



# THE CIVIC INFORMATION INDEX USER GUIDE

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*A roadmap for using data to understand civic health and journalism's role in affecting positive change in communities*

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# Welcome Message

We're so glad you're here. This guide is your starting point for using the Civic Information Index—a tool designed to help you better understand the civic health of your community.

The Index shows how access to news, local participation, equity, and opportunity are all connected—and how strong information ecosystems play a key role in helping communities thrive.

Whether you're a journalist, nonprofit leader, civic organizer, or funder, this guide is built for you. Inside, you'll find helpful steps, tools, and questions to make sense of the data, explore what's happening locally, and take action based on what you learn.

Let's get started.



**-The Listening Post Collective Team**

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***This is not about journalism in isolation. We're building a better house, and this is the first floor.***

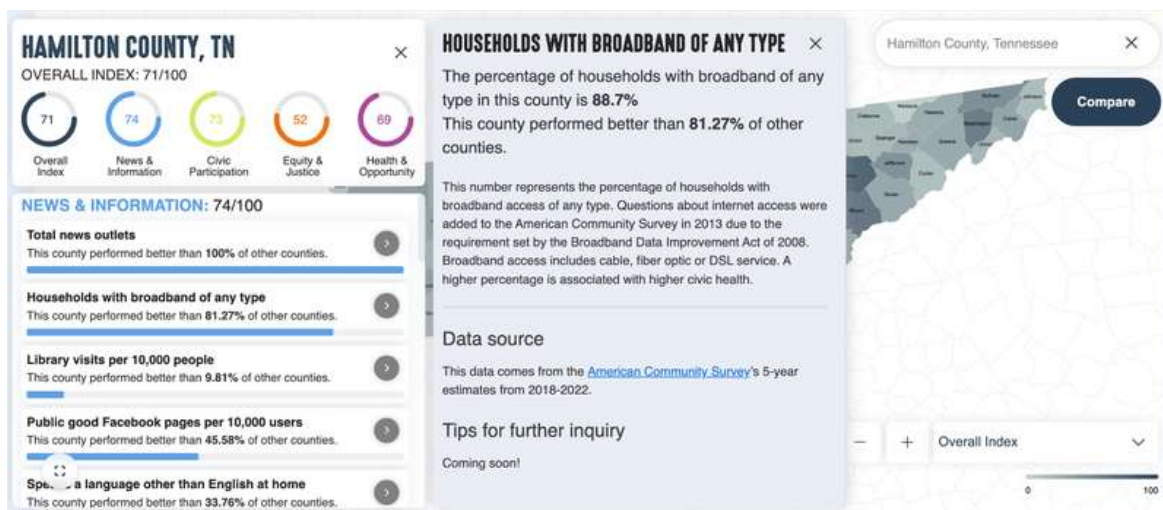
**--Loris Ann Taylor, President & CEO Native Public Media**

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# Using the Index

## 1. Explore the Dashboard

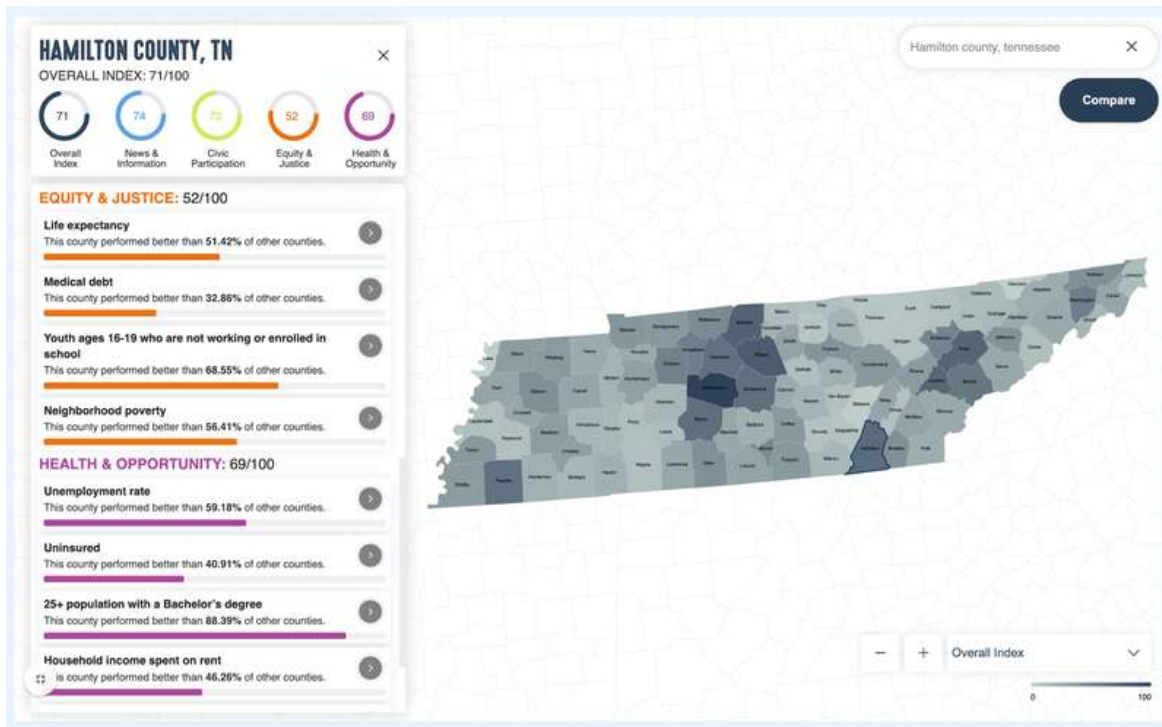
Once you open up your county's Civic Information Index page, one of the first things you'll see is your **overall score**—basically a snapshot of how your community stacks up across the country. For example, **Hamilton County, Tennessee** has an overall score of **71**, meaning it performs better than 71% of counties in the U.S. That's a solid starting point, but the real insights come when you dig into the details.



Take a look at how the county scores across the four pillars. Hamilton County, for instance, scores **74** on *News & Information*—a relatively strong showing. But its lowest score is **52** in *Equity & Justice*, which includes things like income inequality, housing, and debt. That drop could be a signal that equity challenges are at play. So then the natural next question becomes: **What's behind that number?** And just as important—**what strengths already exist that local efforts can build on?**

Looking closer, nearly **1 in 5 residents** in the county struggles with **medical debt**. That's not just a number—that's thousands of neighbors navigating a complex and often overwhelming financial reality. Is this a recent trend? Who's most affected? How are people getting support? This is the kind of info that can guide real conversations—and real action.





Zooming out across all four pillars, you'll also notice other patterns:

- **11.8% of people in the county don't have health insurance.**
- **Voter turnout is low**, around **61.3%**, which puts the county in the bottom third nationally.
- And **library visits?** Fewer than 90% of other counties. These are all jumping-off points for deeper reflection.

For journalists, community groups, or civic leaders, this data can spark some questions with communities, for example:

- How are we reaching people without broadband?
- What about folks who don't speak English at home, or can't afford a newspaper subscription?

Instead of treating the data as a final answer, think of it as a conversation starter—one that can help you tell more complete stories, build trust, and invite more people into shaping the future of their community.



## 2. Map What You See to What You Know

Numbers alone can't tell the full story. Now it's time to layer in what *you* know about your community: the lived experiences, the informal networks, the trusted messengers, the places where people gather, the systems that aren't working for everyone.

Start by comparing what you see in the data with what you already know (or suspect). What aligns? What feels off? Where are the gaps? This is where local wisdom matters most.

### Who should be part of this conversation?

Don't go it alone. Invite others who can bring fresh perspectives or lived experiences to the table. Think about folks like:

- Local journalists, librarians, teachers
- Public health workers, service providers
- Faith leaders, youth organizers, local shop owners
- Mutual aid groups, housing advocates, local artists
- Elders, high school students, non-English speakers

No one needs to be a “data expert” to participate—just curious and invested in the community.

### Ideas for How to Gather People

- Host a community listening session using the Index as a jumping-off point
- Bring it into a staff meeting, editorial meeting, or coalition convening
- Print a few key data points and bring them to a community event, market, or town hall (Check out the Playbook for more in-person engagement tips!)
- Use the Index to co-design a reporting series, local campaign, or program strategy for your organization



### 3. Facilitate Local Conversations

Once you've gathered your community, consider some of these questions to spark dialogue:

- Which data points surprise us?
- Which ones confirm what we already experience?
- What's missing that we wish the Index captured? What stories aren't being told?
- Who in our community is most impacted by low scores in a certain pillar (like equity or civic participation)?
- Who's already working on these issues (like a trusted community radio station or engaged library network), and how might we support or amplify their work? How could they help address areas of need?
- What would a healthy information ecosystem *look* and *feel* like here?
- How could data from the Index inform our next project, story, or partnership?

## Companion Tools

### Make a Plan Before You Collect

Use the templates on the following pages to outline your local data collection approach—from what you're trying to learn, to who you're engaging, and how you'll share results.

### What You'll Define:

- Your key learning question(s)
- Indicators or themes to explore locally
- Methods (surveys, listening sessions, interviews, etc.)
- Timeline + community engagement plan
- How data will be analyzed + used

## What are we trying to learn?

Write down the core questions you're hoping to answer with your data collection efforts. Think about what's unclear, underexplored, or missing from the Index.

**Example:** *How are community members who don't speak English as a first language accessing local information—and what gaps exist in language access, cultural relevance, or trust?*

or

*What parts of the community lack access to clean, safe public spaces, and how does that impact overall civic health?*

### Key learning question(s):

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### What themes or indicators do we want to explore locally?

List any civic information themes that matter to your community but may not show up clearly in the Index. You might be looking at trust in local news, housing instability, transportation access, etc.

### Themes or indicators to explore:

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## How will we engage the community in this process?

Outline your outreach plan: who you'll talk to, where you'll show up, and how you'll invite people to participate. Remember you can use the Playbook for each of these strategies!

### What methods will we use? Check all that apply:

- Surveys
- Community mapping
- Listening sessions
- Social media polls
- One-on-one interviews
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Start date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Key partners or audiences to engage:

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### Events, spaces, or gatherings we'll tap into:

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### How we'll keep people informed and involved:

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### What will we do with what we learn:

Think ahead about how you'll interpret, share, and use the insights you gather.

### How we'll analyze and apply the data:

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### Who we'll share findings with:

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### What decisions or next steps this might inform:

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## Questions to Explore the Civic Information Index Pillars

The Civic Information Index is built around four core pillars that shape a community's civic health: **News & Information, Civic Engagement, Equity & Justice, and Health & Opportunity**. Below are example questions for each area to help spark conversation, reflection, and local insight.

Use them as starting points to guide listening sessions, interviews, or community surveys. Feel free to adapt them based on what matters most where you live.

### News and Information

- Where do you usually get information about your community, and how well does it reflect your life and priorities?
- Which sources of information do you trust the most—and why?
- Are there opportunities for people to learn how to evaluate news and information (in schools, libraries, etc.)?
- What would strengthen the flow of trustworthy, community-centered information where you live?

### Civic Engagement:

- Do you feel like people in your community have real opportunities to get involved and make a difference?
- How do you usually hear about ways to participate—like voting, volunteering, attending public meetings, or speaking out?
- Have you ever taken part in a community decision-making process? If yes, what made that possible? If not, what got in the way?
- Is it clear how local government works and how to connect with services or decision-makers when you need to?
- Where do you see people coming together to solve problems or support each other (formally or informally)?
- What would help more people in your community feel connected, informed, and empowered to participate?

## Equity and Justice:

- Do you feel that everyone in your community has a fair chance to participate, be heard, and influence decisions—regardless of race, income, ability, language, or background?
- Are there specific groups who face more barriers to civic participation, services, or leadership opportunities?
- Are there trusted community organizations, leaders, or movements working to reduce harm and increase justice in your area?
- What would a truly just and inclusive community look and feel like to you?
- What support or changes would help people most impacted by injustice to lead, thrive, and shape the future?

## Health and Opportunity:

- Do people in your community have access to the basics they need to live a healthy life—like housing, food, clean water, and safe air?
- Is quality healthcare easy to access for most people in your area? What about mental health support?
- How affordable and reliable is transportation where you live—especially for people who don't drive or live far from city centers?
- Do schools, childcare, and other education opportunities meet the needs of local families and young people?
- Do you feel safe in your neighborhood? Are there places where people gather, connect, and support each other?
- How has your community been affected by things like extreme weather, pollution, or environmental hazards?
- What would make it easier for people in your community to meet their basic needs and thrive long term?

**\*\*For more survey question ideas, check out the [University of Illinois Community Survey Tool](#):**





# Sharing Data Back with the Community

The next step in any research process should be sharing back and making sure it works for the people you represent. Sharing your findings back with the community is both an act of transparency and a way to strengthen trust, spark dialogue, and inspire action.

Consider these strategies as you share back your data:

## **Make the results accessible:**

- Share findings in plain language, avoid jargon (not everyone knows what an “information ecosystem” is).
- Share the data in languages that people in your community speak.
- Create visuals (infographics, maps, charts) that make the data clear and easy to understand.

## **Use multiple distribution channels:**

- Share digital versions via email newsletters, social media, or community WhatsApp/Facebook groups.
- Print copies or flyers with QR codes and place them in high-traffic community locations (libraries, coffee shops, community centers, laundromats).
- Host a pop-up booth at a community event.

## **Engage a variety of stakeholders:**

- Share your Index with local government agencies, school boards, health departments, and civic organizations so they can adapt how they share critical information.
- Present key data points to local and regional funders whose priorities align with the information needs you identified.
- Tailor your messaging to show how your findings can support their goals (for tips on how to do this, check out the [LPC Civic Media Playbook!](#))

## **Keep the conversation going:**

- Treat sharing your Index as the start of an ongoing exchange, not a one-time handoff.
- Periodically post updates on how your findings are being used or what progress has been made.
- Encourage community members to share their own stories or data that complement your results, online and offline.

When the Index is actively shared and discussed, it becomes a foundation for better decisions, new partnerships, and a more connected, informed community.



## **What if the data feels incomplete or inaccurate?**

The Civic Information Index offers valuable community data at the county level—but in big cities, that can sometimes miss the mark. Cities often include a mix of wealthy and underserved neighborhoods, and when their data is combined, the differences can cancel each other out. Some cities also stretch across multiple counties or get lumped in with nearby suburbs, which can blur the picture even more. That means the Index score might not reflect what residents actually experience day to day. When using the Index in urban areas, we suggest looking for more detailed, local data if possible and engaging directly with populations whose perspectives are likely to be underrepresented in official reports. We're also pushing for more neighborhood-level info to help paint a clearer picture.

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## **How do I combine this with qualitative research or local knowledge?**

The Index gives you a starting point—a snapshot of how a community is doing when it comes to access to civic information. But numbers only tell part of the story. To really understand what's happening on the ground, it's important to talk to people, listen to their experiences, and gather local perspectives. That's where the questions in the guide come in. They're designed to help you spark meaningful conversations—with residents, local leaders, journalists, or librarians—so you can add depth and context to what the data shows. Use the Index as a jumping-off point, and let local voices fill in the gaps.

## **How can I access more localized data?**

Contact Brown Information Futures Lab at [informationfutureslab@brown.edu](mailto:informationfutureslab@brown.edu) and they can assist you in accessing more localized data for your community. Please feel free to reach out at any time if you need help making sense of any of the data points provided in your Index snapshot!

# Checklist to Get Started:

*A simple checklist to guide your local data collection planning for the Index*

## **Clarify what you're trying to learn:**

- Define your key learning question
- Choose which Index pillar(s) your questions connect to
- Identify what's unclear or missing from your Index results

## **Focus your process:**

- Choose 1–2 themes or indicators you want to explore more deeply
- Decide what's most important to understand from a community perspective

## **Choose your methods:**

- Select your primary approach (e.g., survey, interviews, listening session)
- Consider accessibility—what methods make sense for your audience?
- Think about how you'll document or record what you hear

## **Plan for Engagement:**

- Identify partners, co-hosts, or community connectors
- Choose where and how you'll reach people (events, spaces, platforms)
- Create a basic timeline and outreach plan

## **Decide how you'll use the data you collect:**

- Identify how you'll analyze what you collect (alone or with partners)
- Think about how findings will inform next steps (e.g., programming, storytelling, collaboration)
- Plan how you'll share results back with the community

## Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to plan your Civic Information Index data collection! Remember, this process is as much about learning and adapting as it is about gathering data. If you ever feel stuck or want to brainstorm next steps, don't hesitate to reach out to the Listening Post Collective team. We're here to support you every step of the way—whether it's answering questions, connecting you with resources, or helping you think through your approach. Together, we can build stronger, more resilient, and better informed communities.



**THANKS**  
**FOR**  
**LISTENING**

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