As public health continues to advance population level improvements to the nation’s health, there are many pockets where general population level strategies fall short.\textsuperscript{1,2,3,4} This is particularly true for communities of color and for communities where lower incomes prevail. In many of these areas, life expectancies continue to lag behind national averages. For many, the mantra, your zip code may be more important than your genetic code, rings true when using a social determinants of health frame. Indeed, where we live affects how long we will live.

**Organized Communities are Powerful Communities are Resilient Communities**

While population level efforts to improve health are less effective in our nation’s most vulnerable neighborhoods, strong evidence demonstrates that community organizing is a viable strategy for advancing health justice. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded *Communities Creating Healthy Environments* shows that authentic efforts to improve health, led by community organizers, are a viable complement to the general public health population level efforts.\textsuperscript{5} To increase the effectiveness of community organizers that seek to advance health justice, reliable, accessible, and useful data is needed to identify health priorities and disparities, develop campaign strategies, and evaluate how organizers are making a difference.

The Data for Social Change (D4SC) project sought to understand how grassroots organizations and community organizers across the United States use online data resources to advance their organizing and policy advocacy work to support a culture of health and social change.

**Understanding the Landscape: How Grassroots Organizers Use Data for Social Change**

Organizers use data to advance their work every day—whether downloading local public health data, analyzing data that they or their communities collect themselves, or applying knowledge of the local context to organizing and advocacy activities.

**Familiarity with Online Data Platforms**

To better understand what types of data organizers are using to support their work, Praxis asked participants to indicate their familiarity with 44 different online data platforms, data mapping tools, and databases.

A common theme across regions was unfamiliarity with the vast majority of expansive national data platforms. While findings revealed that participants do not regularly use the larger scale data resources that were listed, many still use alternative data resources in their work. Commonly used sources included community-level data, such as local public health data; education and school district data; self-collected environmental screening data; and constituency-collected survey data.

Participants were most familiar with the following data resources:

- **49%** Decennial Census of Population & Housing
- **41%** American Community Survey
- **33%** Environmental Justice Screening Tool (EJSCREEN)
Opportunities for Improved Data Use
The following describes areas for which organizers find data application the most useful:

• **Educating and mobilizing communities with data**—Several groups use data to educate and pique the interest of community members on local health or environmental threats. Community-driven data is particularly useful to organizers’ leadership development efforts because it is planned with the community in mind, and truly reflects the community members interests, capacities and the local context.

• **Localized data that is disaggregated enough for analysis at the census block level** can be used to inform funders and agencies of localized community needs, and to generate support for local policy initiatives that address those needs.

• **Understanding data for self-evaluation and improvement**—Organizers noted that integrating data collection and analysis into their work would help to improve internal evaluation, uplift work already being done, and advance the overall footprint of the organization.

• **Data and storytelling go hand-in-hand**—Participants highlighted the value of storytelling as vital for improving community conditions and mobilizing community members around specific issues. Including data in the stories that organizers already share helps to strengthen their narratives. It also helps to secure buy-in from policy-makers and funders, who may be unconvinced by stories alone.

• **Garnering funding and resources**—Whether related to environmental health disparities, immigration issues, or the over-policing of youth and adults of color, data that exposes inequitable community burdens helps to make the case for crucial funding to support the longevity of key programs and advocacy efforts.

Diving Deeper: Grassroots Data “Super-Users”
In addition to hosting three regional learning circles, Praxis also coordinated a follow-up session to better understand how organizations with dedicated research or data staff use a smaller subset of data platforms. We called these participants “data super-users” and this section highlights findings from that meeting.

- Expand high-speed Internet infrastructure to increase access to data platforms, especially in rural areas.
- Consider data platforms’ cell phone accessibility to increase access in places with limited Internet infrastructure.
- Increase technical support for navigating online databases and tools to improve data use.
- Encourage students of color/low-income students to enter the data/tech field by funding programs to support learning.
- Provide data- and research-focused scholarships to colleges/universities that support students of color (e.g. HBCUs).
- Provide support for internal database creation/management in organizations with more limited resources.
- Provide staff training on conducting participatory research and evaluation.
- Create a strong culture of data use so organizations can access, analyze and use their own data, even if funding ends.
- Recognize organizers as partners, rather than subjects, in the data collection process for richer, more authentic data.
- Build community capacity to collect data by teaching the skills/techniques needed for stronger data collection in the future.
Recommendations for the Public Health Field and Funders

- **Provide ongoing and specific data trainings** to increase organizers’ ability to use data to organize, advocate, and measure the impact of their work.

- **Seek community organizer input when designing data platforms.** Garnering organizers’ input will ensure that the data platforms are effective in helping to advance community goals.

- **Build trusted partnerships between researchers and community organizers.** Creating a mutual understanding will enable researchers to work with community organizers, strengthening the work of both parties.

- **Partner with community organizations to collect data at local levels.**

- **Disaggregate data to create more meaningful levels of analysis and equitable access to resources.**

- **Create community-driven data collection methods and best practices.** Data collection methods need to align with local community contexts for the data to be relevant and useful to advance community goals. Supporting and developing effective community-based participatory research models is one way to ensure this alignment.

- **Hold space for shared-learning and networking opportunities.** Use the process of data collection to increase capacity of community members and increase the strength and resiliency of coalitions and networks. Avoid mining the community for information without leaving something meaningful behind.

This research was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views and recommendations in this brief belong to The Praxis Project and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation. For more information, contact Xavier Morales at xavier [at] thepraxisproject.org
About The Praxis Project

The Praxis Project is a national organization that works in partnership with national, tribal, regional, state, and local partners to achieve health justice for all communities. Our mission is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and our communities. Praxis supports policy advocacy and local organizing as part of a comprehensive strategy for change. We emphasize developing fields of work in ways that encourage multi-level trans-disciplinary learning and collaboration across issues, across the country and across the globe. National, multi-site initiatives are a core part of our work as they operate as “laboratories” where we learn and share lessons for application in related fields to help us collectively move the work of health justice further, faster.

To learn more about our work, visit [www.thepraxisproject.org](http://www.thepraxisproject.org) or follow us on Twitter (@praxis_project) and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com).