



Counting together

Ottawa's collaborative approach to developing cultural indicators

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“If you don't know where you are going, you might not get there.” – Yogi Berra (New York Yankees catcher)

It seems obvious that those involved in strategic planning should have mechanisms to: 1) understand the current state; and 2) track progress in achieving the objectives of their plan.

Municipal cultural planning is no exception. Yet, cultural planners have struggled to develop such measures.

This is not surprising. Culture, by its nature, is difficult to measure. Many benefits of culture, such as building a sense of place, cannot easily be quantified. Other effects, such as the health benefits of involvement in cultural activities, may take many years to assess. Even aspects of culture with numerical indicators, such as economic benefits, often lack reliable local data.

Measuring Culture

In Spring 2016, cultural planners at the City of Ottawa brought together a research group with members from several municipal service areas, the federal government, the cultural sector, community organizations, and academia. The Ottawa Culture Research Group (OCRG) came together as an informal network with the goal of developing a set of indicators that could be used to better understand the state of the city's cultural sector and the effects of cultural policy.

Since they represent different types of stakeholders, the OCRG's members had different reasons for wanting cultural indicators. The cultural umbrella and service organizations wanted to better understand the challenges faced by the sectors they serve. Organizations such as the Ottawa Community Foundation wanted to know how culture is contributing to the city's overall quality of life.

The academic partner, the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa, wanted to further its research agenda and find opportunities for student researchers. The municipal partners, which included several culture areas as well as economic development and planning, wanted better measures for planning and decision making. The federal partner, the Department of Canadian Heritage, saw an opportunity to test local culture indicators for possible use in communities throughout the country.

Counting on Culture

In the Spring of 2017, the OCRG members voted on their priorities for indicators, and then reviewed the top priorities to determine which were feasible in the short term. Broadly speaking, these indicators fell into four general categories – support, presence, participation, and impact – which formed the four chapters of the group's first bilingual report, *Counting on Culture: Impacts and Indicators in Ottawa*.

The “Support” chapter looks at cultural grants and contributions from all three orders of government. At the national level, it compares support received in Ottawa from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Department of Canadian Heritage with other major Canadian cities. Where possible, this information is broken down by discipline.

Federal level data is particularly helpful because it enables benchmarking of Ottawa's cultural sector against its counterparts in other major Canadian cities. Unlike with provincial and municipal grants, where variations in funding may be due to policy differences between the different jurisdictions, federal grants offer more of an "apples to apples" comparison. The ability of Ottawa cultural organizations and producers to compete for and win funding is an indicator of the strength of the sector.

The "Presence" chapter reports on the existence of cultural resources in Ottawa. It shows the number of culture organizations and businesses in Ottawa, the employment they provide, and their concentration within different areas of the city. It also shows how many events and festivals take place in Ottawa each year; the number of buildings, sites, and areas with heritage designations; and the number of performance venues.

The "Participation" chapter profiles not only the total number of people working in culture industries in Ottawa, but also the cultural disciplines in which they work and their location within the city. This chapter also examines the diversity of workers in culture occupations in terms of sex, language, immigration status and period of immigration, Aboriginal identity, and visible minorities. It compares the diversity of Ottawa's culture workforce to the diversity of the city's overall workforce, as well as to the diversity of the culture workforce in other major Canadian cities.

Most of the participation indicators in the report focus on economic participation in culture – in other words, culture as a form of employment and income. This is not because other forms of cultural participation are less valuable, but because local-level data on participation for leisure, education, or volunteering purposes is difficult to obtain. Statistics Canada collects data on participation in many cultural activities through the General Social Survey, but does not report these figures for sub-provincial geographies. The OCRG is now working on strategies to address this data gap for future reporting.

The final chapter of this report discusses some of the "Impacts" of culture in Ottawa. It shows the average employment income of people working in culture occupations in Ottawa compared to other major Canadian cities. It reports, for the first time, the culture Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Ottawa. It also includes a case study of the benefits provided by one segment of Ottawa's culture sector – public libraries.

As with the "Participation" chapter, there are significant gaps in the "Impact" chapter. In particular, there is no clear data on the social and health impacts of culture at a local level. As a side project to *Counting on Culture*, the OCRG's academic partner undertook a literature review of studies on the social and health effects of culture. While there is a sizable body of research in this area, few studies examine how these effects may differ by city or town. The hope is this report will spark further investigation of this topic.

Using Indicators to Support Municipal Cultural Planning

Many of the indicators produced by the OCRG respond directly to the need of culture organizations for evidence-based, Ottawa-specific information for planning and decision making, and for understanding the impact and benefits of their work.

Following publication of the *Counting on Culture* report in November 2018, a symposium was held in partnership with the University of Ottawa, and key data was shared with local culture organizations and policy makers. Almost 100 participants learned critical information for their own organizations' planning and decision-making purposes. For the first time, they had specific data on the economic value of cultural activities in Ottawa. For example, Ottawa's culture GDP in 2016 accounted for \$3.4 billion or \$3,667 per Ottawa resident.

From July 2018 to June 2019, the Ottawa Cultural Alliance (an umbrella group of six of the city's cultural umbrella groups) coordinated the development of a Cultural Roadmap for the city for the 2019-2022 period. An environmental scan, developed by an independent

consultant to inform the Roadmap, relied heavily on the data gathered by the OCRG. In addition to the cost-savings from having accessible local culture data at hand, the OCRG data provided a comprehensive understanding of the state of culture in Ottawa, adding significant value to the environmental scan findings. The resulting *Environmental Scan and Roadmap* are possibly the most extensive data-based reports ever developed for cultural planning in Ottawa.

What We Have Learned

In working together to produce *Counting on Culture*, organizing the Counting on Culture symposium, and supporting Ottawa's cultural planning process, a number of lessons have been learned.

Lesson 1 – Indicators matter

To plan where we are going, we need to know where we have been. Cultural groups need indicators to evaluate their activities, to explain their work to decision makers, and to set priorities and resource levels for the future. Decision makers need indicators to understand the value that culture contributes to a community and to allocate resources accordingly. And citizens need indicators to locate cultural facilities and events, so that they can enrich their lives by engaging in creative activities.

Lesson 2 – Collaboration works

Despite their different needs, OCRG partners found they were interested in many of the same indicators. By sharing resources and expertise, they were able to accomplish more than they could have alone. Partners contributed data; funds for data purchases; space for meetings; lessons learned from past research experiences; and skills in areas such as data analytics, mapping, writing/editing, design, and more.

Lesson 3 – Research is hard but rewarding

It took about two years of hard work to produce our first report. Even though much remains to be done, we are determined to develop the indicators that are still needed to "tell the story" of culture in Ottawa. [MW](#)

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