

# Local Neighborhoods, Bringing the Neighborhood In

# 23

*Goal: As human services professionals seek to promote social and economic justice and foster economic stability for families, it is important to understand the economic conditions of a client's neighborhood. This section provides clinical and community practitioners with the tools to help conduct an economic assessment of any given neighborhood in NYC.*

## A. Neighborhood economic assessment

Neighborhood economic assessment is, essentially, an inventory of the economic assets and liabilities of any given neighborhood. Part of a neighborhood economic assessment involves an analysis of the 'goodness-of-fit' between a person's basic needs and the economic resources available in their neighborhood. For example, a neighborhood without a local supermarket or green market will make it harder to shop for healthful and affordable food. A neighborhood that is geographically isolated with limited transportation can make shopping for food or discount consumer goods dauntingly expensive and time-consuming.

### 1. Neighborhood Economic Asset Assessment: Defined

A neighborhood economic assessment is similar in principle to a bio-psycho-social assessment that includes an individual's economic circumstances. The latter includes an inventory of a client's financial assets and liabilities. Assets include cash, property, investments, retirement accounts, income, benefits, and entitlements. Fixed costs, such as expenditures for housing, food, and health care, are part of the equation, as are liabilities, such as credit card debt or student loans.

Conducting a financial asset and liability inventory, a basic part of financial planning, provides information useful to developing a comprehensive picture of a person's assets, resources, or vulnerabilities as a measure of a person's overall economic well-being. While most individuals and families acquire financial liabilities at one time or another, many people do not have access to Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA), bank accounts or other individual asset accounts. This can be due to lack of income needed to invest in these instruments, but also because of the conditions in their neighborhoods, which do not offer access to economic opportunities.

*An assessment for a group takes the same process as an assessment of an individual*

Similarly, conducting a neighborhood economic assessment involves an inventory of assets and liabilities. However, in a macro level assessment, the unit of analysis is the neighborhood rather than the individual or the family. A neighborhood economic assessment examines the economic status/conditions of the neighborhood in which the client resides.

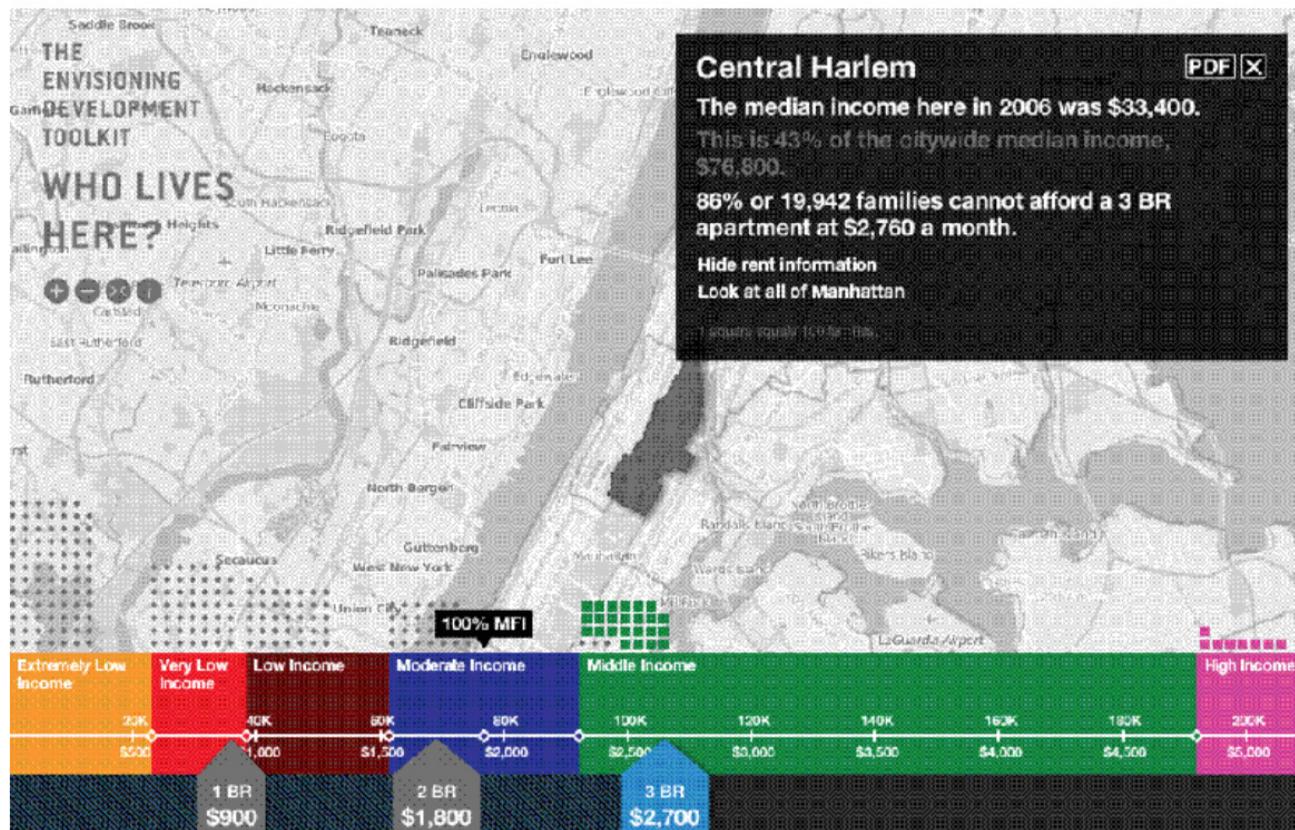
This information can be applied to direct practice with clients to understand the environmental context that may be affecting their social functioning, including mental and physical health, educational and employment options, and other social or environmental problems.

For community organizers and activists it provides an advocacy tool to help inform community development strategies. Using mapping technologies such as GIS (geographic or geospatial information system) is a method of gathering data. Comparisons of high- and low-income neighborhoods can be used to inform, educate and mobilize community residents. This information may promote greater civic participation aimed at community development activities to strengthen the existing services and resources, as well as adding to the community's economic assets.

**RESOURCE:**

Envisioning Economic  
Development Interactive  
Map: Income by Neighborhood

[envisioningdevelopment.net/map](http://envisioningdevelopment.net/map)



## 2. Neighborhood Economic Assessment: Theoretical Framework

The hallmark of social work practice is its commitment to viewing the person within the context of his/her environment. The evolution of social work practice-based theories led to the development of the person-in-environment classification system (PIE), which is a uniquely social work approach. PIE, a classification and assessment system, utilizes a four-factor system to assess the client's social functioning within a bio-psycho-social framework.<sup>1</sup> The four-factor PIE analysis assesses the client along following dimensions: social functioning, environmental, mental health and physical health.

In this section, the PIE classification system is adapted to inform an economic neighborhood assessment. Key environmental factors from the PIE classification correlate to select neighborhood socio-economic indicators. These neighborhood indicators can be used in formulating an economic assessment of the client's neighborhood.

### 3. Key Factors Associated with Neighborhood Economic Well-Being



- **Nutrition:** Food availability and quality; supermarkets and green grocers
- **Shelter:** Housing costs/rental vacancy rates and quality
- **Employment:** Level of neighborhood unemployment, availability and types of local jobs
- **Transportation:** Accessibility and availability
- **Health/mental health:** Medical insurance and access to health/mental health care
- **Safety:** Residents' perception of neighborhood safety
- **Social service:** Persons receiving entitlements/benefits
- **Education:** Physical condition of schools/schools meeting educational standards
- **Economic needs:** Tax base and sufficient income required to meet basic needs

These indicators represent elements of the local infrastructure that affect the economic well-being of its residents. Using these factors to assess a neighborhood contrasts with the more typical practice of describing neighborhoods in terms of the characteristic of their residents such as *demographic traits* (i.e. income, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, etc.) and their behavior (rate of crime, teen pregnancy, single motherhood, school dropout, etc.).

While a neighborhood's demographic characteristics are important descriptors for some purposes, behavioral indicators implicitly blame the victim for the quality of life in the neighborhood. Analyzing the local infrastructure focuses on the conditions in

the neighborhood as they impact the individuals and families that live in the community. By examining elements that are driven by public policy or resource allocation and distribution, organizers and community members may be able to facilitate change through neighborhood activism.

#### 4. Formulating the Economic Assessment

The first step in formulating a neighborhood economic assessment is to obtain the research indicators delineated in Table One for the given neighborhood that you want to learn about. Fortunately, there are a number of excellent data sets which are online, and are free and available to the public. This section describes four data sets that provide essential information in formulating an economic neighborhood assessment. Each of these data sets has its own organization, provides varying levels of specificity, and includes different units of analyses. Social workers are encouraged to explore these sites.

The first step in formulating a neighborhood economic assessment is to obtain the research indicators delineated in the PIE chart for the specific neighborhood that you want to learn about. There are a number of excellent data sets which are free, online and available to the public. The following four sites contain data and information essential to formulating a robust economic neighborhood assessment. Each of the organizational resources listed provide varying levels of specificity, and includes different units of analyses. Human service professionals are encouraged to explore these sites as they provide very rich data.

##### **RESOURCE:**

Model for Assessing Community Needs and Resources from the Community Tool Box. Please apply in relation to the economic issues discussed in this section.

[ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/chapter\\_1003.aspx](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/chapter_1003.aspx)

Organizing the statistical information in a way that is helpful for your analysis is an important process. Consider applying the strength-based approach to the statistics (see Unit 4 Practice Considerations). One way to do this is by creating a plus (positive) and delta (change) chart where you look at strength-based assets in the neighborhood but also identify elements that would benefit from social change or advocacy efforts.

## Organizing My Neighborhood Statistics: Plus/Delta Worksheet

Organizing My Neighborhood Statistics: Plus Delta Chart		
Data	Plus (Strength)	Delta (Challenges/to Change)
Your Neighborhood		
Neighborhood Health		
Neighborhood Costs		
Neighborhood Child Well-Being		

Another method for organizing information is called a SWOT analysis, which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. It is used for evaluating internal or external conditions for strategic planning purposes. A SWOT analysis attempts to turn threats into opportunities. A neighborhood assessment might include:

- **Strengths:** positive characteristics and strengths of the neighborhood (close-knit families, several good schools, houses of worship that are socially active)
- **Weaknesses:** characteristics that place the neighborhood at a disadvantage (far from transportation, few supermarkets, green grocers or businesses, poor sewage)
- **Opportunities:** external elements that could positively change the neighborhood (an environmental group is active in the community)
- **Threats:** external elements that could affect the community (a developer wants to tear down several blocks of residential housing)

## Neighborhood SWOT Analysis Template

<b>Neighborhood SWOT Analysis Template</b>	
<b>Description (what you are analyzing in the neighborhood):</b>	
<b><u>Neighborhood Strengths</u></b>	<b><u>Neighborhood Weaknesses</u></b>
<b><u>Neighborhood Opportunities</u></b>	<b><u>Neighborhood Threats</u></b>

### A. New York City Mayor's Office of Operations: My Neighborhood Statistics

**My Neighborhood Statistics<sup>2</sup>** is an interactive website which is operated by the Mayor's Office. It can be accessed to view selected neighborhood statistics about a specific street address or intersection, and allows for citywide comparisons. The information is grouped under the following four categories: Health, Education, Human Services; Infrastructure, Administrative, Community Services; Public Safety, Legal Affairs; and Business and Cultural Affairs.

## Exercise One: Building Your Neighborhood Assessment

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**Step One:** Choose a New York City neighborhood for your economic neighborhood assessment. The website requires a specific street address or intersection to conduct a search.

**Step Two:** Go to the [My Neighborhood Statistics](#) website and select “Continue” at the bottom of the page. Next, follow the directions, and enter either a street address or street intersection, choose the appropriate borough from the drop-down list, and select “Map It!” to proceed to the interactive website to view the neighborhood statistics.

**Step Three:** Construct a preliminary assessment of the neighborhood, selecting several variables, including as many of the variables from Table One that you can. For each variable, provide a comparison of the neighborhood to the citywide data. Compile a list of the information that you obtained. What did you learn about the neighborhood? How well do you think the neighborhood you are examining compares to the city as a whole?

### B. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)

The [NYC DOHMH<sup>3</sup> website](#) has several data sets that provide extensive information about neighborhood health-related issues, such as health-care access and availability, poverty rates, health disparities, environmental conditions, and much more. There are a number of interactive features that provide tables and maps for a specific neighborhood, borough and as well as city-wide data.

## Exercise Two: Expanding Your Neighborhood

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### *Assessment – Health Factors*

**Step One:** Continue building your neighborhood economic assessment by including health-related information. Browse the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene website in order to add public health factors to your assessment.

**Step Two:** Once you’re familiar with this site, go to the [New York City Community Health Profile](#).<sup>4</sup> Select “Featured Statistics and Maps,” enter the zip code of the neighborhood that you’re researching, and read the respective Community Health Profile. Each community health profile highlights selected key public health issues. Add these issues to your neighborhood assessment.

**Step Three:** Return to the Featured Statistics and Maps Homepage. You will find links to interactive maps and tables for a number of key health issues. Expand the neighborhood assessment to include the percentage of uninsured. Data on residents' self-perceptions of their health status is also available and informative in creating a comprehensive picture.

### C. The Self-Sufficiency Standard

As previously noted, a neighborhood economic assessment includes an analysis of the goodness-of-fit between the client's economic status and the financial costs associated with the neighborhood. One tool that is useful to determine this is the Self-Sufficiency Standard. Developed by Diana Pearce (1996), [The Self-Sufficiency Standard](#)<sup>5</sup> measures how much income is needed for a family to meet the necessary cost-of-living expenses, such as food, clothing, housing, child care, transportation, and to pay federal, state and local taxes – without public or private assistance. The Self-Sufficiency Standard accounts for regional differences and family composition when calculating the amount needed to meet basic living expenses.

## **Exercise Three: Expanding Your Neighborhood Assessment - Cost Analysis**

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**Step One:** Read the report [The Self-Sufficiency Standard for the City of New York 2014](#).<sup>7</sup>

**Step Two:** Expand your neighborhood assessment to include data on how much it costs to live in the borough in which the neighborhood is located. Note that Tables One through Six provide data for the monthly expenses associated with housing, child care, food, transportation health care and miscellaneous expenses for each of the five boroughs in New York City (Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan (North and South), Queens, and Staten Island).

What are the associated housing costs in the borough for the neighborhood you're researching? How much are the other basic expenses? Note that expenses vary by family composition. For your neighborhood profile compare and add the costs associated with the following two family compositions: an adult with no children and an adult with one preschool age child.

**Step Three:** [As you review this report](#), note that the tables provide the hourly wage necessary to meet the basic cost-of-living expenses. Identify what hourly wage would be needed by an adult with no children and by an adult with one preschooler to meet basic expenses. Add these figures to your assessment.

## D. Child Well-Being and Your Neighborhood Economic Assessment

### Exercise Four: Child Well-Being

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One of the most significant indicators is the extent to which the community has resources to effectively support children. This activity will yield critical facts. As you build a customized data set for your economic assessment, keep in mind that your lens is the community and that you are examining indicators related to infrastructure, environment, and resources. Your assessment does not involve researching the demographic traits of the residents.

**Step One:** Log on to the [Citizens' Committee for Children Keeping Track](#) database, an interactive database that allows you to build in-depth data about demographics, economic conditions, housing, health, early childhood education, youth and out-of-school time services, and child welfare. To enter this site, you will first need to create a (free) password.

#### RESOURCE:

Keeping Track Database from  
Citizens' Committee for Children

[www.cccnewyork.org/aboutkt.html](http://www.cccnewyork.org/aboutkt.html)

**Step Two:** Note that the left-hand side menu has two main search functions: “Community District” and “Education.” Select “Community District” and, using the interactive features, build a dataset about the neighborhood you are examining. Refer back to the assessment framework provided in the beginning of the section (Table One); including as many of the neighborhood indicators as you can, paying specific attention to economic conditions, housing, and health.

**Step Three:** Go back to the [Keeping Track](#) Homepage. Select the “Education” function. You will now see two categories: “Elementary/Middle School” and “High School.” Select “High School” as it is a city-wide dataset. Next, select the appropriate borough and then select “Staff and Resources,” and finally select “All Indicators.” You now have key information about schools and their infrastructure to add to your assessment. For a borough-wide comparison, repeat this step, selecting a different borough.

## Putting Your Assessment Together

Now that you have completed your internet research, organize your information into the PIE framework. The tools provided—the plus/delta chart and the SWOT chart are only two possible ways to review and analyze the information. You now have the elements of a neighborhood economic assessment. If you work in direct practice, this information can be utilized to support your work with clients. A community economic assessment helps develop an understanding of the environmental context within which the client lives. An economic neighborhood assessment is also a tool that can be used by community organizers and by social planners to inform their understanding of the community.

## NOTES

### UNIT TWENTY-THREE

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3. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2011) Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/home/home.shtml>
4. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2011) Community Health Profiles. Retrieved from: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/data/data.shtml#1>
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