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Data Usage in Memphis Non-Profits

How Data Shapes
Equity Work
in the Mid-south

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on ethnographic research that was conducted between May-September 2022 by Jennie Doss, a Master's degree candidate in Applied Anthropology at the University of Memphis. This research was conducted in collaboration with the nonprofit Innovate Memphis. This report summarizes major findings of the research, which analyzed how nonprofit organizations within Memphis are using equity as a guiding concept for their work, and how this influences their data usage and needs. Particular attention was paid to the issue of data accessibility in these nonprofits. The researcher used ethnographic methodology, like participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in order to gain insight into the connections between data usage and conceptualizations of equity within Memphis nonprofits.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Data accessibility and availability impacts the ability of nonprofits to address root causes of and provide support to those experiencing inequity in Memphis.
2. More quantitative data than qualitative data is used within nonprofits.
3. There is a need to address gaps in data and data sharing.
4. The priorities of equity work in Memphis nonprofits are transportation, healthcare, education and training, housing, and food access.
5. There is a skills shortage in nonprofits of workers able to gather and utilize data effectively.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The interdisciplinary team at Innovate Memphis seeks to continue elevating the conversation around equity work in the city of Memphis by developing resources to meet community needs while emphasizing the stories and experiences of community members. This report supports this mission by contributing a deeper understanding of both equity markers in Memphis and the data needs and uses of nonprofit community partners.

This research project's development was guided largely by a report put out by the Greater Memphis Chamber's Center for Economic Competitiveness titled "MemMeasures" which was a collaborative effort between the Chamber, Innovate Memphis, and BLDG Memphis that focused on defining economic foundations, enablers, and outcomes in Memphis and the Midsouth that would lead to equity and opportunity for residents.

The research conducted for this report on data usage and equity is a continuation of the work done for the MemMeasures report and specifically is an attempt to capture a deeper understanding of the work already being done to address economic foundations. Nonprofits are an integral part of the Memphis landscape and were chosen as the subject of this research due to their positioning in the Memphis societal fabric, working day in and day out with clients who are facing systemic barriers to reaching more equitable and stable life circumstances.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research in this report examines how those working within nonprofits in Memphis utilized data. This data utilization includes exploring data sources, category and type of data used, any existing challenges to finding or using data, and overall data accessibility in these organizations.

This report also establishes an important connection between the data gathered and utilized by nonprofit organizations in Memphis and the fact that data is central to informing the work that they do to address inequity and provide support to those experiencing its effects.

Through conversation with staff at Innovate Memphis, the following research questions were developed:

1. What uses do Memphis based nonprofits have for data in their organizations and what impact does accessibility have in their utilization of data?
2. How do Memphis based nonprofits conceptualize their work in relation to moving Memphis toward equity and how does data availability and accessibility impact the work that Memphis based nonprofits are able to accomplish?

METHODS AND TIMELINE

Research for this report was conducted between May and September of 2022. It began with a review of existing literature and previously conducted research on the economic foundations and equity work in the Mid-south. Over the course of the research, **18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals from 11 Memphis Nonprofits**. In addition to this, five informative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. It should also be noted that all interviews were conducted over zoom. The final methodology that was employed throughout the entirety of the study period was participant observation, or “learning through active engagement in a research site” (Johnson, Posner and Potoglou 2017). This took the form of attending team meetings both over zoom as well as in person.

Timeline of Research

- May - June 2022
 - Conduct Literature Review
 - Develop Interview Guide
 - Recruit Interviewees from Nonprofits
- July - August 2022
 - Continue Recruitment
 - Conduct Interviews
 - Began Analysis
- September 2022
 - Conclude Interviewing
 - Complete Analysis

DATA AND EQUITY WORK: A CLEAR CONNECTION

Each individual who was interviewed was asked to define or give defining characteristics of the concept of equity. Below are a few of the definitions drawn from this research that encompasses the ways that the concept of equity is used to guide the work that the individuals interviewed from Memphis nonprofits are doing while also shedding light on how they see data contributing to equity work in Memphis.

"I think it's about access. I think it's about representation. But it's about being people at the table having their voice heard. No matter their background. I think it's just access to opportunity".

"Equity involves starting with values - think housing, health, food security. Equality is working within the system. Equity is asking how can we change the system. Understanding people's stories, and their history, and how that forms a collective picture really helps move us toward that change".

DATA AND EQUITY WORK: A CLEAR CONNECTION

"I think it's really it's just the fair distribution or allocation of resources and opportunities. It's not that we just want to like do equality across the board. But we recognize that there are inequities in our system, that people of different socioeconomic status, or race or background, or whatever the particular barrier may be, whether that's mental health, or physical health, or their built environment, everybody's at a different starting place. And so we try to create structures that can help to address and get everybody a little bit more equal access to opportunity, whether that's networks or resources or support or financial opportunities. To me, equity is something deeper and more complex and especially with the systems that we're working on. I think what it means to be equitable within each of those, it's gonna be a little bit different, but I think the concept is still the same - trying to do our best to kind of level the playing field and offer a fair distribution."

Nonprofits in Memphis are generating and using data to support their work to address various barriers to equity that numerous residents of Memphis face. Without data, there would be no way to articulate, address, or understand the full scope of inequities that are being experienced everyday in the Mid-south.

FINDINGS ON DATA USAGE IN MEMPHIS NONPROFITS

01 Data Set Accessibility is a Main Challenge Faced By Nonprofits in Memphis

Throughout the interviews, several challenges faced by nonprofits were discussed with accessibility being the common thread. These are the prevalent issues of accessibility were the most mentioned:

- Organizations working with youth under 18 years of age who needed data from Shelby County Schools. This data that would enable them to provide important, targeted support to youth in need.
- Navigating an ever-growing web of data usage agreements. Even if data is considered public, it can be difficult to obtain. Figuring out who houses certain datasets, asking for access, having to submit a FOIA request (Freedom of Information Act) in some cases, and the time and work on the side of those housing the data were cited as
- One of the main methods of accessing data being knowing who owns the rights to or has access to a data set. One individual shared, "If a person looking for data doesn't know the right person, there's a lot of people that don't know what's there...". They then explained that this leaves easy accessibility of certain datasets largely up to networking.

Data accessibility has direct implications for the ability of nonprofits to address issues of inequity. Inequity is complex with many historic and systemic facets and layers. Not being able to gain access to data reduces the ability of nonprofits to understand what they are up against and to respond appropriately to community need.

"Having access to more of this data could only benefit the effectiveness of programs..."

Data Sources

This chart lists the sources of data that were discussed being used by the 11 Memphis Nonprofits interviewed. To gain access to some of these data sets, organizations needed to pay for access in the form of a one-time fee or a monthly or yearly subscription.

Data Sources Used By Memphis Nonprofits			
Local Partnerships	Publicly Available Data	National Networks	Local Grassroots Databases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelby County Schools • Charter Schools • University of Memphis • Slingshot • Data sharing between Memphis medical facilities • Association of Realtors • Home Builders Association • Urban Institute • Seeding Success • CDC's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALICE Report • American Community Survey • US Census • Memphis City Data Hub • HUD • EPA • USDA • Department of Labor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbor Works • Aspen Institute • NNIP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LINC • Coaction.net

FINDINGS ON DATA USAGE IN MEMPHIS NONPROFITS

02 Quantitative Data More Extensively Used than Qualitative Data

Of the 11 nonprofits interviewed, nine used a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data. Two nonprofits used solely quantitative data within their organizations. Organizations who had the capacity to have data personnel on staff had a much higher rate of consistently generating or incorporating qualitative data

Quantitative data was found to be more commonly used overall. The importance of this rests in the question of whether numerical data is able to thoroughly and accurately capture the lived experience of Memphians. The value of qualitative data in addressing inequity can be seen in this quote from a nonprofit who worked primarily with qualitative data.

"Instead of making [our programs] transactional, we make them relational and we let the residents drive the change by identifying what those root causes are, identifying solutions, and then helping them to support those solutions by helping them identify those resources. It's about building their capacity, so that they become a thriving community. And so that requires us to look at their social engagement, community engagement, economic engagement, and political engagement, and unmuting the voices around all of those. We then use the data that we get from those relationships that we get from the community to then drive equitable solutions."

The collection and use of qualitative data in itself can be a way to confront equity by humanizing and placing agency back in the hands of the disinvested.

FINDINGS ON DATA USAGE IN MEMPHIS NONPROFITS

03 Gaps in Existing Data Sets

There are gaps in datasets and data sharing that came up in interviews.

1. **The first gap was those who may be under represented in available datasets** such as the Spanish speaking population in Memphis. This issue that this poses to addressing inequity, according to one interviewee, that that it becomes, "a question of how we are effectively going to serve, support, and elevate disinvested communities including supporting undocumented individuals properly if data concerning community services are not either weighted appropriately or additional research conducted."
2. **The second gap was in between nonprofits themselves, or a lack of collaboration.** One interviewee explained, "There's so many nonprofits in Memphis and almost no flow between them. It becomes a question of are we really trying to or able to serve our clients in need if we as nonprofits are not willing to take the time to have those conversations and create those pathways... there is no way of knowing what is doing well and where and why."

Without gaps such as these being properly attended to, vulnerable populations will be overlooked and organizational programming and solutions will be employed with a lack of understanding of their impact or reach. Opportunities for collaboration may also be missed due to the silo-ed way many nonprofits are currently operating.

FINDINGS ON DATA USAGE IN MEMPHIS NONPROFITS

04 Data Collection and Usage: A Marker for Equity Work Priorities in Memphis

The types of data used by nonprofits in Memphis speaks to how equity work within Memphis is being prioritized. From the list below of data sets being used by the 11 nonprofits represented in the interviews for this report, it can be seen that transportation, education and training, housing, and healthcare as well as other supplemental datasets are all main considerations in the work they do. This reinforces the findings of the MemMeasures report.

Types of Data Used by Nonprofits

Transportation	Education and Training	Lending (Housing and Entrepreneurial)
Healthcare	Housing	Rent and Utilities
Crime	Income and Wage	Economic Market Trends
Food Accessibility	Spirituality	Unhoused Rates and Need

FINDINGS ON DATA USAGE IN MEMPHIS NONPROFITS

05 **There is a Skills Shortage Among Nonprofits**

A commonly shared experience among the interviewed was that many had seen data workers being drawn away from the nonprofit sector by larger companies, such as FedEx and Amazon, who are able to offer higher salaries and more extensive benefits. In some cases, the turnover rate has been so rapid that they have had an inability to establish a training or continuity plan for the data work being done within the organization.

“There's really a skills shortage in Memphis that really impacts some of the work that needs to be done. And all the excitement behind, you know, big data, and all this data is available, what are you doing with it? Well, we, like everybody else, we're getting good at acquiring the data. But when it comes down to putting it in a nice database and start doing the analytics and some predictive stuff, all that went out the window”.

This shortage of workers trained in data usage and gathering may be a severely limiting factor in nonprofits addressing inequity. Without enough workers who are able to effectively utilize data, it may be difficult for nonprofits to fully grasp the obstacles their clients are facing and implement effective supports.

CONCLUSION

The Mid-south is a unique region facing many economic, social, and historical challenges that is matched only by the generosity and drive of those who live here. While some interviewees expressed doubt over any city becoming 100% equitable, the sentiment was balanced by a tangible hope they placed in their dedication to uplifting those in Memphis who have been disinvested. Overall, data and its utilization by nonprofits is driven by the desire to help Memphians overcome barriers that are preventing them experiencing equity and enable them to thrive.

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