



**Social Impact of
the Arts Project**

University of Pennsylvania
School of Social Work
<http://www.ssw.upenn.edu/SIAP>

Testimony of

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My name is Mark J. Stern. I am a Professor of Social Welfare and History and Co-Director of the Urban Studies program at the University of Pennsylvania. For the past twenty years, I have conducted research on poverty and different strategies for reducing its effect on urban residents in the United States. It was in this context that I founded the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at Penn's School of Social Work in 1994 to examine the ways in which the arts and culture might make a contribution to poverty alleviation and urban community revitalization.

As you know, nonprofit cultural providers are a significant presence across the city. By our estimate, there are over 770 cultural providers in the city of Philadelphia. Five hundred, thirty-eight—70 percent—of these programs are located outside of Center City. (Exhibit #1). These programs run the gamut from world-famous professional organizations like the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Museum of Art to established community institutions like the Fleisher Art Memorial and Taller Puertorriqueno to emerging participatory groups like the Spiral Q Puppet Theater.

We have long understood that involvement in the arts can have an important impact on the lives of adults and children. Yet, this direct impact of cultural engagement on individuals is not the only, or necessarily even the most important, impact of culture on the city. Cultural providers have an effect on the quality of life in Philadelphia that affects everyone, not just those attending performances or taking classes. This morning, I would like to focus on these *environmental* impacts of the arts and culture. Specifically, our project has demonstrated that the arts and culture contribute to Philadelphia's social fabric by:

- improving the social environment for children and youth
- promoting community revitalization, and
- overcoming historical barriers of class and ethnicity.

Let me take a moment to explain each of these influences.

Improving the social environment for children and youth

There is a compelling body of evidence to support the conclusion that cultural opportunities make a significant contribution to children's social and cognitive development. According to educational researchers Shirley Brice Heath and Elisabeth Soep: "In effective youth organizations . . . the arts promote cognitive, linguistic, socio-relational, and managerial capacities." Compared to a national sample of teenagers, young people in arts programs, studied by Heath and Soep, were:

- 25 percent more likely to report feeling satisfied with themselves;
- twice as likely to win an award for academic achievement; and
- 31 percent more likely to say that they plan to continue education after high school.

Yet, the direct effect of cultural training on individual children is just part of the contribution of the arts and culture to youth development. Cultural engagement makes a significant contribution to the *social environment* within which children are raised and develop.

Empowered neighborhoods provide the right environment for the rearing of empowered young people. Recent findings by Harvard public health researcher Felton Earls and his collaborators have focused on what they call “collective efficacy”—the willingness of neighborhood residents to protect the quality of life in their local community. The trust and commitment that flow from community involvement lead to this sense of efficacy, even in neighborhoods in which poverty and unemployment are common. What is more, Earls and his collaborators have found that “collective efficacy” improves kids’ chances for growing up healthy and safe. For example, Earls and his colleagues discovered that collective efficacy reduced the level of violence and other forms of social disorder in Chicago’s neighborhoods.

The environmental impact of cultural participation has had a measurable effect on youth development indicators in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Here I want to focus on delinquency and truancy rates among young people. If we look at the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city—those with the highest poverty and unemployment rates and low educational achievement—we find that areas with high levels of cultural participation have much lower rates of delinquency and truancy than other disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, while only about five percent of all disadvantaged neighborhoods in Philadelphia have very low delinquency rates, over 20 percent of those neighborhoods with high levels of cultural participation have very low delinquency rates (Exhibit #2).

Promoting community revitalization

The recognition of the role of arts and culture in regional competitiveness provided a major rationale for the state’s and city’s investment in the Avenue of the Arts development on Broad Street. Yet, this commitment to the Avenue of the Arts has led some to argue that investment in the arts ignored the city’s neighborhoods. We have come to realize, however, that the Center City and neighborhood cultural scenes are part of a cultural “ecosystem” that include large and small organizations, for profit and nonprofit cultural firms, and individual artists.

Neighborhoods with an active cultural scene are also the homes for the regional cultural audience. SIAP discovered that in four cities, including Philadelphia, residents of neighborhoods with many cultural organizations attended many more regional cultural events than those who lived in other neighborhoods (Exhibit #3).

Community cultural organizations provide a needed lift to the city’s neighborhoods (Exhibit #4). SIAP discovered that neighborhoods with a high concentration of established cultural organizations were *three times more likely* to undergo economic

revitalization during the 1980s than other neighborhoods in the city. Specifically, the study discovered that:

- sections of the city with a strong cultural presence had smaller population losses and a more rapid decline in poverty during the 1980s than other sections of the city;
- that community cultural providers are strategically located to serve as facilitators of community economic revitalization.

Overcoming historical barriers of class and ethnicity

How do cultural programs stimulate revitalization? In contrast to other forms of civic engagement, cultural participation builds bridges across the city's ethnic and class divides. Approximately 80 percent of community cultural participants travel outside their own neighborhood to attend cultural events. This combination of a strong local presence and a regional profile is a unique contribution of arts and cultural organizations to the region's quality of life.

Cultural providers are strategically located in the city's economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Only 30 percent of Philadelphians live in a neighborhood that is either economically or ethnically diverse, but nearly 40 percent of our cultural providers are located in these neighborhoods. What is more, we have documented that diverse neighborhoods with many cultural organizations are more likely to remain diverse. Philadelphia needs more communities where people of different backgrounds can meet as neighbors. Cultural organizations help to realize this goal.

Improving the Quality of Life for All Philadelphians

The arts are simultaneously local and regional. Cultural providers are important social institutions in their neighborhoods. They provide classes and after-school opportunities for children. They sponsor street festivals. They are visible symbols of a neighborhood's vitality and dynamism. This is the reason why residents who are active in cultural organizations are twice as likely as other residents to classify the quality of life in their neighborhood as "excellent." (Exhibit #5).

Yet, the ripple effects from cultural organizations improve the lives of residents who haven't ever taken a class or attended a performance. This contribution is evident in the improved economic circumstances of their neighborhoods. It appears in the sense of community engagement and efficacy that cultural participation stimulates. The stable diverse neighborhoods that are redefining the meaning of community in the city provide further evidence of the contribution of the arts and culture to all Philadelphians. The cultural sector's contribution to youth development, regional and neighborhood economic revitalization, and the quality of community life provide ample reasons for public support of its work.