



STRATEGY BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How is Nebraska's Community Opportunity Map increasing access to and use of timely, high-quality data at the local level?

A [growing body of research](#) suggests that community conditions (such as resident turnover, high child-to-adult ratios, and concentrated poverty) have an impact on the rates of child abuse and neglect in communities, separate from the influence of individual and family characteristics. As such, local data can provide policymakers and stakeholders critical information about the strengths and needs of a given geographic area, which they can use to promote the health and well-being of children and families within their communities. Community-level data can inform **strategic intervention and investment, service planning, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.**

To assist communities in easily accessing high-quality local data, Casey Family Programs launched the web-based, national [Community Opportunity Map](#) in 2018. Using [American Community Survey](#) data, this online tool allows users to explore indicators associated with child maltreatment in user-defined geographic areas (broken down to census tract or block group). The map also allows users to explore **aspects of communities that are associated with safe children and strong families.** With the passage of the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), states and



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tribes have an unprecedented opportunity to rethink how they serve children and families, making it more important than ever to have tools to understand the needs of local communities, determine the populations most at risk, and identify specific evidence-based practices to meet those needs and keep children safe with their families whenever possible.

The [Nebraska Children and Families Foundation](#) (Nebraska Children) and the strong network of organizations it partners with have long understood the value of using data to evaluate community conditions. For more than a decade, the foundation has been examining community-level indicators to determine where to invest in programs and monitor the impact of those investments, and it has been disseminating community-level data to its partners statewide to help them better understand the assets and issues facing their own local communities.

In 2019, Nebraska Children sought to further enhance the use and availability of data by developing its own [Community Opportunity Map](#). To do this, the foundation facilitated a workgroup representing a range

of organizations including the state university system, the nonprofit sector, and state government.¹ The map enhances the foundation's previous work by making data available on-demand, ultimately empowering people across the state to identify and address the needs in their own communities. The map serves as a critical resource for the [Bring Up Nebraska](#) project, a statewide five-sector partnership that includes government, philanthropy, higher education, business, and the community. Bring Up Nebraska supports families and communities through the use of locally developed strategies using a [protective factors framework](#). In addition to data from the American Community Survey, the map includes state data from the [Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services \(DHHS\), Division of Children and Family Services](#); [Nebraska DHHS, Division of Public Health](#); [Nebraska Foster Care Review Office](#); [Nebraska Department of Education](#); [Nebraska Crime Commission](#); and the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#).

The map includes a variety of indicators to understand the well-being of children and families throughout the state.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY WELL-BEING INDICATORS (FROM NEBRASKA'S STATE DATA SETS)	HEALTHY COMMUNITY INDICATORS AND DEMOGRAPHICS (FROM AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work hours required per week to afford rent for a two-bedroom home • Children in single parent households • Teen births • High school graduation rate • Juvenile arrests • Proficiency in English Language Arts • Children below poverty level • Children in out-of-home care • Child abuse/neglect reports • Infant deaths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacant housing • Housing cost burden • Resident turnover • Single mother families • Child-to-adult ratio • People 65 and over • Unemployment rate • Adults with high school diploma/GED • Poverty rate • Population • Distribution of population under age 5 by race/ethnicity

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Implementation considerations

Nebraska's Community Opportunity Map built on years of groundwork that included time to engage partners, identify indicators, and develop capacity for using data. This ensured that the map would include the most relevant indicators, that partners statewide were invested in contributing to and using the map, and that there was capacity to build and sustain the project. Several implementation considerations are presented below.

Invest time in building the foundation

Nebraska Children relied on a solid foundation — representing over a decade of work among partners throughout the state — in successfully launching its Community Opportunity Map.² In 2006, Nebraska Children publicized a “call to action ... to improve and enhance child well-being ... by promoting and aligning actions with measurable key indicators over time at the state, regional, and community level.”³ As a first step, Nebraska Children convened partners from throughout the state to develop a set of indicators to be tracked and reported on regularly.⁴

The goals for the call to action included:⁵

- Achieve a common vision for child well-being across agencies.
- Identify and ameliorate inefficiencies, gaps, and duplication in services associated with key indicators.
- Take a collaborative approach to improving the key set of indicators.

- Work to uniformly collect and strengthen data for indicators.
- Use data to develop new programs and policies, and improve allocation and use of resources to maximize intended outcomes.
- Institutionalize the use of indicators/data in communities and Nebraska's program and policy development.
- Ultimately, see a measurable improvement in child well-being outcomes (including safety, health, school readiness and success, and supportive quality environments).

Over the next decade, Nebraska Children began tracking the indicators and disseminating findings annually to its partners, and developed and refined how to present data in a meaningful way to incite action.

Build relationships among data experts

The organizations that partnered with Nebraska Children on its Community Opportunity Map all have staff with high levels of data-related expertise. Many of the data experts knew each other through work on prior projects. By the time Nebraska Children decided to create its map, a cadre of data-savvy individuals from a number of organizations already existed. Those individuals became invested in the project and contributed their knowledge about available data sources.

Engage community leaders and stakeholders

Approximately 300 local and state leaders participated in the initial process of selecting indicators. Nebraska

This was a great example of state and national partners coming together to increase access to timely, relevant, high-quality data.

— CATHERINE BROWN,
ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION, NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION

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Children focused on having the right organizations involved, not just those that already had relationships with one another, but also ones that could represent varied and even divergent points of view. Going forward, Nebraska Children is interested in exploring how to include an even more diverse set of stakeholders.

Establish criteria for selecting indicators

The original selection of indicators was determined using the [Results-Based Accountability™](#) framework. A neutral facilitator helped Nebraska Children and its partners select the best indicators to track over time, keeping in mind the following criteria:

- **Communication Power:** Does it have a common interpretation across domains? Is it understandable to all?
- **Proxy Power:** Does the indicator build on other measures? Is the link supported by research? Is it useful at both the state and community levels?
- **Data Power:** Does it have established validity and reliability? Can data on the indicator be obtained easily? Is it cost effective?
- **Action Power:** Is it considered significant by the public and policymakers? Does it have a story? Is it viable in today's political climate? Does it lead to action within five years?

More recently, this same set of criteria was used to refine the set of original indicators. Comprehensive

information about each of the indicators incorporated in Nebraska's Community Opportunity Map is included in a detailed data dictionary.

Select an appropriate vendor

Although a number of vendors offer community mapping platforms, Nebraska Children and its partners chose one ([Community Attributes](#)) that developed the platform used in the Casey Family Programs map. Nebraska Children benefited from working with a vendor that had development experience in this niche area, and understood its needs and priorities.

Use of local geographic data

Nebraska's Community Opportunity Map illustrates where families and children are thriving or at risk, by county, state, DHHS service areas, and district court region. For children and families at risk, the map specifies the issue or issues with which they struggle, such as juvenile arrest rates or teen birth rates. Understanding these issues at the local level helps Nebraska's communities **engage in continuous quality improvement and make data-informed decisions about resource allocation, service delivery, emergency planning, and other policies that affect families.**

Localized data also have been invaluable to the [Bring Up Nebraska](#) project, which is committed to promoting consistent measurement and data-sharing practices.

Instead of pulling out sheets of paper that have all kind of data points, we'll just direct [community collaboratives] to the Community Opportunity Map and ask, 'Where are you trying to move the needle? How does this all align to these indicators that you're trying to change for the children and families in your community?'

— CATHERINE BROWN,
ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION, NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION

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[We are] arming the community collaboratives to help educate their representatives about the data and the needs of their community when they're making decisions.

—JENNIFER SKALA,
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION

In addition, [community collaboratives](#) in Nebraska have used the map to help inform their stakeholders—including state legislators—about specific needs. As each community collaborative engages in strategic planning around its community-based prevention activities (using a [toolkit](#) developed by Nebraska Children), stakeholders are being directed to the Community Opportunity Map for quick access to timely and relevant data, instead of having to pore through stacks of paper as in the past.

Moving forward

Nebraska Children and its partners have future plans for the Community Opportunity Map, including:

- Expanding the use of a toolkit to help partners understand and use the map. In addition,

project leaders created a dissemination plan and are conducting trainings with various audiences throughout the state (for example, the Court Improvement Project and State Data Users Conference).

- Identifying and potentially incorporating additional indicators of thriving communities, such as availability of high-quality child care.
- Building additional functionality to present data longitudinally, allowing users to examine trends over time.
- Exploring the possibility of providing the data by additional geographic regions, such as by legislative district or school district.

- 1 Stakeholders involved in the development of the Community Opportunity Map include Boys Town, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Foster Care Review Office, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Nebraska Court Improvement Project, Nebraska Department of Education, Schmeeckle Research, Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Voices for Children.
- 2 Based on conversations with Catherine Brown, Rachel Meier, Jennifer Skala, and Brenda Weyers, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, on September 18, 2019.
- 3 From Call to Action Board of Directors meeting, March 25, 2009.
- 4 Partners included University of Nebraska Foundation, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, University of Nebraska Medical Center, University of Nebraska - Lincoln, University of Nebraska - Lincoln Center for At-Risk Children, University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Boys Town, Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Crime Commission, and Voices for Children in Nebraska.
- 5 From Call to Action Board of Directors meeting, March 25, 2009.

Casey family programs

