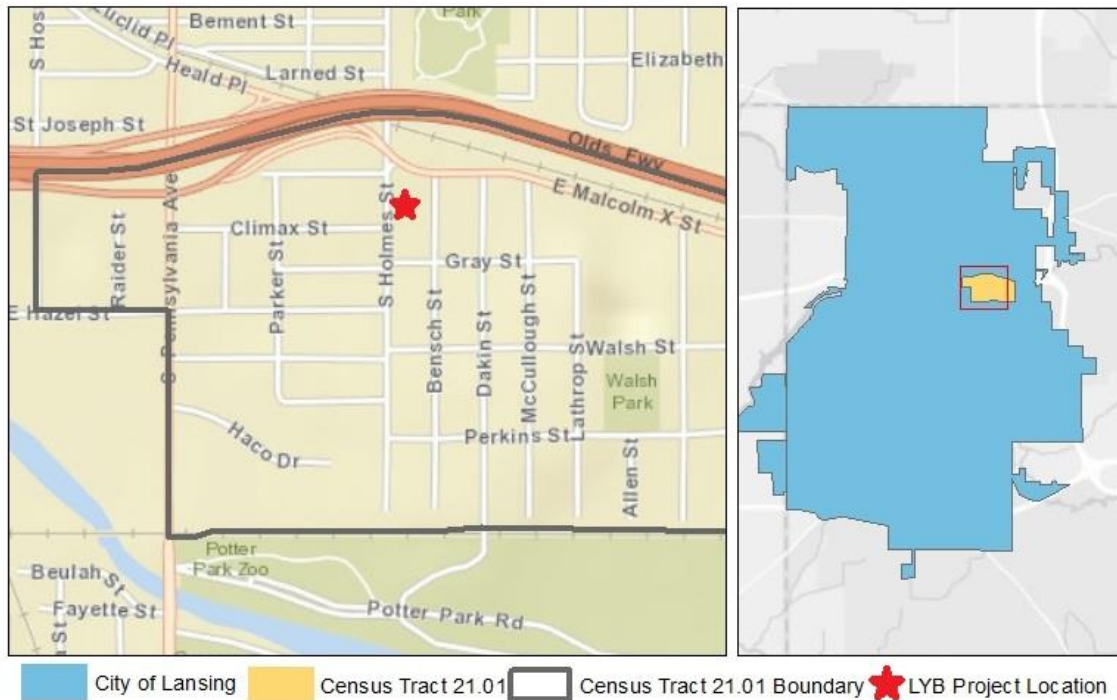
## Lansing

Before the release of the LYB grant funding, Lansing mayor Virgil Benero and other city leaders had been increasing their engagement with neighborhoods. They saw LYB as an opportunity to enhance the city's connection to neighborhoods alongside other efforts, such as the recent addition of a neighborhood resource coordinator position in the mayor's office and the allocation of substantial city resources into ongoing revitalization efforts. City leaders used LYB to create a more stable funding stream for neighborhood work, build trust among neighborhood leaders, and create grassroots momentum by bringing LYB project leaders from across the city together to share ideas and increase neighborhood connectivity across the city. In the first year of LYB, the City of Lansing invested in seven mini-grant projects across the city. Residents in LYB areas participated in 48 community meetings to plan their projects, removed 107 bags of litter (each of which is around 57 pounds) from LYB sites, created 8 art displays citywide, and improved 13 physical structures.

FIGURE 3

## Focal Project and Neighborhood in Lansing, Michigan

### Holmes Street School Garden | Lansing, Michigan



The Lansing LYB efforts were led by the neighborhood resource coordinator (city LYB leader), who reports to the director of planning and neighborhood development. The AmeriCorps VISTA members (AmeriCorps VISTA 1 and 2) were incorporated into the city's neighborhood resource team and focused on community outreach and supporting ongoing LYB projects.

### The Focal Neighborhood and Project

The Holmes Street School neighborhood includes 2,152 residents, 42 percent of whom are white and 32 percent of whom are black (table 1). The area unemployment rate is 19 percent, and the median household income is \$30,611. Residents in the Holmes Street School neighborhood initially galvanized around a vacant, blighted school building that was attracting crime and worrying residents. The neighbors broke off from the larger neighborhood organization (Potter Walsh Neighborhood Association) to form a smaller association focused on addressing issues specific to the vacant school and the immediate surrounding community in 2006. Although the association continues to work on the

large vacant building, some members focused the association's efforts on creating a small project for the neighborhood in 2011 and worked together to create a community garden, a project that predated the LYB grant. In 2015, the neighborhood association applied for LYB funding to install the Holmes Street School garden enhancements, which were worm pipes and a water catchment system, both of which would create a more efficient and thriving garden atmosphere. The focal project leaders and their helpers also used their mini-grant to build a fence around the garden to keep out unwanted wildlife.

## Neighborhood Leadership

The resident leader for the LYB project was the copresident of the Holmes Street School Neighborhood Association (neighborhood leader 1). The other president of the neighborhood association (neighborhood leader 2) assisted in the project's planning and execution but focused more on crime prevention and less on the garden project. Both leaders own property near the garden. Gardeners who were already personally invested in their plots provided the most help to the enhancements project (neighborhood core team members 1, 2, and 3). During the LYB project, neighborhood leader 1 used her weekly neighborhood newsletter to help residents stay informed about the garden improvements, and various residents stopped by the garden to get updates or help.

### Holmes Street School Community Garden



**Source:** Clara Martinez, "The Urban Institute, Cities of Service, and the City of Lansing Neighborhood," LinkedIn, August 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6301816601490579457/>.

# Boston

With a focus on increasing citizen engagement among its low-income population, Boston hoped LYB would augment Mayor Marty Walsh's Boston Shines initiative, a Boston neighborhood initiative focused on improving neighborhoods by helping residents take ownership of their surroundings through cleanup projects. Love Your Block grant funding is provided to the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and in its first year supported projects in the Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury neighborhoods. During the first year, residents in LYB areas participated in 19 community meetings to plan their projects, removed 227 bins of litter from LYB sites, created 8 art displays citywide, and improved 1 physical structure.

During the first year, the position of director of LYB (city LYB leader 1) was created in the Office of Civic Engagement to oversee the program. The Cities of Service AmeriCorps VISTA members were based in the mayor's office and worked with the city's civic engagement team. The AmeriCorps VISTA members attended neighborhood meetings in all LYB project neighborhoods. After the first year, the director of LYB (city LYB leader 1) moved to a new city position and was replaced by the former Roxbury neighborhood coordinator (city LYB leader 2).

## The Focal Project and Neighborhood

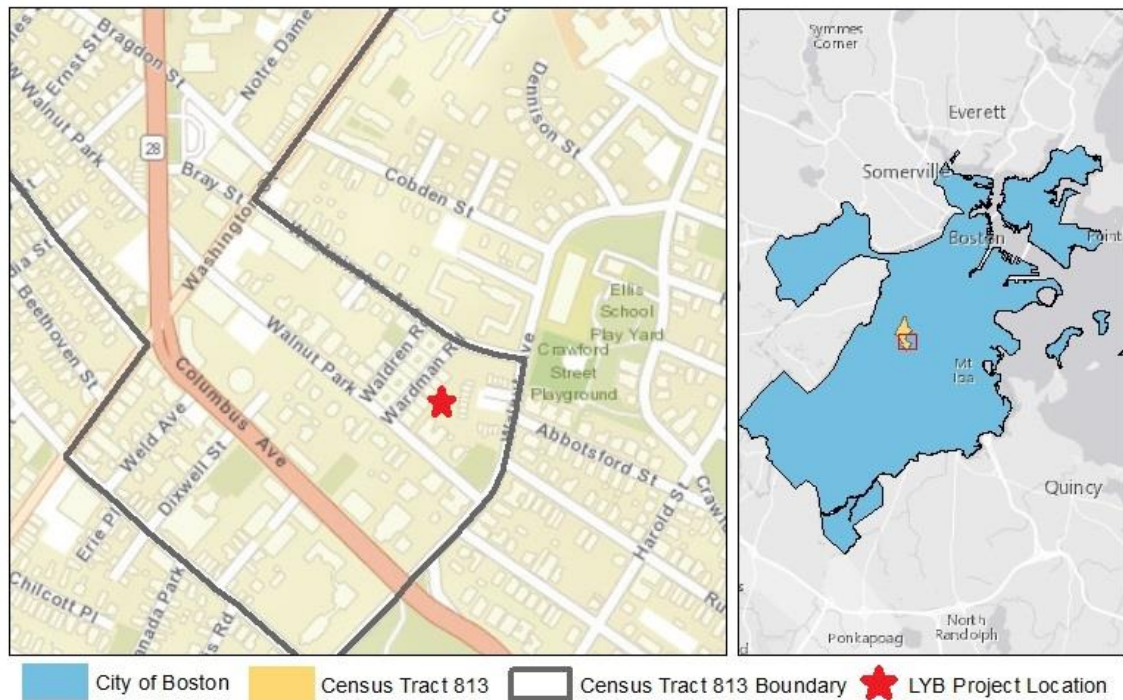
The census tract where the focal LYB project for Boston took place is home to 5,428 people, 38 percent of whom are black and 43 percent of whom are Hispanic (table 1). The unemployment rate in the neighborhood is 4 percent, and the median household income is \$20,914. The area is 92 percent renter occupied, and the residents involved in the LYB project at this site reside in affordable housing rental properties owned by a Roxbury community development corporation called Urban Edge.



FIGURE 4

Focal Project and Neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts

## Waldren Road Park Cleanup | Boston, Massachusetts



The Waldren Road Park, at the center of the focal project, is adjacent to affordable housing complexes owned by Urban Edge. The neighborhood core team that implemented the focal project, the Waldren Road Park Cleanup, is a property-based working group facilitated by Urban Edge staff that had come together previously for a project of urgent community importance. The group decided to focus its LYB mini-grant on beautifying this pocket park because it had fallen into disrepair and become an eyesore adjacent to their apartment complexes. During the LYB project planning phase, Urban Edge and neighborhood leaders worked with a local artist at the YMCA to help youth restore and paint park benches (pictured below). The YMCA employee worked with adolescents from the adjacent complexes and elsewhere in the neighborhood to design and paint the benches. In addition, the core neighborhood LYB team organized a block party to unveil the benches and celebrate the culmination of the LYB project.

## Neighborhood Leadership

Urban Edge played a prominent role in finding the grant from the city and helping residents through the LYB process. Urban Edge employs neighborhood liaisons, who facilitate property-based working groups of residents to discuss ongoing problems and opportunities. The Walnut-Washington-Wardman working group originally formed and galvanized in 2014 because of community concern about a sidewalk shooting of a neighborhood youth. The group's first project was to advocate to the city for security cameras on streets adjacent to their properties.

### The Waldren Road Park



**Source:** "Love Your Block Mimi-Grants," City of Boston, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.boston.gov/departments/neighborhood-services/love-your-block-mini-grants>.

Shortly after the installation of the security cameras, the Urban Edge neighborhood liaison for the Walnut-Washington-Wardman complexes (nonprofit staff 1) told residents in the property's working group about the LYB opportunity and encouraged them to apply for the funding from the city. A longtime resident and elder in the community (neighborhood leader 1) wrote the application for the grant, working with Urban Edge staff for support and working with another active senior in the community (neighborhood leader 2). There were also two other residents (neighborhood core team members 1 and 2) involved in the project's design and implementation. Core team member 2 is the daughter of neighborhood leader 2, and all four core team members had been involved with the project to bring security cameras into the neighborhood.

During the planning phase, neighborhood leader 1 reached out to the local YMCA to work with youth on painting the benches and spreading the word about the event. The YMCA artist-in-residence (nonprofit staff 2) recruited youth from the neighborhood and surrounding areas to design and paint the benches. These youths later attended working group meetings to present their designs and receive feedback from the neighborhood core team. The neighborhood core team also conducted various tasks to set up the block party, which included telling other residents, inviting police officers and local politicians, and coordinating food and activities for neighborhood families.



# Social Connectedness in Love Your Block

The social networks formed around LYB projects show differing patterns of engagement between neighbors, city government officials, and outside entities, including nonprofits and businesses. We used network analysis software to visualize the pattern of connections described by the LYB focus groups and to support qualitative findings on resident perceptions of social cohesion, social capital, and changes in city services, public safety, and neighborhood involvement.

## Social Networks Attached to LYB Projects

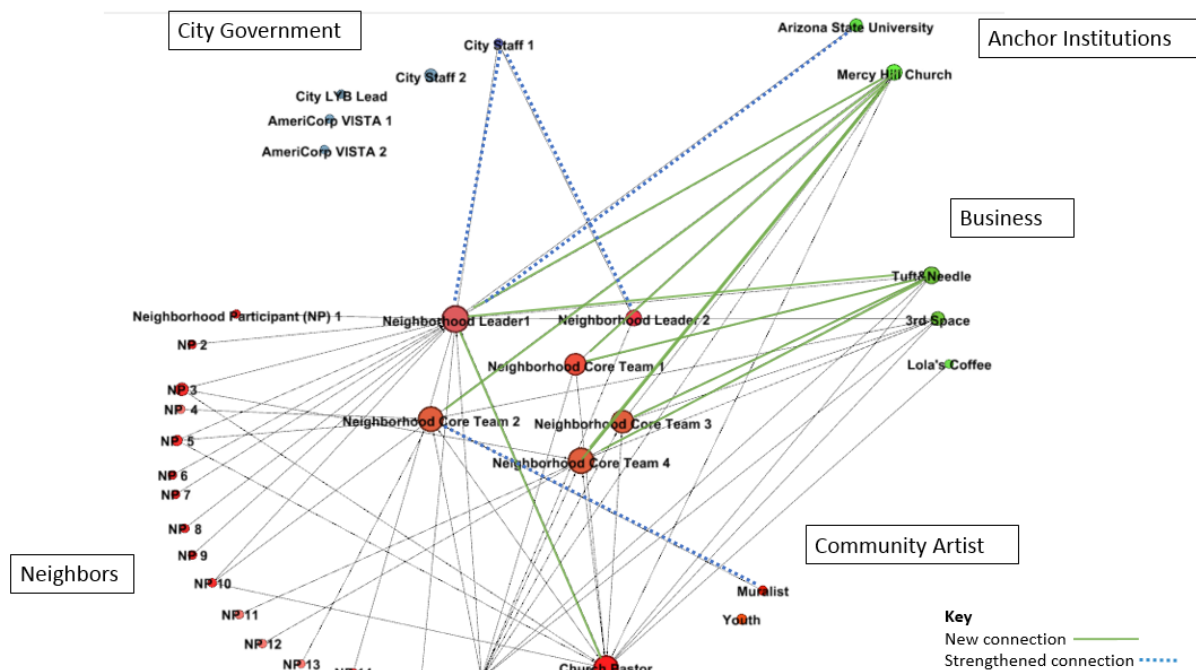
Research shows that network analysis is a good tool for understanding social capital and civic engagement (Dempwolf and Lyles 2012). Social network analysis uses nodes (data representing individuals or organizations) and edges (lines representing the relationship or connection between nodes) to create a *sociogram*, a graphic representation of the entire social network under study. This study developed sociograms using data from focus groups with residents from the focal neighborhoods who participated in the focal projects. Because of the purposive sampling method used for recruiting focus groups members, in almost all instances, LYB focus group members were members of the neighborhood core team that organized and implemented the project. Love Your Block focus group members identified the people (nodes) whom they related to (edges) in their respective LYB projects. These visualizations are based on LYB focus group members' perceptions and correspond to data collected through the interviews and focus groups but do not provide a complete picture of participation in a focal project. Rather, they represent the networks a subset of participants expanded or accessed because of their affiliation with an LYB project. The network analysis is split between three groups, as identified by LYB focus group members: neighborhood participants (red dots), city government officials (blue dots), and other entities (green dots). Our analysis examines the connections LYB focus group members (slightly larger red dots) already had or made to each person or entity involved in the focal LYB project, noting differences between the quantity and quality of these connections.

The sociograms have been refined to display green edges for new connections and blue dotted edges for strengthened connections between the LYB focus group members and city government

officials or other entities, such as nonprofits, business, artists, and so on. Because of time limitations and other factors, focus group members were often unclear about their connections to other neighborhood participants who were not in the focus group. The research team did not attempt to show new or strengthened connections between the neighbors in the focus groups and other neighborhood participants depicted on the sociograms. Rather, those edges remain a “neutral” gray. In addition, there are a few instances where key LYB-involved people (e.g., city officials, area youth) were not identified by any LYB focus group members as someone they connected with during the project. We show those people without any edges connecting them to others on the sociogram.

FIGURE 5

### The Social Network Attached to the Phoenix Focal Project



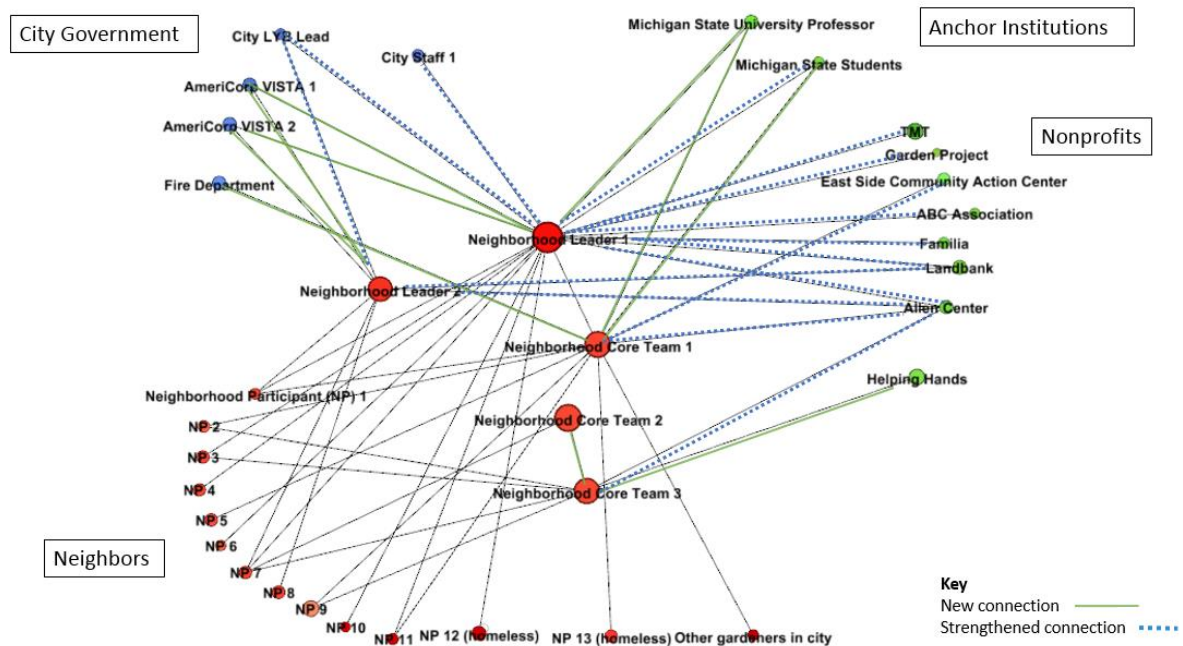
For the Hu-O-Te Park Mural and Park Cleanup project in Phoenix, the network analysis (figure 5) shows that the LYB focus group members formed many neighbor-to-neighbor connections, represented by 18 neighborhood participant dots, including dots for the church pastor and the muralist. Especially on the day of the cleanup and mural painting, the project brought together many neighbors previously unknown to the core team and neighborhood leaders. The neighborhood participants mostly came by to see “what was going on,” as one focus group member described it.

In contrast to the numerous links made to other neighbors involved in the Phoenix project, members of the LYB focus group identified only two connections between neighbors and the city. These are preexisting links neighborhood leaders 1 and 2 had to city staff 1, which were strengthened by the LYB project (these strengthened edges are represented by blue dotted lines).

Another distinguishing feature of this sociogram is that three of the six connections to other entities were made between the core team and the owners or staff of for-profit businesses (Lola's Coffee, 3rd Space, and Tuft & Needle). In the other two focal projects, most of the other entities the neighborhood core teams connected to were nonprofits and community groups. Two of the businesses are popular neighborhood coffee shops, so the core team simply used these existing connections for meetings with one another without strengthening them. But the neighborhood leaders, core team members, and neighborhood participants formed new and fruitful connections to the neighborhood's new business, the national mattress firm Tuft & Needle (these new connections are visualized by green lines between the core team members and neighborhood leader to the business). The connection to the socially active local congregation, Mercy Hill Church, was facilitated by the church pastor, who is a neighborhood resident. And finally, an existing connection to the community artist, who designed the mural, was used and strengthened by neighborhood core team member 2 and developed anew for neighborhood leader 1 as a result. Interestingly, as is true for the Boston focal project, the connection to area youth was formed entirely by the artist for creating the mural. The neighborhood core team claimed no independent connections to the youth. The sociogram does not display any lines connecting the youth to focus group members, many of whom were core team members.

FIGURE 6

### The Social Network Attached to the Lansing Focal Project

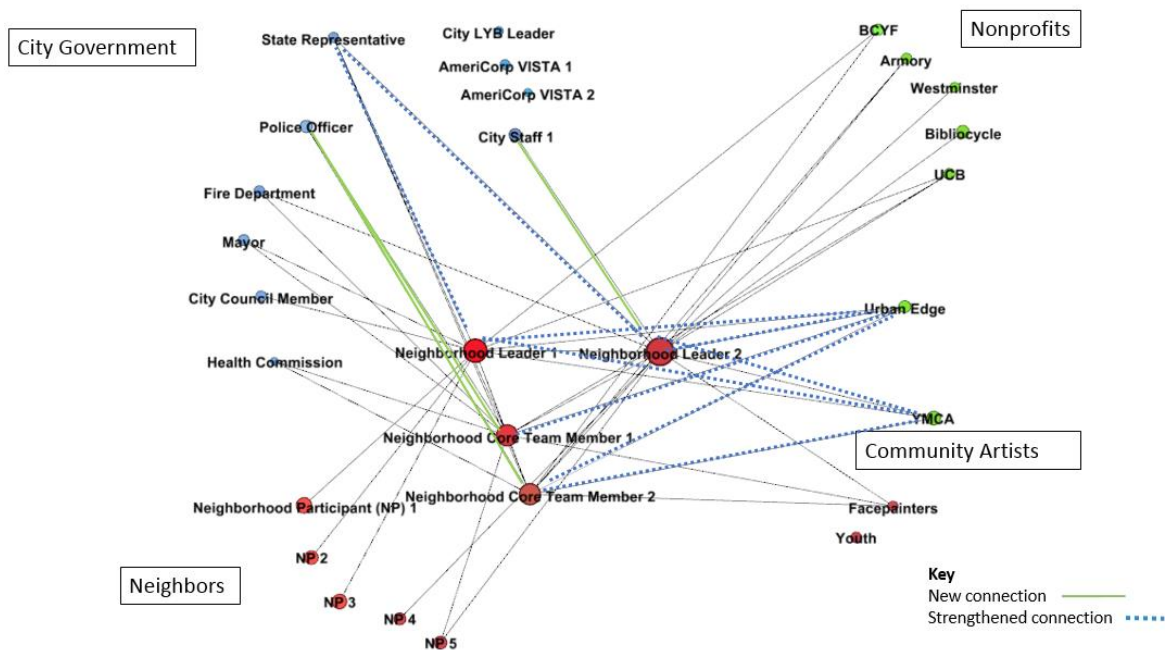


For Lansing, the network analysis shows a relatively even distribution of connections from focus group members to their fellow neighbors and other entities, most of which are nonprofits. In addition, neighborhood leaders 1 and 2, as well as two neighborhood core team members, formed and strengthened several connections to city government officials.

In contrast to the other two focal projects, which focused on revitalizing neglected spaces from scratch, the Holmes Street School garden enhancements project was incorporated into a preexisting community revitalization effort, namely, the Holmes Street School Community Garden, which began in 2011. Focus group members described how they strengthened connections to numerous nonprofits with which they had worked previously. Love Your Block mini-grant funding prompted neighborhood leader 1 to further connect with the nonprofit staff at the land bank, food bank, and local community center to access more garden equipment and seedlings.

FIGURE 7

## The Social Network Attached to the Boston Focal Project



Boston LYB focus group members, who were all on the neighborhood core team, identified the fewest LYB-relevant neighborhood participant connections. One neighborhood core team member did not identify any neighbors as people she reaccessed or made a fresh connection to because of LYB. Limitations in our methodology prevent us from assessing if new or stronger connections were made between the neighborhood core team and other neighborhood participants. The focus group data suggest that most connections to neighborhood participants were likely preexisting or fleeting encounters and not necessarily strengthened because of LYB project planning and execution.

Boston focus group participants identified the most connections to government officials compared with the other projects. But none of the connections LYB focus group members described were to city officials who were assigned to the LYB project. Rather, most were preexisting connections that the core team members strengthened in service of LYB project goals. For example, neighborhood leader 2 strengthened a powerful connection to her state representative by inviting her to view the revitalized park on the day of its unveiling. In addition, a few focus group members noted making stronger connections to a police officer in the area, whom they had previously gotten to know only in passing while addressing community safety.

The sociogram shows core team members used and strengthened numerous preexisting nonprofit connections in service of their Waldren Road Cleanup project. Chief among these were the connections formed between core team members and Urban Edge staff and their subsidiary property management firm, WinnCompanies Management. Urban Edge played a catalytic role in this focal project by bringing the mayor's office LYB application to the attention of neighborhood leader 1 in the first place. In addition, Urban Edge continues to play a large facilitation role with the Walnut-Washington-Wardman working group because the property-based working groups are their primary tenant engagement mechanism for the properties they own. Another significant "other entities" connection was made between neighborhood leader 1 and core team member 2 to the local YMCA for engaging youth interested in designing and painting the benches. Like Phoenix, it was an artist (specifically, the art teacher at the YMCA) who formed the connection to area youth from the immediate Walnut-Washington-Wardman neighborhood and nearby areas.

## Cross-Site Comparison

- The Phoenix focus group identified the most neighbor-to-neighbor connections and developed the most connections to local businesses.
- The Lansing focus group identified the most nonprofit connections, as well as many neighbor-to-neighbor connections. This group also developed the most new connections to government officials that did not exist before Love Your Block.
- The Boston focus group identified the most connections to government officials and began Love Your Block with the most preexisting connections to government officials.

## Social Cohesion Outcomes

Love Your Block projects can be an effective vehicle for strengthening the emotional and social investment participating residents have in their surrounding neighborhood, increasing their attachment to one another and sense of shared destiny. The potential social cohesion effects experienced by residents who did not participate in the focal projects are less clear, though data suggest that residents of the broader neighborhood modestly benefit from the increases in social cohesion that LYB projects generate over time.

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## BOX 2

### Why Is Social Cohesion Important?

Research shows that social cohesion can benefit communities in times of need and increase their capacity to be efficacious. Literature on resiliency and natural disaster preparedness highlights how communities with stronger social network support and higher levels of cohesion can lead to positive outcomes.<sup>a</sup> In addition, formal methods for building social cohesion and capital can help low-income residents mitigate the harmful effects that living in concentrated poverty can have on one's well-being.<sup>b</sup> Community programs that foster social cohesion can lead to higher city government performance and foster increases in collective efficacy.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Tran et al. 2013; Uchida et al. 2013

<sup>b</sup> Matthew Fowler, "Building Social Capital through Place-Based Lawmaking: Case Studies of Two Afro-Caribbean Communities in Miami—The West Grove and Little Haiti," *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 45, no. 2 (2014): 425–62.

<sup>c</sup> Johnny Goldfinger and Margaret R. Ferguson, "Social Capital and Governmental Performance in Large American Cities," *State and Local Government Review* 41, no. 1 (2009): 25–36; Robert Sampson, "Collective Efficacy Theory: Lessons Learned and Directions for Future Inquiry," in *Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory*, ed. Francis T. Cullen, John Paul Wright, and Kristie R. Blevins (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 149–68.

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### Potential Social Cohesion Effects for People Involved in LYB Projects

In all three focal sites, participants noted the importance of the LYB projects for connecting them to their neighbors. Though the neighborhood leaders were already well known to many participants before the LYB projects, the leaders and other project participants perceived a great benefit in connecting with neighbors they had not previously spoken to or regularly interacted with through LYB project planning and implementation. Across the LYB focus groups, each member knew at least one other LYB neighborhood participant before the project, but many noted how LYB involvement deepened those relationships and allowed them to meet other neighbors. In Lansing, several neighborhood participants credited the Holmes Street Neighborhood Garden and the related LYB enhancement project for facilitating interaction and friendships between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

When asked what he was most proud to see come out of the project, one neighborhood participant said, "To me, it was the connections that were made. It brought a lot of people together to achieve one goal in a positive manner." A Boston city official said these projects bring "together neighbors who knew each other somewhat but didn't really know each other." Similarly, a Phoenix city official noted LYB has "created a structure for [the neighborhood leader] and her group of resident volunteers to organize,"

fostering greater social connectedness among residents. In Lansing, one 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 now. 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!”

Neighborhood-wide events, which were project components in the Hu-O-Te Park Mural and Park Cleanup project in Phoenix and the Waldren Road Park Cleanup in Boston, were viewed as important opportunities to motivate community involvement from neighbors who might not otherwise interact with other residents. Participants remarked that having a one-day event made the project feel like a party and allowed various types of people to bond. The leader of the mural component of the Phoenix focal project (core team member 2 in figure 5) 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.” Youth involvement spiked on the day of the event largely because word of mouth had spread among peers about the opportunity to revitalize a valued hang out spot and to paint the mural alongside the local artist who had conceptualized it.

Love Your Block participants in Phoenix also noted that their culminating one-day event prompted volunteers to move beyond the corner park to help nearby neighbors who appeared to be struggling to keep their yards maintained. One participant stated, “There was a woman who lived across the street from the park who was seven months pregnant and had gotten burned at work. And that family needed to clean up the front yard [because] the city was on their case [and they] believed they would be fined. Another neighbor across the street has a really bad hip, and they hadn’t been able to clean up their easement in the front. We had so many people show up to help with the cleanup project that we just went over to help. It was a very organic thing—we just had that many people and the tools to do it.”

Overall, LYB focus group members pointed to the neighborhood leaders as being key to the social cohesion effects they perceive because these people tend to be the area “movers and shakers” who know how to bring the right people together to plan a project and how to entice new neighborhood participants to get involved.



## Potential Social Cohesion Effects for Residents of the Larger Neighborhood

Data from the non-LYB focus groups in Phoenix and Boston and from other sources close to the focal neighborhoods suggest that residents who were not involved in the LYB projects do not perceive the robust social cohesion effects of the projects that LYB project participants do. When asked if they thought community-level social cohesion had improved since fall 2015 (the approximate project start date), the assessment of non-LYB respondents in Phoenix was mixed. Some said the closeness among community members had improved, while others complained of the neighborhood becoming markedly more divided along income and ethnic lines in recent years. Respondents who believed social cohesion had improved did not tie their impressions to the focal project, with a few respondents being largely unaware of the beautification of the corner park and its new mural.

Disappointment over the focal neighborhood's social cohesion was particularly pronounced at the Boston site, where focus group members were unanimous in their impression that residents had not become more invested in the community and each other since 2015. A few participants thought community cohesion had gotten worse. One Boston non-LYB focus group participant said, "There used to be a lot of community events, and there were a lot more people who were community leaders and would get people together and knock on doors. There isn't that much anymore."

The exception to this lack of alignment in perceptions between LYB and non-LYB neighbors came from the Lansing focal neighborhood. Members of the Lansing non-LYB focus group said they have seen a pronounced uptick in social cohesion, and they gave much of the credit to the Holmes Street Neighborhood School Community Garden and to neighborhood leader 1 who continues to lead community activities and maintain the community garden. Although it is hard to discern how Lansing participants apportion these perceived social cohesion effects between the original garden project or the LYB-sponsored enhancement project, there was evidence that LYB neighborhood participants had sought to draw additional neighbors—even from diverse or marginalized groups—into the effort during the LYB project. One participant said, "Two homeless people would sit in the shade by the garden, and we got to know them and put a name with a face because they are in our community as well, and the garden is also good for them." During the LYB project, these homeless people were given their own plots in the garden and support to maintain them. One city official in Lansing mentioned that LYB has allowed "the capacity of [the neighborhood association] to be built" in ways that galvanize other residents who were not involved in LYB to come out for other projects.

In Boston, the focal LYB project has been key to sparking regular neighborhood events, which residents of the larger neighborhood appreciate. The focal neighborhood enjoyed regular block parties

decades ago, but these stopped before the focal LYB project began. The LYB core neighborhood team drew on the success of the LYB event in Waldren Road Park to restart the tradition. Despite their negative view of social cohesion in the neighborhood, members of the non-LYB focus group spoke appreciatively of the block parties and acknowledged these events to be important vehicles for bringing residents together.

## Possible Challenges to Building Social Cohesion

Love Your Block participants and nonparticipants spoke of challenges to social cohesion that the LYB focal projects had not or could not address, or, in Phoenix, had perhaps even accentuated. Especially in the Phoenix and Boston neighborhoods, residents said that challenges remained, especially around neighborhood change, income, and race and ethnicity.

In Phoenix, city officials and participants had different perspectives on how the LYB project might have interacted with issues from the rapid pace of demographic change and gentrification in the focal neighborhood. Some city officials noted ongoing neighborhood dynamics reflecting gentrification, but that “LYB creates a focal point that brings people together, and the park is something that everyone will use.” Some residents were less optimistic, though, largely because of communication barriers and interpersonal challenges between longtime Latino community members and participants in the LYB project who were mostly white. One neighborhood core team member said,

I think some of the issue [at the beginning of the project] was gentrification on top of a personal conflict between neighbors. But I do have this anxiety about being so involved in the organizational side of things and also recognizing that any positive impact we have is veiled privilege. And the fact that I have access to the LYB grant—I have political access, access to internet. It's part of the struggle of 'how do we [the neighborhood association that sponsored the project] incorporate our neighbors?' We've been working on bilingual outreach, but it's still not representative of the neighborhood.

Another focus group participant noted, “My wife is Hispanic, and she talks to others in the neighborhood, and there's a lot of misunderstanding [about the neighborhood association]. Some of the louder voices on both sides (Latino and white) keep other opinions from being heard. It takes time to get people to be more neighborly.”

Interestingly, the challenges LYB projects may face in promoting social cohesion for changing neighborhoods may have been mirrored by challenges the research team experienced in recruiting a diverse range of focus group participants and other key participants for the Phoenix site. Though

numerous attempts were made to recruit adult Latino residents who were willing to share their views on social cohesion and about the LYB focal project, these attempts were unsuccessful.

Participants from both Boston focus groups, who were all black residents living in Urban Edge affordable housing complexes, had a different perspective on neighborhood change and its relationship to efforts like LYB for promoting social cohesion. Participants in the LYB and non-LYB focus groups acknowledged that signs of gentrification were showing up throughout the larger neighborhood, such as new and usually white residents buying vacant properties and putting lavish homes on them. Focus group participants did not know any of these new residents and did not see them as a threat to their affordable housing complexes or as relevant to tenant efforts, such as the LYB focal project of the Walnut-Washington-Wardman working group. But a few members of the non-LYB focus group expressed concern about what they observed to be a recent influx of Latino immigrants to this once majority-black neighborhood, suggesting that the lack of connection and adherence to the neighborhood and its long-established social norms is the cause of what they perceive to be worsening social cohesion since 2015. In contrast, however, one member of the Boston LYB focus group, a Latina who lives in the Walnut-Washington-Wardman complex and a member of the working group and LYB neighborhood core team, said she perceived relations between black and Latino neighbors as being generally positive. This view was affirmed by other members of the Boston LYB focus group.

Issues of gentrification are not apparent in the Lansing focal neighborhood and were not raised in the Lansing LYB and non-LYB focus groups. Both neighborhood participants and neighbors not involved in the garden or the LYB enhancement project saw these efforts as important mechanisms for revitalizing a neighborhood struggling to counterbalance the blight and disinvestment made so visible by the vacant school. In addition, participants felt that the LYB project provided an opportunity to connect with community members across socioeconomic status. 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.”

## Social Capital Outcomes

At its simplest level, social capital is the resource a social network uses to produce collective action. Key elements of social capital include high-quality social connections and relationships within a community, as well as social organization and cooperation among community members. These elements can lead to

collective action that increases the capital a community has (Fulbright-Anderson and Auspos 2006). The Cities of Service theory of change posits that city leaders can generate impact relevant to mayoral neighborhood revitalization goals by making action-oriented connections to a city's residents at the grassroots level (figure 1). For the focal LYB projects in this study, interviewees attributed the intentional linking process between city officials and neighborhood leaders with boosting the social capital that LYB core team members draw on to make tangible impacts on neighborhood quality of life. Involvement in the LYB focal projects also appears to motivate neighborhood leaders to leverage the enhanced social capital of their core teams in ways that extend beyond completion and maintenance of the LYB projects.

The research team did not find data to suggest that social capital effects spread to neighborhood residents beyond the immediate LYB project leadership circle. This may be because of this study's qualitative nature, which limits the scope of our inquiry. Some evidence suggests that residents who did not participate in LYB projects may still enjoy benefits, over time, from the social capital the core teams develop and wield.

## **Potential Social Capital Effects for People Involved in LYB Projects**

A key factor in the social capital an LYB project produces appears to be the perception it creates among participants that their neighborhood is important to high-level decisionmakers in the city. Numerous LYB core team members expressed feeling empowered by the fact that the LYB program is connected to city hall. In Boston, one of the neighborhood leaders said the LYB project “added more positivity to know that we can make the change and do things. I was so amazed when they were even giving us the grant because it was only certain people that could get it. That made a big difference to us. It felt like we were building up our neighborhood and seeing changes in the things we do. Now, we’re not just a mouthpiece—we’re seeing action. It was a visible expression of our activity.” Although a sense of empowerment is not a direct component of social capital, it seems to fuel collective action for LYB project participants. Therefore, the feeling of empowerment that LYB projects instill in community members appears to make an essential contribution to building neighborhood-level social capital.

The city officials who coordinated the LYB mini-grants in their cities also noted the value of the mayor's office empowering community residents and directly supporting volunteerism in target neighborhoods. One Phoenix city official mentioned, “Each city is a big maze, and people want to know if they’re getting to the right person. LYB has created those connections.” Another Phoenix city official described how LYB forges “a bridge to the communities” from the mayor's office, which adds an

important dimension of social capital in the target neighborhoods. The official went on to say, “It’s like a mechanism for connection that we didn’t have prior. Especially with the AmeriCorps VISTAs on board [to help] with that ongoing dialogue.” Similarly, one Boston city official shared that LYB gave the residents an opportunity to organize themselves “and have a greater opportunity to see the results they want in terms of improvement.”

Gaining a better understanding of who and where to go to for information and resources in a city may be another important social capital effect neighborhood residents accrue from participating in LYB projects. Having a better understanding of available resources likely increases people’s ability to use those resources and may also affect a community’s social organization because it allows residents to more efficiently and effectively stimulate change. In Lansing, residents said they rely on the LYB neighborhood leaders for information about the city and then connect with city officials, as needed. “I would use my community as the first link in the chain of command to addressing a problem,” said one LYB focus group member. Many LYB core team members in the three sites said they never realized how many opportunities are available to receive city support. A Phoenix core team member said, “[The LYB project] got everyone going, ‘Hey, we can do this? We can find grants and call the city and they’ll bring us tools?’ I didn’t know we could do that. I didn’t know the city would help bring us tools so we could do stuff. Because we did that [LYB] project, we learned that we have more resources than we thought.” Phoenix and Lansing core team members also mentioned the importance of the AmeriCorps VISTA members for helping them navigate different parts of city government or connect them to city resources that helped the project.

## THE CENTRALITY OF NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS

The sociograms show that the neighborhood leaders held the most LYB-related connections overall and to city government officials. In the parlance of social network analysis, the neighborhood leaders have “high node centrality.” In all the focal projects, at least one of the two LYB neighborhood leaders had a connection to city officials before the LYB project, a connection these leaders unanimously agreed was strengthened by participating in the LYB process. As one Phoenix core team member put it, “We’re fortunate that we have someone like [the neighborhood leaders] pushing this whole thing.”

In the Lansing and Phoenix focal sites, core team members noted that the two neighborhood leaders often acted as the liaisons between the city and other project participants. This liaison role extended beyond the LYB project and into the project leaders’ community work. For example, in Lansing, neighborhood leader 2 is also the neighborhood liaison to the police. Participants perceived their connection to her as their best means of connecting to public safety officials and described it as another benefit of joining the LYB project. One participant noted, “[neighborhood leader 2] is our police

ears in the community, and even knowing her because of the garden gave me a greater sense of community—even just knowing where to go if I think there might be an issue.” Both Lansing focal project neighborhood leaders confirmed that the LYB project deepened their relationships with Lansing city government, including police officials. In Boston, one city official noted that the LYB process helped reveal communication gaps between even the most engaged neighborhood residents and the city. In response, they “are now trying to come up with the best way [of communicating with resident leaders], even if it’s something like letting them know that if they need more volunteers or flowers, they can reach out to us, and we can try and find volunteers to help them do those types of things.” The ever-evolving nature of the connection between the city and resident participants in LYB projects may suggest a role for capacity building even for already-engaged LYB neighborhood leaders and other core team members.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Often, LYB neighborhood leaders cited the personal connection they had made with city officials because of LYB as the cornerstone of their enhanced social capital. For example, in Boston, preexisting connections to government officials appeared to become more valued by LYB participants because they had become more personal. Unlike in the other two projects, all members of the Boston core team said they had strong preexisting connections to city officials and their state senator, so requesting what they want from city representatives was not new for them. But one of the neighborhood leaders did credit LYB for turning her vague familiarity with a local police officer into an actual relationship with him: “Not too long after [a dangerous incident occurred], a policeman came in to the community and was talking to everyone. And then he came up to me and hugged me. This never would’ve happened before the LYB project. Because I didn’t [really] know him, and now I know him through this forum. And other people are kinda looking around because he’s a big white guy, but it was refreshing to have a policeman come up and hug you.”

### THE ROLE OF CONNECTIONS TO NON-CITY ENTITIES IN BUILDING THE SOCIAL CAPITAL OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN LYB

Although the Cities of Service citizen engagement model focuses on the connection between neighborhood residents and city officials, each focal LYB project made impressive and often powerful connections to other entities, such as nonprofits, area universities, and local businesses. In all the projects, other entities donated tangible resources (e.g., garden supplies, evaluation support, and talents) to the focal projects. There were also unique connections made. In Phoenix, relationships with local businesses, particularly Tuft & Needle, were a distinctive and important aspect of focal project networking. In Boston, the community-based organization Urban Edge cofacilitated the project with the

neighborhood core team. Nonprofit staff 2 played an essential role planning, developing, and executing the LYB project. Urban Edge staff also supported writing the grant application and were liaisons between city officials and LYB neighborhood leaders. In Lansing, community-based organizations did not play the central facilitation role Urban Edge did in Boston, but the Holmes Street School Neighborhood Association strengthened its connections to numerous area nonprofits that donated gardening supplies to the garden enhancement project.

In addition to these connections, *anchor institutions*—or large, place-based organizations that are core fixtures (i.e., unlikely to relocate) in cities and local communities (e.g., hospitals, universities, and religious congregations)—also played important roles in Phoenix and Lansing. State universities participated in LYB project activities at these sites. Arizona State University undergraduates conducted a survey on the day of the park cleanup, and Michigan State University undergraduates volunteered for weeding and garden maintenance in the spring before the planting season began. In Phoenix, the local church participated in the focal project. The church pastor, who attended the LYB focus group, described the church’s decision to get involved: “Our church owns basically a full city block [in the Triangle neighborhood,] and we’re having conversations now about having asset-based community development....There’s a lot of shared values between those who live in our neighborhood, so when you have opportunities to [have] a better park, people can come gather around that.”

#### YOUTH AS A SIGNIFICANT SOURCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The contributions young people made to the LYB projects in Boston and Phoenix were valued by the core teams at these sites because they brought additional creativity, vitality, and diversity to LYB social networks. In Boston, youth created the artwork for the benches and received a \$150 stipend for participation. The art instructor at the YMCA brought young people together from the affordable housing complex and from the broader neighborhood. Youth came into direct contact with core team members when they presented their designs for the benches, and the adults voted on their favorites to put in the park. Similarly, in Phoenix, the artist commissioned to do the mural recruited local and surrounding-area youth to paint the mural at the unveiling event. Because the youth were mostly children from Latino families in the Triangle neighborhood, this also appears to be the primary juncture at which longtime Latino residents and new white residents encountered one another during the Phoenix focal project. In addition, participants in both projects highlighted the ongoing value of the improved parks as resource spaces where young people can gather to hang out safely and for constructive purposes.

## SIGNS OF GROWING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The data collected for this study suggest that social capital built up by the connection city officials make to neighborhood participants in LYB may continue to grow, even after the LYB projects conclude. For two of the three focal neighborhoods, neighborhood leaders and other core team members continue to use their connection to city officials to push new neighborhood goals.

In Phoenix, neighborhood leader 1 brought neighborhood concerns about the danger of crossing the main thoroughfare in Triangle to the attention of mayoral staff: “After that...we got the HAWK system, [a pedestrian crossing alert system]. [That was] energized [by] the LYB project.” Goal achievement now runs in both directions: “And I ran into Mayor Stanton, and he asked how the LYB project was going! Now the city can call us also, and 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.” The Phoenix core team also continues to leverage its connection to the large national business Tuft & Needle, the mattress firm headquartered in Triangle. The company has pledged to provide a funding match to city dollars for the next project the Triangle Neighborhood Association has planned, which is to illuminate the alley that runs adjacent to Hu-O-Te Park.

In Lansing, the Holmes Street School Neighborhood Association is also exercising the social capital it cultivated under the LYB project to enlist support from Lansing officials for their ongoing neighborhood beautification efforts, especially in a new project to revitalize an unsightly freeway overpass. Evidence of the influence the group may now wield is offered by one Lansing city official, who observed the residents are “starting to do regular cleanups under the bridge, and it’s really spreading to other portions of their neighborhood, and that’s allowed them to be a more credible voice in this discussion about what’s happening with the [vacant] building in their neighborhood.” In addition, neighborhood core team members continue to connect with partner nonprofits for garden support and to use other services provided by these entities. One core team member sought first-time homebuyer counseling through a nonprofit in 2016 after connecting with the organization through the project. And the neighborhood leaders regularly attend community leadership trainings offered by a partner nonprofit and bring along an LYB core team member so she can take the lead on future neighborhood projects.

The Walnut-Washington-Wardman working group does not seem to be engaging its connections to city officials. But the group is advocating with Urban Edge and WinnCompanies Management to refurbish out-of-date laundry rooms in the building complex, a project that is highly valued by their fellow tenants. Although this effort leverages relationships with landlord partners rather than city



officials, this effort may also indicate growing social capital among LYB core team members on behalf of their focal neighborhood.

### POTENTIAL THREATS TO ENDURING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The neighborhood leaders appear to play a pivotal role in brokering support from city leaders into the social capital funds of the LYB-related social networks. Although this leader-to-other-influencers connection is hardly a unique community-level dynamic, this study may shed light on the challenge this pattern might pose to long-term banking of social capital by neighborhood groups when their leaders move away or burn out. The Phoenix and Boston sites offer insights into this issue.

During conversations with the Phoenix neighborhood leaders, it became apparent that both intend to ease out of their positions with the neighborhood association. Neighborhood leader 1 has already moved out of the neighborhood because of family needs, and neighborhood leader 2 is increasingly absent from community meetings because of work and travel. Although core team member 1 appears to be the obvious person to take over, she is involved in a high-pressure and time-consuming career. Neighborhood leader 1 said, “My big fear would be that the work we’ve put in over the last couple of years and our neighborhood meetings kind of ended around the time I moved out because [leader 2] and I were the core duo. I was writing the grants, and he was helping go to make things happen.”

In Boston, the leadership succession problem appears to be different. The neighborhood leaders show no signs of retiring from the Walnut-Wardman-Washington working group, and, even if they did, core team members 1 and 2 appear to be capable replacements. Passing on social capital does not lie in immediate leadership succession *per se*, but rather in the limited social cohesion this small LYB network has generated in the first place. Per the sociogram, Boston LYB focus group participants, who were also the four core team members, identified connections to the fewest LYB participants beyond themselves, even on the day of the LYB unveiling event for the refurbished park benches and other amenities. (Numerous people arrived for the neighborhood party that day, but few were involved in the park cleanup.) Given the apparent lack of “roll up your sleeves” energy that the Boston focal project could muster from residents, the social capital this group appears to wield could diminish easily because there are so few neighbors capable of calling upon it

Interestingly, the social capital held by the core team for the Boston focal project may be the greatest for any of the three projects, primarily because of the robust city and state connections the two neighborhood leaders have built up through their other organizing roles for the neighborhood before LYB started. The neighbors in the non-LYB focus group identified the lack of a crosswalk on a street adjacent to the Waldren Road Park as a serious safety hazard for residents but were frustrated

by their inability to get city attention paid to this issue by calling the Boston “311” line, the standard procedure for calling in city help. If the links between these people and LYB core team members were stronger, city officials they needed would likely be contacted directly. This surprising juxtaposition of weak social cohesion and strong social capital may have implications for how Cities of Service and its partners might think about developing future projects.

## **Potential Social Capital Effects for Residents of the Larger Neighborhood**

Although it was hard to discern social capital effects beyond the immediate networks of people who had come together around the LYB mini-grant opportunity, LYB projects might have generated greater social control (a form of social capital) for residents of the broader focal neighborhoods. Increased community ownership of public space in the focal neighborhoods, which is related to the exercise of social control, is a strongly perceived outcome of the focal projects by those who participated in the projects and even by non-LYB participants.

For example, speaking about the reciprocal benefits that Lansing’s Holmes Street School neighborhood enjoys from including diverse participants, one Lansing core team member said inclusion “prevents people from wanting to cause trouble. Word has gotten around about the garden, not to mess with it, and I think that’s because of the homeless gardeners.” In Phoenix, one core team member said the focal project “started a form of ‘community’ that wasn’t there before. We all know each other, but there were separate factions, and [the project] created a more cohesive group of people that we now know we can rely upon if we need to take action for something. It also introduced us to people we didn’t know who may not want to be involved but want to know what’s going on. There’s a lot more walking around, and people are more likely to say hi to their neighbors. They recognize your face a lot more. It lets you know that people who have lived there for a long time are more in focus.”

# Potential Impact Outcomes of Love Your Block

One objective of this study was to determine how LYB neighborhood participants perceived changes in city services, public safety, and other policies since the LYB project began. Resident interviewees and focus group participants could not pinpoint precise changes in city-level policies or services they could link to LYB. But they were fairly consistent in identifying four key results that cut in various ways across both city and community levels: The first two outcomes—increased community togetherness and increased access to city officials and services—are discussed above. The other two outcomes—increased public safety and increased ownership and respect for public space—are discussed below.

## Increased Public Safety

Love Your Block neighborhood participants in all three focal projects believe that crime has decreased in the focal neighborhoods since 2015, but they link this drop in crime to several factors (e.g., an improving economy) rather than just to the focal project. To the extent LYB participants linked their perception of improved public safety to the focal projects, they typically cited more people being engaged in positive activities at the improved garden and revitalized parks as the reason. One participant from Boston said that the project put “more eyes on the street,” a term made famous by Jane Jacobs (1992) and urbanist literature, 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. Crime literature shows that a decrease in collective efficacy predicts increased homicide (Morenoff et al. 2001), validating the interviewees’ perception that community safety may have increased in response to the enhanced social cohesion and social capital their projects brought to their neighborhoods. Several participants also noted new and positive connections to police officers on account of their work on an LYB focal project. But no participants made a direct link between these new relationships and the perceived drop in crime.

Frequently, participants associated the beautification of public space with increased safety. In Lansing, a participant described the change, saying, “While [community members] always liked living in the neighborhood, outsiders wouldn’t come visit them. This [garden] made [the neighborhood] feel safer. People did not used to have a reason to stick around in that neighborhood, but they do now with

the garden.” Similarly, in Boston, one city official remarked how the newly cleaned-up LYB project site “gave people the chance to meet in a safe location or have a BBQ instead of doing so out on the sidewalk or in a place where the city would not want them to do that.”

In Phoenix and Lansing, LYB focus groups members believed the LYB project helped deter fights that previously occurred in the park and vacant lot and decreased the frequency of people experiencing homelessness sleeping at the project sites. Members of the Phoenix focus group agreed when one member said, “There used to be homeless people sleeping in the park and lots of fighting, but this has decreased since the [LYB project].”

For residents who did not participate in the LYB focal projects, perceptions about public safety effects were more mixed. Non-LYB participants in Lansing were unequivocal in their assessment that the LYB project and preceding work on the Holmes Street School Garden were dominant factors in making the neighborhood feel safer. In Phoenix, non-LYB participants agreed that the project had made the corner park more safe but that public safety was increasing in the neighborhood for other reasons. In Boston, a few non-LYB focus group participants thought the neighborhood had become less safe since 2015, but other participants were unsure about this. These views were not associated with the Waldren Road Park cleanup because non-LYB focus group members were unaware of that effort.

## Increased Ownership and Respect for Public Space

In all three projects, LYB participants and non-LYB participants agree that they see other neighborhood residents assuming more ownership over the revitalized parks and improved garden and treating these spaces with more respect. These perceptions appear to be closely related to the sense of increased social control. In Phoenix, one participant noted that before the project, the park wall had “been graffitied over the years...but it hasn’t been tagged once since the mural was created. [The LYB artist’s] murals rarely ever get tagged. It’s almost like a respect.”

In Boston, community ownership seems to have extended beyond the people involved in the LYB bench-painting project, at least in one notable instance. A resident who parks his motorcycle adjacent to the park had met the YMCA artist who worked with youth to paint benches one day when she was giving the benches some finishing



touches shortly after the LYB event. Months later, the resident noticed the paint deteriorating and reached out to the artist via Facebook to ask her to come back and “bless [the neighborhood] again.” This story illustrates the sense of ownership some residents may feel toward the space even though they did not participate in the LYB process, including a desire to see the revitalized spaces maintained after the LYB project has ended.

The literature on community ownership validates participants’ perception of increased use and care for their revamped public spaces. Community participation practices in designing and developing urban public space can provide residents an increased sense of attachment to the space and results in spaces that are better tailored to residents’ needs (CABE Space 2009; Ismail and Said 2015).

## Potential Relationship between Social Connectedness and Impact Outcomes of Love Your Block

The data collected for this study validates the Cities of Service citizen engagement model (figure 1). The connections the LYB program forges between city leaders and citizens at the neighborhood level appear to be a powerful catalyst for collective action by LYB neighborhood core teams and their networks. The interest and framing support provided by the mayor’s offices, as well as the LYB funds and other resources a city might contribute, appear to be factors that motivate neighborhood leaders to connect their neighbors and leverage old and new social capital on behalf of community revitalization.

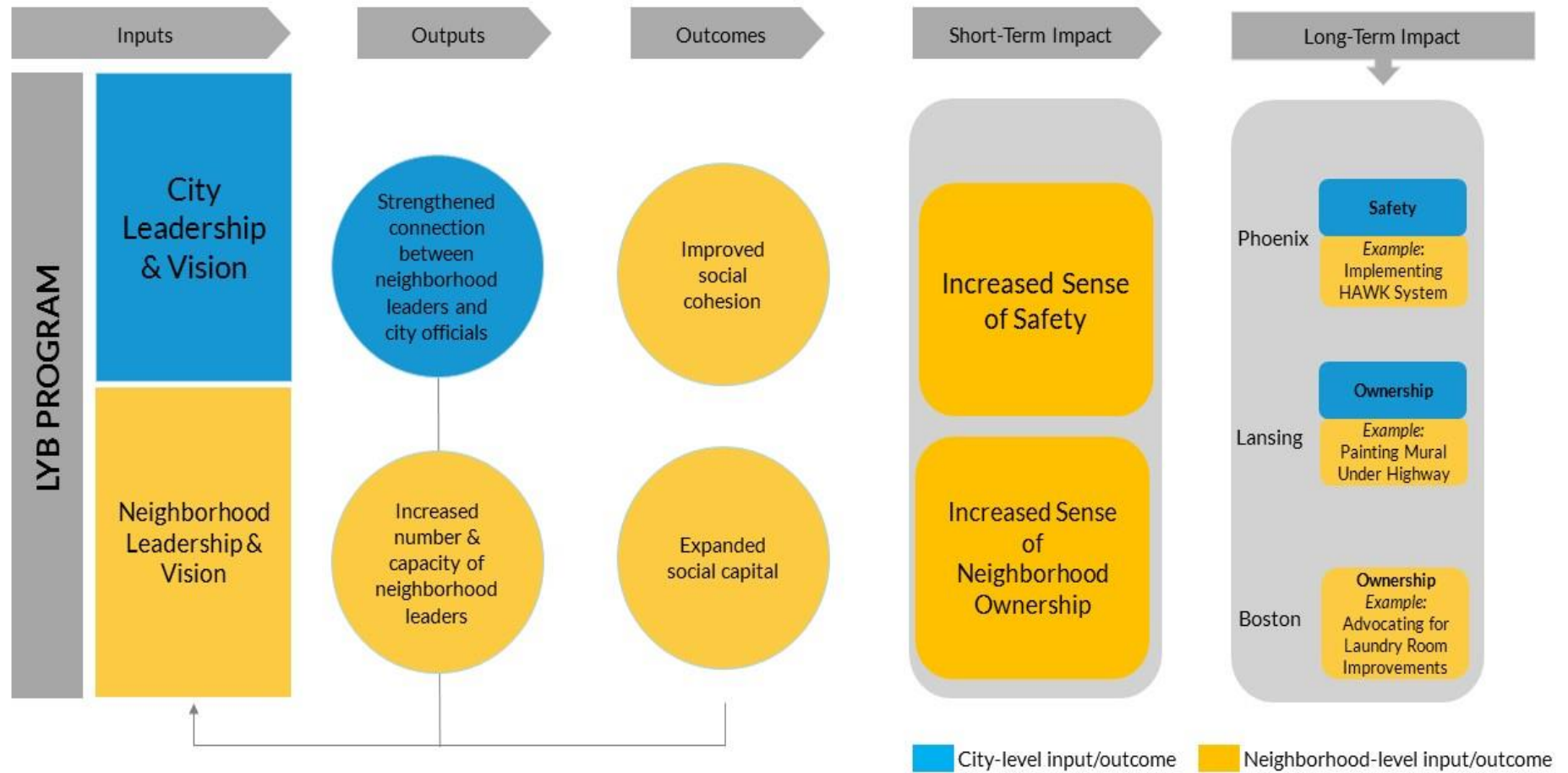
In Boston, core team members believe that receiving the LYB mini-grant conferred credibility upon them with other neighborhood residents and entities, motivating them to activate their considerable social capital with government officials in deeper ways. In Phoenix, the LYB project was the primary basis for forming the Triangle Neighborhood Association and its direct connections to city officials and local businesses. In Lansing, core team members and participants believe the community- and city-level connections they fostered through LYB have expanded their capability to address long-standing community disinvestment. One Lansing neighborhood leader said, “Every year, we have tried to do at least one project [as a neighborhood association], but with the grant money, we were able to do ALL of the projects.”

In addition, all three LYB teams are pursuing new projects, following the loop of trust and sustained engagement in the civic engagement model. One Phoenix LYB focus group member said, “LYB is what started everybody saying let’s do other projects” (e.g., a shade tree project, a community garden).

Although the citizen engagement model correctly depicts the important role city leaders play in helping citizens tackle neighborhood revitalization problems, it may underrepresent the importance of neighborhood-level leaders. This study shows that crucial LYB inputs include LYB program resources and sustained contributions from both city and neighborhood leaders, who organize their fellow citizens to participate (figure 8). These inputs produce links between city and neighborhood leaders and increase local leadership capacity, which produces improved social cohesion and social capital outcomes at the neighborhood level that produce short-term impacts on neighborhood safety and ownership. Finally, the momentum catalyzed by the cycle appears to motivate LYB leaders to pursue new projects, leading to additional impacts on neighborhood ownership and safety.

FIGURE 8

Love Your Block (LYB) Outcomes Map





# Recommendations

## Promote Leadership Development Strategies

The momentum Love Your Block projects create may not be perpetual (i.e., continue to flow along the trust and engagement loop shown in the Cities of Service citizen engagement model) unless city officials nurture current and rising neighborhood leaders' capacity. Many interviews and focus group conversations ended without an answer to a research team question about what would happen to core team efforts if the current neighborhood leaders step down. The executive director of a Lansing community organization summed up the challenge: "There's something we refer to here as 'the president for life.' For organized neighborhood groups, it's really critical to develop a deep bench of leaders. One neighborhood association has a bylaw that requires the president change every two years. What that means is that 15 years after the organization was established, they have a bench of about 30 people who are capable of taking on projects, heading up a special meeting, and acting in a leadership capacity again. That's something that the Holmes Street School community really will have to deal with." Strategies for building neighborhood leadership capacity could be seeded across LYB cities by promoting webinar exchanges among LYB city leaders. Lansing supports a program called LiNCS (Leaders in Neighborhood + Community Service), a peer-to-peer network that LYB neighborhood leaders are required to join. LiNCS offers a weekly update email and monthly meetings for neighborhood leaders across the city. One LYB neighborhood leader said of LiNCs, "It was inspiring, and I enjoyed that part. It really opened up the inter-neighborhood connection. And it actually gives other neighborhoods ideas, thinking, 'oh, they did that in this neighborhood? Maybe a few years down the road we could try it here!'" In addition, Lansing offers an annual "Love Lansing" event, organized by the Neighborhood Services Department to recognize the efforts of neighborhood leaders and watch captains on behalf of the city.

## Ensure Project Maintenance

In Lansing, the participation of gardeners who work the soil has made the project self-sustaining. In Boston, however, the park is falling into modest disrepair already, and questions about whether the city or Urban Edge is responsible for its maintenance are met with disparate answers, suggesting that the needed repairs may not come soon. This is surprising because the Boston LYB project application asks

mini-grant applicants to include a plan for sustaining the project with city staff, noting that projects should be easy to keep up and not require volunteers to be the only source of maintenance. The research team also observed at least one other project (not the focal project) in Phoenix where a “ribbon-bombed” fence had become sodden and soiled. Just as the Lansing project has become a powerful symbol of social cohesion and social control for the neighborhood, LYB projects might become symbols of social disorder if they fall into disuse and disrepair after the project periods conclude.

## Experiment with Connections to Other Entities

Cities of Service encourages city leaders to make connections between Love Your Block projects and other entities, particularly nonprofits, for helping citizens secure the in-kind resources and talent they need to implement projects. Cities of Service could build on this technical assistance by supporting or funding city and neighborhood leaders to work together to develop innovative connections to specific organizations that they strategically target for the high levels of expertise, resources, or other capacity they can bring to LYB projects. All the focal sites in this study offer examples of the powerful results targeted partnerships with high-capacity organizations might yield. In Phoenix, a community-minded national mattress firm offers cash and in-kind resources (e.g., meeting space and catering) to the LYB core team for its next-phase projects when new neighborhood leaders are ready to take them on. In Lansing, Michigan State University offers agricultural expertise and trained student labor for enhancing the community garden. In Boston, Urban Edge offers a substantial organizational support structure to the Waldren Road Park neighborhood core team. But the paradoxical juxtaposition of apparently weak social cohesion with strong social capital at the Boston site may offer an important lesson on the importance of being strategic about achieving the right balance between other entities and neighborhood leadership. The Boston focal project sociogram is striking in that the neighborhood core team members asserted no connections to the LYB city leaders. Because the Boston core team has numerous other connections to city and state officials, this disconnection may be because of the strong intermediary role Urban Edge played in this project—that is, the nonprofit “layer” came between LYB-involved citizens and the city leaders designated to support them. Because Urban Edge is an effective and mission-driven organization, city LYB leaders might consider encouraging them to use their standard working group structure to support and develop new neighborhood leaders, while promoting seasoned leaders (e.g., the focal project core team) to recruit and mentor these new teams or reach out beyond the bounds of their properties to take on issues of wider neighborhood concern. The vision and motivation of the neighborhood leaders for the Boston focal project is ripe for taking LYB to new

heights. One said, “I feel like this project was a catalyst and the next stepping stone to take [the community] where they want to go. I know residents are still involved and enjoying [the revitalized pocket park]. I occasionally get phone calls, and people say they’re still using it. It’s a stepping stone in the right direction of where they want to be and know they can go towards. And it builds better relationships. Not only between neighbors, but also law enforcement, property management, because everyone was in it together.”

## Foster Intergenerational Connections

The robust, hands-on youth participation was a striking aspect of the LYB focal projects in Phoenix and Boston. Love Your Block focus group participants in both cities were proud of the youth participation and considered it an important aspect of the social cohesion and social capital they were building. In Phoenix, it was clear that youth participants formed the only real link the project had to longtime Latino families in the Triangle neighborhood. Likewise, the neighborhood leaders for the Boston core team are highly regarded elders in the focal neighborhood, who brought years of built-up civic connections and community respect to the table. Mini-grant incentives that promote direct intergenerational engagement and cross-leadership may help break through the challenges to social cohesion discussed in this study and unleash new sources of social capital in communities.

## Explore Outcome Sustainability Strategies

The LYB program is a successful mechanism for fueling the first cycle in the loop of engagement and trust depicted in the citizen engagement model (figure 1). But to sustain this initial momentum and make the loop self-perpetuating, Cities of Service may need to develop program components that combine or cut across the recommendations offered above. Grantees might be invited to build in youth leader apprenticeship elements or, like Boston, require that neighborhood core teams work with city leaders to develop a plan for project maintenance. Additionally, Cities of Service might offer to fund optional “Take It Higher” mini-grants for cities and neighborhood core teams that wish to pursue successor projects that pursue more ambitious goals, use diverse new leaders, engage the community more broadly in setting project goals, or support neighborhood teams in pursuing larger funding sources, such as Community Development Block Grant funds, or high-capacity partners, such as local businesses. In this regard, the Lansing focal project and the social cohesion and social capital effects it appears to have transmitted to the broader community is an exemplar. Rather than fuel an entirely new

effort, the Lansing LYB project provided a critical burst of energy and capacity to the Holmes Street School Neighborhood Association. The resulting momentum strengthened the existing garden project and went on to fuel the new overpass beautification effort. And finally, Cities of Service might offer grantees technical assistance and convening support for engaging their highest-capacity neighborhood core teams to contribute to developing and implementing citywide civic engagement plans, expanding the citizen engagement model loop to include a pathway by which neighborhood leaders become city leaders.

# Conclusion

The research team noted that the Love Your Block brand and many of its programmatic features are being adopted as the citywide label for ongoing citizen engagement initiatives in Boston and Phoenix. Love Your Block concepts may be fomenting systemic changes at the city level in addition to the neighborhood-focused outcomes in this report. Although beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to consider how these rebrandings may also signal nascent city leader recognition of greater two-way city-to-neighborhood social cohesion and capital building. City leaders are inviting citizens to Love Your Block together with their elected and appointed public servants, with all the trust and mutual engagement that such an invitation implies. If this observation bears out, it may bode well for the momentum and long-term outcomes that LYB programs may have sparked.

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*Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.*

—Henry Ford

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