Background

In the Fall of 2013, the Marquette Democracy Lab conducted a survey of Milwaukee’s community-based organizations (CBOs) to better understand how they contribute to local civic life. An online survey was emailed to 98 organizations that were identified by undergraduate research assistants as working to affect social change within Milwaukee’s neighborhoods. A total of 56 organizations started the study, 43 of which completed the entire survey. The focus of the study was to learn more about the ways in which CBOs facilitate civic engagement in their neighborhoods and to begin to examine the variation in their efforts.

The results reported in this report reflect the survey responses of CBOs. We have excluded nine organizations that reported they work citywide, as the focus of our study was on organizational efforts within Milwaukee’s neighborhoods. The exclusion of these nine organizations did not appreciably change response patterns.

Focus Groups
Many organizations indicated that they would be interested in participating in follow-up focus group discussions. Although the descriptive statistics presented in this report shed some light onto how community-based organizations promote civic engagement in their neighborhoods, many questions remain. The purpose of these focus groups will be to examine more deeply the strategies that organizations use to engage neighborhood residents, and to reflect on the successes of these efforts and the challenges that remain.

If you did not complete the online survey, but would be interested in participating in a focus group, please email Dr. Wichowsky at amber.wichowsky@marquette.edu. We will be organizing these focus group discussions in the fall of 2014.
What issues do CBOs work on?

Organizations were asked to identify a program area that best describes their organizational activities and were then given the opportunity to select additional issues. This bar chart shows the distribution of responses. The blue bars reflect the percentage of organizations reporting each program area as their primary activity. The red bars reflect the percentage of organizations that reported working on these issues, but did not identify them as their primary program area.

Neighborhood improvements top the list, with the largest share of organizations saying that this issue area best describes their organizational efforts. Although public safety comes in at number 10 on this list in terms of primary program area, 41 percent of respondents noted that they work on this issue. Economic development, youth development, and community organizing and advocacy also rank high.
What policy challenges are CBOs working to address in their neighborhoods?

Organizations were asked whether they are working to address any of the following neighborhood issues. The bars reflect the percentage of organizations who reported that they are working to address these policy challenges. Housing concerns top the list. Seventy percent of organizations reported that they are working to address “housing conditions” and 58 percent specifically named tackling the number of foreclosures in their neighborhoods. Addressing transportation and childcare needs ranked lower on this list.
Relationships with other local stakeholders

Relationships are an essential ingredient to community building. CBOs not only work to bring neighbors together to discuss community issues, but can also help connect residents to external resources, build common purpose within neighborhoods, and facilitate collective action. As sociologist Robert Sampson noted in his study of Chicago: “communities possessing a rich organizational life are ahead of the curve.”¹

CBOs were asked about the extent of their relationships with local government and other community organizations in the city. Overall, organizations reported significant engagement with both local government and other community organizations. Relationships with other community organizations tended to be of higher quality.

Importance of Partnerships with Community Stakeholders

CBOs were also asked to rank the importance of their relationships with a variety of community stakeholders. Specifically, we asked organizations: “How important are partnerships with the following sectors in helping your organization achieve its goals.” CBOs ranked each on partnership on a three-point scale, ranging from 1 (not very important) to 3 (very important). The chart below shows the average ranking for each stakeholder group. Community members, local government, neighborhood organizations, law enforcement, local business and private foundations ranked near the top, while partnerships with housing authorities, healthcare providers, workforce investment boards, and the federal government ranked considerably lower.
Interests in Building Partnerships

We also asked CBOs to identify which local stakeholders they would like to work more closely with in the future. Organizations were asked to list only those that they have not worked closely with over the last year. Although CBOs did not rank colleges and universities as a high-priority community partner (see last graph), they nevertheless reported a strong interest in building stronger ties to local institutions of higher education.
Online Connections

Although face-to-face communication remains essential to the work of CBOs, many organizations are also taking advantage of social media to conduct their community outreach. Nearly all organizations are on Facebook. Slightly more than half of CBOs have a Twitter account. Nearly a third are using LinkedIn to connect to other community stakeholders. Far fewer are on Milwaukee’s local social media site, MKE123.org.

Percentage of organizations reporting they are on each of the following social media outlets
Perceptions of Local Influence and Responsiveness

How much impact do CBOs think they have on local government? We asked organizations whether they think they can influence local decision-making and whether Milwaukee’s public officials care about their concerns. Overall, organizations reported high levels of political efficacy.

Views on Political Efficacy
(Percentage of respondents)

- Blue bars: Organizations like ours can influence what local government does
- Red bars: Milwaukee’s public officials care a lot about what organizations like ours think
Resident Engagement

Neighborhood revitalization efforts are most successful when they are self-sustaining. Many CBOs work to build community capacity by engaging residents to set policy priorities, identify local assets, and tailor programs to meet community needs. We asked organizations about their resident engagement activities. Large majorities of organizations reported that residents sit on their boards and volunteer their time. More than 70 percent of organizations said they have a formal process for soliciting community input.

Percentage of respondents reporting yes to each of the following:

- Residents on board?
- Resident volunteers?
- Formal process for community input?
- Residents on advisory board?
- Staff person responsible for civic engagement/community outreach?
- Residents on paid staff?
Facilitating Community Connections

Many CBOs serve as “civic intermediaries,” connecting individuals to policy makers, government officials, businesses, and other local institutions. We asked CBOs whether they have facilitated connections between residents and a variety of community stakeholders. Nearly 75 percent of organizations reported that they have connected residents to police departments. A majority also reported that they have facilitated communications with elected representatives. Connections with local businesses also ranked high on this list.

Percent of organizations that have connected residents with each of the following

- Police department
- Legislative office and/or elected official
- Local business
- Healthcare provider
- School/College/University
- Funder
- WIB/Job training center
- Housing authority
Promoting Civic Engagement

Although citizen participation is essential to democracy, civic involvement in the United States is marked by significant economic, occupational and educational divides. The nonprofit sector, however, is often overlooked in studies of political inequality. This is somewhat surprising given the long tradition linking voluntary associations to political engagement. For example, a recent study conducted by NonprofitVOTE and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that nonprofits can increase voter turnout among nonprofit clients and constituents.²

We asked CBOs in Milwaukee about their civic engagement activities more broadly. Many organizations are active in the neighborhood--sponsoring events, conducting surveys, and hosting forums. However, participation in election-related activities (e.g. holding forums with candidates and related get-out-the-vote efforts) was much lower.

² NonprofitVOTE and CIRCLE. 2013. Can Nonprofits Increase Voting Among Their Clients, Constituents, and Staff?