



INFORMATION NEEDS IN DETROIT

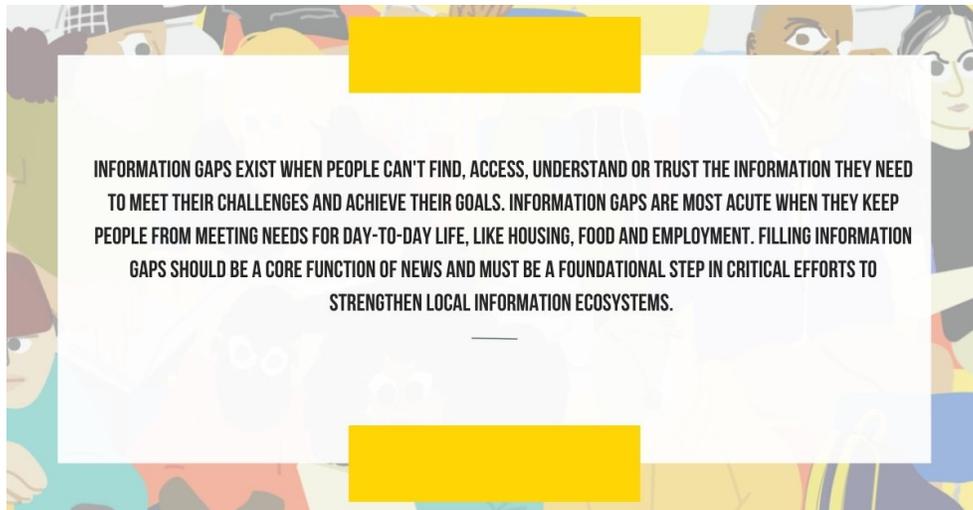
SARAH ALVAREZ
JUNE, 2022
ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS BY
JAMES MCBROOM



Introduction

The constant stream of available and sometimes unavoidable news and information is overwhelming to many Americans. Most Detroiters, meanwhile, are still navigating their lives without the critical information they desperately need.

Information gaps like this hold back individuals, families, and entire communities. They also feed inequity, misinformation, and a lack of accountability. These gaps are more likely to exist in communities, or parts of communities, with less wealth.



Healthy information ecosystems are a necessary component of more equitable communities. Organizations that work in news and information should prioritize identifying which information gaps people struggle with most and help fill those gaps effectively with verified and responsive news and information – and ensuring affected individuals receive it. Many civic organizations and governments work to fill information gaps, but their work is not sufficient to meet the need, nor are they necessarily focused on creating the accountability required to close systemic gaps.

Increasing access to the internet, or closing the digital divide, will help but is not sufficient to close information gaps. People still need to be able to find and trust accurate information they can use on the internet. [One recent Harvard Business Review study](#) ranked Michiganders 27th among people in all other states in digital proficiency, illustrating that information gaps are caused both by a lack of access to information and a lack of quality information to access.

Outlier Media was among the first and is still one of the few news organizations working to discover community information needs. We use a methodology we began to develop in 2016 that takes inspiration from [a study Google commissioned](#) to improve its search engine along with traditional qualitative and quantitative data analysis. We use these assessments to focus our coverage.

This report summarizes our assessment methods and the results of an assessment of Detroit's information needs we conducted in April and May of 2022.

There are few, if any, best practices for this work and there has not been a concerted effort to support newsrooms or nonprofits working to assess information needs in their communities. We have continued to add data sources and rigor to our methods since our first assessment six years ago, but our methods and results are not scientific or comprehensive. Nevertheless, the impact of having our work steered by these assessments demonstrates that our results are valuable and can unearth new learnings to better address the consequences of disparities in Detroit. We believe similarly rigorous information needs assessments should be standard procedure for news organizations working to inform communities and contribute to healthy civic life.

Assessment Methods

We look for signals in data and survey responses that point to a lack of resources or an inability to navigate systems to acquire needed resources. We use these as a proxy for information gaps. We believe resource gaps are a good proxy for information gaps because a lack of resources is a complex problem reliably caused in part by a lack of information or a lack of responsiveness. For example, a huge need arose for income support in the spring of 2020 when most businesses were ordered to close to stop the spread of COVID-19. More unemployment benefits were quickly made available to help, but getting those benefits was difficult for many because people were unfamiliar with the system, the information put out by the state was [difficult to understand and sometimes inaccurate](#), and the system was [beset by problems](#). The resource gap was money, and this led us to an information and accountability gap with unemployment benefits.

We look for signals of resource gaps in data sets ranging from 911 response times to property code compliance, municipal spending, and calls to United Way's 211 service. We selected these datasets, and others described below because they point to how information about how resources are distributed within Detroit, as well as how resource distribution compares between Detroit and the rest of the state and country.

DATA SOURCES

UNITED STATES CENSUS

CITY OF DETROIT BLIGHT TICKET DATA

CITY OF DETROIT PARCEL POINTS DATABASE

CITY OF DETROIT EMERGENCY CALL DATA

211 COUNTS

MICHIGAN PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION QUARTERLY REPORTS

SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS TRAFFIC DATA

IMPROVE DETROIT APP DATA

LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY MUNICIPAL SPENDING DATA

ADDITIONAL SOURCES:

MICHIGAN'S BUREAU OF LABOR MARKET INFORMATION

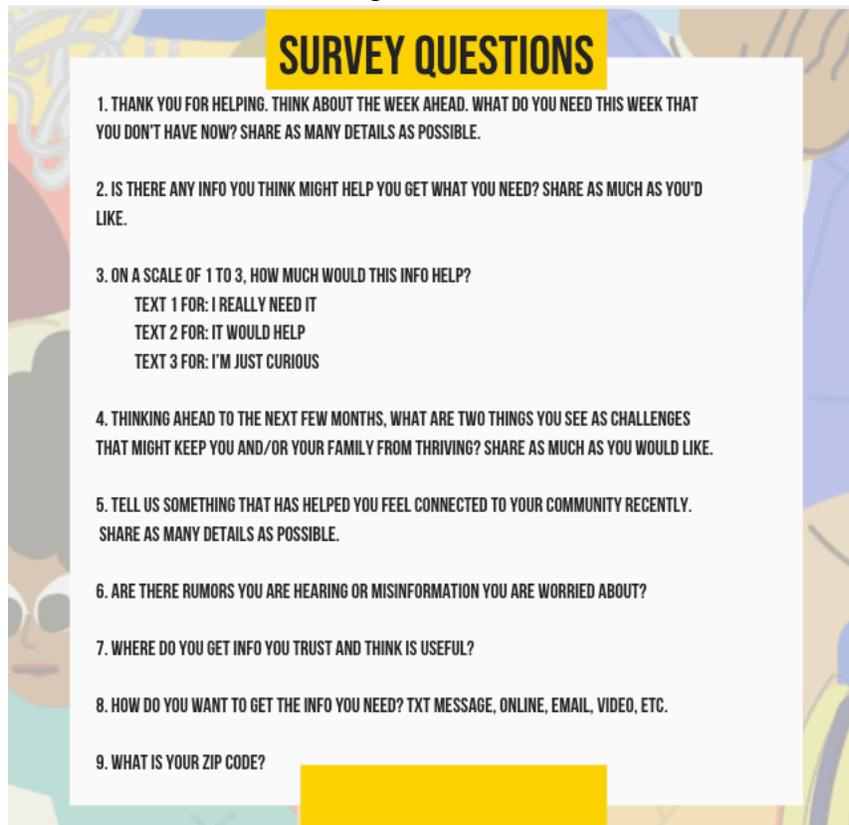
MIT LIVING WAGE CALCULATOR

DETROIT METRO AREAS COMMUNITIES SURVEY

We also ask people directly about the challenges they are experiencing.

This spring, we sent a survey containing nine easy-to-understand, brief questions by text message to 10,000 Detroit users of Outlier’s text-message-based information service and published an online version.

Surveys were distributed over three days in late April 2022. Of the 10,000 recipients, 88 completed the survey in full. All questions are open-ended except for one that asks people to rank how badly they need the resource they mentioned. The introduction to the survey is in English, but recipients can choose a Spanish or Arabic language version of the survey from that intro text message and an introduction in their language will appear. None of our respondents elected to take the survey in either Spanish or Arabic.



We categorize survey responses by the type of resource or information gap they represent. Responses are categorized using a taxonomy developed by [211 Counts](#), a call center service of the United Way aiming to connect low-income people to resources and that then keeps data of what category of resource was needed. Their taxonomy is extensive, but we use their broad need categories, called level 1 and level 2, that include general categories like “basic needs-housing” and educational services.”

For example, the first question we ask reads, “Thank you for helping. Think about the WEEK ahead. What do you need this week that you don't have now? Share as many details as possible.” A respondent answered, “*I need help finding employment and food and transportation.*”

We categorize this response as identifying three needs in the 211 taxonomy: “income support and employment,” “basic needs: food” and “transportation.” We categorize up to three needs per respondent.

We hope to get people to identify both short-term and longer-term challenges by asking them about the “week ahead” and the “next few months.” Shorter-term challenges tend to be more acute.

We also ask people how they prefer to get their information and if they have an info source they trust. We tell participants they will be compensated with a \$10 gift card if they are among the first 50 people to complete the survey.

Results

This section explains how the data sets we chose to analyze can inform the information needs assessment and explains the value each brings for identifying resource gaps. The latter part of this section explores the results of our survey in depth.

Demographics

Demographic analysis is essential in assessing information needs. Higher-income people and communities simply [have fewer resource and information gaps](#). [News and information sources typically cater to higher-income individuals](#), creating and exacerbating info gaps. Our source for demographic data is the United States Census Bureau unless otherwise noted.

Detroit is Michigan’s most populated city. The 2020 census count is being challenged by the city government but the population is estimated to be between 639,000 and 670,000.

City residents are among the most economically challenged in the country. Around one-third of all Detroiters are working to make due with incomes that keep them below the poverty line.

The estimated median household income for people living in Detroit is lower, by half, than the median income for the nation at large. The median Detroit household income was \$32,498. The state average was \$59,234 and the national average was \$64,994.

Income & Poverty	
Median household income (in 2020 dollars), 2016-2020	\$32,498
Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2020 dollars), 2016-2020	\$19,569
Persons in poverty, percent	33.2%

Source, [United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey](#).

The financial struggles of many Detroiters cannot be divorced from race and the negative impacts that [systemic racism has on wealth acquisition in America](#). Detroit’s population is an estimated 77% Black, 14% white and 8% Latinx. The census categorizes people of Arabic or Middle Eastern descent as white.

Compared to the rest of the state and country, the relative economic position of Detroiters alone means they are likely to face significant information gaps and that these gaps could interfere with daily life. But inadequate income is only one of the issues Detroiters struggle with and need high quality information to navigate.

Employment and jobs

In 2019, the most recent year for which Census data is available, the unemployment rate in Detroit was 11.2%. The pandemic pushed that rate higher. Recent survey data from the [Detroit Metro Area Communities Survey](#), conducted by the University of Michigan, revealed the [unemployment rate in Detroit remained at 20% throughout 2021](#).

The DMACS survey found that people who had previously been employed in low-wage jobs bore the brunt of the pandemic unemployment. In the survey sample, 43% of Detroit residents in households previously earning less than \$30,000 annually were unemployed.

Economic recovery in Detroit coming out of the pandemic is uneven across race. White Detroiters in the DMACS sample were able to exit unemployment more quickly. The unemployment rate among white Detroiters had declined to 6% by February of 2022, but it remained at about 23% for both Black and Latinx Detroiters. More than 90% of all unemployed survey respondents said they were actively seeking employment.

Statewide, the unemployment rate has been in steady decline since the worst of the pandemic and now [sits at just above 4%](#).

Michigan's Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives found wages are rising since the worst of the pandemic, but more than 63% of the increases in jobs in Michigan are going to people [who already earn at least 150% above the statewide median wage](#). In Michigan, 30% of hourly jobs pay between \$10 and \$15 an hour.

Researchers at MIT have developed a ["living wage" calculator](#) that attempts to calculate how much money an individual in a household would need to support themselves and their family, a measure that accounts for more comprehensive living costs than the federal poverty threshold. That calculator puts the pre-tax income necessary to meet expenses in the Detroit metro area at between \$75,071 and \$115,259 for a family of four, with childcare being the most significant variable.

The Census estimates that in Detroit, 65.8% of all households, regardless of family size, were supported on less than \$75,000 in 2019.

Resource challenges

The United Way of Southeast Michigan runs a localized 211 service, a call center and a website for low-income people looking for resources. Between May 15, 2021 and May 15, 2022, just shy of 73,000 people living in congressional districts 12 and 13 (the closest approximation of Detroit city boundaries for which data exists) accessed this resource. Callers' most frequent need (33%) was housing-related issues, and the largest number of those calls were from people looking for low-cost housing (31%) followed by rent assistance and then shelter.

The difficulty of finding quality, affordable housing in Detroit is supported by a tremendous amount of data and public records of personal experience. The majority of Detroiters (53%) rent, instead of own, the places where they live. Quality rental housing has long

been an area of concern. The City of Detroit has stepped up attempts to regulate the conditions of rental housing, but the enforcement of city standards with landlords appears to continue to fall short.

Evictions have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, but the 36th District Court did process about 4,500 evictions in Detroit in the first four months of 2022, and around 16,000 in 2021, [according to court data provided to the Detroit Free Press](#).

Detroit residents who rent also encounter housing quality issues, often exacerbated by absentee or negligent property owners. Housing quality standards are not widely upheld in Detroit, as demonstrated by an analysis of blight ticket and rental compliance data.

A basic inspection by the city is required for rental properties to be issued a certificate of compliance (COC), which affirms they are in compliance with city housing regulations. The city neglected to enforce its COC rules for decades but began again in 2018. While not a perfect indicator, rentals with a certificate of compliance can be expected to meet a basic standard of quality.

A blight ticket is issued when a landlord fails to get a COC and this failure is brought to the attention of the Buildings Department. Of all blight tickets issued for failure to get a COC, 36,333 responsible parties had not paid any of their fine compared to 28,141 who had paid at least part of their fine. As of May 2022, 6,128 rental properties, a small portion of available rentals in the city of Detroit, have a COC.

Vacant property is another common housing issue in Detroit that impacts safety and housing supply. Of all tickets issued for failure to secure a vacant one- or two-family dwelling since 2005, 1,159 responsible parties have not paid their fines, compared to 663 responsible parties who have made at least a partial payment. The pattern continues with tickets issued to owners who failed to register a vacant property, for which 1,390 responsible parties have not paid their fines, compared to 727 responsible parties who have made at least a partial payment. The owner of the most [vacant homes remains the city itself](#), though the Detroit Land Bank Authority. Blight tickets are not issued to the DLBA so the extent of unsecured vacant property is difficult to know.

Detroit's housing stock is old, with maintenance needs that can affect housing quality for tenants and homeowners. The Census estimates 77.4% of homes in Detroit were built before 1960.

The median value of an owner-occupied home in Detroit is relatively low at \$52,700, making it difficult to finance repairs or qualify for loans or mortgages. The median value of a home in Michigan overall, at \$162,600, is more than three times the Detroit average. In part because of these values, the [majority of housing sales in Detroit are still cash deals](#), leaving buyers at greater risk for scams and expensive future repair bills.

After help with housing, callers to 211 asked for help with the cost of utilities most often (17%). Most of those callers (64%) needed help with the cost of electricity or keeping electric service on, followed by gas service (19%) and water service (13%).

In the first quarter of 2022, the most recent period for which data is available, DTE Energy, Detroit's private but state-regulated utility provider, disconnected 58,740 electric accounts and 4,628 gas accounts, 27% more electric shutoffs and 20% more gas shutoffs than occurred during the same time period last year.

There is a moratorium on water disconnections for nonpayment in Detroit through the end of 2022, but according to the city, since the pandemic began in March of 2020 collections on accounts has dropped from over 90% to around 75%, indicating that more people are having trouble affording their bills.

Other indicators of resource and information needs

Municipal spending

The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy collects and standardizes [data on municipal spending](#) for the 200 largest cities in the nation. The last full year of data available is 2017. This data can be helpful in learning where municipal resources are concentrated and where there might be gaps.

In 2017 Detroit spent the most, per capita, on housing and environmental costs (30%) which includes natural resources, parks and recreation, housing and community development, sewerage, and solid waste management. Public safety was the second biggest expenditure (13%), followed by government administration (9%), which was higher than education expenditures (7%) and transportation expenditures (6%).

Public Safety

We use data on 911 response times as an indicator of the level of public safety need and how that need is being addressed. If certain parts of a community are underserved even during emergencies, people in those areas may have trouble getting officials to respond to or be accountable for less acute but also important needs. The dataset was 911 calls for service from September 2016 through September 2020. During that time there were more than 4 million calls for service.

Residents living in the 48224 zip code (covering part of Detroit's far east side) experienced the longest overall response time, at 23 minutes, after a 911 call or an incident called in by an officer. Response time includes the amount of time it takes to dispatch an officer and travel time to the incident. Dispatch time makes up the majority of response time. The zip codes 48235, 48221, and 48223 (all west side) also each had response times of more than 20 minutes. The average response time to all zip codes throughout the city is 13 minutes. All of these zip codes had median household incomes above that of the city at large and units in those zip codes are majority owner-occupied.

The most incidents occurred in 48207 (Detroit's Eastern Market area). The majority of those calls were categorized by the Detroit Police Department as "[special attention](#)." Calls are categorized this way when an officer stops by a business or a home without a 911 call being placed, or when an officer is dispatched by police staff offsite surveilling live video feeds from Project Greenlight sites that have surveillance cameras installed by cooperating businesses. Households in the 48207 zip code are also above the median income of the city at large but are 76% renter-occupied, a higher percentage than the city at large.

In the city as a whole, these calls for "special attention" were the most common type of police call, followed by traffic stops initiated by the police themselves. Calls for special attention were 32 times more prevalent than calls involving the most common serious crime, larceny. Traffic stops were nine times as prevalent as larceny calls.

Citywide quality of life and service complaints

The City of Detroit has deployed a smartphone app that is also accessible online for residents to register complaints about common issues in the city like illegal trash dumping, vacant property issues, or water main breaks. The app has a limited number of issue areas residents can choose from to register a complaint, and the service is not accessible to people who do not have easy access to smartphones and/or cellular data plans. We, therefore, believe this data has limitations but can still be instructive. In 2021 Detroit residents used the Improve Detroit app to register concerns about trash and debris more than any other issue.

Survey responses

The first question we ask in our survey is what, if anything, respondents need at that moment or within the next week. More than 93% of survey responses identified a challenge that could be classified as a need, with 35% of respondents listing two needs and 17% listing three or more needs.

Respondents gave answers we categorized as a need for "income support or employment" first and most often, with 30% of respondents articulating this need first, and 22% of all responses fitting under this category.

"More money. I have bills I can't pay" was a fairly typical response in this category, but responses like the more detailed one below were also designated as containing an "income support and employment" need.

SURVEY RESPONSE

"I need about \$600 to help with rent and DTE bill; I need more income. There is a need for more money for gas for the vehicle, and to cover the insurance for the home and vehicle for this week. Prices have skyrocketed and my income has not increased to cover everything in a timely manner. This means my late fees are attached to my bills that are already a struggle to pay."

The next most common first-articulated need was for items categorized as “basic needs” (21% of responses). Food was the most mentioned basic need, followed by consumer goods, housing, rent payment assistance, and utilities. Responses covering “basic needs” identified both cost and access as barriers to meeting these needs:

“Closer access to fresh groceries,” began one response.

There were also a significant number of responses in the category of “individual and family life.” This is a category less about material needs that concern individual goals or family well-being (it excludes mental health concerns, categorized separately). The presence of a relatively high number of these responses may have to do with the lingering stress of the pandemic.

SURVEY RESPONSE

“More time. I work full time and have 2 grandkids and a husband and an entire household to care for. There are just not enough hours in the day.”

Around 7% of our respondents said they did not have an immediate need. *“I’m personally okay. It’s others I worry about,”* said one respondent.

Needs mentioned in at least 10% of responses, in descending order:

1. Income support and employment
2. Basic needs: in descending order of prevalence: food, consumer goods, housing, rent assistance, and utilities.
3. Transportation
4. Individual and family life

The last time we surveyed Detroiters, in April 2021, the top needs identified were also income support, basic needs, and transportation.

We also ask respondents if there is more information they think they need or that could help them with the immediate challenge they identified. Only 60% of respondents were able to identify the information they felt could be helpful. This underscores why we use resource gaps as a proxy for information gaps – it is more difficult for individuals to identify their information gaps than their resource needs, and that difficulty is a foundational barrier that prevents people from meeting their resource needs.

SURVEY RESPONSE

“A direct number in the Michigan Unemployment Dept to speak with a human body ASAP!”

Answers to this question were not concentrated in one area. They ranged from better local news to information on how to find grief counseling, food assistance, jobs and activities for children.

SURVEY RESPONSE

“Hardship programs for people who are working with no children but are barely making ends meet.”

We asked respondents to rate the severity of their information need, and 45% of the respondents said they “really needed” the information, which we categorize as a severe need. The next largest group (36%) said the information “would help.” Only 19% of respondents said they were “just curious” for the information they wanted. We interpret these numbers as pointing to a real need for more and better information that serves Detroiters.

We ask respondents directly if they believe anything might keep themselves or their families from achieving their goals over the next few months. With this question, we are hoping to give people the opportunity to think about the longer-term challenges they face. These needs match closely with the shorter-term challenges identified, but housing was identified as a long-term challenge at a higher rate (9%) than a short-term challenge (3%). Long-term challenges identified in 10% or more of responses included income needs and employment (22%), basic needs (17%), and transportation (10%).

We do not ask detailed questions about the information diets of respondents but do ask people where they get the information they trust and think is useful. Just over 60% of our respondents have an information source they trust. However, only 27% of those respondents mentioned a legitimate news source as a source of their information. Other sources people listed were “trusted friends” or “YouTube” or “my own research.”

Our respondents represented 26 zip codes in Detroit (of 51 total) and 19 in metro Detroit. The most represented zip code was 48224 with 6 respondents.

We asked people how they would like to receive information, and people listed a variety of sources. The most common preference was “text message” followed by “online” and then “email.”

Conclusions

There remains a considerable need and a large potential market for news and information targeted toward Detroiters who are struggling financially and need basic information to navigate the city and meet their needs. There are few news organizations targeting this audience in Detroit, and they are not adequately resourced to meet this need. Nonprofits, social service organizations, and public institutions do not appear to be able to fill the many large information gaps in Detroit alone.

The data sets we analyzed, and our survey results point to a pressing need for more information that people in Detroit can use to meet their challenges and achieve their goals. This information should be actionable and help connect people to resources.

Income inequality affects Detroiters in very real ways. Our results lead us to believe that more information addressing how to navigate the labor market and the local economy is necessary along with information about the availability and allocation of basic needs and services like housing, transportation, and the affordability of basic services.

Around 72% of people in Detroit [have access to broadband internet at home](#), so we believe that an SMS-based or analog system is still necessary to effectively distribute news and information. Resources and information are not distributed evenly throughout the city. We recommend targeting resources specifically at zip codes 48224, 48235, 48221 and 48223, zip codes where police response times were slowest.

We believe the information gaps identified in our analysis may point to accountability gaps and can and should inform more traditional investigative reporting aimed at interrogating more deeply what is standing in the way of residents having sufficient resources for daily life. We question whether currently there is sufficient accountability for landlords and utility providers. We also question whether there may be a nexus between the large number of police traffic stops, which can lead to interactions with the criminal justice system and lead to license suspensions, and Detroiters' transportation needs and concerns.

Detroiters also desire and deserve information to achieve their goals beyond essential needs. Our survey uncovered a need for information that helps people be healthier, happier and more connected. News and information providers can and should consider offering ways to help community members build connections through programming like social events, volunteering and supporting local businesses or each other. Programs like [Detroit Documenters](#) can also be a way for residents to become more informed and participate in a community good.

Information gaps change over time and recur at specific times. For instance, people are more likely to need to know how to find utility bill assistance during the winter. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we saw a surge of need for reliable health and safety information and how to navigate the unemployment benefit system. Information needs can be cyclical, but they persist until addressed or circumstances change.

There are many tools, technologies, and programs that can be used to construct a healthier, more valuable, and more equitable local information ecosystem. The most necessary commitment is to put community information needs at the forefront of the effort – then track impact and consistently reassess these needs.