

September 2021

A Guide to Public Life Studies in DC

District of Columbia
Office of Planning



Using this Guide

Welcome!

This guide provides an overview of how to design, manage, and communicate the results of a public life study within the unique context of Washington, DC's public realm.

Reflected in this guide is the accumulated knowledge of the DC Office of Planning (OP) from undertaking eight public life studies between 2016-2021. The methodology and techniques described on the following pages were developed by the Gehl Institute as adapted by OP. Links to additional tools and reports can be found on the Resources page.

This guide is for anyone who may want to design, manage, or participate in a public life study, or implement its findings and recommendations.

Questions or comments? Contact the DC Office of Planning at: publiclife@dc.gov.

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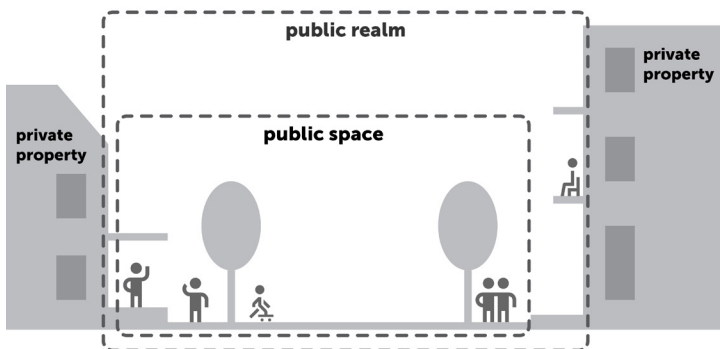
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Why Study Public Life?

Public life is about the everyday activities that people naturally take part in when they spend time with each other outside their homes, workplaces, and cars. Public life thrives when all people can enjoy being in public together.

DC's Comprehensive Plan promotes a varied and vibrant public life for all as an important part of achieving an inclusive and prosperous Washington, DC. With this goal in mind, we study public life to improve project outcomes of public space design and activation.

Public Space, Public Realm, and Public Life



Public space is the area under public ownership, including parks and streets (porches and other elements sometimes project into public space).

Public realm is the area under public and private ownership that is publicly accessible or experienced from public space.

Public life is what people create when they connect with each other in the public realm: the streets, plazas, parks and city spaces between buildings.

We Manage what we Measure

A public life study is a data-driven approach that applies observational, people-centric measures to inform policy, regulations, and public space design. It is used to measure and understand the human experience of our shared public realm.

As DC grows, public life studies seek to understand the social practices and cultural dynamics of public spaces to validate local experience, building from what works now and identifying opportunities for improvements.

With District, federal, and community partners, OP has completed public life studies in eight locations.

Re-Imagining Reeves	(2021)
Eastern Market Plaza	(2021)
Florida/New York Intersection	(2020)
Congress Heights	(2019)
K Street Transitway	(2019)
Tenleytown	(2019)
People on Penn	(2016)
Ward 7 Superstop	(2016)

Throughout these studies, OP has collected a lot of data on public space use and worked with community partners to promote the value and methods of public life analysis.

30,000+	people observed moving
3,500+	people observed staying
4,750+	people surveyed in person / online
500+	hours in the field
100+	fieldworkers trained
12+	partner agencies / groups engaged

Locations of Public Life Studies



Designing the Study

Consider the following questions when scoping and designing a public life study:

- What is the design problem? What do you need this data for? How will it actually be used? Who is the audience?
- Is there a hypothesis that you are trying to prove?
- Is there a focus on people moving, stationary activities, or user preferences?
- Who are the allied partners involved in developing, executing, and implementing the study's findings and recommendations? Will there be potential challengers?

Building the Team

A public life study should have a dedicated manager that assigns key roles to deliver the project: fieldwork scheduler, fieldwork manager, data analyst(s), report writer, and study champion. One person could fill all or multiple roles, or roles can be assigned based on skills.

Public life studies are a great way to involve local stakeholders as co-creators and contributors to the project, ideally at the outset of design. Consider the study as a key component of a broader engagement strategy that builds relationships of trust in the community.

Include professionals involved in the later design and engineering phase as well as leaders who can champion the study's findings and recommendations.

In addition to diverse roles and interests, try to build a team that reflects a diversity of personal experiences and identities (age, race, gender, language, etc). We all experience public space differently—more perspectives challenge privileged or biased interpretations of the data.

Recent Public Life Studies in DC

Florida and New York Ave NE Intersection -

With the NoMa Business Improvement District, the study informed designs of new public spaces created from the reconfiguration of the complicated “Dave Thomas Circle” intersection. The study was funded the regional Transportation Planning Board’s TLC program, and included an online survey.

Tenleytown - With the Tenleytown Main Street, the study informs major changes to pedestrian access and circulation around the Metro station. The study compared the Wisconsin Avenue commercial corridor with the parallel bus loop block adjacent to DC’s biggest public high school and busiest indoor pool. University of Maryland students were trained to perform field work and propose design interventions.

Eastern Market Plaza - With the DC Department of General Services, the study explored patterns of public life on neighborhood parks and public plazas along Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, in the Capitol Hill Neighborhood. The study recommended ways to enhance the diverse cultural appeal of the parks and plazas to better serve their users.

Equity and Inclusion

Public life studies are understood to be grounded in a more equitable approach to planning and design. A public life study can:

- Make observations and engage with people in the neighborhoods where they already are, thereby reducing barriers associated with attending a scheduled and structured meeting or overcoming privileged access to public processes and staff.
- Expand the number and type of participants engaged, beyond the “usual suspects”.
- Include as co-creators participants from the community, a range of professional backgrounds, varied life experiences, and of diverse personal identities in both fieldwork and analysis.
- Elevate marginalized or underrepresented stories and narratives of a place.

3 Ways to Elevate Equity and Inclusion

Elevating equity and inclusion in OP’s public life studies program is an ongoing activity that is being pursued in these three ways:

Reporting – document citywide data to understand the differing public life dynamics across neighborhoods and by participating groups.

Collaborating – carry out public life studies in different parts of the city, with new partners (including under-represented age groups), in under-resourced areas (beyond BIDs, Main Streets, etc), and with more nuanced analysis metrics (racial justice).

Storytelling – share the intent, methodological approach, and expected value of the program in accessible and educational ways, digitally, on paper, and in person.

Adapting Public Life Studies in Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged both our understanding of successful public life and ability to perform public life fieldwork and analysis.

Nevertheless, public life adapted to and persisted under pandemic conditions, while highlighting established inequities across DC with disparate impacts on public space use and access.

The public life study has proven adaptable to these conditions, as was the case with the [Re-imagining Reeves Public Life Survey](#) in fall 2020. Partnering with Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1B, the study shifted to more digital data collection methods, with a focus on memory, experience, and storytelling centered on the culturally significant intersection of 14th and U Streets, NW. The online survey received over than 4,000 responses during a two-week period.

The public life approach was also applied to the digital engagement for DC's [Ready2Play](#) Parks and Recreation Master Plan update. The plan's "Creative Distancing" component surveyed residents on how they used the everyday outdoor spaces in their neighborhoods to stay active and connected, but in safe and physically distant ways.

Collecting the Data

Public life study data collection typically includes site analysis, scheduling and training fieldworkers, and a fieldwork activity over one or more days.

Site Analysis



Typical Daytime Activity
(commercial/civic operating hours, peak travel hours, school dismissals, etc.)



Public Realm Assessment
(inventory of furnishings and trees, public/private property access, etc.)



Environmental Conditions
(sun/shadow study, wind, noise levels, etc.)



Facade Assessment
(transparency, operable doors, visual interest)



Land Use Characteristics



Area Demographics

Fieldwork



**Counting
People Moving**



**Mapping
People Staying**



**Surveying People's
Preferences**

Fieldwork Tips

Solicit sign-ups online and set up a fieldwork schedule. Consider buffering additional fieldwork days (in case of weather cancellation) or plan a rain date.

Train fieldworkers. Schedule a stand-alone training session.

Fieldwork is labor intensive. Be conservative with the amount of fieldwork, as more data collection locations equals more fieldworkers. Plan for the weather! Wind, rain, sun, hot, cold, etc.

Plan for no-shows! Try to have a 'floater' available on fieldwork day for filling in shifts and addressing unexpected issues.

Be thoughtful. Consider fieldwork safety, access to bathrooms during shifts, providing snacks and water.

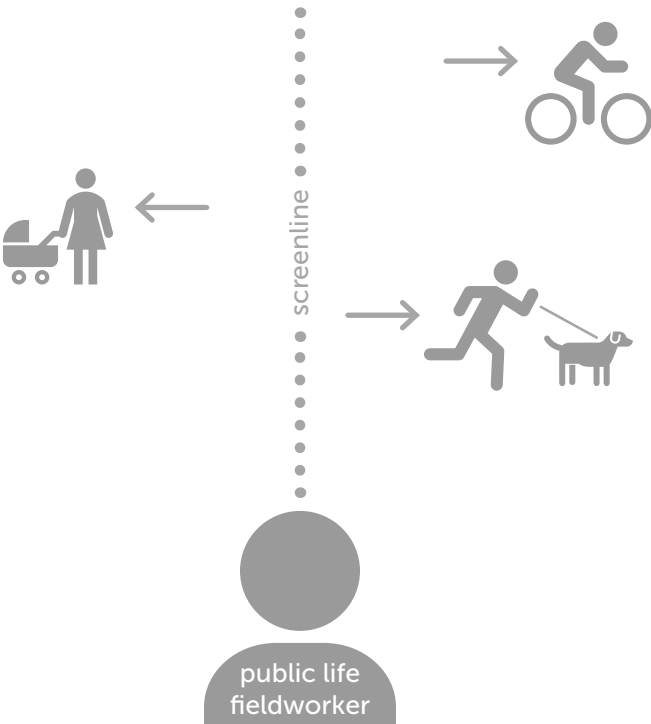
This is a paper-based exercise. While digital tools have been explored, OP's study technique remains mostly paper based, which is sensitive to rain (shelter) and wind (binder clips / clipboards).

Take photos! It can be difficult for fieldworkers to take photos, so the study manager/floater should take many photos capturing social behaviors. Try to access roofs and other unique vantage points.










Counting People Moving

At your location, count the people crossing the imaginary “screenline” in front of you, to the curb. The arrow on the small map is the direction you should face. Tick off each person at the top of the form crossing either left to right or right to left, including their perceived sex. If time allows, for each person move on to the age, and any accompanying info (stroller, etc.). This can get busy at times, so focus just on the totals if necessary.

Typically, a 10-minute sample count is performed at each screenline, representative of that hour.



Example Pedestrian Counting Form

PEDESTRIANS				SUBTOTAL		TOTAL
DIRECTION OF TRAVEL		LEFT TO RIGHT →		← RIGHT TO LEFT		
				→	←	
PERCEIVED GENDER	MALE					
	FEMALE					
0-6 YEARS OLD						0-6
7-14 YEARS OLD						7-14
15-19 YEARS OLD						15-19
20-30 YEARS OLD						20-30
31-64 YEARS OLD						31-64
OVER 65 YEARS OLD						65+
CYCLING						
RUNNING/ JOGGING						
SKATEBOARDS, ROLLERBLADES, SCOOTERS						
WHEELCHAIR/ SPECIAL NEEDS						
GROUPS						
WITH PETS						
WITH STROLLERS						

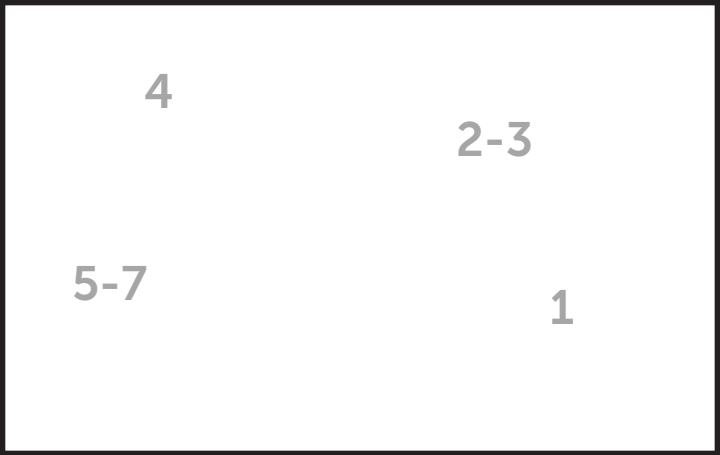
Mapping People Staying

Walk through the area outlined on the map. On the map, mark locations with numbers of people who are sitting, standing (include people at bus stops but not waiting at crosswalks). The number corresponds to the chart, where you input their perceived demographics and activity(ies). For groups, circle the numbers of the people together.

Typically, one 10-minute sweep of the study area is performed for the stationary mapping area, representative of that hour.



Example Stationary Mapping Form



	PERSON OR OBJECT		AGE					POSTURE			GROUP		ACTIVITIES								
	PERCEIVED GENDER		0-4 YEARS OLD	5-14 YEARS OLD	15-19 YEARS OLD	65+ YEARS OLD	STANDING OR LEAVING (FW: WHEELCHAIR, 5-5 STROLLER)	SITTING - PUBLIC SEATING (FW: WHEELCHAIR, 5-5 STROLLER)	SITTING - PRIVATE / CAFE (FW: WHEELCHAIR, 5-5 STROLLER)	LIVING	SITTING - IMPROVED	PAIR = 2	GROUP ≥3	EATING / DRINKING	TALKING WITH ONE ANOTHER	PEOPLE-WATCHING	ELECTRONIC DEVICE	EXERCISE/RECREATION	CHILDREN PLAYING	PERFORMING	WAIT
1																					
2																					
3																					
4																					
5																					
6																					
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17																					
18																					
19																					
20																					
TOTAL																					

Surveying User Preferences

Use the intercept survey to understand how people using the study area feel about the space and what changes or improvements they would like to see. Everyday users of a public space may not live in the neighborhood or be able to come to a local design meeting, but their experience is highly informative and can validate or challenge certain preferences.

Surveys and questions can vary to accommodate the study, but should be designed for brevity—the shorter the better. Consider what biographical information is critical and what might feel invasive (cultural competency).

Surveying Tips

Randomize: surveyors are encouraged to pick every 5th person they see to approach to survey, to counter our respective individual biases.

Be opportunistic: approach people sitting or waiting at longer crosswalks. Trying to stop people walking at peak travel hours can be a challenge because they are heading some place with purpose.

Be friendly and official: smile and open with something like “Do you have a minute to tell us how to improve this space?” Mention its a city-led study and try to display an OP logo (t-shirt, folder, etc.). DC residents are used to solicitations for money and signatures.

Example Intercept Survey Questions

How often do you visit [the study area]?

How did you get here today? (mode of longest distance traveled)

What three words would you use to describe [the study area]?

What brings you to [the study area] today?

Do you recognize anyone in [the study area]?

What are three things that would encourage you to stop or spend more time in [the study area]?

What is your home zipcode?

Additional demographic questions asking for age, gender identify racial/ethnic identity, and household income.

Analyzing the Data

Hold a Fieldworker debrief to share observations, surprises, validated expectations, photos, etc.

Perform the data entry as soon as possible after the fieldwork.

Develop a system for ensuring data accuracy and addressing missing data. Schedule additional counts if necessary.

Data analysis is an iterative process. Cross-tabulate and continue asking questions of the data. What stories is it telling?

A critical approach to data analysis is a good means for quality assurance and finding potential discrepancies or errors in the data management.

Incorporate a diversity of perspectives when analyzing the data, including those that may not have participated in the study's design or fieldwork.

See More Online

OP's public life studies are online. Check out the various analysis, findings, and recommendations from completed studies at:

planning.dc.gov/page/public-life-initiatives

Communicating Findings

Understanding the process that the study's data, findings, and recommendations will be plugged into can inform how the study will be communicated. Consider the different audiences who might use the findings and how they can be best communicated with.

Formats can include a written report, single high-resolution poster, and/or slide deck. Make excessive use of photos to illustrate findings and infographics that combine maps and data points.

Answer the questions: What's next? How will the data be used to inform future neighborhood planning, real estate development, public space design, or programming?

Tips for Communicating Findings

Tell a story: organize the findings and study with a narrative arc.

Go digital: consider formatting key takeaways as simple graphics for social media to accompany the roll-out of the study's release.

Go analog: share your data, findings, or recommendations in the study area itself with local public life participants and contributors, such as in transit shelters or in shop windows.

Reconnect: circle back with key stakeholders and fieldworkers to share the study's outcomes.

Pilot: implement a low-cost intervention that pilots one or more of the study's recommendations to demonstrate the value of change.

Resources

DC Office of Planning Public Life Initiatives
planning.dc.gov/page/public-life-initiatives

DC Comprehensive Plan (Urban Design Element Section
UD-3: Fostering a Vibrant Public Life)
planning.dc.gov/page/comprehensive-plan

Gehl People Public Life Tools
gehlpeople.com/tools

Interested in learning more about the DC Office of
Planning's public life studies?

Visit: planning.dc.gov

Email: publiclife@dc.gov

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