

Reimagining civic engagement: A narrative inquiry into Block Talks and community storytelling
in Topeka, Kansas

by

Isabel Huckins

B.A., Washburn University, 2020

M.S., Washburn University, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Leadership Communication
Staley School of Leadership

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

Civic engagement is commonly measured through measures of formal participation, such as meeting attendance, voting records, and public comments. This approach is flawed, as the use of such measures is rooted in an assumption that participation is equally accessible, obscuring the structural, relational, and emotional barriers that shape who is able to engage in practice. This dissertation examines how civic engagement is experienced and enacted within Block Talks, a neighborhood-based civic practice in Topeka, Kansas. This practice emerged in response to community-identified concerns related to safety, trust, and access, designed to create accessible, relationship-centered spaces for storytelling and collective dialogue outside of formal institutional settings.

Grounded in leadership communication and community-engaged scholarship, the study conceptualizes civic engagement as a relational and communicative process rather than a measurable outcome. Using narrative inquiry, it draws on narrative interviews with Block Talk hosts, participating neighbors, and community partners—as well as participant observations, analytic memos, and community-generated materials—to answer four overarching research questions: (1) How do participants experience and make meaning of civic engagement within Block Talks? (2) How does leadership emerge from relationships among hosts, neighbors, and community partners in Block Talks? (3) How does storytelling shape leadership, participation, and civic agency within Block Talks? and (4) What tensions and limitations shape leadership and participation within neighborhood-based civic engagement practices?

Across five analytic claims, the findings articulate the dynamics underlying Block Talks in a context where traditional civic spaces have been experienced as extractive or inaccessible, while tensions related to safety concerns, emotional labor, and sustainability have complicated

neighborhood-based engagement efforts. The first claim asserts that storytelling created the relational conditions—mutual trust, recognition, and presence—that made it possible for leadership to emerge. The second claim, framing leadership as something rooted in dialogue rather than directive authority, presents it as collective sensemaking, by which community members gradually constructed shared understandings of community concerns. The third claim reveals how leadership practices exhibited adaptiveness, shifting amid heightened fear and safety concerns toward an approach rooted in subtlety, pacing, and the avoidance of pressure. The fourth claim centers on leadership as boundary work and power negotiation, revealing how it was enacted through community-first facilitation practices. The final claim clarifies that leadership did not only emerge in Block Talks to address crises and tensions; it also arose in ongoing practices of care, coordination, and collective action.

This study contributes to leadership communication scholarship by documenting the practice of civic engagement in Block Talks as a lived, relational practice and, in turn, by demonstrating the value of narrative inquiry in examining informal civic processes. By centering community storytelling and neighborhood-based engagement, the dissertation challenges dominant institutional definitions of participation and offers an alternative understanding of civic agency grounded in lived experience.

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Approved by:
Major Professor
Dr. Samuel Mwangi

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xii
Acknowledgements	xiii
Chapter 1 - Reimagining Civic Engagement	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Research Orientation and Lived Context	7
Community Context and Structural Conditions	11
Purpose of the Study	14
Research Questions	16
Overview of Methodology	17
Emergence of Block Talks	19
<i>Introduction to the Practice</i>	19
<i>Block Talks as a Community-Led Process of Civic Engagement</i>	21
<i>Block Talks' Organizational Origins: CIVIC</i>	26
Toward a Different Possibility	33
Significance of the Study	34
<i>Scholarly Significance</i>	34
<i>Methodological Significance</i>	35
<i>Community and Practical Significance</i>	36
Organization of the Dissertation	37
Chapter 2 - Literature Review	39
Community-Engaged Scholarship in Leadership Communication	39
Civic Engagement as Unequally Accessible	43
Community Storytelling as Collective Meaning-Making	45
Community Storytelling, Symbolic Convergence Theory, and Shared Meaning	47
Social Capital, Trust, and Relational Leadership	49
Informal Learning, Adult Education, and Dialogic Spaces	52
Narrative Inquiry and Participatory Knowledge Production	54
Theoretical Frameworks	57

<i>Critical Theory</i>	57
<i>Relational Leadership Theory</i>	59
Summary and Implications for the Study	61
Chapter 3 - Methodology	64
Methodological Orientation and Research Design	65
Research Context: Block Talks and the Community Setting.....	68
Relevant Community Assessments and Pre-Existing Data	70
Researcher Role and Positionality	71
Participants and Community Roles	73
Data Sources and Collection Methods	76
<i>Narrative Interviews</i>	77
<i>Participant Observations and Composite Fieldnotes</i>	78
<i>Analytic Memos</i>	78
<i>Community-Generated Materials</i>	79
<i>Descriptive Survey and Civic Data</i>	80
Data-Analysis Process.....	81
Research Timeline.....	85
<i>Phase 1: Research Planning and Community Coordination (February – March 2025)</i> .	85
<i>Phase 2: Data Collection and Fieldwork (June – December 2025)</i>	85
<i>Phase 3: Narrative and Interpretive Analysis (January 2026 – March 2026)</i>	86
<i>Phase 4: Writing, Integration, and Dissemination (December 2025 – April 2026)</i>	86
Ethical Considerations	87
Trustworthiness and Rigor	89
Chapter 4 - Findings.....	92
Storytelling Created the Conditions Under Which Leadership Could Emerge	94
Leadership Emerged Through Collective Sensemaking.....	99
Leadership Arose Amid Fear and Safety Concerns	102
Leadership Was Enacted Through Boundary Work and Power Negotiation	106
Leadership Emerged Through Care, Coordination, and Collective Action Beyond Crisis	110
Chapter Summary	115
Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications	117

Answers to the Established Research Questions.....	118
The Implications of Leadership’s Emergence for Community-Engaged Scholarship and Practice.....	122
Methodological Contributions	127
Limitations and Directions for Future Research	128
Conclusion	130
References	132
Appendix A - Narrative Interview Protocols	140
Appendix B - Composite Fieldnotes	170
Appendix C - Analytic Memos	183
Appendix D - Survey Instruments and Summary Data	193

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Infant Mortality and Stillbirth Report (Screenshot From Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2018)	12
Figure 1.2. Stanford Project Data on Robinson Middle School (Zip Code 66604, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year, 2020–2024)	13
Figure 1.3. Stanford Project Data on Jay Shideler Elementary School (Zip Code 66610, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year, 2020–2024)	14
Figure 1.4. Visualization of Engagement Process Behind Block Talks	24
Figure 1.5. Community-Identified Safety and Trust Concerns (From Community Inspired Violence Intervention Coalition)	28
Figure 1.6. Barriers to Accessing Community Resources (From Community Inspired Violence Intervention Coalition, 2024 Community Survey)	30
Figure 1.7. Topeka Neighborhood Health Map (City of Topeka, 2024)	32
Figure 3.1. Overview of Research Design	65
Appendix Figure A.1. Block Talks Interview Protocol	119
Appendix Figure A.2. Interview Notes, Block Talk Host	122
Appendix Figure A.3. Interview Notes, Community Partner	129
Appendix Figure A.4. Interview Notes, Community Member	138
Appendix Figure A.5. Overview of Interview Participants	146
Appendix Figure A.6. Coded Interview Excerpts	147
Appendix Figure A.7. Cross-Interview Theme Table	148
Appendix Figure D.1. Block Talk Neighborhood Assessment Survey	173
Appendix Figure D.2. Participant Demographics	201
Appendix Figure D.3. Household and Income Context	202
Appendix Figure D.4. Housing Stability	203
Appendix Figure D.5. Transportation, Housing, and Food Insecurity	204
Appendix Figure D.6. Help, Connection, and Hope	205
Appendix Figure D.7. Likert Scale and Open-Ended Responses	206
Appendix Figure D.8. Post-Meeting (End of Block Talk) Survey Results	207

List of Tables

Table 3.1. Overview of Data Sources	81
Table 3.2. Analytic Artifacts and Reflexive Practices	85
Table 4.1. Analytic Claims	94

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not exist without the neighbors who opened their doors, shared their stories, and trusted this work enough to be part of it. To the hosts, neighbors, and community partners who participate in Block Talks—thank you. You give your time, your experiences, your grief, your ideas, and your care, all despite being under no obligation to do so. Many of you have been asked to share your stories without having seen any change or follow-through. The fact that you have chosen to participate again is not something I take lightly. This work belongs to you as much as it belongs to me.

Block Talks were not created by any single person. They were shaped by conversations on porches while door-knocking, at kitchen tables while sharing meals, and in all the moments in which neighbors have said, “There has to be another way.” The ideas in this dissertation grew out of lived experiences—out of real moments of safety, loss, belonging, frustration, and hope. You are the experts on your neighborhoods. Thank you for reminding me, time and time again, that civic life is already happening in ways that institutions often fail to see.

Chapter 1 - Reimagining Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is often discussed abstractly as something that communities always need more of, yet little attention is paid to the conditions that make civic engagement possible in the first place. This dissertation examines means of making civic engagement accessible through neighborhood-based community practice. Through a narrative inquiry into Block Talks in Topeka, Kansas, this study explores how the practice fostered participation through storytelling, relationships, shared sensemaking, discussions about safety, and everyday acts of care and coordination. In the chapters that follow, leadership is examined not as a role or outcome, but as a communicative process through which civic engagement becomes reachable and sustainable for community members.

Civic engagement has traditionally been viewed as a responsibility, a standard of care, or a measure of a healthy community. Contemporary as well as traditional public perspectives hold that the community members who attend meetings, speak up at hearings, consistently vote, and engage in formal decision-making spaces are those who “care”; conversely, those who do not are seen broadly as disengaged, apathetic, or indifferent (Putnam, 2000). Critically, however, this outlook is nothing more than an assumption—one rooted in the false belief that civic engagement is equally accessible to all people and, in turn, that participation is purely a matter of motivation rather than one of reach (Skocpol, 2003). In truth, being civically engaged is a privilege that is not experienced evenly across communities (Fung, 2015).

This research is grounded in an understanding that care and participation are not mutually dependent factors. Thus, it is unreasonable to treat community members as though they do not care simply because systemic barriers created by these institutions keep them from participating.

The Topeka community is full of people who care deeply about their families, neighborhoods, and communities, regardless of how often they access the formal spaces in which decisions are made. The expectation that people constantly give up their time, energy, and emotional labor to be heard reflects a civic system that fundamentally fails to consider the realities of everyday life (Leighninger, 2011). As it currently stands, civic engagement is more of a privilege than it is a universal right (De Weger et al., 2020). These inequities reflect differences in social capital, particularly trust, shared norms, and relational access, which shape who feels able to participate in civic life and under what conditions (Putnam, 2000).

This research was carried out in Topeka, Kansas, where the researcher was born and raised. Throughout their time in Topeka, they have seen the same people consistently show up in these formal spaces: primarily those with flexible schedules, familiarity with relevant institutions, and the capacity to invest the necessary time, money, and emotional labor. Meanwhile, those without such advantages—working parents, caregivers, neighbors experiencing grief, people navigating economic instability—are judged for their supposed apathy and lack of motivation, and their voices are ignored (Aldrich, 2012). One of the most damaging sentiments in the realm of civic engagement is, undoubtedly, “if they cared, they’d be here” (Leighninger, 2011).

People should not be forced to choose between family care and community care, yet formal civic processes frequently force that tradeoff (Putnam, 2000). That tradeoff can come in the form of meetings being held during working hours or late in the evening, public transportation being highly limited, institutions offering no accommodations or support to aid residents in navigating complex systems, norms, or terms—and overcoming such barriers while still keeping up with daily responsibilities gives way to strain and emotional fatigue (Holt-

Lunstad et al., 2010). In neighborhoods impacted by violence, those who are hurting are often expected to grieve publicly in order to effectively advocate for the safety and well-being of their neighborhood, forced to incessantly explain their trauma in order for it to be taken seriously by those with the authority to effect change; otherwise, their silence, rest, or withdrawal may be interpreted as disengagement (Gilmore, 2007) or, worse yet, as an indication that the problem at hand isn't one that really needs to be addressed in the first place.

This dissertation examines the stories, everyday realities, and views of civic engagement among those who face these kinds of struggles. It examines how contemporary civic engagement demands sacrifice, excluding many of those most impacted by institutional decisions. Institutions force people to give up more than they have in exchange for being heard and valued, shifting responsibility for access away from those institutions and onto individuals and communities. Over time, this dynamic gives way to mistrust, exhaustion, and disengagement (Alter et al., 2017). Ultimately, the study reveals that such outcomes are not the result of apathy among community members; rather, they stem from these community members realizing that caring is simply not sustainable within such a system.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews existing scholarship on civic engagement, storytelling, leadership communication, and informal learning to lay a foundation for the study's subsequent assessment of one particular community practice that reshaped participation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology behind the study's narrative inquiry. Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, showcasing how communicative leadership practices made participation more accessible. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of these findings for both research and practice.

Statement of the Problem

Participation in formal civic spaces is shaped by a wide array of factors: spare time, income, caregiving responsibilities, reliable transportation, job flexibility, emotional capacity, prior harm, and trust in institutions, among others. Survey responses reinforced the scope of these barriers. For many community members—especially those who are actively navigating economic precarity, family responsibilities, or exposure to violence—civic participation in prevailing engagement structures inevitably entails sacrifice, and institutions at large fail to acknowledge this dynamic. When people are unable to make such a sacrifice, their absence is misinterpreted as apathy (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). It is the job of institutions to serve the people by making truly democratic decision-making possible; if citizens’ stories or grievances being heard is dependent on privilege, a functioning democracy cannot be said to exist.

This dynamic is not isolated to the experiences of just a few individuals. Research has historically shown that factors like socio-economic status, job flexibility, family responsibilities, access to reliable transportation, and prior institutional experience shape access to civic participation (Ospina & Foldy, 2010), with “showing up” entailing high emotional costs. This study’s interviews, open-ended surveys, and composite fieldnotes revealed similar trends (see Chapter 4: Findings; Appendix B: Composite Fieldnotes; Appendix D: Survey Instruments and Summary Data).

These dynamics are most common in communities experiencing economic precarity, systemic disinvestment, or exposure to violence. Critically, most of these communities have grown accustomed to these expectations, giving way to a foundational state of mistrust, fatigue, and withdrawal from neighbors and institutions, exacerbating disenfranchisement. This

researcher heard the sadness and frustration among members of such communities—people who had tried to give what they could to make a difference, only to end up feeling like they had been used. Even when institutions do take notice and hold events with or gather feedback from these communities, those efforts are often only made to “check a box,” furthering their own agendas, while real voices from neighborhoods remain unheard (Kliewer & Priest, 2019)

Although researchers have increasingly critiqued traditional models of civic engagement for their exclusionary effects, most scholarship continues to focus on formal participation and institutional reform (De Weger et al., 2020; Leighninger, 2011). There has not been enough research on informal, neighborhood-level civic practices that operate outside of institutional structures, grounded in relationships, care, and lived experience (Glandon et al., 2017). Similarly, there is only scant empirical research on storytelling as a civic practice that organizes engagement, shapes power relations, and supports collective meaning-making (Riessman, 2008). Our communities are built by all of their members; no single individual makes the world go round. We cannot effect true change—or even know what kind of change is needed—without first hearing and understanding people’s lived experiences. Stories constitute the way we keep history, the way we learn from one another, the way we understand our world. Proper civic engagement is not possible unless all voices and stories are a part of the conversation—and, more importantly, a part of the decision-making.

Much of the literature treats civic engagement as an outcome to be measured rather than a relational process to be understood. In contrast, theories of social capital and sense-making highlight how participation is shaped by shared interpretations, relationships, and the communicative processes through which communities construct meaning together (Weick, 1995). Engagement in civic spaces is generally assessed by attendance; participation is highly

valued, and individuals are expected to comply with longstanding institutional procedures (Putnam, 2000), leaving little room to consider how civic agency develops over time or how people make meaning of their participation.

In reducing engagement to numbers or visibility, we lose sight of so many people who matter—of so many important stories and voices—and we end up with spaces to which people have no interest in returning. While not everyone can come to a meeting, they may show up when a neighbor gets sick by mowing their lawn or bringing them a hot meal. Even those who can never make it to a meeting often still do what they can to stay informed through other avenues and form opinions that should be valued. Nevertheless, institutions often fail to consider what others are going through and what they are sacrificing to be able to participate. In failing to pay attention to such relational dynamics, efforts to expand civic participation risk reproducing the very same barriers that exclude many community members from the outset (Williams & Cooper, 2019)

The creation of Block Talks was the end result of an effort to address this gap. Block Talks are neighbor-led gatherings aimed at building community through sustained relationships, shared storytelling, and locally defined actions geared toward promoting connection, safety, and neighborhood priorities. They offer local, relationship-based opportunities for neighbors to connect with one another that do not involve formal meetings, institutional spaces, or rigid schedules. In doing so, they show what it can look like when civic engagement centers storytelling, relational accountability, and resident-led decision-making.

However, there is scant research on how practices like Block Talks function, how participants experience them, and what tensions or limitations they may entail. Although this

dissertation is place-specific to Topeka, Kansas, its contribution extends to broader debates about how civic agency may be cultivated when formal participation is inaccessible or harmful. These barriers and struggles are not unique to any one neighborhood. Thus, it is critical that informal civic practices are no longer under-theorized and neglected within academic and institutional discourse.

Ultimately, the problem that this research addresses is not simply low participation in formal civic spaces but also the definition of civic engagement itself. There is a serious need for research that looks at how community members understand civic agency to be experienced and enacted within relational, story-centered, and neighborhood-based practices, especially in communities where formal participation is inaccessible or unsustainable. This study responds to that need by examining Block Talks as a lived civic practice and centering the experiences and narratives of those who have participated in it (Alter et al., 2017). The perspective that guides this research is shaped by many longstanding relationships to place, community, and civic life in Topeka. This research looks at the whole picture.

Research Orientation and Lived Context

This research is shaped by my lived experiences, relationships, and longstanding commitments to my community. I approach this work as someone whose life has been deeply intertwined with care, responsibility, and collective survival. I am a single mother raised by teen parents, and I come from a family in which firstborn children were often responsible for not just themselves but also for their siblings and extended kin. In many families, including my own, children take on caregiving responsibilities early to enable the adults to navigate survival demands. From an early age, caring for others was not a choice but an expectation; community

engagement was understood as both necessary and moral, even when institutions failed to reciprocate that care.

I was raised in environments marked by chronic stress, financial instability, and limited access to rest or security. Civic engagement has never been abstract or optional for me; it has been constantly negotiated alongside survival, parenting, and work, demanding tradeoffs that formal civic systems rarely acknowledge. When I was a child, civic engagement simply was not something we could always afford, resulting in us often being excluded from the conversations and spaces in which decisions about our neighborhood were made. As my family's capacity to participate increased, we were treated as more "legible" and valuable; as that capacity decreased, that legitimacy was withdrawn. These experiences shaped my understanding of civic engagement as something relational, uneven, and deeply human rather than something idealized and procedural in nature. At the same time, they informed my skepticism toward institutional models of participation that assume community members' time, stability, and safety to be a given.

As I grew into a young single mother navigating multiple jobs and inaccessible systems, these dynamics persisted. Still, I was experiencing civic life as something that demanded presence without accommodating reality. Having been both a recipient and provider of care and support—often simultaneously—I've come to realize how much *could* change. At the same time, I've seen how difficult it can be to effect such change, with institutions shifting rapidly from seeing someone as an "asset" to treating them as a liability once their life no longer aligns with prevailing norms of productivity and respectability.

Still, it's important to note that I have conducted this research from a position of significant privilege. I am a white woman, and that identity shapes the way I'm able to move through the world, the way in which I am perceived, and the degree of safety and legitimacy that

I am afforded in academic, public, and institutional spaces. Although I have certainly experienced hardship and instability, my whiteness has insulated me from the routine racialized surveillance, exclusion, and violence that shape many residents' civic lives. Put simply, I have been more likely to be believed, protected, and granted access, even amid struggle.

Of course, merely identifying my privilege is not sufficient; accountability requires practice. In this work, I am intentional about how I use my privilege. Rather than positioning myself as a spokesperson, advocate, or authority for community experiences that do not belong to me, I use my access to help create and protect spaces in which others can speak for themselves. I step back, redirect attention, and leverage my advantages to support those who are often unheard, resisting the urge to translate, sanitize, or professionalize community narratives for the sake of institutional comfort. This also means stepping back when my presence could overshadow or redirect community voices and being accountable to feedback when I misstep.

My role in this research is not to take positions *for* the community but to help foster conditions under which leadership, storytelling, and meaning-making can emerge collectively. I approach leadership not as something to be possessed but as something that should ideally circulate through relationships and through communication. This orientation aligns with prior community-engaged scholarship that has exhibited an understanding of knowledge as co-constructed and one of research as inherently relational rather than neutral (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Fine & Torre, 2004).

I maintained reflexivity throughout the research process via analytic memos, fieldnotes, and dialogue with community partners, treating it not as a one-time disclosure but as a continuous practice, consistently examining how my assumptions, emotions, and positionality shaped facilitation, interpretation, and representation. This entailed being attentive to moments in

which my comfort level differed from that of the participants, particularly when it came to matters of safety, institutional presence, and visibility.

My experiences of hardship do not grant me access to experiences of racialized oppression, nor do they authorize me to claim a shared understanding where one does not exist. I hold these distinctions deliberately. You can listen and stand up to something without saying you understand what it is like to go through. My commitment is to listen, to be guided by community knowledge, and to be accountable to the people whose stories and labor have made this work possible. Where I cannot fully understand, I do not attempt to stand in another's experience. Instead, I merely stand alongside it.

In community-engaged research, positionality is not a limitation to be managed but a responsibility to be fulfilled. In naming both my lived experiences and my privilege, I sought to make transparent the standpoint from which this research was conducted. Transparency is ethically necessary to ensure not only that safety is at the core of my efforts but also that this narrative inquiry takes seriously the power dynamics embedded in who gets to speak, who gets to be heard, and whose knowledge is treated as legitimate.

For the sake of transparency, it is also important to clarify that my involvement in this community work was at no point separate from my academic efforts. In fact, my experiences at Kansas State University were deeply intertwined with the creation and evolution of this research. Upon beginning my doctoral studies, I had no formal research plan or predetermined project; I only had a deep commitment to understanding and improving the forms of civic engagement that I had long been witness to and part of, having long served as a community advocate and volunteer.

Over time, as I worked through the doctoral program, my exposure to theories of leadership communication, qualitative methodology, and community-engaged scholarship enabled me to view my community work in a new light. Around the same time, I began collaborating with the Community Inspired Violence Intervention Coalition (CIVIC), a local initiative focused on reimagining community safety and engagement. The theoretical knowledge I was acquiring through my coursework soon influenced how CIVIC approached its work. Conversely, the stories and patterns to which I was exposed through CIVIC revealed practical gaps and opportunities that scholarship had yet to adequately address. It was only through these parallel experiences that I came to recognize that community voices were more than mere data to be collected; they were sources of knowledge, leadership, and innovation.

While the specific organizational processes through which Block Talks emerged are detailed later, it is sufficient here to assert that this mutually influential dynamic was a foundational one for this dissertation. My coursework and research design provided me with the methodological tools to study Block Talks with rigor and ethical care, while the lived outcomes of Block Talks exhibited and refined the theoretical claims I was developing for my dissertation. Put simply, these academic and practical efforts constituted a full-circle process, continually informing one another. It is not possible to separate my role as a researcher from my role as an advocate with CIVIC; the boundary between them was too blurry. Crucially, however, this blurred boundary is precisely what demonstrated that Block Talks worked—that communicative leadership and relational trust could transform civic engagement at the neighborhood level.

Community Context and Structural Conditions

Historical health and safety data effectively illustrate the structural inequities that shape civic life in the neighborhood where Block Talks emerged. Statewide infant mortality data

(widely recognized as a key indicator of neighborhood health) from 2014 to 2018 identified the 66604 zip code in Shawnee County as that with the highest (reliably estimated) infant mortality rate at 12.3 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Figure 1.1. Infant Mortality and Stillbirth Report (Screenshot From Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2018)

Rates by Zip Code

Thirty-one zip codes had sufficient infant deaths in 2014-2018 to allow analysis. The zip codes with the highest reliable (relative standard error $\leq 30\%$) mortality rates included:

- One in Shawnee County:
 - 66604 (12.3 deaths per 1,000 live births; 95% CI: 7.4, 19.2)
- Three in Sedgwick County:
 - 67218 (10.8; 95% CI: 6.6, 16.7)
 - 67211 (10.7; 95% CI: 6.3, 16.9)
 - 67214 (9.7; 95% CI: 5.4, 15.9)
- One in Johnson County:
 - 66202 (9.3; 95% CI: 4.8, 16.2)

These disparities are echoed by public safety data. Topeka Police Department records show that, between 2018 and 2023, the 66604 zip code experienced 1,080 incidents of violent crime—dramatically higher than the 21 incidents recorded in the 66610 zip code over the same period. Notably, the latter is among the most highly resourced areas in the city, exhibiting the highest median household income and relatively strong reading and math scores. These discrepancies effectively illustrate the uneven distribution of health, safety, and institutional attention across Topeka neighborhoods, which shapes residents' experiences of trust, risk, and civic participation.

Figure 1.2. Stanford Project Data on Robinson Middle School (Zip Code 66604, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year, 2020–2024)

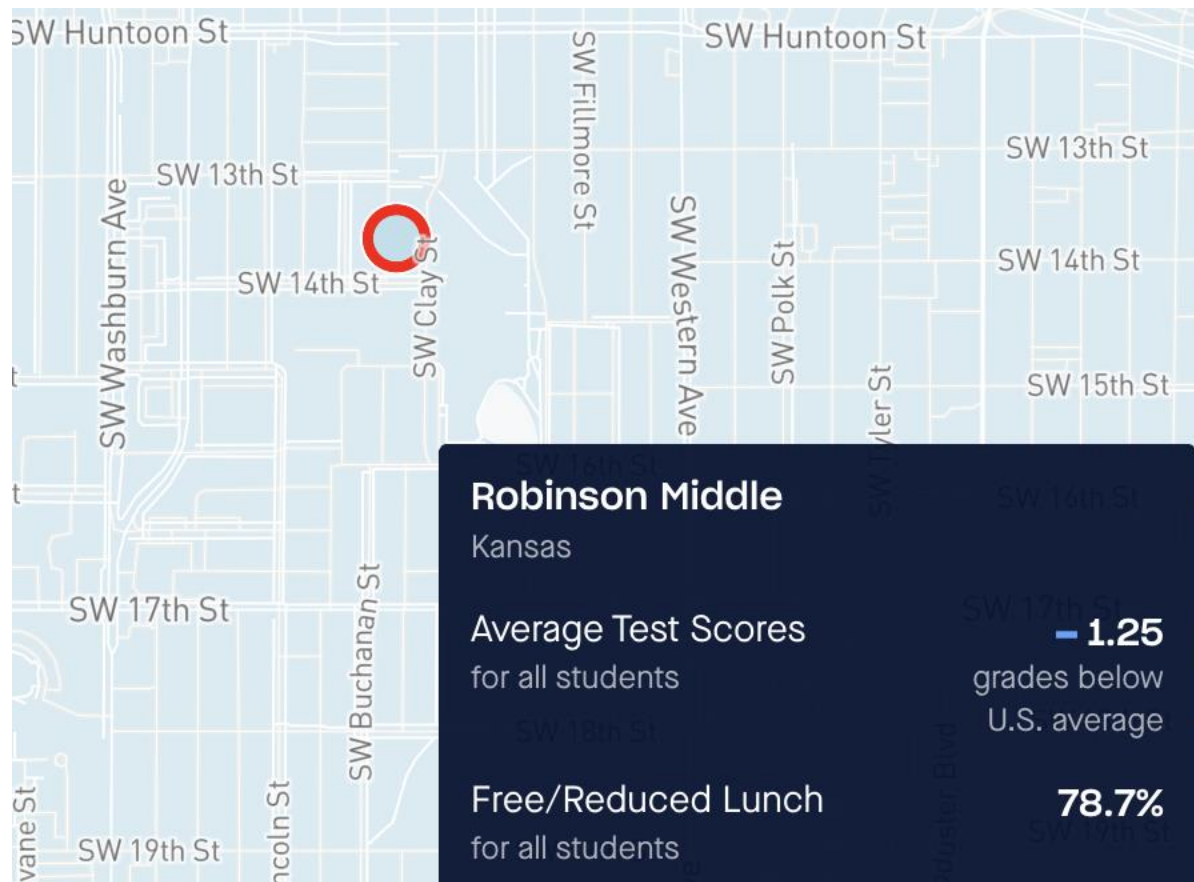
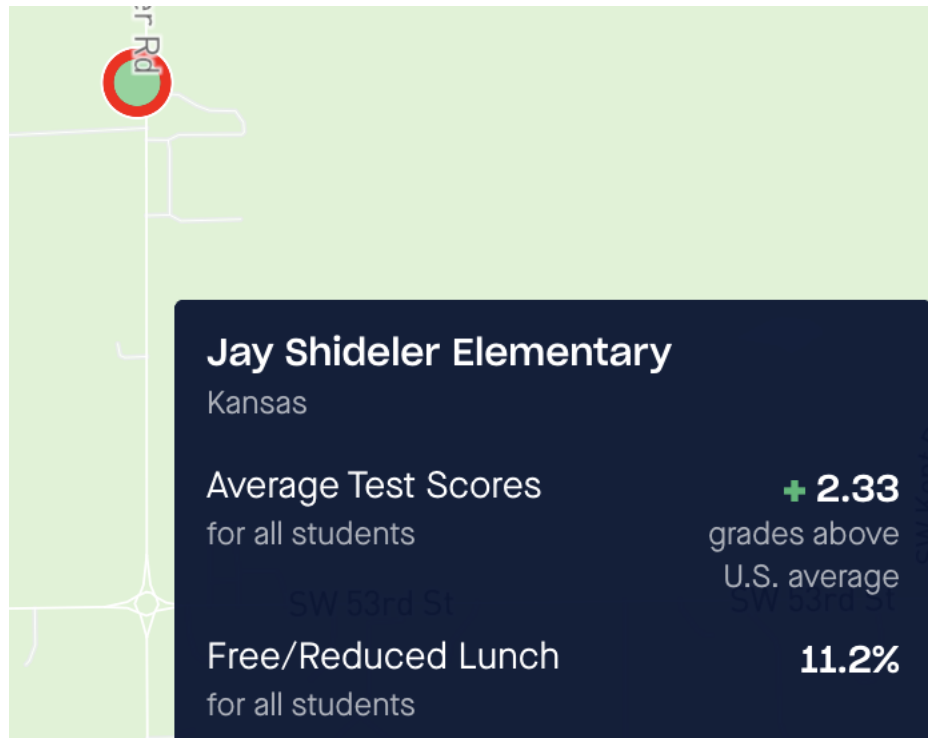


Figure 1.3. Stanford Project Data on Jay Shideler Elementary School (Zip Code 66610, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year, 2020–2024)



It is within this context of sustained structural inequity that Block Talks were introduced, offering a community-defined space for dialogue, relationship-building, and participation outside the bounds of formal institutional channels.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how civic engagement is experienced and enacted within Block Talks, a neighborhood-based civic practice in Topeka, Kansas. Through narrative inquiry, the study explores how storytelling, relationships, and everyday community interactions create the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Particular attention is paid to how leadership emerges communicatively through shared sensemaking, care, boundary negotiation, and collective action within these neighborhood spaces.

This research covers three participant groups within a disadvantaged area of Topeka. The majority of the research will be conducted with a Block Talk host, a participating neighbor, and a community partner to understand how each individual views their role within Block Talks. By focusing on individuals across different spaces within a Block Talk, we examine how responsibility and influence move within the group, how participation is negotiated, and how engagement is sustained over time. This approach is informed by Symbolic Convergence Theory, which emphasizes how shared stories and “fantasy themes” shape collective understanding and group identity, all key elements in the emergence of leadership within community settings (Bormann, 1983). Rather than treating leadership as a fixed position, the research views leadership as something fluid that emerges from interactions, trust, and care between neighbors (Ganz, 2011).

As storytelling is a central practice of Block Talks, it represents an essential component of this study. Stories shape how neighbors understand their experiences, relate to one another, and decide collectively on what matters to them. By positioning storytelling as a civic practice, the study explores how meaning, priority-setting, and action come about within Block Talks (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Critically, however, storytelling is not the only research technique employed here. The study draws on multiple data sources, including narrative interviews, community-generated materials, and survey responses, to achieve a rich understanding of participants’ experiences.

The goal of this study is not to evaluate Block Talks as a model to be replicated or scaled, nor is it to measure outcomes in terms of policy change or participation rates; rather, its goal is to examine Block Talks as a *lived civic practice* and investigate how civic engagement is experienced, negotiated, and sustained through storytelling and relationships. The study

documents and analyzes how civic engagement unfolds within a specific relational context, considering the alternative means of practicing civic life revealed by that unfolding process. By closely examining one Block Talk, this research contributes to the broader conversation about how civic agency may be cultivated in ways that are responsive to particular places and lived experiences (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020). This work is important to the Topeka community at large as well as the many people within it who want their dedication to civic engagement to be recognized and understood. By documenting how civic engagement is experienced within Block Talks, the study also provides insights that are potentially transferable to other communities exploring neighborhood-based engagement.

Research Questions

The study is guided by qualitative research questions centered on the participants' lived experiences and relational meaning-making within an informal, neighborhood-based civic practice, as well as community members' understandings of civic engagement. The research questions are grounded in narrative inquiry and community-engaged scholarship, viewing community members as holders of knowledge rather than subjects of evaluation. These questions intentionally prioritize stories, reflections, and meaning-making over compliance, attendance, and institutional benchmarks. By centering community members' views, the study aims for an understanding of civic engagement as it is lived, not as it is often defined. Ultimately, it aims to fill the gap left by traditional civic research that fails to incorporate diverse stakeholder voices. The following research questions guided the data-collection and -analysis processes.

1. How do participants experience and make meaning of civic engagement within Block Talks?

2. How does leadership emerge from relationships among hosts, neighbors, and community partners in Block Talks?
3. How does storytelling shape leadership, participation, and civic agency within Block Talks?
4. What tensions and limitations shape leadership and participation within neighborhood-based civic engagement practices?

Together, these questions support an in-depth examination of civic engagement as a relational and evolving practice. They also align with leadership-as-process perspectives, which view leadership as something constructed through communication, shared meaning, and evolving social relationships rather than individual traits or positions (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Their scope encompasses indifference, contradictions, and complexities across neighbors' experiences while creating space to examine shared patterns and meanings that emerge through storytelling and interaction. These questions are not meant to facilitate generalizations, determine effectiveness, or construct a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement. Rather, they are aimed at ascertaining the texture of participants' lived experiences, meaning-making, and relational processes, in line with the study's overarching interpretive paradigm and narrative inquiry methodology. In this way, the work stays grounded in community members' narratives, contributing to broader conversations about civic engagement, leadership, and community practice without reducing the underlying experiences to simplified measures or outcomes.

Overview of Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, community-engaged research design grounded in narrative inquiry, a methodological approach intentionally aligned with the study's focus on

lived experience, meaning-making, and relational civic practice. Rather than measuring outcomes in the form of participation or effectiveness, this methodology is geared toward achieving an understanding of how individuals experience and interpret civic engagement in their everyday lives. Too much is lost when we view everything as numbers; it is simply not possible to truly know people or what they need by looking at quantitative data. Qualitative data, in contrast, enables researchers to understand human-level dynamics. Emotion is part of this work, and it cannot be ignored if a comprehensive, textured understanding is to be achieved. (Williams & Cooper, 2019).

Narrative inquiry serves as the primary methodological framework because it targets real stories and raw emotion—both legitimate and necessary forms of knowledge. Through stories, community members can articulate how they understand their roles, relationships, and sense of agency over time despite the inaccessibility or harm inflicted by civic spaces. This emphasis on storytelling aligns with Symbolic Convergence Theory, which explains how shared narratives create collective frames of reference, and with social capital theory, which highlights how trust and reciprocity strengthen through ongoing relational interaction. This approach treats the community not as sources of data to be extracted but as co-constructors of meaning whose experiences shape the knowledge accrued by the research.

The study draws on a diverse range of qualitative data sources to provide the necessary depth and context while boosting the study's accessibility to participants. The narrative interviews, community-generated data (e.g., surveys, observed engagement activities), and research from other sources collectively provide contextual grounding, situating community members' narratives within broader patterns. Crucially, these forms of data are not competing

with one another; rather, the unique ways in which they are all collected ensure that anyone who wants to be part of the research can be.

Ethical considerations are central to the study's methodological design. Informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality underpin every aspect of data collection and analysis. Given the relational nature of the research context, particular attention is paid to issues of power, care, and accountability. Reflexivity is treated not as a supplemental consideration but as a crucial ongoing practice. Within a space where individuals are accustomed to being used and placing their trust in the wrong places, ethical practice is of the utmost importance.

Emergence of Block Talks

Introduction to the Practice

Block Talks did not emerge from an established solution or policy intervention. It developed slowly over time through patient community engagement, driven by the limits of existing civic engagement structures. Neighbors began to realize that, although they were often invited to participate in civic spaces, the forms of engagement on offer were not aligned with how they actually lived their lives (Fung, 2015). Meetings took up too much time to make it most of the time, and even when they did, they felt too drained or preoccupied with managing any number of responsibilities to engage effectively. Regardless of the details, they were not getting real work done or getting the most out of their experiences in civic spaces.

While its institutional origins are detailed later in this chapter, it is first important to understand that Block Talks emerged from these individual-level tensions. They also emerged from a relational environment in which neighbors were already engaging in informal sensemaking processes, interpreting community problems, testing shared explanations, and

forming early narrative convergence around their experiences (Weick, 1995). Instead of asking neighbors to change their lives or sacrifice their spare time and energy, this new approach asked neighbors: What would civic engagement look like if it were shaped around the average person's relationships and lived experiences, designed to meet people where they are? What if participation began not with agendas, compliance, or urgency but with conversations, trust, and a shared understanding? In posing these questions, everything changed. These residents are tired and struggling, but they want to see things change. By creating spaces that allow them to be part of that change, the substance of those changes can hold more meaning and be more significant (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020). One participant described their first experience of Block Talks in contrast to prior attempts as follows: "I started by just asking for food help to see how it would go, and I got food right away, brought to me with the times I could be home, no judgement."

At the core of the practice, Block Talks are neighborhood-based gatherings designed to create spaces for storytelling, connection, and collective sensemaking. They are intentionally flexible in both form and space so that engagement may unfold in ways that feel accessible instead of extractive. Instead of prioritizing efficiency or outcomes, Block Talks center on presence and relational accountability (Riessman, 2008). Civic participation in these spaces is measured not by attendance alone but also by the substance of connections, shared meanings, and care developed over time. Care looks like neighbors taking notes for one another when the need arises, like creating phone logs to gather input on and ideas for changes, like people showing up whenever they are able and being treated the same no matter the consistency with which they attend. We need equitable—not equal—access to civic engagement. Every person has different needs and different experiences; one should never make the mistake of assuming that

there's some one-size-fits-all approach that would be effective, especially if they occupy a position of power over communities.

In sharing their stories about safety, trust, grief, and access to resources, neighbors revealed that many forms of civic participation were not accounting for people's emotional capacity, trauma, or realities. Block Talks formed in response to this disconnect, offering a space to which people could show up as they are rather than as they are expected to be. It didn't matter how they were dressed, whom they were with, or whether they were tardy; they were experts on their own community that everyone was happy to see, and this dynamic fostered a widespread sense of belonging and recognition within the neighborhood.

Block Talks as a Community-Led Process of Civic Engagement

Block Talks function as a neighborhood-based process of civic engagement that lowers barriers to participation through a focus on storytelling, shared responsibility, and community relationships over formal procedures or institutional authority. Block Talks do not require neighbors to enter unfamiliar civic spaces, as they take place within people's own neighborhoods, often in homes, on porches, or in shared community spaces, reducing the logistical, emotional, and symbolic costs of participation (Alter et al., 2017).

At the core of Block Talks is a view of civic engagement holding that storytelling and active listening should be at the forefront, not agendas or action plans. This emphasis reflects the communicative mechanisms described in Symbolic Convergence Theory, where shared stories serve as the basis for forming group identity and collective interpretation. These neighborhood gatherings are structured around the stories and conversations that can emerge in safe, welcoming spaces that make neighbors feel comfortable sharing anything important to them,

from safety concerns to loss to the minutiae of their daily lives. When a Block Talk first forms, some neighbors already know one another, some have seen one another before, and others have never really gotten to know anyone in their neighborhood. The ice and the barrier of food access are broken immediately when neighbors arrive at a gathering to share a meal and begin sharing stories to get to know one another. People quickly let their guard down, uncover similarities with their neighbors, and naturally come up with ideas to improve their neighborhood. Spaces in which everyone shares the same goals and understands where the others are coming from foster a particular kind of comfort that is rarely seen in formal spaces, allowing real stories to emerge. These stories are treated not as testimonies that need to be defended or justified but as valid forms of civic knowledge that shape how communities understand their needs and priorities (Riessman, 2008).

Critically, Block Talks are hosted by local community members. These hosts are positioned not as traditional leaders but as conveners responsible for creating space in which others can engage in dialogue and form bonds. Their role entails welcoming neighbors, fostering conversation, and maintaining an environment characterized by care and respect. Hosts are neighbors who care deeply about their communities, as many of them were doing similar work before Block Talks came into the picture. Hosts care deeply about their neighborhood, work hard to get to know and look out for their neighbors, and are widely viewed as trusted members of the community. They work to ensure that all voices get a chance to be heard through a sense of comfort and safety. They keep track of when individuals are missing and might need extra help, ensuring that nobody falls through the cracks. Of course, they don't do any of this alone, as they understand that Block Talks work best when everyone works together. Hosts encourage and help their neighbors to do what they do so that, over time, they can reach even more people. This

hosting model shifts leadership away from institutional representatives and toward community members themselves, reinforcing the idea that civic engagement can be facilitated without formal authority (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Participation in Block Talks is intentionally flexible. Nobody is required to speak publicly, disclose personal experiences, or attend every gathering to be considered engaged. Some neighbors contribute through storytelling, others through active listening, and others through informal conversations outside of the gathering. Non-gathering opportunities are always on offer, from individual meetings with a trusted member or host to conveying their story anonymously in written form. This flexibility reflects an understanding that engagement looks different depending on people's life circumstances, emotional capacity, and personal comfort.

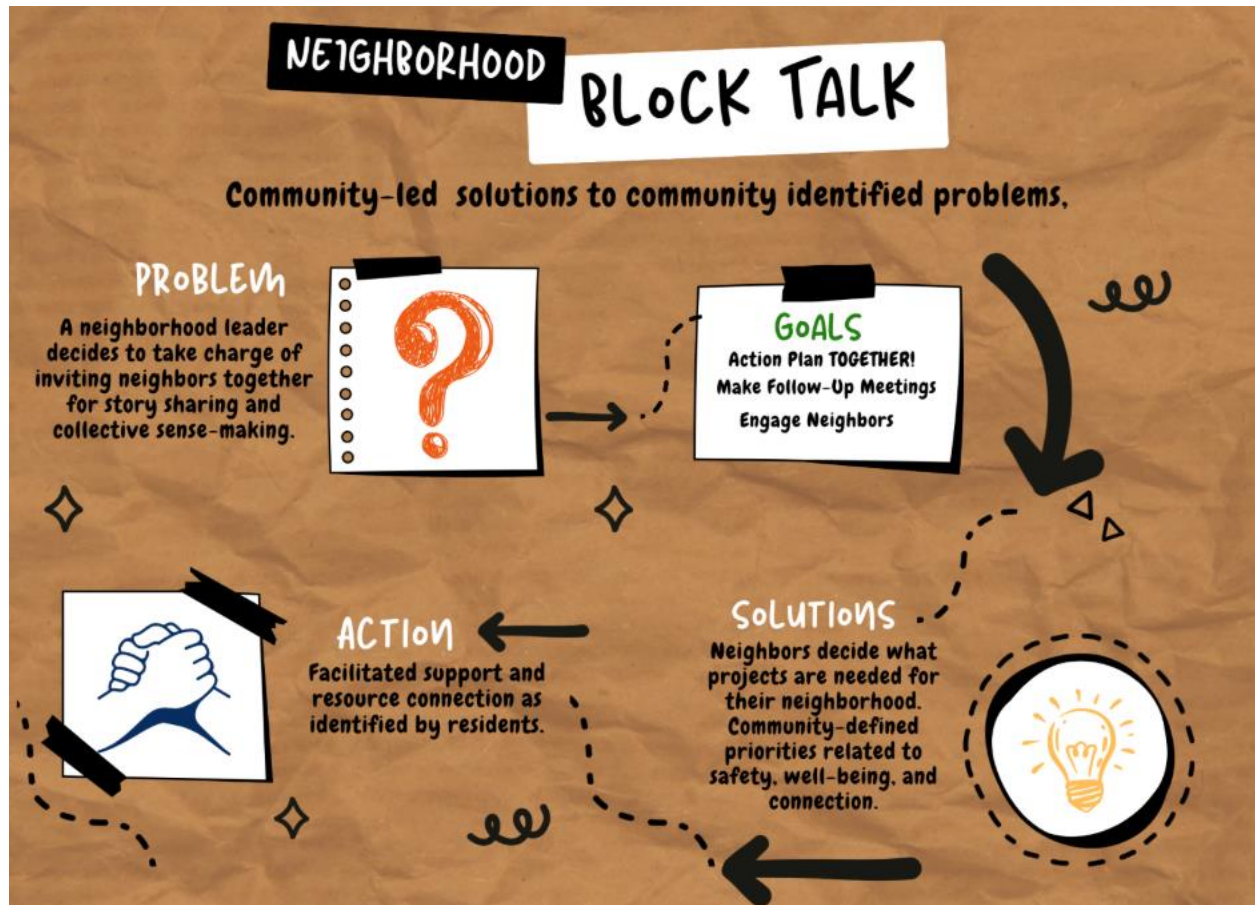
Of course, shared themes and concerns naturally emerge as conversations unfold, allowing priorities to develop through collective sensemaking instead of predetermined plans. Neighbors identify patterns across stories, recognize shared challenges, and identify what matters most to them as a neighborhood. Expected themes like gun violence and food insecurity often arise, but so do things that people on the outside looking in may not have considered, such as the way streets clog in the rain or how far the nearest food pantry is despite the bus not allowing groceries. There are so many things that organizations miss when they fail to value the input and stories of those who need their help the most (Glandon et al., 2017). This process that Block Talks follows allows civic issues to be defined by neighbors' lived experiences rather than their external agendas, ensuring that the information they share can really make a difference (Riessman, 2008).

Action within Block Talks, when it is taken, grows out of these shared understandings. Actions taken include mutual support, resource sharing, follow-up conversations, or engagement with external partners when neighbors ask for it. However, these actions are not treated as the only (or even the main) indicator of success. Relationship-building, trust-building, and connections among neighbors are considered the most meaningful civic outcomes. This orientation resists urgency-driven models of engagement that prioritize visible outputs over sustainability and care (Alter et al., 2017).

Community partners, including community organizations, act as supporters; they do not play an authoritative role within Block Talks, lacking any semblance of decision-making authority. Rather, their involvement—as well as the substance of that involvement, be it in the form of resources, information, or logistical support—is guided by the neighborhood itself, entirely subject to the latter’s invitation. This contrasts sharply with traditional spaces, but it allows the neighbors to truly feel valued and, in turn, comfortable, pushing them to get more creative with their ideas (Israel et al., 2010). This unique trait ensures that Block Talks’ priorities are kept in line with neighbors’ priorities.

Figure 1.4 illustrates the process underlying Block Talks as a relational, iterative civic practice rather than a linear program model. It depicts how relationship-building, storytelling, collective sensemaking, and action inform one another over time. Rather than moving toward a fixed endpoint, Block Talks evolve as a living civic process through ongoing participation, trust, and community context.

Figure 1.4. Visualization of Engagement Process Behind Block Talks



In structuring civic engagement around accessibility, relationship-building, and shared meaning-making, Block Talks offer an alternative to formal models of participation centered on visibility, performance, and compliance. This process creates space in which civic agency can align better with the realities of everyday life, particularly in communities where traditional engagement has been inaccessible or even harmful (Putnam, 2000).

Block Talks’ Organizational Origins: CIVIC

Many different pieces came together to create Block Talks, sparked by a county-wide effort to understand and address the underlying causes of community violence in Topeka and Shawnee County. One critical piece was a multi-year, community-engaged research process linked to CIVIC—one of eight teams selected nationwide for funding from the National Association of County and City Health Officials in 2023—housed within the Northeast Kansas YWCA. CIVIC was formed in response to mounting concerns over neighborhood safety, violence, and weak trust in support systems across Shawnee County, serving broadly to identify patterns of harm and, more importantly, to achieve a stronger understanding of how neighbors experience safety, civic engagement, and resource access in their everyday lives.

On a more material level, the coalition met weekly to analyze data, share stories, and identify neighborhood-level gaps in safety, trust, and access. Upon receiving its second grant from the Federal Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program, it quickly expanded its capacity to develop evidence-based, community-led strategies rooted in a public-health-oriented approach. It soon became clear to the coalition that residents wanted more than mere programs or meetings; they wanted meaningful connection, relational safety, and consistent spaces in which their lived experiences would be the guiding force behind developed solutions.

Out of this organizational groundwork, the community and its partners—most notably the local organization PARS, which had previously managed Safe Streets initiatives like “National Night Out” and “Neighborhood Watch”—pursued a new model of civic engagement centered on neighborhood dialogue. In recognizing that traditional engagement programs were no longer

meeting people's needs, PARS and other actors under the CIVIC umbrella spearheaded efforts to reimagine these structures.

CIVIC's process emphasized listening over intervention, relationship-building over quick solutions. Its engagement efforts included door-to-door outreach, neighborhood conversations, town halls, focus groups, and community-wide surveys, ensuring that as many voices as possible could offer input. It was not a one-and-done meeting or survey announced once but a long-term process done in partnership with neighbors, activists, and community members across the county. Everyone involved made sure to find ways to reach people, reflecting the principles of community-engaged scholarship: the notion that research must be responsive to community context and grounded in sustained relationships rather than extractive data collection (Israel et al., 1998, pp. 173–202).

The findings from CIVIC's survey and engagement activities revealed several consistent themes. Many neighbors reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods and having little trust in the institutions responsible for addressing violence and conflict (CIVIC, 2024). Insufficient information, transportation challenges, economic constraints, and prior unsuccessful attempts to access help were frequently cited as barriers to well-being. In the first few door-knocking meetings with neighbors, you could hear neighbors' hope grow, seeing how others believed they were experts. Individuals hugged door-knockers and cried while telling their stories, as they had never been listened to before, never had their story valued. So many shared their stories, their hopes, and their concerns. These findings did not show disengagement from community life but rather frustration with inaccessible and unresponsive systems.

Figure 1.5. Community-Identified Safety and Trust Concerns (From Community Inspired Violence Intervention Coalition)

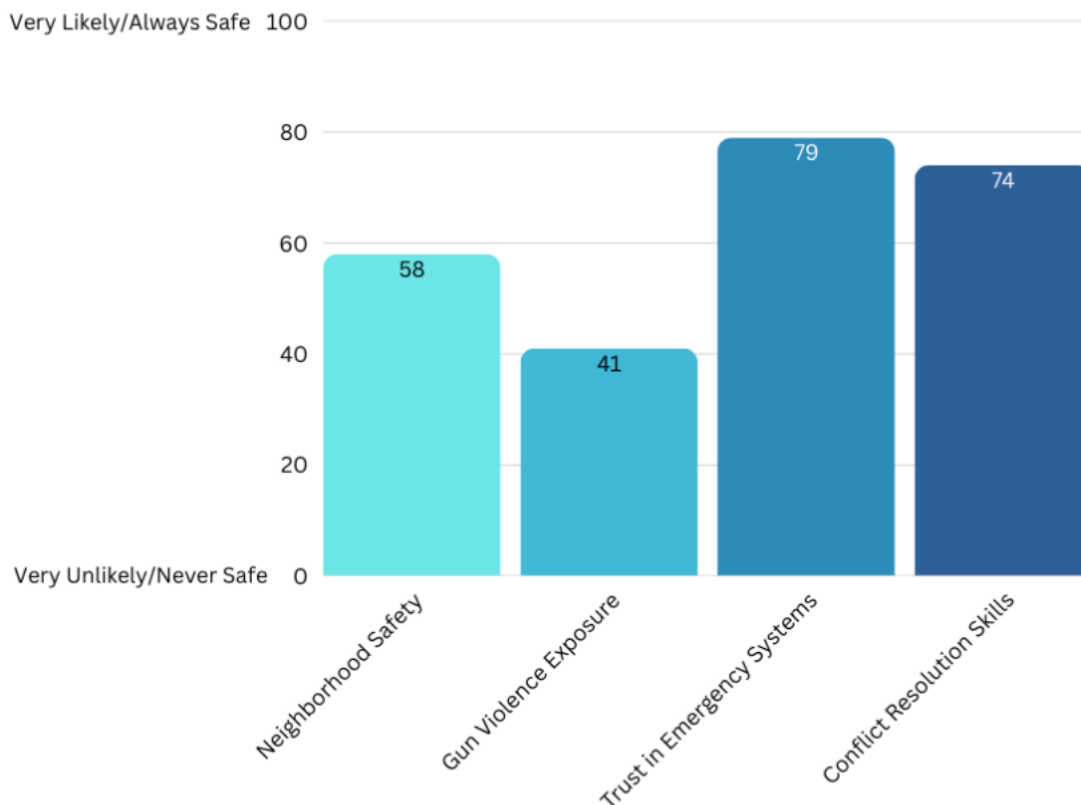


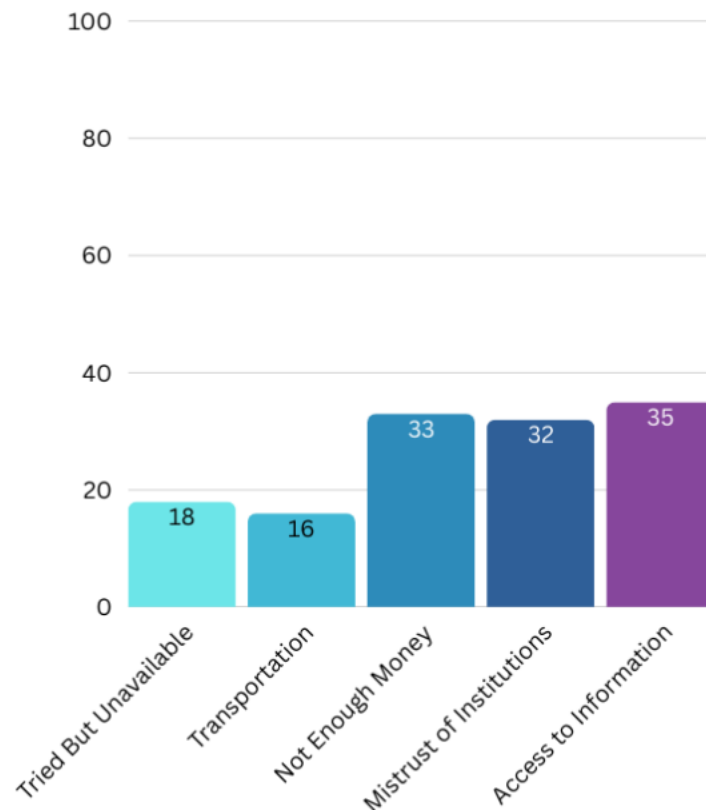
Figure 1.5 details how neighbors expressed complex and sometimes counterintuitive sentiments related to safety and trust. Many expressed confidence in their own conflict-resolution skills and emergency systems but negative feelings about overall neighborhood safety and exposure to gun violence, pointing to underlying tensions. Evidently, safety is not experienced as a stable or uniform condition; rather, it is negotiated in everyday life, in relationships, and under structural constraints.

CIVIC data also revealed strong attachment to place (CIVIC, 2024). Many neighbors indicated that they would miss their neighborhood if they had to leave despite expressing serious

concerns about it. Researchers have previously stated that attachment to place often coexists with critique, serving as a powerful motivator for engagement when appropriate structures are available (Haney, 2025, pp. 101–115). This tension between care for place and dissatisfaction with formal systems highlights a critical gap in existing civic engagement structures. CIVIC highlighted that residents cared deeply but lacked ongoing engagement spaces that felt accessible and relational.

The CIVIC research also revealed important insights into the engagement process itself. Neighbors shared how draining civic engagement felt to them despite never seeing results from said engagement. They never experienced true follow-through—constantly asked to show up and provide information but never provided with any information in return. Of course, these concerns align with broader critiques of civic engagement models already elaborated in previous sections (Leighninger, 2011): Neighbors don’t see the payoff as worth dealing with the associated barriers, especially given that these barriers were systemic, not incidental or isolated, which only reinforced cycles of frustration, mistrust, and disengagement. (Attree et al., 2011)

Figure 1.6. Barriers to Accessing Community Resources (From Community Inspired Violence Intervention Coalition, 2024 Community Survey)



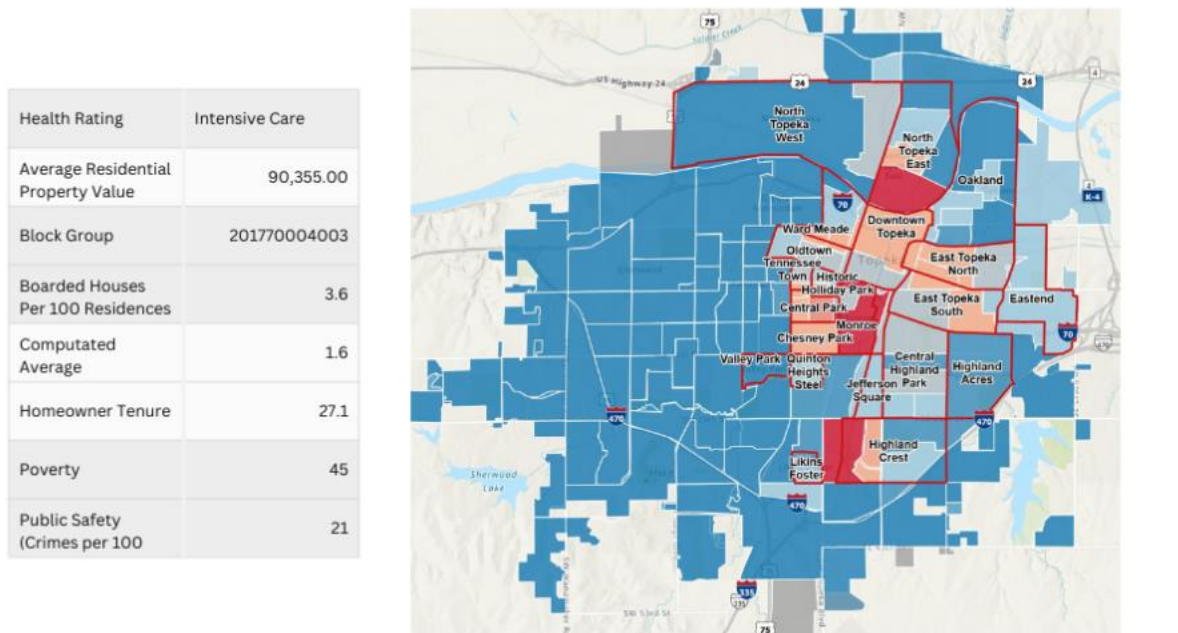
Note. The Y-axis indicates the percentage of respondents who faced each barrier to accessing community resources. The question behind these responses was optional, and participants could select multiple barriers.

Figure 1.6 shows that the most commonly reported barriers to community resources were insufficient information, financial constraints, insufficient transportation, and a lack of trust in institutions. Evidently, disengagement from formal civic systems is generally rooted in consistent experiences of obstruction and exclusion. When access becomes labor-intensive or emotionally costly, participation becomes unsustainable.

Instead of responding to these findings with a new program or institutional initiative, the CIVIC partnership began asking different questions to kickstart a reimagining of engagement itself: What would engagement look like if it began with neighbors rather than institutions? What if agenda-setting came from lived experiences rather than organizational priorities? What forms of engagement were created to be sustained, flexible, and relational rather than episodic?

These questions gave way to answers that must be understood within neighbors' everyday physical and structural contexts, which are dictated by neighborhood-level conditions—often historical disinvestment and uneven resource access. Understanding where these experiences are concentrated is important when considering why neighborhood-based engagement emerged as a critical need.

Figure 1.7. Topeka Neighborhood Health Map (City of Topeka, 2024)



Note. Neighborhood health rated along a color-based scale: deeper blues = stronger health; deeper reds = weaker health.

Figure 1.7 visualizes some of the CIVIC findings—health outcomes, resource access, and structural vulnerabilities—within the broader spatial context of Topeka: place-based conditions that shape residents’ everyday experiences, perceptions of safety and trust, and access to both resources and formal civic participation. This context helps to explain why traditional, centralized engagement strategies often fail to reach residents in the most vulnerable neighborhoods.

Block Talks were created as a response to such disparities in place-based conditions. Their development was directly informed by the CIVIC findings. Instead of asking neighbors to enter institutional spaces, Block Talks brought civic engagement—storytelling, accessibility, and

community leadership—into neighborhoods, letting conversations unfold in familiar, comfortable environments, and letting neighbors themselves dictate how things would work.

Toward a Different Possibility

If civic engagement does not stop demanding sacrifices, it will continue to exclude those who are already carrying the greatest burden (Tronto, 2013). Neighbors should not have to choose between going to a meeting and making their family dinner, between advocating for a safer neighborhood and keeping their job, or between being heard and being healthy. It is not the responsibility of neighbors to overcome inaccessible systems; it is the responsibility of institutions to design systems that acknowledge and align with the lived realities in communities.

This dissertation explores one such system: Block Talks, the first pilots of which were kickstarted in Topeka's core neighborhoods (Central Park among them), where residents had identified the strongest need for localized, relational engagement. The early success of these meetings led to their gradual expansion. As of 2026, eleven Block Talks are operating across the city, each guided by the same principles of accessibility, storytelling, and community ownership. At the same time, they are all intentionally flexible, with each neighborhood having the autonomy to determine how, when, and where to meet, ensuring that engagement fits into residents' everyday lives rather than disrupting them. Gatherings may take place in churches, community centers, and parks—or even around clean-up projects and family events. Regardless, they always feature shared food, space for children, and an emphasis on listening over hierarchy, fostering a space in which everyone can participate in their own way.

In exploring this system, the dissertation explores an alternative form of engagement, pursuing an image of civic engagement that's grounded in relationships, storytelling, and care

rather than extraction, urgency, and performance. It asks how civic participation could be recreated to meet people where they are—emotionally, materially, and relationally—instead of expecting people to conform to institutional expectations. This alternative form was created with the community and for the community.

Significance of the Study

This work’s significance lies in its treatment of civic engagement as something more than attendance and compliance. The study contributes to leadership communication and civic engagement scholarship by examining civic engagement as a lived, relational practice rather than a set of measurable behaviors. In both academic and community spaces, engagement is still measured by who shows up, who speaks out, and who aligns with prevailing institutional structures. What these forms of measurement end up missing is the way in which people are already participating in civic life through relationships, care, and day-to-day survival decisions that would never present themselves in typical meeting minutes. This research documents an approach to civic engagement that begins with neighbors’ lived realities and the relational conditions that make participation possible.

Scholarly Significance

The literature on civic engagement has generally been centered on formal participation and institutional sites of decision-making, reinforcing the assumption that civic life is most “real” when visible to institutions. By contrast, social capital and sensemaking frameworks foreground the relational, interpretive processes that structure everyday civic life, putting an emphasis on the importance of trust, shared meaning, and mutual recognition outside of formal institutional venues. This study’s contribution to the scholarship lies in its focus on informal, neighborhood-

based civic practices, by which civic agency emerges not through formal authority but through relationships, storytelling, and shared meaning-making. Instead of framing leadership as an individual role or title, the study looks at how influence, responsibility, and legitimacy flow through a community when engagement is grounded in trust and ongoing contact. In other words, it offers language and evidence for what many communities already know: Civic life is practiced regardless of whether it is recognized by institutions.

This work also treats storytelling as more than a supplemental method. Block Talks ensure that storytelling is a fundamental part of the civic process: it is how priorities are recognized, how concerns are interpreted, how tensions are named, and how trust is built. By positioning storytelling as a structuring civic practice, the study adds depth to researchers' understanding of participation, power, and belonging.

Methodological Significance

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry as a means of examining civic engagement as a lived experience rather than a measurable outcome. It clearly illustrates how research can honor complexity without forcing community experiences into simplified categories of “engaged” and “not engaged.” By using narrative interviews with participants who play diverse roles within Block Talks, this research showcases the relational dynamics not seen in research focused strictly on program design, attendance, or institutional outcomes. This design declines to treat “the community” as a single voice, recognizing that civic practices are experienced in different ways depending on individuals' responsibilities, positions, and access. This interpretive approach is aligned with sensemaking theory, which posits that meaning is constructed through lived experience and cannot be reduced to singular or

institutional narratives (Weick, 1995). More broadly, this research acts as a model for a research posture that is accountable to people, places, and relationships. Traditional civic engagement research has falsely claimed neutrality in its efforts, but this study is intentionally grounded in community-engaged ethics and the reality that research is never separate from the people involved in it.

Community and Practical Significance

This research offers a form of civic engagement that communities can recognize as real and possible. Instead of asking neighbors to enter unfamiliar institutional spaces and adopt opaque institutional language, Block Talks offer opportunities for neighbors to flexibly engage in familiar, comfortable settings at their own pace, recognizing their everyday caregiving, professional, and emotional demands. This is significant for communities and organizations working to rebuild trust, reduce engagement fatigue, and create opportunities for forms of participation that do not compel neighbors to “prove” that they care.

The study is also valuable for practitioners working in violence prevention, community safety, and neighborhood resilience. When safety is treated as something that can only be addressed through heightened enforcement or surveillance systems, communities already harmed by those systems are asked to take on even more of a risk. A relational civic practice rooted in storytelling shifts the starting point from control to care, from extraction to relationship, and from urgency to sustainability. This is not to say that Block Talks can make conflicts and structural problems disappear overnight; it is to say, however, that they enable people to identify what is happening, build community connections, and decide together what warrants investing their collective energy into.

Finally, this study is important for the Topeka community because it documents civic life as it is lived here, shaped by local history and conditions as well as the everyday tradeoffs that residents have long been forced to make. It reveals not only barriers that Topeka residents face but also the strengths that already exist among them: the ways they care for one another, share knowledge, show up informally, and persist—even when institutions make it difficult to do so. This research makes no claim that one model can fix civic engagement everywhere. Rather, it aims to show, with care and with honesty, what is possible when engagement is created based on human reality rather than institutional convenience.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. Each chapter builds on the others, working toward an understanding of civic engagement as a relational, story-centered practice grounded in everyday life rather than formal participation.

Chapter Two builds on Chapter One’s introduction of Block Talks as a model of civic engagement by reviewing relevant works and theoretical frameworks in the literature, including both historical and contemporary ones. In doing so, it positions this dissertation within the interdisciplinary scholarship and identifies the key gaps that it is seeking to address.

Chapter Three details the adopted methodological approach, building on Chapter One’s overview. It outlines the qualitative research design and the narrative inquiry framework that were key to ensuring that the work was ethical and inclusive. It also elaborates on the data sources consulted and the participating community members’ roles, laying the analytic foundation in preparation for the following chapter’s deep dive.

Chapter Four presents the study's findings, organizing them around themes derived from community members' narratives. In doing so, it explains how civic agency, responsibility, and belonging are experienced within Block Talks from the perspectives of hosts, neighbors, and community partners.

Chapter Five discusses the implications of the findings for scholars, practitioners, and communities alike, reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of neighborhood-based civic engagement in the face of the long-dominant formal models of civic engagement. Moreover, it lays out potential avenues for continued inquiry on this topic.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This dissertation is grounded in the extensive literature on leadership communication that acknowledges leadership as a relational and communicative process rather than a fixed style, position, or set of traits. Drawing from leadership-as-process perspectives and narrative approaches to leadership, this study conceptualizes leadership as something that emerges through interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making within communities. Rather than positioning leadership as an outcome of formal roles or institutional authority, this approach recognizes how leadership is practiced collectively in everyday communication, particularly in community spaces that have gone largely overlooked by traditional leadership research. This perspective is critical when working in community contexts, where leadership is typically distributed across relationships rather than individuals, with predominant communicative practices dictating whose voices are recognized, validated, and taken up in collective processes. This orientation aligns with community-engaged scholarship by recognizing community members as active agents in leadership processes and by centering lived experience, storytelling, and relational trust as the foundation for civic engagement and collective action. Accordingly, this chapter reviews the interdisciplinary literature situating leadership, civic engagement, and learning as relational processes, paying particular attention to community storytelling as a communicative practice from which leadership and collective action can arise.

Community-Engaged Scholarship in Leadership Communication

Undoubtedly, this dissertation is an example of community-engaged scholarship (CES), a form of research that initially emerged as a response to critiques of traditional research practices that have long positioned communities as objects of study rather than partners in the knowledge-creation process. Within the field of leadership communication, CES represents a challenge to

hierarchical models of expertise through its emphasis on reciprocity, mutual benefit, and shared authority between researchers and community members. Instead of creating knowledge *on behalf of* communities, CES ensures that researchers are focused on producing knowledge *alongside* communities, particularly those that have historically been excluded from institutional research processes (Strand et al., 2003). In this way, it has catalyzed a fundamental shift in how leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and studied in community spaces.

The field has recently shifted toward a general understanding of leadership as a relational and communicative process rather than a set of individual traits or positions (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). CES aligns with this perspective by presenting interaction, dialogue, and the co-construction of meaning as central to leadership and research alike. In community-engaged projects, leadership often comes from facilitating, listening, and trust-building rather than the enactment of authoritative control. In this way, all voices within a community can be heard, including those who don't show up or speak up in the conventional ways. This framework resists dominant narratives that equate leadership with formal authority, instead recognizing it as something that can be practiced collectively every day in community spaces. Each person has something unique to offer, but the true diversity in local expert knowledge may be lost if spaces fail to facilitate the comprehensive documentation of individuals' perceptions and experiences.

A defining characteristic of CES is its ethical orientation. Community-engaged researchers are expected to ensure methodological rigor by always remaining mindful of issues of power, representation, and accountability (Israel et al., 2010). Researchers like Freire (1970) have illustrated how research centered on marginalized communities tends to reinforce the very marginalization that it purportedly aims to address. CES addresses this tendency through an emphasis on dialogic engagement, reflexivity, and shared ownership of both the process and its

outcomes. In leadership communication, this ethical stance requires researchers to carefully consider how communication practices can either reinforce or disrupt existing power structures. Ethical considerations inevitably become complex in such research, as the researcher must get involved, get personal, and become part of the very research that they are conducting. Communication plays a role in every stage of this process, and it is precisely in that communication where ethics must be upheld to the highest standard. Marginalized individuals use communication—use their stories—to reclaim power over their identities and histories, but the amplification of their voices must be done in a manner that prioritizes respect and authenticity.

Within the broader CES landscape, leadership communication occupies a unique position due to its focus on discourse, narrative, and meaning-making. Communication is not just a tool common in community projects; it is a mechanism through which relationships are built, decisions are negotiated, and collective action becomes possible. Ospina and Foldy (2010) describe such communication as “leadership-in-the-making”; leadership is constituted through interaction, not imposed through structure. CES makes these processes recognizable by valuing community members’ stories, local knowledge, and lived experiences as legitimate forms of data. Stories lend greater detail to uncovered quantitative data, as having the stories behind the numbers can humanize them, completely changing the way in which a researcher interprets them. Such stories cannot be collected or transcribed as easily as other forms of data, but they are nonetheless critical to a comprehensive and mindful analysis.

Unsurprisingly, CES is still contested in academia, with critics questioning its rigor, generalizability, and objectivity relative to positivist research traditions (Jacquez et al., 2016). In response, leadership communication researchers have crafted a set of criteria for quality,

including credibility, relational trust, and usefulness to community partners (Kliewer & Priest, 2019). These criteria align closely with those of other qualitative and narrative methodologies that prioritize depth, context, and meaning over the capacity for prediction or control. Instead of viewing engagement as a threat to scholarly rigor, CES reframes it as something that may be strengthened through sustained ethical relationships.

CES also challenges every university to reconsider its role in its community. Rather than functioning as neutral observers or external experts, researchers engaged in CES operate as participants within ongoing social systems. This orientation is particularly relevant for leadership communication research conducted in local, place-based contexts, where historical relationships between institutions and communities may be marked by mistrust or exclusion. In Kansas, communities often take pride in and trust their local universities because, from Washburn University to Kansas State University, they work to build up the students, people, and neighborhoods across the state. Engaging in such efforts does not hinder the production of quality research; on the contrary, they are foundational to its integrity.

Ultimately, CES offers a sound theoretical as well as practical foundation for leadership communication research aimed at capturing leadership as relational, collective, and grounded in lived experiences. CES leaves space for forms of leadership built through collaboration, dialogue, and ethical accountability, which have traditionally been neglected by the literature. This study builds on that foundation by examining how community storytelling functions as a communicative practice by which leadership and civic engagement are negotiated in everyday community life.

Civic Engagement as Unequally Accessible

Scholarship and public discourse have traditionally framed civic engagement as a neutral or universally accessible activity, measuring it via voting, public meeting attendance, volunteering rates, or participation in formal leadership structures, among other factors. However, researchers have begun to challenge this framing, arguing that civic engagement is neither evenly distributed nor equally accessible across communities (Levine, 2013); in reality, access is shaped by historical exclusion, structural inequality, and differential access to social, cultural, and economic resources. This poses a problem, as someone's voice and choice regarding a matter that greatly affects them and their community should not be reliant on their rate of participation. Landlords who occupy the edge of the subject matter under discussion shouldn't get more of a say than those bearing the brunt of the decision-making solely because they pay to be on a board or are retired and can attend meetings in the afternoon. Treating civic engagement as a matter of individual motivation obscures the systemic barriers that constrain who can participate and how. Participants in this study echoed these barriers, describing civic engagement as something that long felt "out of reach" and inaccessible due to the realities of daily life.

Social capital theory has been particularly influential in explaining the uneven patterns of civic engagement. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as access to resources embedded within relationship networks, emphasizing that these networks are shaped by power and, in turn, the reproduction of long-held advantages. Putnam (2000) later popularized the distinction between different forms of social capital (which will be covered in greater depth later on), highlighting the civic benefits offered by cross-group connections. While useful, these frameworks have been critiqued for underestimating the impact of historical marginalization on

people's opportunities to build and leverage social capital from the outset (Portes, 1998).

Communities that are under-resourced and underserved are those that most need access to civic engagement—yet they are also those that face the highest barriers. yet

Beyond material barriers (e.g., time, transportation, childcare), researchers have identified psychological and relational barriers to civic engagement that are deeply rooted in historical exclusion. A sense that one does not belong, a lack of trust in institutions, and prior experiences of being ignored or harmed by formal systems can significantly impact one's willingness to participate (Sanders, 2015). These factors are particularly salient in communities subjected to systemic racism, disinvestment, or criminalization. When people are used to not being heard and to their voices being used against them, they begin to hesitate to open up. Those who are underserved simply do not consider traditional spaces for civic engagement to be “safe,” in multiple senses of the world.

At the observational level, critical civic engagement researchers also caution against overly narrow definitions of engagement that privilege participation in complex and formal institutions while dismissing informal or community-based practices (Ginwright & James, 2002). Researchers have traditionally overlooked mutual aid, storytelling, neighborhood-based problem-solving, and grassroots organizing despite their significance to community leadership and collective agency. Despite not aligning with dominant metrics, these forms of engagement and these spaces often constitute more accessible—and often more meaningful—pathways toward participation for marginalized groups. Block Talks were created to serve as one such space.

Critically, those historically privileged institutional spaces often rely on technical language, formal procedures, and rigid norms, reproducing the very exclusion they're often purportedly aimed at addressing. In the U.S., 54% of adults read at or below a sixth-grade level,

while 64% of the country's fourth graders do not read proficiently (NCES, 2025). Given these dynamics, people should not be forced to speak in a certain way to have their input considered. Spaces for civic engagement must facilitate adaptable communication methods to ensure greater flexibility.

Taken together, this body of literature clearly demonstrates that civic engagement cannot be meaningfully understood if one fails to properly consider the core tenets of inequality, history, and communication. By recognizing engagement as something that is invariably shaped by resource access, relational trust, and communicative practices, researchers can better account for the forms of leadership and participation that emerge in everyday community life. This study builds on these insights by examining community storytelling as a practice that expands civic engagement by lowering barriers to entry and reframing lived experiences as a legitimate starting point for leadership.

Community Storytelling as Collective Meaning-Making

Community storytelling has traditionally been recognized as a powerful meaning-making mechanism, particularly in spaces where dominant narratives have marginalized or erased lived experiences. CES understands storytelling not merely as the sharing of personal accounts but as a collective process through which communities interpret their histories, articulate present concerns, and imagine alternative futures (Riessman, 2008)—a process that has the power to actively shape how individuals understand their place within a community as well as their capacity to act. Stories can be deeply personal, offering others a glimpse into one's own perspective and situation. Of course, that end result isn't the only benefit of storytelling; the process itself also serves to build community, creating an opportunity for long-term change.

From a leadership communication perspective, storytelling is a communicative practice by which shared understanding is negotiated. When community members exchange stories, they are not only conveying their individual perspectives; they are testing values, naming tensions, and building symbolic connections with one another, all while fostering a deeper level of group understanding and trust. This process fosters the conditions under which coordinated action can bloom through the establishment of common frames of reference (Fairhurst, 2011). In this way, storytelling operates as a leadership practice, enabling groups to move from isolated experiences toward collective sensemaking.

Symbolic convergence theory (SCT), originally developed by Bormann (1983), offers a useful framework for understanding how narrative gives way to this collective sensemaking: Shared stories, or “fantasy themes,” can converge into a broader “rhetorical vision” that shapes group identity and action. While SCT has conventionally been applied to organizational or mediated contexts, its emphasis on shared symbols and narrative alignment makes it highly relevant in grassroots community settings, where rhetorical visions emerge not through formal messaging but through consistent stories that reflect shared concerns and aspirations.

SCT illuminates how leadership can emerge without formal leaders: As stories circulate and gain traction within groups, narratives can form and begin to organize collective understanding and decision-making. Leadership, in this context, is not located within any one individual who speaks the loudest or holds formal authority; it lies in resonant stories capable of moving the group toward action, in the relationships and trust molded by the common ground reflected in these stories, in the bridging of individual experiences and collective agency. Stories can connect people across divides, no matter how big or small, transforming personal stories into

collective causes. This framing aligns with leadership-as-process perspectives, locating leadership within communication itself.

Community storytelling also functions as a counter-narrative practice for communities that have historically been excluded from institutional decision-making. Dominant civic narratives typically privilege technical expertise, policy language, and abstract data, marginalizing experiential knowledge (Sanders, 2015), but storytelling disrupts such hierarchies by legitimizing lived experience as a valid form of knowledge. In this way, harmful dominant narratives can be recognized and unpacked, and complex social issues can be humanized, giving way to greater awareness and, in turn, action. Ultimately, storytelling redistributes communicative power and lays more inclusive pathways to civic engagement and leadership.

Overall, the literature positions community storytelling as a communicative practice through which leadership emerges, meaning is negotiated, and collective action becomes possible. By examining storytelling through the lens of symbolic convergence and leadership communication, this study highlights how leadership may be enacted through shared narratives rather than individual authority. In doing so, it lays a critical foundation for understanding how community-based initiatives create space for leadership and civic engagement to develop in ways that are relational, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

Community Storytelling, Symbolic Convergence Theory, and Shared Meaning

While community storytelling has historically been recognized as a mechanism for collective meaning-making, Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) offers a specific explanation of how individual narratives become shared interpretations within groups. Bormann (1972) developed SCT to position storytelling as the foundation for the formation of shared symbolic worlds – social realities constructed, sustained, and circulated through communication. In this

way, SCT aligns closely with the leadership communication perspective that understands leadership as something produced through interactions rather than positional authority (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

SCT centers on the concept of fantasy themes, which are dramatized messages, anecdotes, or symbolic interpretations that people share as they work to make sense of their environments (Bormann, 1972). These themes represent emotionally resonant accounts through which people organize their understanding of events. When others identify with a fantasy theme, they respond with elaboration or parallel experiences, enabling the theme to “catch on.” In this way, fantasy themes become shared symbolic resources where groups express concerns, articulate hopes, and negotiate the meaning of lived experience.

When fantasy themes resonate strongly, they chain out, spreading rapidly within and across conversations (Bormann, 1983). Fantasy chaining helps explain why certain stories or interpretations quickly become central within community contexts. For example, a single story about mistrust of institutional decision-making may elicit similar experiences among neighbors, prompting repeated stories of exclusion or harm. As these narratives circulate, they become collectively held frames instead of individual accounts. This phenomenon mirrors how sensemaking unfolds socially, with meaning developed through the interplay of shared interpretation, emotion, and relational exchange (Weick, 2001).

As fantasy themes continue to chain and gather shared emotional significance, they eventually form a broader rhetorical vision which Bormann (1982) explains as a unified, coherent worldview that provides a group with shared language, identity, and direction. Rhetorical visions answer the question of “who we are” and “What we believe,” giving communities a way to establish collective priorities and imagine a shared future. In

neighborhood based civic engagement, rhetorical visions often form around concepts such as safety, belonging, or mutual care. These visions are not produced by institutional authority but through ongoing neighbor-to-neighbor storytelling.

SCT provides a particularly useful lens for understanding leadership in marginalized or historically excluded communities, where communicative processes, not formal roles, shape how participants recognize one another as knowledgeable and legitimate (Hernández et al., 2020). Storytelling allows community members to construct and circulate symbolic worlds that reflect lived experience rather than institutional expectations. In contexts where neighbors have been historically positioned as recipients instead of authors of civic meaning, SCT highlights the importance of narrative convergence as a foundation for civic agency.

Within Block Talks, fantasy themes such as mistrust of formal civic institutions, pride in neighborhood resilience, concerns about safety, and desires for connection repeatedly surfaced and chained across conversations. These themes eventually coalesced into shared rhetorical visions about what safe, accessible, and dignified civic engagement should look like. SCT thus provides a theoretical explanation for the communicative dynamics that shaped how leadership emerged within Block Talks. It clarifies how individual stories became shared symbolic resources that supported collective sensemaking, coordination, and action. These processes are examined in greater depth in the findings and discussion chapters.

Social Capital, Trust, and Relational Leadership

The notion of social capital has been widely cited to explain how relationships enable individuals and groups alike to access resources, influence decision-making, and participate in civic life. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as the accumulation of resources (actual or potential) linked to durable relationship networks, emphasizing that access to such networks is

uneven, shaped by power. Later researchers expanded this work, examining how social ties facilitate civic engagement, cooperation, and collective problem-solving (Putnam, 2000). Within community contexts, social capital helps to explain why some groups can mobilize their shared concerns while others remain disconnected from civic processes. Individuals' access to communities, whether just their families or their fellow community members more broadly, fosters collective unity and, in turn, community integration. De Weger et al. (2018) assert that community may be said to constitute a critical component of a person's health, explaining that having it to lean on creates a platform for collaborative change.

While social capital theory has offered useful insights, it has also faced significant critique. Early applications of the theory often assumed that networks were inherently beneficial, overlooking how social capital can also reinforce dominant power structures and, in turn, exclusion (Portes, 1998). Communities that have experienced systemic marginalization may possess strong internal bonds yet remain disconnected from institutions that control resources and decision-making. Strong community ties do not necessarily translate into institutional access, a reality that must be acknowledged by any leadership research seeking to avoid deficit-based interpretations of community capacity.

To address these limitations, researchers have differentiated between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital: Bonding capital refers to strong ties within homogenous groups; bridging capital links individuals across social divides; and linking capital connects communities to institutions bearing formal authority (Woolcock, 2001). In this dissertation, bonding capital is the most prominent by far, as it arises organically from the spaces created for civic engagement (e.g., dinner meetings, community events). Bridging and linking capital, however, are far more difficult for marginalized communities to access due to historical exclusion and mistrust.

Bridging occurs once connections are made within communities; once plans are made and common ground is found, the next step is to reach out for resources that are missing. Linking occurs once collaboration begins to take shape, giving way to lasting change. Understanding these distinctions helps to clarify how leadership and engagement unfold in community-based settings.

Trust is a central component of not only social capital but also relational leadership, as it is the primary determinant of whether individuals feel safe sharing their experiences, participating in dialogue, and committing to collective action (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). It binds society together (Redfern, 2009). In communities shaped by trauma or institutional neglect, trust is not simply assumed; it must be built through consistent relational interaction. Of course, this process takes time, as it is reliant on long-term reliability, credibility, and intimacy (Brown, 2024)—yet trust can also be lost in an instant. Leadership, then, must be enacted through reliable listening and responsiveness, not directive authority.

From a leadership communication perspective, social capital (and the underlying development of relational ties) is not some resource that exists prior to engagement; it is something that must be produced through communication—through everyday interactions, shared stories, and mutual recognition (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Community storytelling can strengthen relational bonds by validating lived experience and fostering empathy across differences. Trust and connections form through the feeling of authenticity that derives from storytelling activities. These communicative practices help to transform individual relationships into collective capacity. Thus, in community contexts marked by informal or grassroots engagement, leadership arises not as formal direction or instruction but as facilitation, coordination, and support. Every individual is a leader in that they have the power to shape their

environment and support their community. In this sense, social capital is what fosters the conditions under which this kind of leadership can emerge and persist.

Ultimately, the literature on social capital and relational leadership showcases the importance of trust, connection, and communication in community-based civic engagement. Leadership is not the product of any one individual's skill or style; rather, true leadership capacity is built collectively through the formation and strengthening of relationships over time. This study draws on these insights to examine how community storytelling contributes to the development of social capital and supports relational forms of leadership within community-engaged initiatives.

Informal Learning, Adult Education, and Dialogic Spaces

Community leadership development often occurs beyond the bounds of formal educational and institutional settings. Informal learning environments (e.g., neighborhood gatherings, mutual aid spaces, grassroots initiatives) play a critical role in shaping how individuals understand themselves, their communities, and their capacity to act collectively. Research on adult education has long emphasized that learning is fundamentally a social and experiential process shaped by one's context, relationships, and lived experiences (Jarvis, 2012)—yet formal leadership programs feel inaccessible and even irrelevant in many communities.

Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic education represents a foundational framework through which to understand how learning and leadership emerge in unison. Rather than positioning educators—or leaders—as authorities who transmit knowledge, dialogic approaches put co-creation, critical reflection, and mutual learning at the forefront. Under this model, dialogue is not a technique but a stance rooted in respect, humility, and shared inquiry that

influences the redistribution of power within community storytelling spaces. This approach aligns closely with leadership communication scholarship that frames leadership as something that emerges through interaction rather than instruction.

Informal learning spaces are particularly important in communities that have historically been excluded from formal institutions. Research on community engagement consistently demonstrates that traditional programs often fail to reach underserved populations because they are designed around institutional norms rather than community realities (Attree et al., 2011). Informal, dialogic spaces allow for learning that is responsive to local needs, cultural practices, and collective priorities. Community-based learning spaces foster flexibility and responsiveness by refusing to impose a one-size-fits-all approach. In this way, such environments create entry points for participation that entail no requirements for prior credentials, confidence, or institutional trust. Instead, they offer relational and transformative learning—even when it is not explicitly labeled as such. Marsick and Watkins (2001) describe informal learning as something that may be achieved through everyday problem-solving, reflection, and conversation. In community storytelling spaces, participants learn by listening to one another, recognizing shared challenges, and collectively reinterpreting their experiences. Learning is something that is always happening; it need not be planned or named to occur. This form of learning supports leadership development by fostering critical awareness, empathy, and collective agency.

Recent scholarship on community engagement further demonstrates the role of dialogue and learning in supporting collective action. Realist reviews of such initiatives highlight the key mechanisms of trust, reciprocity, and shared understanding for meaningful participation (De Weger et al., 2020). These findings reinforce the idea that leadership development is not a linear outcome of training; rather, it is a relational process shaped by sustained engagement. It is

important to keep showing up—regardless of how much progress has taken place—to ensure that the progress continues, that engagement is never viewed as a one-time event. Thus, by supporting ongoing relationship-building and reflection, informal learning spaces essentially function as incubators for leadership.

In this sense, they shape how individuals come to see themselves as capable of contributing to collective decision-making. As participants become more confident in expressing their experiences and interpretations, they begin to claim voice in ways that extend beyond the immediate space (Dugan, 2017); they shift their perceptions of themselves as well as those of one another. This process is particularly significant in communities where individuals have been socialized to view leadership as something that belongs to others—something that can't belong to them.

Evidently, the literature covered in this section highlights the importance of spaces that center experience, dialogue, and relationship-building. These insights are especially relevant for understanding leadership development in community-engaged settings, where individuals and groups learning and acting collectively can lead to real action and change. This study draws on these insights to examine how community storytelling functions as an informal learning practice that supports relational leadership and civic engagement.

Narrative Inquiry and Participatory Knowledge Production

Rather than treating stories as illustrative examples, narrative inquiry understands storytelling as the primary way in which individuals and communities make sense of their worlds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are not merely reflections of people's experiences; they are constitutive of their identities, relationships, and actions. Stories constitute a fundamental aspect of human experience and communication, making them a natural starting point for

understanding community life. This orientation aligns closely with leadership communication scholarship that depicts meaning-making as a key factor behind collective action.

Narrative inquiry is grounded in a constructivist epistemology holding that knowledge is co-created by way of interaction and shaped by social, cultural, and historical context (Polkinghorne, 2005). In contrast to positivist approaches that prioritize objectivity and distance, narrative inquiry values proximity, reflexivity, and relational engagement. This stance is particularly important in community-based research, for which traditional notions of neutrality can obscure power dynamics and, in turn, silence marginalized voices. Distance or “objectivity” is often straightforwardly misaligned with the demands of ethical community work.

Participatory approaches to narrative inquiry further challenge hierarchical models of knowledge production by positioning community members as co-creators rather than subjects of research. Scholars of participatory action research and community-based inquiry often emphasize that communities possess deep contextual knowledge that is often overlooked or undervalued by institutional research practices (Israel et al., 2010). In directly telling real stories centered on neighborhood experiences, community members showcase their local expertise. This dynamic makes participatory narrative inquiry both a research method and an ethical commitment to shared authority.

In the field of leadership communication, narrative inquiry represents a means of examining how leadership emerges through discourse rather than through formal roles or individual traits. Storytelling showcases how people interpret their own experiences, negotiate the meaning of those experiences with others, and imagine possibilities for collective action (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). By attending to how stories circulate, converge, and get collectively adopted—not only what stories reveal but also how they are invited, interpreted, and

represented—researchers can better understand leadership as an emergent and relational process. In other words, through narrative inquiry, researchers can identify forms of leadership that are often overlooked by leader-centric frameworks.

Of course, ethical considerations must be central to narrative inquiry, especially in communities shaped by trauma, exclusion, or institutional mistrust. Sharing stories can be empowering, but it can also invoke feelings of vulnerability and, in turn, risk. Thus, researchers emphasize the importance of trauma-informed, relational, and accountable research practices that prioritize participants' agency and well-being with consent, care, and emotionally accommodating pacing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Narrative inquiry also challenges conventional notions of rigor by reframing quality in terms of credibility, resonance, and usefulness rather than replicability or generalizability (Tracy, 2010). Trustworthiness in this kind of research is established not through detachment but through transparency, reflexivity, and sustained engagement. Relationship-building in studied communities contributes to rigor by fostering a collaborative environment in which everyone is motivated to contribute their best ideas and work toward common goals. This reframing aligns with CES's emphasis on accountability to both academic and community audiences.

Ultimately, narrative inquiry offers a methodological and epistemological framework that is particularly well-suited for community-engaged research centered on lived experiences, community dialogue, and relational meaning-making. This study builds on these foundations to explore community storytelling as not just a source of data but also a site of learning, leadership, and collective possibility.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study's use of narrative inquiry—and all the methodological tools underlying it—was informed by two key theoretical frameworks: critical theory and relational leadership theory.

Critical Theory

Critical theory offers a philosophical foundation upon which to understand civic engagement and leadership as social and political processes shaped by power, ideology, and systemic inequities rather than neutral practices. Having originated from Frankfurt School thinkers, critical theory challenges the presumption of objectivity in social science, instead positioning knowledge as something that is socially constructed and politically embedded (Habermas, 1984; Horkheimer, 1972). At its core, critical theory pursues emancipation through critique of domination—through a focus on how social structures uphold inequality in access to participation, decision-making, and voice (Brookfield, 2005). Within community-engaged scholarship and leadership communication, this framework urges scholars and practitioners alike to interrogate who benefits from engagement practices, whose knowledge is legitimized, and how communicative processes can reproduce or resist inequity.

Importantly, critical theory reframes leadership as a discursive and power-laden process rather than an inherently benevolent or neutral phenomenon. According to Fairhurst and Grant (2010), communication does more than just transmit meaning; it frames organizational and community realities. This dynamic is precisely how dominant narratives about leadership often privilege white, middle-class, and male-coded norms of authority and rationality (Calás & Smircich, 1991). In this way, critical theory compels researchers to attend to the structures that silence marginalized voices and to celebrate communicative acts that resist that silence. Moreover, as Cann and DeMeulenaere (2020) argue, it prompts them to examine how

institutional structures—including universities—often reproduce the hierarchies they claim to challenge.

Critical theory also informs CES through its commitment to praxis—the integration of reflection and action in pursuit of social transformation (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Within CES, this commitment manifests in a methodological rejection of extractive research and the embrace of participants as co-constructors of knowledge. In this way, research becomes not a mere academic exercise but a form of civic practice aimed at addressing structural injustices. In this sense, adopting a critical stance within CES goes beyond amplifying community voices; doing so also facilitates an examination of the power relations that shape collaboration, authorship, and representation.

From a civic engagement perspective, critical theory exposes how dominant conceptions of “participation” often obscure inequalities of access and misrepresent civic disengagement as apathy. According to Schudson (1998) and Skocpol (2003), formal models of engagement often reflect institutional convenience rather than true civic inclusivity, privileging those with cultural and material capital when it comes to the navigation of bureaucratic systems. Critical theory challenges such assumptions by centering structural analysis over individual blame. It draws attention to the ways in which communicative and institutional norms (e.g., meeting procedures, language-related expectations, assumptions about professionalism) can exclude those already marginalized by race, class, gender, or ability (Fraser, 1990). In this way, critical theory provides an epistemological foundation upon which to reimagine civic engagement as a process of resisting—rather than reinforcing—hierarchy.

Recent CES builds on this critical lineage by incorporating intersectional and decolonial perspectives that complicate traditional Western notions of participation and leadership (Collins,

2019; Dutta, 2015). These perspectives argue that “voice” itself is insufficient if systemic inequities persist in determining the audibility or credibility of particular voices (Lugones, 2010). For instance, decolonial scholars have emphasized that participatory practices must not merely invite marginalized communities into existing frameworks; rather, they must transform those frameworks to reflect pluriversal knowledges: multiple, coexisting ways of knowing and being in the world (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This resonates with studies of leadership communication that position storytelling and relational dialogue as acts of counter-narration—as forms of communicative resistance that challenge dominant epistemologies (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Therefore, applying critical theory to the field of leadership communication entails a dual task: first, revealing how communicative practices are implicated in systems of domination; and second, leveraging communication as a means of transformation. This approach situates leadership as an ongoing negotiation of meaning rather than a fixed positional authority, attending to how voices, relationships, and histories shape what is possible within civic life. In this dissertation, critical theory supports the conceptualization of leadership and civic engagement as communicative acts occurring amid broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and belonging. It frames Block Talks not simply as sites of participation but as a unique form of resistance against exclusionary civic systems that have historically defined who gets to lead, speak, and be heard.

Relational Leadership Theory

Relational leadership theory represents a framework through which to understand how leadership emerges not from positional power or individual traits but from communication, interaction, and the ongoing negotiation of relationships. Uhl-Bien (2006) conceptualized this theory as a paradigm shift away from structural and leader-centric models toward relational

processes that co-produce leadership through mutual influence. This perspective challenges the persistent assumption that leadership is something that one has or enacts alone, instead positioning it as something that happens *between* people. From this standpoint, communication represents more than a mere medium through which to transmit ideas; it makes up the very substance with which leadership—and, by extension, community—is enacted (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

The very notion of relational leadership is grounded in a social constructionist view of organizations and communities. Rather than positioning leadership within individual behaviors, relational leadership theory homes in on the embedded, reciprocal, and co-created processes that link people within shared contexts (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). These relational dynamics are made visible through dialogue, narrative, and collective sensemaking—practices that generate shared meaning, trust, and coordinated action (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Leadership communication scholars have extended this relational orientation by showcasing how collective practice is shaped by discourse, identity, and framing (Fairhurst, 2011; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010); communication not only reflects relationships but also defines who is authorized to speak, what knowledge is considered valid, and how shared realities are negotiated. Thus, viewing leadership through a relational lens highlights equity, inclusion, and the quality of connection as central to effective engagement. When applied to community settings, relational leadership shifts the focus from individual leaders to the communicative ecosystems that sustain collective agency.

Relational leadership also emphasizes the ethical dimensions of connection—mutual respect, empathy, and care—as integral to the leadership process. Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2013) describe relational leadership as purposeful, inclusive, empowering, ethical, and process-oriented, providing a useful framework for community-based initiatives reliant on

collaboration rather than command. In neighborhood contexts, these values translate into open dialogue, shared ownership, and a focus on power imbalances—conditions that are particularly salient for communities that have historically been excluded from formal civic spaces.

Applied within community-engaged scholarship (CES), which aims to democratize knowledge production by positioning community members as co-researchers, relational leadership theory offers an explanatory link between communication and collective learning—and, in turn, between theory and practice. Block Talks exemplify relational leadership in action: Participation is structured around relationships rather than roles, and leadership emerges through dialogue, storytelling, and everyday acts of care. Leadership represents a shared process that allows communities to co-create meaning, redefine civic participation, and cultivate resilience. In this way, relational leadership theory provides the underlying logic with which to understand how communication fosters belonging, distributes influence, and fosters the social fabric necessary for sustainable civic engagement.

Summary and Implications for the Study

This chapter reviewed interdisciplinary research to establish a conceptual foundation on which to examine community storytelling as a site of civic engagement and leadership development. Drawing from community-engaged scholarship across the fields of leadership communication, social capital, adult education, and narrative inquiry, this chapter's review posed a direct challenge to traditional leader-centric and institutionally bound understandings of leadership and civic engagement, pointing instead to leadership as a relational, communicative, and emergent process molded by resource access, trust, and shared meaning-making. This reframing is necessary for the communities at the center of the study.

The literature on civic engagement demonstrates how participation is unevenly distributed, having been molded by historical exclusion, structural barriers, and relational dynamics. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based narratives framing disengagement as a sign of apathy. The reviewed research on community storytelling and symbolic convergence presents shared narratives as means of collective sensemaking that enable communities to surface lived experience, negotiate meaning, and coordinate responses to shared challenges. The literature on social capital and relational leadership highlights the key roles played by trust, relationships, and communication in sustaining collective action. In this way, it presents social capital not as an inherent asset held by all communities but as something that must be built, constrained, and mobilized through interaction over time. Narrative inquiry and participatory approaches to knowledge production collectively represent a methodological and ethical framework that is fundamentally aligned with this study's theoretical commitments. Finally, critical theory and relational relationship theory influence the very way this research interprets its findings on civic engagement.

Together, the reviewed literature establishes a clear need for research to examine leadership and civic engagement as communicative, relational processes grounded in community experience. This dissertation takes on the task directly, leveraging participatory civic engagement and narrative inquiry to assess the creation of community spaces for storytelling as both a method and a phenomenon as it answers the following research questions:

1. How do participants experience and make meaning of civic engagement within Block Talks?
2. How does leadership emerge from relationships among hosts, neighbors, and community partners in Block Talks?

3. How does storytelling shape leadership, participation, and civic agency within Block Talks?
4. What tensions and limitations shape leadership and participation within neighborhood-based civic engagement practices?

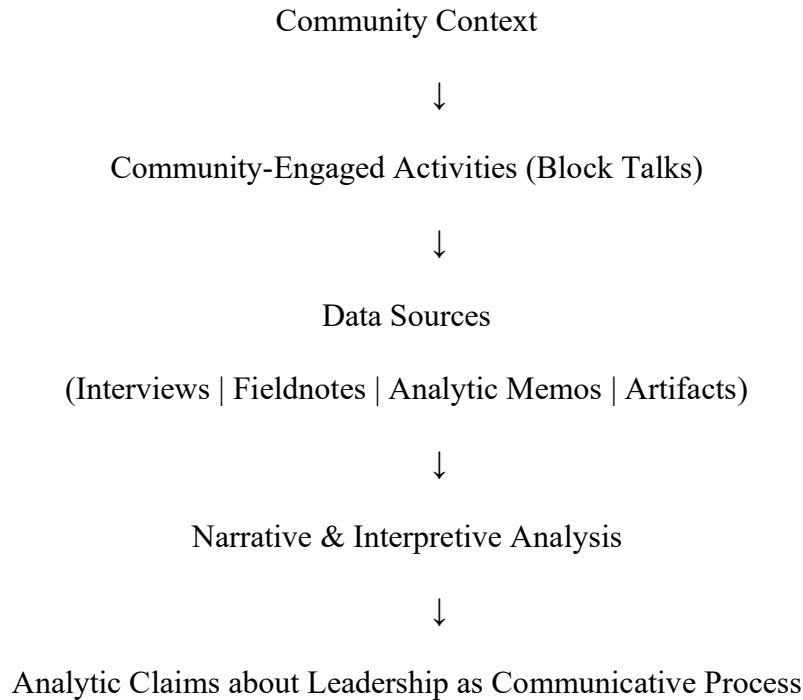
The following chapter details the methodological approach adopted to explore how such spaces function as sites of learning, leadership, and civic engagement within community-engaged contexts.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter Three details the methodological approach adopted to examine the emergence of leadership through community storytelling and civic engagement within a single neighborhood. Grounded in the previously reviewed literature on leadership communication and community-engaged research, the methodological choices outlined below align with the study's conceptualization of leadership as a relational, communicative process rather than something born of a fixed role or position, as well as its core aim of understanding how community members view their place in engagement activities (both formal and informal) and in their community more broadly.

The chapter begins by outlining the research design's overall methodological orientation. It then situates the research within its community context, details the researcher's role and positionality, outlines the employed data sources and collection methods, and explains the process of data analysis undertaken. The chapter concludes with a discussion of relevant ethical considerations as well as the strategies employed to ensure the study's rigor and trustworthiness. Ultimately, the chapter grants the study far greater transparency regarding how it was conducted and how the knowledge was generated alongside community members. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the community-engaged research design, showcasing the iterative and relational nature of the research process.

Figure 3.1. Overview of Research Design



Methodological Orientation and Research Design

This study adheres to a qualitative, community-engaged research design grounded in narrative inquiry and conducted through the frameworks of critical theory and relational leadership theory, as detailed in Chapter 2. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this research given its aim to understand how people make meaning of their experiences, how their relationships shape their participation, and how leadership is enacted through everyday communication (Tracy, 2010). More precisely, narrative inquiry represents a framework through which to examine stories not as mere reflections of experience but as communicative practices through which individuals and communities construct shared understandings. By attending to how stories are shared, responded to, and taken up within community spaces in this manner, the research design allows for an examination of leadership as an ongoing collective process (Ganz,

2011) and, in turn, one of how common ground—recognized via storytelling—empowered people to feel less alone.

As informed by leadership communication scholarship (see Chapter 2 for a more in-depth elaboration of the literature, this study attends to how leadership is enacted through everyday interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In turn, narrative inquiry centers communication as both the site and substance of this leadership. In contrast to more traditional leadership models—those focused on individual styles or positions—this study declines to pursue a one-size-fits-all scenario; rather, it recognizes that each and every person in the community has their own story, their own way of learning, and their own way of comfortably communicating.

In line with CES conventions, this research was conducted as part of a close relationship with an ongoing community-engaged initiative: Block Talks. As a result, the study reflects prolonged engagement within a single neighborhood and prioritizes responsiveness to community-identified concerns. Rather than treating the community as a site from which data may be extracted, the research design centers relational accountability, mutual respect, and ethical considerations. The study being functionally embedded in the community under analysis undoubtedly influenced how it unfolded. The research was carried out with care and consideration for what was considered personal to the community. There were clear expectations and open communication regarding the work being something that will persist rather than a mere one-time experiment. The researcher was known to the community members as a neighbor, a support system, a partner, and a friend. This was advantageous, as evidence suggests that communities participate more fully when they perceive processes as relevant, respectful, and shaped by their own concerns (Attree et al., 2011).

The decision to focus on a single neighborhood was intentional. Doing so facilitated a more in-depth exploration of relational dynamics, storytelling practices, and leadership emergence over time (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). While similar engagement efforts have been performed across multiple neighborhoods, this study sought to prioritize narrative depth, ethical responsibility, and methodological coherence, giving the stories that emerged the attention they deserve. This focus also enabled the research to center on the Topeka neighborhood that has arguably been most severely excluded historically from these kinds of experiences and connections.

Multiple forms of qualitative data were collected to achieve a rich and heavily contextualized understanding of community engagement and leadership practices. These include narrative interviews, composite fieldnotes (participant observations), analytic memos, and community-generated materials. These were supplemented by previously collected civic data—secondary sources that provided contextual background and informed the development of the central community initiatives. Worth noting is that some of this contextual data was done before the idea for this research even came into being, demonstrating how this work has truly been created in tandem with the community. Distinguishing between analytic and contextual data supports methodological clarity while honoring the broader conditions that shaped the work (Glandon et al., 2017). Scholars caution that engagement efforts that fail to attend to communities' power dynamics and historical inequities—even if those efforts were invited by those communities—risk reproducing exclusion (Cahill, 2020). This research design seeks to avoid that pitfall by centering the lived experiences, relational trust, and community knowledge of community members throughout the research process.

Research Context: Block Talks and the Community Setting

This study is situated within a single neighborhood in Topeka, KS and centers on Block Talks, a community-engaged initiative designed to create space for dialogue, storytelling, and collective problem-solving. Block Talks, which emerged in response to community member-identified concerns, were intentionally structured as informal, relationship-centered gatherings rather than formal meetings or institutional forums. They did not need to be introduced to the neighborhood because they were created alongside neighbors each step of the way. As neighbors helped to create Block Talks, they also helped introduce it to others, sharing updates and information through both formal and informal channels.

Research across the fields of public health, development, and community planning has consistently shown that engagement efforts are most effective when they are grounded in local priorities, relational trust, and sustained presence rather than externally imposed agendas (Attree et al., 2011). Block Talks were developed with this orientation in mind; thus, they do not abide by any rigid structure, instead privileging accessibility, flexibility, and adaptive responsiveness across all voices and levels of creation. They enable neighbors to engage with one another even amid the disruptions and barriers imposed by the realities of everyday life.

The neighborhood-level context in which Block Talks took place is shaped by broader structural conditions that influence how its residents experience safety, participation, and civic life. Scholarship on community health and development highlights that fear, surveillance, and historical institutional mistrust can significantly hinder participation in forms of civic engagement, particularly in communities that have experienced disinvestment or disproportionate policing (Williams & Cooper, 2019). Evidently, safety—and the perception of safety—cannot simply be assumed as universal conditions; they must be understood as relational

and situational. Thus, Block Talks were intentionally designed as community-controlled spaces. Institutional actors (e.g., law enforcement, city representatives) were not routinely present, invited only when explicitly requested by residents. This approach reflects the literature's cautions against assuming institutional presence to be inherently beneficial; power asymmetries and community-defined boundaries must be put at the forefront of civic engagement (Cahill, 2020).

While this study is focused on a single neighborhood, the initial development of Block Talks was informed by previously collected civic data from other settings (e.g., the CIVIC data introduced in Chapter 1). Such contextual data has been shown to play a valuable role in grounding engagement efforts without displacing community voice or narrative knowledge (Glandon et al., 2017). Importantly, however, this civic data functioned purely as an early needs-assessment tool; it was not considered in the study's data-analysis process.

Block Talks occurred under a diverse range of community circumstances, including routine gatherings, periods of heightened concern following instances of local violence, collaborative meetings with community partners, and community-wide events focused on community connection and resource access. This is critical, as research on community resilience has shown that leadership and collective action often emerge in different ways across different types of circumstances (Aldrich, 2012). Situating Block Talks within these varied contexts enabled the study to examine how leadership practices shift in response to shifting emotional, social, and relational conditions.

This research context constitutes the foundation underlying the methodological choices detailed in the sections to come. By grounding the study in a single neighborhood and an

ongoing community-engaged initiative, the research prioritizes relational depth, ethical accountability, and narrative coherence.

Relevant Community Assessments and Pre-Existing Data

Before diving into the methodological choices, however, it's first worth considering some applied research conducted at the local level that further illustrates how inequities manifest in practice. Project CLEARs data are not treated as findings of this study, but they are used to contextually ground the conditions under which Block Talks emerged. Project CLEARs—Community-Led Engagement and Resilience Strategies—was initiated to assess community-law enforcement relations in Topeka, Kansas, following concerns over trust in, the communication of, and the legitimacy of public-safety responses raised to an incoming chief of police. Rather than focusing solely on crime metrics or enforcement outcomes, the Project CLEARs team emphasized the importance of relationship-building, informal engagement, and community-defined spaces for dialogue as critical components of public safety.

The team explicitly identified Block Talks as a promising community-led approach to engagement. In their analysis, the researchers noted that Block Talks fostered conditions for participation that many formal civic spaces fail to provide, particularly for those who feel excluded from traditional meetings or decision-making processes. The report goes on to articulate that Block Talks fostered trust, accessibility, and dialogue by meeting residents where they are—both physically and relationally—recommending that law enforcement consider partnering with such initiatives to bolster legitimacy and community trust (Project CLEARs Research Team, 2025). These findings highlight the importance of examining communicative practices, such as storytelling, that foster relational access to civic participation and leadership.

Researcher Role and Positionality

This study was conducted by a community-embedded researcher whose role was shaped by ongoing participation, relationship-building, and accountability to the considered neighborhood. Rather than adhering to a detached or observational position, the researcher was actively involved in the planning, facilitation, and reflection processes that supported Block Talks and related community activities, as detailed at greater length in Chapter 1. It is widely recognized in CES that such embedded roles must be accompanied by the careful consideration of power, responsibility, and representation dynamics, as researchers are simultaneously serving as both participants in and interpreters of community life (Israel et al., 2010). I have lived in this community my entire life, experiencing every aspect of how things work here and how people here interact with one another.

This community-embedded positioning reflects a deliberate methodological choice, not a limitation. Scholars argue that leadership, learning, and civic engagement may best be understood through sustained presence and relational proximity, particularly in contexts where trust has been historically undermined (Aldrich, 2012). This role enabled the researcher to observe the emergence of leadership over time through everyday interactions, informal conversations, and collective storytelling. My long-term community presence enabled me to identify shifts in how people act depending on who is at the table, how comfortable they are, and even where conversations and stories are being shared.

At the same time, community-embedded research requires explicit reflexivity when it comes to power and positionality. Participatory and critical scholars emphasize that researchers must be attentive to how their identities, institutional affiliations, and resource access shape their interactions and interpretations (Hernández et al., 2020). In this study, reflexivity was practiced

through ongoing reflection, analytic memoing, and attentiveness to moments in which the researcher's role may have influenced dialogue or participation. Even though I was part of the community, it was important to stay keenly aware of this potential influence; things change when one is acting as a researcher, and that must be acknowledged and remembered at all times. One important step I took in this regard was always ensuring that people knew they could come to me either as a researcher or as a neighbor—it was their choice. Everything did not always need to be documented or shared.

My role as the researcher was not to direct outcomes or determine community priorities; such an outlook would have gone against the basic tenets of leadership communication scholarship (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Rather, my role entailed supporting dialogue, facilitating storytelling, and stepping back whenever community members took ownership of conversations or actions. This would take time, but the notion of leadership steadily shifted away from the sense that one person needed to be in charge toward an understanding of how each community member could help lead.

The researcher's positionality was also shaped by ethical considerations related to safety, trust, and participation. In communities broadly fearful of surveillance, enforcement, or institutional harm, researchers must be attentive to how their presence and practices affect participants' willingness to engage (Williams & Cooper, 2019). Thus, this study prioritized transparency, honored community-defined boundaries, and focused on spaces in which participation was always voluntary and controlled by residents. Safety was my number-one concern and priority, so I always made sure to be open and honest with everyone in the community.

Rather than presenting the researcher's own experiences as data using autoethnographic analysis, this study treats the researcher's perspective as a contextual and reflexive consideration. Reflexive fieldnotes and analytic memos were used to document observations, questions, and interpretive decisions, supporting transparency without centering the researcher as a primary subject of analysis (Tracy, 2010). This approach aligns with narrative inquiry's emphasis on relational meaning-making while maintaining analytic focus on community storytelling and leadership practices. This distinction was important to the integrity of the study.

Overall, the researcher's role as a community-embedded participant shaped both the process and ethics of this study. By always considering power, safety, and relational accountability, the research sought to honor community knowledge while critically examining how leadership emerged through communication. Now, the next section turns to the participants, outlining how different forms of participation contributed to the research.

Participants and Community Roles

This study centers on participants not as mere representatives of demographic categories but as relational actors within a community-engaged process. The literature on leadership communication emphasizes that leadership emerges through interaction and participation, making the roles that individuals occupy within communicative spaces analytically significant (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Accordingly, this study employs a more appropriate and ethical approach: It describes participants not with demographic identifiers but in terms of their roles within Block Talks and the broader community. This decision aligns with ethical recommendations in narrative and participatory research to minimize the risk of identification while preserving the analytic value of participants' perspectives (Fine & Torre, 2004). At the

same time, focusing on roles rather than individuals reinforced the study's conceptualization of leadership as collective and relational rather than individualized.

Three primary participant roles informed the narrative interviews conducted for this study: a community partner, a Block Talk host, and a community member. Each role reflects a distinct relationship to the initiative and, in turn, offers a unique perspective on how leadership, storytelling, and civic engagement were experienced and enacted. This is critical, as scholars of participation and empowerment have shown that a proper understanding of how individuals engage across roles can illuminate power dynamics and pathways toward collective action more effectively than individual characteristics alone (Hernández et al., 2020). Each of these roles shaped the kinds of stories that neighbors shared. Hosts were trusted members of the neighborhood: They were there to help keep things on track and facilitated, but never as traditional leaders. Partners, on the other hand, were there when their presence was requested to support community efforts and build trust with the neighborhood. Finally, community members constituted the experts at the table.

Here, it's worth diving into each of these distinct roles for the sake of full context. The interviewed Block Talk host represented a role rooted in place-based leadership and relational trust. Hosts often function as connectors, fostering hospitable spaces and modeling participation without relying on formal authority. Such informal leadership roles are critical when it comes to sustaining participation and fostering trust, particularly in neighborhoods where institutional engagement has been uneven or harmful (Attree et al., 2011; Ogbuabor & Onwujekwe, 2018). Having a host and facilitator (distinct from the researcher) who is actually from the neighborhood allowed for a particularly high level of trust and safety to arise among neighbors.

The interviewed community partner supported Block Talks through donations, coordination, and institutional collaboration. Interviewing someone in this role provided insight into how leadership operates at the intersection of community priorities and organizational or institutional systems. Research on collaborative engagement highlights the importance of boundary-spanning roles that—while always remaining accountable to local voices—translate community knowledge into actionable partnerships (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Of course, in the context of Block Talks, any outside partners coming in couldn't simply take charge; they had to work to build trust by showing up consistently and being active listeners. Some organizations struggled with this in the beginning. However, once they came to understand the novel dynamics that defined Block Talks, they brought unique perspectives and resources to the table.

The interviewed community member offered a valuable perspective from those who engaged in Block Talks as neighbors trying to support their community. This role foregrounds lived experience and everyday knowledge as central to leadership and civic engagement processes. Researchers across public health and community development argue that centering community members' voices is essential if one's aim is to achieve equitable engagement and meaningful participation (Cheng & Levey, 2019). This participant's stories and perspectives revealed a raw and detailed point of view that no other role could have offered.

Participants were recruited through the researcher's relationships within the neighborhood as well as their ongoing involvement in Block Talks. This approach reflects community-engaged research practices that prioritize trust, voluntary participation, and accessibility over formal recruitment mechanisms (Glandon et al., 2017). Participation was not limited to those who were most visible or vocal; rather, the study sought perspectives that reflected different ways of engaging with the initiative. Of course, it was made clear to those

recruited that their participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any time without facing any pressure or consequences. It helped that trust had already been built before this stage of research was conducted, so people were excited to take this next step in contributing to research on Block Talks and their community.

Together, these participants and their distinct perspectives presented a layered view of how leadership and storytelling function across different points of engagement within a single community. The decision to work with three individuals for this study comes from recommendations by Creswell & Roth (2018) who explain how a sample size of 1 to 2 individuals in narrative inquiry helps keep the focus on the detailed life story of individuals to provide a deep, longitudinal portrait. Riessman (2008) further supports this by stating how sample size varies but is often small, the emphasis should be on the unit of analysis being the story itself, not the persona. One person can provide multiple stories. Squire (2013) argues that the number of people you talk to is determined by the purpose of research (Depth vs. Breadth) and when you have enough material to answer your research questions. The next section details the means used to capture these perspectives.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

This study draws on multiple qualitative data sources to examine how leadership emerges through community storytelling and engagement practices. By working across multiple data sources—and, in turn, allowing everyone a chance to participate however they felt most comfortable doing so—the study achieves a richer understanding of the underlying relational dynamics while simultaneously promoting methodological rigor through triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is a well-established fact among community-engaged scholars that combining

interviews, observations, and community-generated materials facilitates the capture of both expressed perspectives and enacted practices in participatory contexts (Glandon et al., 2017).

Narrative Interviews

Three narrative interviews were conducted, with each interviewee occupying different roles within Block Talks: a host, a community partner, and a community member. Narrative interviews were used because they allow participants to frame their experiences in their own terms and to highlight what they perceive to be meaningful rather than simply responding to categories set by the researcher (Chase, 2011). This approach aligns with leadership communication scholarship that treats meaning-making as something that emerges from and is co-constructed through interaction (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). The interviews were intentionally set up in a conversational (rather than structured) way, the purpose being to encourage story-driven and honest responses. Interviews were guided by open-ended prompts geared toward promoting reflection on the participants' experiences with Block Talks, their perceptions of leadership and participation, and their thoughts on the role of storytelling in shaping community engagement. This flexible structure reflects recommendations in CES to allow participants to guide the direction of conversation while still allowing issues to surface that may not have been anticipated by the researcher (De Weger et al., 2020). Narrative interviews were documented through handwritten notes taken during conversations and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. This approach served to prioritize participant comfort, safety, and consent, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the varying levels of trust with recording technologies. Transcriptions reflect each interviewee's language and meaning as closely as possible, though it must be recognized that these are narrative reconstructions rather than verbatim transcripts. Approaches to the interview process were adaptable based on each

individual's comfort level, and the priority was always on their safety and comfort. See Appendix A for more details on the narrative interview protocols.

Participant Observations and Composite Fieldnotes

Participant observations constituted a central data source, capturing how leadership and storytelling unfolded during Block Talks and related community activities. Observational data included interactions among participants, facilitation practices, moments of tension or alignment, and informal exchanges before and after structured conversations. Ethnographic and narrative scholars note that these types of observations are essential to an understanding of leadership as something practiced rather than merely described (Aldrich, 2012). Throughout these interactions, the focus was on the way people felt, interacted, and spoke, the central aim being to see how things changed over time and what kinds of conversations would commonly arise. Rather than presenting observations as discrete, event-specific records, fieldnotes were synthesized into composite fieldnotes that reflect recurring patterns across engagements. Composite fieldnotes are commonly used in community-based and narrative research to protect participant anonymity while still facilitating the analysis of collective processes (Fine & Torre, 2004). This approach supports the study's focus on leadership as distributed and relational rather than tied to singular moments or individuals. It was important to protect anonymity as often as possible, especially in this neighborhood where there is already so much mistrust. See Appendix B for the composite fieldnotes in full.

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos were developed as a complementary data source to document reflexive insights and emerging interpretations across key moments of engagement. Four analytic memos were drafted, each centered on a distinct community context: the first Block Talk, a meeting that

followed multiple shootings, a community–police input meeting, and a neighborhood resource fair. Writing memos helped me notice patterns across different types of engagement activities, mirroring scholars’ indication that analytic memoing supports transparency, reflexivity, and theoretical sensitivity in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2016). At the same time, the use of analytic memos aligned with leadership communication research that positions context, emotion, and interaction as central to leadership processes (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). These memos functioned not as participant data but as analytic artifacts, tracing how leadership practices shifted across different conditions of trust-building, crisis, power negotiation, and collective celebration. They served as interpretive supports rather than stand-alone narratives, reinforcing the study’s emphasis on leadership as process. Memos felt significant in carrying out this research because so many different engagement activities were happening once Block Talks got up and running; so, it was important to keep consistent notes and data to look back on. See Appendix C for all four analytic memos.

Community-Generated Materials

Community-generated materials, including community assessment forms, mutual aid request forms, and planning documents, served as supporting qualitative data. These materials provided insight into neighborhood-identified priorities and forms of civic engagement that occur outside meetings and interviews, illustrating the importance of flexibility to many people’s ability to engage. Scholarship on participation and empowerment more broadly highlights the importance of attending to such artifacts as expressions of agency and collective voice (Kamruzzaman, 2020). These materials were not used as standalone analytic units; rather, they were analyzed thematically and used to contextualize interview and observational data. This approach was employed to align with recommendations laid out in the literature on community

engagement to integrate community-generated knowledge without displacing narrative accounts or lived experiences (Glandon et al., 2017). See Appendix D for details on the employed survey instruments and assessment materials.

Descriptive Survey and Civic Data

Several forms of descriptive survey data, including event feedback and neighborhood assessments, were considered as contextual information on participation and engagement patterns. These data were not analyzed inferentially and did not contribute to the analytic claims. Instead, they served to offer background context, helping to situate the qualitative findings within broader patterns of engagement (De Weger et al., 2018). Additionally, previously collected civic data informed the identification of neighborhood needs as well as the initial development of Block Talks. Scholars note that such data can support community-engaged work when used as a starting point for action rather than a replacement for community voice (Williams & Cooper, 2019).

Collectively, these data sources facilitate a comprehensive examination of leadership as a communicative, relational practice embedded in community life. Table 3.1 summarizes the sources, supporting transparency while clarifying how multiple forms of qualitative data contributed to the analytic claims made later on. The next section details the analytic strategies used to make sense of the data and identify significant patterns.

Table 3.1. Overview of Data Sources

Overview of Data Sources		
Data Type	Description	Role in Analytic Process
Narrative interviews	Three role-based interviews with a community partner, a Block Talk host, and a community member	Primary narrative data informing analytic claims
Composite fieldnotes	Synthesized observations across multiple community engagements	Identification of recurring leadership and storytelling practices
Analytic memos	Four analytic memos documenting leadership across varied contexts	Reflexive and interpretive support for analysis
Community-generated materials	Assessments, mutual aid forms, and planning documents	Contextual and illustrative data
Descriptive surveys	Event and neighborhood surveys	Contextual information (not primary analytic data)

Data-Analysis Process

This study's approach to data analysis was guided by a narrative and interpretive approach designed to examine how leadership emerges through storytelling, interaction, and collective sensemaking. Rather than seeking to code for frequency or isolate variables (which would have failed to capture what mattered most in this research), the analysis focused on identifying patterns of meaning, relational dynamics, and communicative practices across data sources in a manner well-suited for research concerned with process, context, and lived experience (Riessman, 2008).

Analysis proceeded iteratively and reflexively, beginning during data collection and continuing throughout the research process. Scholars engaged in narrative inquiry have widely

argued that analysis is not a discrete stage but an ongoing engagement with stories as they are heard, retold, and interpreted over time (Chase, 2011). Fieldnotes, analytic memos, and interviews were reviewed multiple times to attend to how stories evolved, how participants responded to one another, and how leadership practices became visible across different contexts. Recurring patterns and themes began to be visible after just a single interaction.

The analytic process emphasized narrative sensemaking rather than thematic reduction. Themes were certainly identified, but they were treated as interpretive lenses rather than fixed categories. As established by scholars of narrative and organizational communication, meaning often emerges not from isolated statements but through story circulation, convergence, and shared framing (Bormann, 1983). This approach allowed the analysis to focus on how stories were taken up collectively, how certain narratives gained traction, and how leadership was enacted through shared understanding. One story and concern that was consistently brought up—regardless of the type of engagement—was the matter of code enforcement and its issues. Such reported issues ranged from getting lawns mowed to needing assistance with trash or housework. Through Block Talks, neighbors quickly realized how many of their neighbors were experiencing similar struggles, while others were finding ways they could help.

Analytic memos, recognized as a critical practice for developing analytic depth and theoretical sensitivity in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2016), facilitated the tracing of leadership's emergence across diverse community circumstances. Each memo centered on a distinct context, ranging from trust-building and institutional engagement to crisis and collective celebration. In this way, they enabled a comparison of how storytelling and leadership practices subtly differed between these circumstances.

Of course, as already established, leadership was analyzed as a communicative and relational process rather than as an individual attribute. Drawing from leadership communication scholarship, the analysis examined how leadership was enacted through facilitation, listening, boundary-setting, and the fostering of particular conditions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This lens shifted analytic attention away from identifying “leaders” and toward examining moments in which influence, direction, or collective agency emerged through interaction. Public narrative theory further informed the analysis by providing the language with which to understand how individual stories connected to shared values and collective action. Scholars who align with this theory argue that narratives linking personal experience to communal concerns can mobilize engagement and foster shared purpose (Ganz, 2011). This framework was used to examine how stories shared in Block Talks transitioned from personal accounts into collective interpretations capable of shaping the neighborhood’s actions, priorities, and understandings.

Throughout the analytic process, attention was paid to how power, safety, and emotion shaped storytelling and participation. Research in community psychology and public health shows that fear, trauma, and structural inequity influence not only what is said but also how and when people are willing to speak (Williams & Cooper, 2019). Rather than treating these factors as confounding variables, the analysis considered them integral to properly understanding the emergence of leadership within the community context. Moments of silence, hesitation, or restraint were treated as analytically meaningful rather than as absences, reflecting a view of leadership that considers care, pacing, and boundary-setting to be important communicative practices.

The ultimate outcome of this study’s analytic process is not a definitive account of neighborhood leadership; rather, it is a situated interpretation of how leadership emerged within

a specific context through storytelling and collective meaning-making. The next section details the ethical considerations that guided this analysis, including consent, representation, and care for participants' voices.

Table 3.2 outlines the analytic artifacts and reflexive practices that supported transparency and rigor in this qualitative study, demonstrating how analytic decisions were documented and revisited throughout the research process.

Table 3.2. Analytic Artifacts and Reflexive Practices

Analytic Artifacts and Reflexive Practices		
Analytic Artifact	Purpose	Use in Dissertation
Composite fieldnotes	Document recurring patterns across community engagements	Findings (Chapter Four)
Analytic memos	Trace leadership practices across contexts and conditions	Findings (Chapter Four)
Reflexive notes	Examine researcher positionality and interpretive decisions	Methodology (Chapter Three)
Audit trail documentation	Maintain transparency in analytic decisions	Methodology and appendices

Research Timeline

Here, it is worth detailing the precise timing of the data-collection and data-analysis processes detailed above. The research process may be divided into the following four distinct phases.

Phase 1: Research Planning and Community Coordination (February – March 2025)

In early 2025, I finalized the research design, obtained the necessary approvals from Kansas State University, and re-established the relevant agreements with PARS. Upon carrying out those foundational tasks, I was able to begin practically preparing for the research by developing the narrative interview protocols, finalizing the ethical framework for composite fieldnotes, and co-developing plans for outreach and participation with neighborhood hosts. These preparatory steps ensured that research activities could commence immediately within existing Block Talk initiatives while maintaining reciprocity and transparency with participants.

Phase 2: Data Collection and Fieldwork (June – December 2025)

This phase covered the bulk of the fieldwork over the course of seven months. During this time, I conducted sustained participant observation at multiple Block Talk gatherings across the target neighborhood, using detailed composite fieldnotes to document recurring patterns of communication, leadership, and participation. Between October and December, I also conducted three formal narrative interviews—one with a Block Talk host, one with a community partner, and one with a community participant—to capture layered perspectives on relational leadership and civic engagement. Parallel to these interviews, I was collecting community-generated materials (e.g., mutual-aid forms, assessment surveys, planning notes) to contextualize those perspectives. This period represented the heart of the study, balancing intensive observation with the community’s ongoing civic work.

Phase 3: Narrative and Interpretive Analysis (January 2026 – March 2026)

Immediately following the data-collection process, I kickstarted a three-month phase of focused analysis. Through iterative coding, narrative reconstruction, and analytic memoing, I identified five key analytic claims regarding how leadership emerged as a communicative and relational process within Block Talks. This analysis was conducted alongside ongoing engagement with community partners to validate all interpretations, ensuring that the findings aligned with the participants’ lived realities and, in turn, maintaining ethical accuracy. This collaboration parallel to analysis allowed for early refinements to be shared with community stakeholders prior to the conclusion of the research process; in this way, the research was able to play a positive practical role prior to finalization.

Phase 4: Writing, Integration, and Dissemination (December 2025 – April 2026)

This phase, the start of which overlapped with Phases 2 and 3, continued until the publication of the dissertation. It was in these last few months that the analytic claims were

synthesized into full dissertation chapters and shared with faculty at both Kansas State University and PARS. The findings were also summarized in accessible community reports for local funders and the City of Topeka, empirically demonstrating how and why Block Talks expand civic accessibility. This final phase marked the conclusion of a full-circle process in which academic research and community practice mutually reinforced each other—documenting, validating, and advancing a model of relational civic engagement that emerged from and continues to live within the community.

Ethical Considerations

This study's ethical practice was grounded in CES's understanding of ethics as relational, contextual, and ongoing rather than procedural or transactional. Scholars across CES traditions argue that ethical responsibility extends beyond formal approval processes, encompassing care for participants, attentiveness to power, and responsiveness to community-defined needs and boundaries (Fine & Torre, 2004). This orientation guided all aspects of the research design, from data collection and representation to decisions about presence, safety, and consent.

CES emphasizes that ethical rigor should be demonstrated through transparency, accountability, and care in practice, especially in place-based research for which relationships extend beyond the study itself (Alter et al., 2017). Thus, ethical considerations were discussed and revisited consistently over time.

Consent was understood within this research as an ongoing, relational process rather than a single procedural moment. Community-engaged scholars note that relational consent is particularly appropriate in longitudinal, place-based research for which trust is developed over time and participation evolves (Israel et al., 2010). Participants were informed that the stories shared in Block Talks and related activities could be featured in the research write-up in a

synthesized and anonymized form, and consent was consistently informally revisited through ongoing dialogue and participation. Moreover, I would always check in with community members to offer spaces and ways in which people could check in with me privately outside of meetings; my contact information was shared regularly and easily accessible to every person involved with Block Talks.

Safety was a central ethical consideration throughout the research process. Research across the fields of public health, community psychology, and development has consistently shown that fear of surveillance, enforcement, and institutional harm can significantly hamper participation, particularly by members of marginalized or historically mistreated communities (Williams & Cooper, 2019). In this study, safety was understood as a relational and contextual condition shaped by participation and silence rather than a universal standard.

Careful attention was paid to representation and anonymity in both the documentation and presentation of data. Composite fieldnotes were used to synthesize recurring patterns across engagements while minimizing the risk of identifying specific individuals or moments. Narrative scholars more broadly have argued that composite approaches can ethically represent collective experience without exposing participants to unintended harm (Fine & Torre, 2004). This was important, as protecting anonymity was particularly important in the considered neighborhood.

Overall, these ethical considerations reflect a commitment to conducting research that is accountable to the community, attentive to power and safety, and respectful of participants' voices. Ethics in this study were not confined to formal procedures; they were considered and adhered to in everyday decisions about listening, representation, and care.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness in this study was established through strategies aligned with qualitative, narrative, and community-engaged research traditions. Rather than pursuing statistical validity or replicability, rigor was understood as the extent to which the research process was transparent, reflexive, and grounded in sustained engagement with the community context. This understanding reflects qualitative scholars' general emphasis on credibility in interpretive research as something that is achieved through coherence between research questions, methods, and analytic claims (Riessman, 2008).

Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement within the considered neighborhood. Extended involvement enabled the researcher to observe leadership and storytelling practices across different times and contexts, including moments of routine engagement, crisis, institutional interaction, and collective celebration. CES highlights prolonged engagement as essential to the building of trust, the deepening of understanding, and the avoidance of surface-level interpretations of participation (Aldrich, 2012). Being present over time also fostered trust and made the work stronger overall.

Triangulation further contributed to trustworthiness by drawing on multiple forms of data, including narrative interviews, composite fieldnotes, analytic memos, and community-generated materials. Rather than seeking convergence as proof of a single truth, triangulation was used to examine the appearance of leadership and meaning-making across different settings and forms of engagement. Such interpretive triangulation strengthens qualitative research by illuminating—rather than eliminating—complexity (Denzin, 2012).

Moreover, scholars note that trustworthiness in CES is closely tied to how researchers honor participants' voices, navigate power, and remain responsive to community concerns

(Cahill, 2020). By centering relational consent, protecting anonymity, and prioritizing community-defined safety, this study sought to produce knowledge that is not only methodologically sound but also ethically responsible.

In terms of rigor, reflexivity was a central component of efforts to uphold it throughout the research process. Analytic memos and reflexive notes were used to document evolving interpretations, moments of uncertainty, and the researcher's positionality within the community. Qualitative methodologists emphasize that reflexivity enhances rigor by making visible previously concealed interpretive processes (Finlay, 2002). Sometimes, during engagement activities, too much would be going on for everything to be properly interpreted; reflexive writing allowed for such activities to be dissected with a clear mind.

Transferability, rather than generalizability, was considered to be key to the study's potential relevance to other community-engaged contexts. Through its thick descriptions of the neighborhood setting, engagement practices, and communicative processes, the study allows readers to gauge the findings' applicability to their own contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Many different readers and practitioners could learn from this work, changing the way in which research is conducted and, in turn, opening up all forms of work and study.

Finally, dependability and confirmability were supported by the clear documentation of research decisions, data sources, and analytic steps. By maintaining an audit trail through fieldnotes, memos, and methodological documentation, this research aligned with general recommendations for transparency in qualitative and participatory research (Tracy, 2010). These practices, beyond making me feel more confident in the analysis, ensured that my interpretations were grounded in data and that all analytic choices may be traced throughout the research process.

Together, these strategies to bolster trustworthiness and rigor reinforced its alignment with narrative inquiry, leadership communication, and community-engaged scholarship. The following chapter presents the findings that these methodological approaches and choices facilitated.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the narrative inquiry and addresses the study's research questions. Across the data corpus, the participants consistently described participation as something that emerges through communicative leadership practices rather than formal authority or structured roles. Leadership emerged as a relational and collective process shaped by storytelling, shared sensemaking, boundary negotiation, the expression of concerns, and everyday acts of care and coordination.

The findings are organized around five analytic claims developed through iterative narrative analysis across the multiple considered forms of qualitative data (see Chapter 3 for details). These analytic claims reflect recurring patterns observed across different contexts rather than isolated moments or individual perspectives. The analytic claims cover leadership as it emerged under a diverse array of community conditions, including early trust-building gatherings, moments of collective interpretation, periods marked by heightened fear and safety concerns, interactions involving negotiated institutional presence, and community efforts oriented toward care and connection. Just as the data needed to come from different spaces and forms, leadership needed to be studied across different situational contexts to achieve a properly comprehensive understanding. Through this contextual diversity, all participants were able to exhibit how they lead depending on where they were strongest or most comfortable.

In keeping with the traditions of narrative inquiry and community-engaged research, this chapter prioritizes patterns of meaning-making over exhaustive descriptions of events (Riessman, 2008). Participant excerpts are cited sparingly, only when they serve to substantively illuminate analytic claims. Quotations are also kept intentionally brief to ensure that the consulted voices are kept with the community to which they belong. This dissertation was not the

right space to use their full stories, as these stories do not belong to the researcher. All excerpts are attributed to a participant role rather than a name, and composite descriptions are used to safeguard the participants' anonymity and emphasize the significance of collective processes over individual actions or sentiments.

As with the dissertation more broadly, ethical considerations are central to the presentation of findings. This chapter provides no identifying details (e.g., neighborhood name, dates of Block Talks or referenced events), and care is taken to avoid reproducing harm, surveillance, or unintended exposure in relaying the findings. These protections are important, especially for communities subject to systemic mistreatment.

Each remaining section of this chapter offers an in-depth presentation of findings pertaining to one of the five identified analytic claims. Table 4.1 provides an overview of these claims as well as the data sources that informed them.

Table 4.1. Analytic Claims

Analytic Claim	Narrative Interviews	Composite Fieldnotes	Analytic Memos	Community-Generated Materials
Storytelling created the conditions under which leadership could emerge	✓	✓	✓	—
Leadership emerged through collective sensemaking	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leadership arose amid fear and safety concerns	✓	✓	—	—
Leadership was enacted through boundary work and power negotiation	✓	✓	✓	—
Leadership emerged through care, coordination, and collective action beyond crisis	✓	✓	✓	✓

Storytelling Created the Conditions Under Which Leadership Could Emerge

Across the data corpus, storytelling emerged as a relational practice that created the conditions under which leadership became possible. Rather than serving as a persuasive or instructional mechanism, storytelling functioned as an entry point for participation, lowering barriers to engagement and legitimizing everyday experiences as a valid source of knowledge (Riessman, 2008). This dynamic reflects what social capital theorists describe as the early formation of bonding social capital, as neighbors built trust and mutual recognition through story-centered interactions (Putnam, 2000). From an SCT perspective, these early stories also operated as emerging fantasy themes that helped participants recognize shared concerns and

values (Bormann, 1983). Stories were not shared by the same people at each gathering, nor were they simplified or filtered to sound more “appropriate.” Over time, stories came to be shared freely across a wide range of participants, with different voices emerging based on the specific gathering and context. In this way, leadership emerged not as a predefined role but as a collective communicative practice that invited presence, listening, and mutual recognition.

In a narrative interview, one Block Talk host described how storytelling fundamentally altered their sense of capacity and legitimacy within the neighborhood. Reflecting on their early experiences, they explained that, despite initially feeling unsure of their ability to lead, sharing stories shifted how they saw themselves:

I do not always feel like I could be doing this or like I know how to do it. At first, I was excited, but I was still nervous a lot too. I think seeing how I can be viewed as someone who can be in charge and who can make a difference and is smart enough was so important to me.

Evidently, leadership emerged relationally rather than positionally. The narrative interviews (Appendix A) clearly demonstrated that participants experienced storytelling as an invitation rather than a demand. That same host explained, “when we were able to voice our opinion and tell our stories to people ... it really empowered me.” As one community member reflected, “It felt like people could come as they were and just talk about what they were seeing without having to know what to do next.” More precisely, this community member offered the following description of their engagement at Block Talks:

The conversations we would have at meetings ... would feel really easy. I didn't ever feel like I had to change what I was saying in any way. I could just talk freely. ... We were using our stories to make a difference.

It was important for leadership to emerge in such a natural way. Storytelling created the communicative conditions under which people could recognize themselves as contributors to collective meaning-making rather than passive recipients of direction, could recognize their own authority and value—not because they were assigned a role, but because they were seen, trusted, and listened to by others. Elsewhere, the host relayed a recollection:

I remember saying, “Oh my gosh, I am so sorry, I don't know why I just said all of that,” and all you did was smile and tell me, “Thank you for sharing it.” That is what we are there for.

This memory depicts storytelling operating as a norm-setting practice; the response offered not evaluation or correction but an affirmation that the space was designed for disclosure.

Composite fieldnotes (Appendix B) illustrate how early storytelling moments often involved neighbors sharing personal observations or concerns without necessarily expecting a resolution or any other particular kind of response; instead, stories were often met, simply, with affirmation or a quiet collective acknowledgment: “This happened to me too” was often followed by something along the lines of “I thought I was the only one.” Such interactions gave way to understanding. As these interpretations converged, residents developed shared language, an essential component of social capital, that reinforced group cohesion and reduced ambiguity during dialogue. Participants came to realize that this form of engagement did not require

community members to wield any kind of authority or expertise, contrasting sharply with more traditional forms of civic engagement. Being an “expert” in Block Talks came down not to one’s position or background but to one’s lived experiences within their neighborhood. Thus, in creating space for neighbors to share their stories with one another without any pressure to act, Block Talks established relational trust and, in turn, allowed leadership to emerge over time.

Analytic Memo 1 (Appendix C) further documents how storytelling shaped participation over the course of the first Block Talk by framing leadership as a collective presence rather than the imposition of a particular direction by a particular individual. The memo articulates how leadership was enacted in various ways; for example, stories were invited, the conversational pace was slowed, and an effort was made to resist the urge to move quickly toward concrete solutions, the overall aim being to “hold space long enough for stories to settle before moving into planning.” Pacing, here, represented a leadership practice. When civic engagement has historically been dominated by ever-present pressure to always be working on finding solutions and fixing things, doing anything else can feel unproductive or even counterproductive. It takes time to get comfortable with such a foundational change. Ultimately, however, these practices successfully positioned storytelling as foundational to leadership through the prioritization of relationship-building and shared understanding.

One neighbor described how the comfort of the space made forms of disclosure possible that would not have occurred elsewhere: “I remember, the very first time, I had no idea what I was getting into, and I really did not expect much, yet by the end I had shared my entire life story. I never do that.” The conditions established by Block Talks fostered leadership development by creating relational safety rather than demanding a certain level of performance

or expertise. Another community member similarly described how storytelling altered how they experience engagement and care:

What stands out to me the most is that no matter what was going on, I was always just treated like a neighbor, and so was my family. It was such a weird feeling to be seen and heard and viewed like a person, not part of a job ... There was so much uncertainty in our lives, and we felt really alone and even ashamed about everything.”

This emotional context helps to explain why storytelling functioned as an entry point for this individual: It enabled engagement without requiring public disclosure beyond what felt safe to them.

Across multiple forms of qualitative data, storytelling consistently emerged as a means of redistributing voice and recalibrating expectations about leadership. Critically, leadership did not surface through charismatic speech or formal facilitation; it emerged through the accumulation of shared narratives signaling belonging and mutual responsibility (Chase, 2011). By foregrounding stories as legitimate forms of participation, Block Talks cultivated relational conditions under which leadership was able to emerge as a shared communicative process.

Overall, these findings indicate that storytelling was more than just a feature of community engagement—it was a foundational practice that made the emergence of leadership possible. In doing so, they greatly contribute to answering RQ1, showcasing one of the key ways in which Block Talk participants experience civic engagement. By legitimizing lived experience as knowledge and reducing the pressure to perform expertise, leadership emerged in this civic engagement space through sharing and listening. Of course, this section also painted a clear picture of how storytelling molded leadership, civic agency, and even participation itself in

Block Talks, offering a clear answer to RQ3. The next section examines how the collective sensemaking behind these storytelling practices activated said emergence.

Leadership Emerged Through Collective Sensemaking

Leadership emerged within Block Talks not through individual direction or formal authority but through collective sensemaking. As participants shared stories about their experiences, leadership became visible in the very ways in which those stories were taken up, reframed, and linked to one another through dialogue. Sensemaking, defined in leadership communication scholarship as a communicative process through which people jointly interpret situations and construct shared meaning (Ospina & Foldy, 2010), gave way to leadership in Block Talks by fostering conditions under which the participants could collectively make sense of community concerns. In Weick's terms, participants were continuously answering the question "what's the story here?" through dialogue, gradually establishing shared interpretation that oriented the group toward collective action (Weick, 1995).

Composite fieldnotes (Appendix B) capture how shared sensemaking unfolded through recognition and repetition rather than formal facilitation. When one participant shared a lived experience, others responded with brief affirmations, such as "That happened to me too" and "I thought I was the only one." Such sentiments shifted conversations away from individual perspectives and toward communal sentiments. In the words of one community member, "It is like we are all a team. We would not have that if we did not get chances to know each other so well through stories we tell and hear." This directly reflects sensemaking as a form of relational convergence: Stories were transformed from individual accounts into shared interpretations of the neighborhood's reality.

End-of-meeting survey responses echoed this understanding, with participants emphasizing having felt heard, respected, and more connected to their neighbors rather than citing any specific outcomes or action items as markers of the meeting's success (see Appendix D, Figure D.8). This signaled a pivot from the pursuit of abstract problem-solving to the collective recognition of shared conditions. Silence commonly followed participants' disclosures, serving as an indicator not of discomfort but of collective acknowledgment. Leadership was enacted in these moments through listening, restraint, and mutual validation.

Composite fieldnotes also demonstrate that sensemaking generally unfolded gradually as participants echoed one another's experiences, revisited earlier stories, and collectively clarified which issues felt most pressing. This process represented a steady path toward progress and understanding. Rather than responding to stories with immediate solutions—"I like that we don't have to decide everything tonight; even us just showing up is still productive"—participants frequently engaged in reflective listening and affirmation, allowing for individual narratives to accumulate over time into shared understandings. This dynamic aligned with and accommodated participants' daily realities: "My brain is just fried. I am exhausted." Ultimately, these kinds of interactions present leadership as a relational accomplishment grounded not in decision-making authority but in steady communicative convergence.

Analytic memos further showcase how leadership emerged through subtle communicative practices in support of collective interpretation. Analytic Memos 1 and 4 (Appendix C) depict moments in which leadership was enacted through pauses, questions that invited reflection, or inclusive language that signaled shared ownership. Block Talk facilitators consistently responded to emotionally charged stories with silence or reflective prompts rather than pivoting to agendas, promoting the development of shared interpretation before any kind of

push for action. These practices helped to shift conversations away from individual perspectives and toward a collective orientation, reinforcing leadership as a process of guiding meaning rather than directing action.

Narrative interviews (Appendix A) corroborate these observations, highlighting participants' experience of leadership as something distributed and emergent. A Block Talk host described how ideas and concerns gradually became shared sentiments rather than notions attributed to any one speaker: "after a while, it wasn't about who said what first—it was about what we were all seeing together." At the same time, the sharing itself gave way to renewed understandings: "[listening to other people's stories] gives us a chance to see a different side of our neighbors ... to see that, hey, they are just like me. They have the same fears and needs." These accounts underscore how leadership was enacted through the collective interpretation of stories; ownership of meaning became communal rather than individual. The interviewed community partner made it clear that this collective storytelling gave way to new ideas:

You can look any direction and you see everyone sharing their stories and building relationships. ... They are also sharing because they are constantly coming up with new ideas, and, for some people, it is the first time their ideas are being encouraged, which is sad but also wonderful to see.

This kind of idea-generating discourse was possible because, as reported by the interviewed community member, "everyone always cared about what each person said, and we also always seemed to find ways [to] relate to each other."

Across the data corpus, collective sensemaking functioned as one of the main mechanisms through which leadership took shape. Stories were treated not as isolated expressions of personal experience but as resources with which to negotiate shared

understandings and orient collective attention (Bormann, 1983). Through ongoing dialogue, participants collaboratively constructed narratives that defined what mattered within their community and how those concerns were understood. In doing so, they steadily developed a stronger idea of the meaning behind civic engagement—one enabled by this new form—offering some indications of how RQ1 may be answered. Evidently, leadership within Block Talks was sustained through communicative processes of collective sensemaking—through affirmation, repetition, and shared interpretation—not formal or authoritative leadership, showcasing the critical role played by relationships among Block Talk participants when it comes to fostering leadership. This lays a clear path toward answering RQ2. Finally, in tracing how storytelling gives way to sensemaking, and sensemaking gives way to leadership, we can begin to answer RQ3: Storytelling shapes leadership through sensemaking.

The following section explores how these processes took place under conditions marked by fear and safety concerns, illuminating how leadership adapted in response to changing community contexts.

Leadership Arose Amid Fear and Safety Concerns

One crucial contextual dynamic surrounding the Block Talks is the fact that they often took place under circumstances marked by heightened levels of fear, uncertainty, and safety concerns, which inevitably shaped what was entailed by participation. Rather than treating safety as a discrete topic of discussion, participants described it as an ambient condition that influenced their daily routines, their approaches to parenting, and their willingness to be publicly visible. In this context, leadership was enacted through practices that helped people to remain present: pacing conversations, offering affirmation without pressure, and fostering conditions under which stories could be shared without additional risk. These relational adjustments were

necessary because linking social capital was limited; neighbors did not have trusted, stable ties to institutions, making neighborhood-controlled spaces essential for participation (Woolcock, 2001).

Several forms of qualitative data show how safety concerns permeated participants' engagement even when safety was not the topic at hand. Participants frequently referenced violence as an ever-present factor of daily life. One neighbor stated plainly, "It's been bad lately. It feels normal sometimes." Others discussed feeling the need to modify their routines, particularly when it comes to ensuring the safety of their children: "I don't let my kids play outside like I used to. I miss how neighborhoods used to be when we all would hang out and spend time together outside." Evidently, leadership emerged in Block Talks under constraints, with participation itself compelling participants to navigate fear, vigilance, and risk. One community member described the conditions that shape their daily life as follows:

We had just went from being homeless the year before. I got a okay job, but it was commission, and my husband worked really weird hours, so it was hard to ever make it to the things we would need to go to get help. I also was pregnant, and we already have four other kids—it takes a lot of our time. We were just trying to survive and not let our kids feel all of the pain.

This account situates leadership—and just participation—in Block Talks under conditions of chronic instability, with caregiving, exhaustion, and survival shaping the possibilities and the limits of their engagement.

Composite fieldnotes also showcase how fear associated with institutional presence shaped participation. Several participants indicated that they actively avoid civic spaces due to concerns about surveillance or police presence. One explained:

I don't go to those meetings because the police are always there, and I do not trust them. Last time I went to a meeting and police were there, they were trying to take a person who was there to talk because of a warrant or something.

Others drove this point even further: "I don't want to be anywhere ICE might show up, and I am a citizen." These were more than just preferences. Participants believed that civic engagement, if it's linked to institutional presence, could pose serious risks: "I'd rather stay home than risk my future." At the same time, they expressed a belief that institutional presence offers no tangible benefits, reporting past experiences of being talked over, dismissed, or used to legitimize predetermined decisions: "They already knew what they wanted; it just looked good for a news article."

Leadership was enacted in Block Talks through boundary-setting and neighbors' control over how and when institutions were invited into the space, reframing safety as something to be defined by the community rather than something to be imposed externally. This form of boundary work aligns with SCT's notion that groups must define the symbolic boundaries of their rhetorical vision, deciding who is allowed to contribute to the shared meaning-making process and under what conditions (Bormann, 1982). These narratives align with survey responses from CIVIC, in which many respondents reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood despite expressing confidence in their own personal conflict-resolution abilities (see Appendix D).

Narrative interviews (Appendix A) corroborate these observations by highlighting how participants experienced leadership as distributed and emergent. A Block Talk host described noticing more people showing up and speaking up, stating, "It was also nice to see how many

people showed up who I know never would have showed up to something with the police before.” This suggests that collective sensemaking is shaped by who feels able to participate, which itself is a factor influenced by fear and safety concerns. Beyond the benefits that Block Talks offer through absence, it’s also worth noting the positive benefits achieved through this form of civic engagement. The environments that Block Talks foster are highly unique, according to one interviewed community member: “Pretty much every time I speak, I think about how good it feels but how I never would have [shared that] anywhere else.” The interviewed host concurs on this point: “I seem to always be sharing stories now that I would not share in other spaces ... because of how comfortable it is.” That comfort was achieved by holding a Block Talk session in a familiar space:

Being at the church is a very familiar space for a lot of us ... it allows you to put your guard down, relax, and open up. The church is a safe space and a spot where anyone can go even if they are not religious.

All of these findings provide a clear response to RQ4: Leadership’s emergence through collective sensemaking within Block Talks was subject to and limited by dynamics of fear, instability, and prior harm, as these factors determined whether participants considered “showing up” to be possible. Despite these limitations, however, Block Talk participants experienced civic engagement as a relief from such tensions and hardships—and as a means of overcoming them—offering some clarity with regard to RQ1. Block Talks were adaptive in a manner shaped by survival demands, be those demands public or private, and these demands were met by the relationships being forged with hosts, community partners, and especially fellow community members. This dynamic represents a clear answer to RQ2. Of course, these relationships could

only be forged because Block Talks were designed to prioritize the protection of participation conditions rather than promote attendance or action.

Leadership Was Enacted Through Boundary Work and Power Negotiation

Leadership within Block Talks was frequently enacted through boundary work rather than overt decision-making authority. Instead of directing conversation or setting outcomes, leadership appeared in how participation was shaped, how limits were negotiated, and how power was managed within community spaces. Here, boundary work refers to the communicative practices by which inclusion, access, and authority were continually negotiated among participants. Leadership communication scholarship recognizes such boundary-setting as a central leadership practice, especially in contexts where participation is heavily influenced by power differentials and institutional histories (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

One way in which boundary work became visible was through facilitation practices that prioritized community control over conversational pace, focus, and composition. In the narrative interviews, one community partner explained, “The main issue was we had no volunteers. It was really hard to want to expand anything in a volunteer-run company. Not a single person at Silverbackks is paid.” This highlights how engagement with institutional actors and community partners was constrained by the realities of participant capacity, which dictated the boundaries of what support could look like.

Composite fieldnotes document moments in which facilitators redirected discussion away from premature problem-solving efforts and resisted the imposition of external agendas that did not align with neighborhood priorities (Appendix B). These redirections were not framed as corrections or directives; rather, they functioned as subtle recalibrations to protect the integrity of the space. Leadership, in these moments, was enacted through communicative restraint and

attentiveness to whose voices were being centered. Boundaries also made Block Talks feasible and comfortable for a broader range of participants, many of whom identified themselves as longstanding helpers within their families or neighborhoods. These role were described with pride but also visible exhaustion: “I’m always the one people call.” These participants generally expressed relief when leadership expectations were lowered or shared: “I don’t have to be here every time?”; “I don’t have to run this?”; “I like that I can just sit here.” Such accommodating dynamics allow for reduced involvement when participants are dealing with grief or any other kind of heavy or time-consuming personal matter.

Power negotiation was especially evident in interactions involving institutional presence. Analytic Memo 3 (Appendix C), which documents a community meeting in which residents invited law enforcement representatives to listen and receive feedback, illustrates how leadership was exercised through conditional access rather than unconditional inclusion. The structure of the meeting, the framing of participation, and the choices behind the meeting’s facilitation all reflected intentional boundary-setting driven by neighborhood input:

The meeting was intentionally designed as a facilitated working session rather than a debate or town hall, emphasizing listening, shared visioning, and trauma-informed engagement. The presence of police did introduce power dynamics that ended up shaping participation, but the neighbors in this context ensured there was careful boundary setting, including clear expectations that officers were present to listen rather than defend or explain ... This structure ensured that no actions could be taken by the officer in the space.

Leadership in this meeting was not about mediating consensus between parties but about maintaining community-defined terms of engagement.

In another case, a community resource fair was held to connect youth, families, and older residents to summer activities, programs, and support systems. The fair was developed with an emphasis on access, celebration, and relationship-building. Crucially, that development was not spearheaded by any one individual or group; rather:

The event emerged directly from neighborhood ideas and concerns ... Leadership was distributed across community members, partners, and volunteers, with no single individual directing the event. ... Everyone felt safe and comfortable.

Narrative interviews (Appendix A) further illuminate how participants understood leadership in relation to these boundaries. A community partner defined leadership as “knowing when to open the door and when to keep it closed,” emphasizing that leadership entails protecting community voices as much as it does inviting dialogue. In practice, this meant defining when partners could speak, what decisions remained resident-led, and how external resources would be integrated without resulting in a shift in control. That same community partner explained that such boundary-setting gives way to new forms of engagement:

Block Talks make me see how engagement can be quieter and more about relationships. People can slow down, listen, and connect before trying to act on anything, and you actually get better plans. That challenges the idea that “doing” is the only way of participating.

This perspective highlights leadership as an ongoing negotiation of power rather than a fixed role, with boundary-setting functioning as a communicative act that shaped participation and accountability. By managing these boundaries collectively, neighbors strengthened internal bonding social capital while carefully limiting the risks associated with external linking capital.

A community partner reflected on how Block Talks shifted traditional power dynamics by placing decision-making authority squarely with the neighborhood: “This is the first time it feels like they’re here for us. We are in charge of it all.” This reflects residents interpreting their own roles as those of owners and those of their partners as those of supporters, clarifying how authority was understood within the group. This reflection shows how leadership operated as boundary work, with neighbors determining the terms of engagement, the presence of institutions, and the pace of action.

Importantly, boundary work did not signal exclusion for exclusion’s sake. Rather, it operated as a means of sustaining trust, preserving safety, and ensuring that community engagement remained responsive to resident concerns. Leadership emerged through communicative acts that maintained these boundaries while still allowing for dialogue and relationship-building to take place in line with community terms. A community partner described their role within Block Talks as intentionally restrained: “I would describe my role in Block Talks as a resource... I do not serve it or make it, so much of the credit still stays [with] the neighborhood.”

Across the data corpus, boundary work consistently operated as a leadership practice that balanced openness with protection. Decisions about who was present, how conversations unfolded, and what forms of participation were encouraged reflected an understanding of leadership as a form of relational stewardship rather than one of control. These practices align with community-engaged scholarship that has emphasized the importance of community-defined boundaries, particularly in contexts where institutional engagement has historically been uneven or harmful (De Weger et al., 2020).

Together, these findings indicate that leadership within Block Talks was enacted through the ongoing negotiation of power and participation. Leadership appeared not as command or persuasion but as the careful shaping of conditions under which community members could engage meaningfully and safely. In this way, Block Talks acknowledged and addressed the tensions that have traditionally shaped the way in which leadership has been able to emerge in civic engagement practices. In turn, offering an answer to RQ1 and RQ4, Block Talks allowed for new dynamics to govern the emergence of leadership, eliminating (or at least mitigating) longstanding tensions. Roles were negotiated through communicative boundary-setting that protected residents' decision-making while still allowing for partner support. This kind of negotiation formed a big part of participants' experiences with civic engagement in Block Talks, pointing to another answer for RQ2. At the same time, this boundary work surfaced tensions around institutional histories, trust, and the risks associated with shifting control away from residents. Below, the final analytic claim turns to how leadership emerged even beyond moments of tension or negotiation.

Leadership Emerged Through Care, Coordination, and Collective Action Beyond Crisis

Leadership within Block Talks went beyond the management of crises and negotiations; it also encompassed practices of care, coordination, and collective action. Leadership became visible in the everyday work of connecting people, aligning resources, and sustaining relationships over time. Rather than emerging from urgency or conflict, leadership arose from the quieter forms of coordination that supported access, belonging, and shared responsibility. This finding aligns with leadership communication scholarship that emphasizes leadership as an

ongoing, relational practice embedded in ordinary interaction rather than extraordinary moments (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

This is reflected in the narrative interviews, with one community member describing how care-based leadership emerged through informal coordination rather than formal planning:

Everyone came together and set a time to go to his house, clean up his yard, and do it really nicely. Some people brought different things to help, kids helped, and some people made food. It became like an event. We were helping someone, but it felt like a fun time.

This community member presented care as exhibited best through relational responsiveness, not service delivery, which can best be offered via knowing and understanding rather than eligibility:

No matter what was going on, I was always just treated like a neighbor, and so was my family. When people were helping us get winter clothing, they also brought kids personalized toys, not something we asked for or ever would have expected, but because we all had gotten to know each other, they wanted to do that too. It was such a weird feeling to be seen and heard and viewed like a person, not part of a job.

That same community member insisted that listening to others' stories during Block Talks "even felt like therapy sometimes." These kinds of accounts are particularly impressive given the starting point, with neighbors not feeling particularly comfortable reaching out in their community:

It doesn't feel good to need help and many times when I have tried to use resources it hasn't gone well so I was not sure at first if I could trust it all.

After that, everything continued quickly and we really felt like we belonged in the neighborhood for the first time.

Worth noting is that these sentiments are not exclusive to the community members, as the interviewed host reported feeling “a sense of family”:

Being together with neighbors that are very similar to you allows you to put down walls and be more direct because all of a sudden these people are not strangers, they are family. When your neighborhood is your family, everything can change ... [I] bring educational sources to the neighborhood, feed them, and build a solid team of people willing to do just a little bit extra to make a difference.

The interviewed community partner felt the same, explaining how simple relational care can go a long way toward community-building and collective leadership:

Food can do wonders for bringing people together. Many people were there for the event, but having food made it so they could do something like this over lunch. It also made it so some people really only came for the food but stayed for the community-building experience and fun once they got pulled in ... Block Talks make engagement feel kind of fun ... It feels easy.

Leadership here appears not as hierarchy or obligation but as collective action rooted in care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. These relational actions demonstrate the operation of norms of reciprocity, a central mechanism of social capital, where support and care circulate through the community in mutually reinforcing ways (Portes, 1998).

These findings align cleanly with survey data, which revealed respondents most frequently identifying insufficient access to food, transportation, and information as barriers to well-being, reinforcing the centrality of neighbor-led coordination and informal support (See Appendix D).

The analytic memos point to a similar dynamic, with a community-organized resource fair illustrating how leadership was enacted through collective effort rather than individual direction (Analytic Memo 4, Appendix C). Planning and coordination were distributed across community members and partners, with leadership expressed in the form of responsiveness to neighborhood-identified needs and the consideration of relational dynamics.

Composite fieldnotes (Appendix B) further demonstrate how leadership through care was woven into informal interactions surrounding community events. In these moments, community members welcomed newcomers, facilitated connections among neighbors, and attended to the presence of children, elders, and other family members in ways that prioritized comfort and inclusion. They took care of each other, and this care manifested in various forms: “I can drive”; “I can check on people”; “I cannot help with the yardwork, but I can make the food”; “I have some bread I made for you. Thank you for dropping this off for me.” Through this kind of neighborly assistance, support became mutual without ever being transactional. This reciprocity also reinforced the group’s rhetorical vision, as shared commitments to care and mutual support became part of the symbolic narrative of what leadership meant within Block Talks. Leadership, in these instances, was not announced or claimed; it was enacted through communicative practices that made participation easier and more accessible. Such practices underscore leadership as relational labor that, despite often going unnoticed, is essential to the sustainability of community engagement.

Community-generated materials, including planning documents and mutual aid requests, also reflect how leadership played out in Block Talks through coordination and collective responsibility (see Appendix D). For instance, mutual aid requests functioned as an informal infrastructure within which support was coordinated without any need for public disclosure, allowing for care practices to occur without forcing visibility or infringing on participants' feelings of safety and comfort. These artifacts illustrate how leadership extended beyond meetings into ongoing care practices, with residents identifying needs and then working collaboratively to address them. Rather than providing evidence of any particular outcomes or impacts, these materials simply showcase how leadership unfolded as infrastructural connections within the community—connections that support ongoing engagement.

Though the kind of leadership covered in this analytic claim—that enacted through care and coordination—differed in tone and visibility from the kinds of leadership covered in the other four claims, it did not replace those other forms. Rather, it complemented them, showcasing the dynamic and responsive nature of the leadership that arose from Block Talks and the relationships formed within them. This leadership—be it in the form of storytelling, sensemaking, boundary work, or care—emerged as communicative practice shaped by context, as a multifaceted process enacted not through positional authority but through interaction. This relationship-bound practice was the texture of civic engagement in Block Talks, simultaneously addressing both RQ1 and RQ2.

This section offered a comprehensive delineation of the study's analytic findings, showcasing how leadership was sustained in Block Talks through practices geared toward fostering connection, coordination, and shared responsibility. Participants experienced civic engagement as more than public participation; they experienced it as everyday care and mutual

responsiveness, as personalized care sustained through relationship-building and storytelling, and as “help” transformed into belonging.

Chapter Summary

Across five analytic claims, this chapter outlined the various ways in which leadership emerged within Block Talks, illustrating how it took the form of everyday communicative practices to shape participation, meaning, and collective orientation within community spaces. The first claim asserted that storytelling created the relational conditions—mutual trust, recognition, and presence—that made it possible for leadership to emerge. The second claim, framing leadership as something rooted in dialogue rather than directive authority, presented it as collective sensemaking, by which community members gradually constructed shared understandings of community concerns. The third claim revealed how leadership practices shifted amid heightened fear and safety concerns toward an approach rooted in subtlety, pacing, and the avoidance of pressure, exhibiting Block Talks’ adaptiveness. The fourth claim centered on leadership as boundary work and power negotiation, revealing how it was enacted through community-first facilitation practices that shaped who could participate, how institutional actors were engaged, and under what conditions dialogue could occur. The final claim served to clarify that leadership did not only emerge in Block Talks to address crises and tensions; it also arose in ongoing practices of care, coordination, and collective action.

Taken together, these claims make for a nuanced account of leadership as an adaptive, relational, and contextually situated communicative process. Leadership emerged through storytelling, sensemaking, boundary work, and care, always shaped by the community’s conditions and needs. These findings pose a significant challenge to leader-centric models of

leadership, contributing to leadership communication scholarship by foregrounding how leadership is enacted collectively through narrative interaction in community-engaged settings.

The following chapter situates these findings within the broader scholarship, examining their implications for leadership communication theory, community-engaged research, and practical efforts to promote civic engagement. In doing so, it answers the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

This study set out to understand how civic engagement can become accessible in neighborhood-based community practices. Through a narrative inquiry of Block Talks in Topeka, Kansas, the findings demonstrate that participation did not emerge through formal structures, recruitment strategies, or institutional outreach; rather, civic engagement was made accessible through communicative leadership processes embedded in storytelling, shared sensemaking, discussions about safety, boundary negotiation, and everyday acts of care and coordination.

Chapter 1 presented civic engagement as something that, despite often being framed as universally available, remains unevenly accessible in practice. By illustrating how Block Talks facilitated the emergence of leadership in various ways, the findings explain why practical accessibility can be difficult to achieve. Rather than lacking interest or motivation, participants described needing forms of engagement that fit within their everyday realities—work, caregiving, safety concerns, and institutional mistrust—and Block Talks addressed these realities through its various means of distributing leadership as a practice, not a position. In this way, Block Talks constitute just one example of how civic engagement can become more reachable when participation is structured around relationships rather than requirements.

In line with the traditions of qualitative and narrative research, the discussion is organized not around individual data sources or events but around the analytic claims developed in Chapter 4. This approach foregrounds meanings, interpretations, and contributions while ensuring that the research questions can be answered.

This chapter sets out with three primary aims. First, it addresses the research questions directly. Second, it offers an overview of the analytic claims, this time with a dual focus on

leadership's emergence as a communicative and narrative process and the implications of that emergence for community-engaged scholarship and practice. Third, it reflects on the study's methodological contributions. After achieving these aims, the chapter concludes by noting some of the study's limitations before reflecting on the broader significance of understanding leadership as an emergent, relational practice embedded in community life.

Answers to the Established Research Questions

This section looks back at the research questions laid out in Chapter 1 and presents them alongside the analytic claims that provided the answers to them. In doing so, it ensures that the dissertation offers clear and direct answers to the questions that guided the entire research process.

Beginning with RQ1—How do participants experience and make meaning of civic engagement within Block Talks?—an answer emerged across all of the analytic claims, beginning with the first. That claim revealed storytelling to be a foundational practice underlying leadership, laying the conditions for its emergence. In laying these conditions, storytelling functionally determined how participants experienced civic engagement within Block Talks. The second analytic claim furthered this answer, delineating the precise practices by which the participants engaged in sensemaking: ongoing dialogue, collaborative narrative construction, and the steady development of an idea regarding the meaning of civic engagement. It is precisely through these practices that the participants experienced and made meaning of civic engagement within Block Talks. These dynamics reflect the development of bonding social capital, as trust, mutual recognition, and emerging norms of reciprocity formed through repeated storytelling and collective interpretation (Putnam, 2000). The third analytic claim illuminated the answer to RQ1 in a rather counterintuitive way—by showcasing the experience textures that Block Talks helped

participants to *avoid*. It revealed that civic engagement is often constrained by fear, instability, uncertainty, and distrust rooted in prior harms but that, through mindful design, Block Talks provided participants with a kind of civic engagement that granted them relief from such tensions and hardships, as well as potential means of overcoming them. The fourth analytic showcased the novel civic engagement dynamics provided by Block Talks and, in turn, the less tense experiences that its participants were afforded. This comfortable experiential texture was made sustainable by an emphasis on ongoing negotiation with one another, with hosts, with community partners, and with institutional actors. The fifth analytic claim's contribution to answering RQ1 is fairly straightforward: The communal care, coordination, and collective action facilitated by Block Talks gave way to a comfortable and beneficial experience of civic engagement. Through these repeated interactions, neighbors also developed a shared language around safety, belonging, and mutual support. This process was an important communicative mechanism through which social capital becomes actionable in community contexts (Woolcock, 2001). These analytic claims make for an extensive and comprehensive answer to the first research question.

Now, for RQ2—How does leadership emerge from relationships among hosts, neighbors, and community partners in Block Talks?—relevant insight is offered by three of the analytic claims. The second analytic claim highlights the primary mechanism served by these relationships. This claim established clearly that collective sensemaking was facilitated not through authoritative leadership, but through communal practices of affirmation, repetition, and shared interpretation—as well as the relationships underlying them and the relationships born of them. In this sense, relationships are at the very core of the conditions that catalyze leadership's emergence. From a Symbolic Convergence Theory perspective, these relational exchanges

enabled certain “fantasy themes” related to safety, mistrust, and care to resonate across participants, laying the groundwork for collective meaning-making (Bormann, 1983). The third analytic claim details how the Block Talk participants overcame the tensions—the fear and safety concerns—that they knew from prior civic engagement efforts: relationships. Block Talks were designed to be adaptive to prospective participants’ survival demands, and those relationships could only be met by the relationships being forged with hosts, community partners, and especially fellow community members. As these themes were repeated and affirmed across gatherings, they “chained out,” shaping how neighbors collectively interpreted their neighborhood and what leadership should entail (Bormann, 1982). Finally, the fifth analytic claim highlights the importance of the care, coordination, and collective coordination that the Block Talk participants consistently showed to one another when it came to facilitating the emergence of leadership. Simply put, that kind of mutual support could not be achieved if relationships were not being molded. All in all, it is clear from the findings laid out in the second, third, and fifth analytic claims that the relationships among hosts, community partners, and neighbors were integral to the pursuit of leadership in Block Talks. This aligns with leadership-as-process scholarship, which argues that leadership emerges through communication, coordination, and shared interpretation rather than through positional authority (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Onto RQ3—How does storytelling shape leadership, participation, and civic agency within Block Talks?—an answer may be constructed from the findings underlying two analytic claims. The first analytic claim gets to the root of storytelling’s impact in Block Talks. Contrasting it with more traditional spaces for civic engagement, the findings highlight how the practice of storytelling led to the redistribution of voice among participants and a fundamental

collective recalibration of what to expect from leadership. Over time, the repetition of these stories formed a shared rhetorical vision, a coherent narrative about what leadership, safety, and community responsibility should look like within the neighborhood (Bormann, 1983). They came to consider leadership to be something born of the steady accumulation of shared narratives signaling belonging and mutual responsibility, and this shift informed the degree of agency evident in their civic engagement. The second analytic claim's contribution to answering RQ3 is a particularly straightforward one. In tracing how storytelling gave way to sensemaking in Block Talks and, in turn, how sensemaking gives way to leadership, it revealed the way in which storytelling shapes leadership: through sensemaking. It is clear from these insights that the second and fifth analytic claims showcase storytelling's impact on the substance of leadership, participation, and civic agency within Block Talks. This reflects Weick's (1995) notion of sense-making, where individuals collectively construct meaning by interpreting cues from shared stories and experiences, ultimately shaping their orientation toward action.

Finally, RQ4—What tensions and limitations shape leadership and participation within neighborhood-based civic engagement practices?—finds its answer in the third and fourth analytic claims. The third claim's answer to RQ4 is the most direct of any across this entire section: Leadership's emergence through collective sensemaking within Block Talks was subject to and limited by dynamics of fear, instability, and prior harm, as these factors determined whether participants considered "showing up" to be possible. These dynamics reveal limitations in linking social capital, as residents possessed strong internal bonds but lacked reliable, trusted connections to institutional systems, intensifying fears and constraining participation (Woolcock, 2001). The fourth analytic claim is less direct here, offering its answer through a depiction of the dynamics that Block Talks had to pursue in order to address the tensions and limitations in many

of the more traditional spaces for civic engagement. In this sense, traditional tensions and limitations impacted leadership and participation through the design choices that made Block Talks what they are. From an SCT standpoint, neighbors were also performing symbolic boundary work, determining who could safely contribute to the shared meaning-making process and under what conditions institutional actors could be incorporated into the community's evolving rhetorical vision.

Having provided straightforward yet extensive answers to the research questions that guided this dissertation, it is now necessary to examine the implications of those answers.

The Implications of Leadership's Emergence for Community-Engaged Scholarship and Practice

The findings of this study extend leadership communication scholarship by reinforcing and deepening the understanding of leadership as a communicative and narrative process rather than the product of any particular position, style, or individual capacity. In answering the research questions established in Chapter 1, the analytic claims reveal leadership to have emerged through interaction, dialogue, and shared interpretation, challenging longstanding leader-centric frameworks. This process-oriented view aligns with and advances established perspectives in the field of leadership communication that conceptualize leadership as something that people *do together* through communication (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). This developed understanding has several significant implications for community-engaged scholars and practitioners alike. It indicates that, instead of positioning leadership as a precursor to engagement or as a function of formal roles, communication practices—storytelling, collective sensemaking, boundary negotiation, and care—must be facilitated in sites designed for civic engagement to ensure the production and sustainability of leadership. Here, it is worth going

through the analytic claims one by one to clarify their implications for both scholarship and practice.

By foregrounding storytelling as central to the facilitation of leadership practice via conducive relational conditions, the first analytic claim contributes to a mounting body of literature that recognizes narrative as a foundational enabling factor for the emergence of leadership. Stories functioned not merely as expressions of experience but as communicative resources with which participants made sense of their context, recognized one another as legitimate contributors, and oriented themselves toward collective concerns. This finding aligns with prior research in the field of narrative leadership, indicating that storytelling functions as a means of constructing shared meaning and guiding collective action, avoiding the need to rely on directive authority (Ganz, 2011). In practical terms, this suggests that community-engaged initiatives would benefit from creating spaces that promote mutual storytelling without imposing any immediate pressure to respond with actions or material resolutions.

The second analytic claim's emphasis on collective sensemaking advances leadership communication theory by illustrating how leadership emerges through convergence rather than persuasion, with leadership emerging through collective sensemaking in the considered community. More precisely, leadership was enacted through listening to, reframing, and revisiting shared narratives over time, highlighting the conduct of sensemaking as a relational accomplishment—as something that participants experienced together via shared interpretations and, in turn, shared understandings. This developed perspective makes a valuable contribution to sensemaking scholarship by demonstrating that leadership can be sustained through ongoing narrative interaction rather than episodic decision-making or strategic messaging (Bormann, 1983). For practitioners, it suggests that facilitation strategies should prioritize dialogue,

listening, and iterative interpretation over directive agendas, shifting the focus of community-engaged efforts from managing outcomes to supporting processes (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Importantly, the third analytic claim complicates efforts for those who would rather maintain the longstanding assumption that leadership is most evident in moments of action or resolution. In stark contrast to that assumption, this study often found leadership to have been enacted through restraint, pacing, and the protection of space, especially when Block Talks were taking place amid feelings of fear or uncertainty. Critically, participants did not describe needing more invitations; they described needing engagement that fit with the realities of their everyday lives. This suggests that increasing civic engagement may depend less on recruitment strategies and more on the design of accessible forms of participation. Such practices underscore leadership's function of communicative judgment rather than command, broadening leadership communication theory to encompass silence, delay, and boundary-setting as meaningful leadership acts. This understanding has some notable implications for practitioners, particularly those working in contexts marked by fear, trauma, or historical institutional mistrust. They must reconsider the leadership practices that they aim to facilitate, striving to include silence, delay, and boundary-setting as legitimate and necessary. By designing engagement processes that allow participants to control the depth and timing of their own participation, practitioners can better support relational safety and sustained involvement (Williams & Cooper, 2019).

The fourth analytic claim points to the importance of boundary work as a leadership practice within community-engaged initiatives. Leadership was enacted in Block Talks through the negotiation of who could participate, how institutional actors were to be engaged, and the conditions under which dialogue would be allowed to occur. Critically, for practitioners, this finding emphasizes that inclusion does not require the elimination of boundaries; on the contrary,

leadership should entail the establishment and maintenance of boundaries that ensure accountability is enacted and the community voice is upheld. In this sense, boundary-setting should be maintained as an ethical and communicative responsibility in community-engaged research and practice, not as a means of exclusionary control (Kamruzzaman, 2020).

Finally, the fifth analytic claim contributes to leadership communication scholarship by illustrating how leadership was distributed across participants and moments instead of being concentrated within an individual person or position. Leadership emerged through the accumulation of communicative practices over time, with different participants enacting leadership in different ways depending on context. In other words, leadership was enacted through ongoing efforts to connect neighbors, align resources, and maintain relationships, as well as everyday practices of care and coordination. It was not achieved so straightforwardly through an individual exhibiting charisma or positional authority, as some dominant models prefer to imagine. For scholars and practitioners alike, this dynamic highlights the importance of attending to the informal (and often invisible) forms of leadership that support community capacity. Recognizing these practices widens the scope of what counts as leadership, challenging leader-centric models that privilege visibility, authority, and immediate impact.

Taken together, the analytic claims present leadership as an emergent, narrative process that is deeply embedded in everyday interaction. By centering community storytelling and collective sensemaking, this study offers a communication-centered account of leadership that foregrounds relational processes, contextual consideration, and collective meaning-making. In doing so, it advances leadership communication scholarship by providing empirical support for leadership-as-process perspectives grounded in community-engaged practice. At the same time,

by understanding leadership as this kind of emergent communicative practice, scholars and practitioners can design more responsive, ethical, and sustainable engagement efforts.

These findings also extend several theoretical traditions. First, they expand social capital theory by demonstrating how trust, reciprocity, and shared language are built through narrative interaction instead of formal civic participation. Second, they advance symbolic convergence theory by illustrating how fantasy themes and rhetorical visions surrounding safety, mistrust, and neighborly care structured collective meaning-making and leadership emergence. Third, these findings contribute to sensemaking and leadership-as-process scholarship by showing how leadership arises through shared interpretation, relational adaptation, and ongoing communicative negotiation rather than individual authority. More importantly, however, they demonstrate the validity of applying the frameworks of critical theory and relational leadership theory to CES. Regarding critical theory, the results clearly showcase how leadership emerges as a social and political process shaped by power dynamics and ideology rather than a neutral practice shaped by individual roles. Within this framework, the Block Talks represent a means of emancipation enacted through institutional strategies aimed at addressing existing forms of domination. Regarding relational leadership theory, the results clearly show that communication can function as more than just a medium for transmitting ideas; it can act as the substance through which leadership and community are enacted. Block Talks facilitate the very communication, interaction, negotiation, and storytelling that give way to collective leadership, demonstrating that positional power and individual traits are not the sole or even primary determinant of community leadership structures.

Methodological Contributions

This study contributes methodologically to the literature on leadership communication by showcasing the value of narrative inquiry and community-engaged qualitative methods in examining leadership as an emergent, communicative process. Rather than relying on interviews alone or isolating leadership within discrete events, this study's methodological approach foregrounded storytelling, interaction, and meaning-making as sites where leadership could be observed over time. In addition to representing a valuable alternative to leader-centric or outcome-driven research designs (which often struggle to capture the relational and processual dimensions of leadership), this approach (as stated in the previous section) showcased the validity of researching civic engagement through a lens colored by critical theory and relational leadership theory.

With these frameworks in mind, narrative inquiry was employed to examine leadership as it unfolded through shared stories rather than retrospective accounts alone. Narrative interviews, composite fieldnotes, analytic memos, and community-generated materials collectively facilitated an assessment of leadership as an ongoing communicative practice embedded in everyday interaction, something that traditional qualitative approaches—those focused on roles, decisions, or individual perspectives—would have struggled with (Riessman, 2008).

The study further contributes methodologically by demonstrating that community-engaged research does not need to rely on formalized intervention models or predefined leadership outcomes. It did this by examining leadership as it emerged through community-driven activities shaped by neighborhood priorities rather than researcher-imposed structures. This approach challenges the longstanding methodological assumption that leadership research

must involve training programs, leadership development initiatives, or experimental designs to produce meaningful insight.

Finally, this study contributes to ongoing methodological conversations about ethics and representation in CES. Its decisions to avoid naming the neighborhood, omit dates, and employ role-based attribution reflect a commitment to protecting participants while still producing rigorous analysis. By integrating ethical considerations directly into analytic and representational choices, the study demonstrates how methodological rigor and ethical care can be mutually reinforcing elements rather than competing priorities.

Taken together, these methodological contributions illustrate how narrative inquiry and community-engaged qualitative methods can advance research on leadership communication by making visible the communicative processes through which leadership emerges. This approach expands the methodological toolkit available to leadership scholars and offers a model through which to study leadership in ways that are relationally grounded, ethically attentive, and responsive to community contexts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Future research should examine how other communities create accessible forms of civic engagement and how communicative leadership processes shape participation across different settings. As with all qualitative CES, this study's findings are shaped by the scope, context, and methodological choices that guided the inquiry. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study; rather, they clarify the boundaries within which the findings should be understood and interpreted. Attending carefully to these limits bolsters the study's credibility and proposes some productive directions for future leadership communication research. Moreover, by clarifying the study's boundaries and identifying directions for future inquiry, this section underscores the

contributions made by the research while situating it appropriately within broader conversations about leadership, communication, and community engagement.

One of this study's key limitations lies in its focus on a single community context. Leadership practices were examined within one neighborhood shaped by its own unique relational histories, local dynamics, and social conditions. While this focus allowed for depth, sustained engagement, and ethical care, it also means that the findings are not (and are not intended to be) generalizable across different communities or contexts. Instead, the findings offer an in-depth, situated account of leadership as it emerged under a particular set of circumstances. Future research could examine how similar communicative leadership processes unfold across different neighborhoods, regions, or cultural contexts to explore patterns of transferability.

Another limitation stems from the nature of this study's data sources. While the study relied on multiple forms of qualitative data, it did not incorporate longitudinal interviews with the same participants over time. In this way, it assessed the emergence of leadership across interactions rather than along extended individual trajectories. Future research could build on this work by incorporating longitudinal narrative interviews to examine how individuals' understandings of leadership evolve over the course of sustained community engagement.

The study's methodological commitments also shaped its limitations. By prioritizing narrative inquiry and process-oriented analysis, the research declined to assess outcomes, effectiveness, or measurable impacts of community engagement activities, reflecting its intentional focus on leadership as communicative practice rather than programmatic success. However, future research could benefit from pairing narrative approaches with complementary methods to explore how communicative leadership processes relate to longer-term community outcomes without reducing leadership to metrics alone.

Ethical considerations further influenced the scope of the study. While the decision to avoid using neighborhood identifiers, contextual details, and institutions' names was necessary to protect participants and maintain relational trust, supporting ethical representation, they also constrained the findings' contextual specificity. Future research conducted in partnership with communities that actively desire greater visibility or public documentation may explore alternative approaches to representation that balance ethical care with contextual richness.

Finally, the researcher's role as a community-embedded participant presents both a strength and a limitation. Proximity to the community enabled sustained engagement and a nuanced understanding of relational dynamics, but it also required ongoing reflexivity to navigate positionality and interpretive responsibility. While analytic memos and reflexive practices were used to address this tension, future research could examine how different forms of researcher embeddedness shape the study of leadership communication in community settings.

Of course, these limitations also collectively point toward several avenues for future research. Future leadership communication research could build on this work by examining storytelling and sensemaking across other community-engaged contexts, exploring leadership under different constraints or uncertainties, and further theorizing boundary work as a communicative leadership practice. Methodologically, future studies could make greater use of composite fieldnotes and explore participatory narrative analysis to achieve deeper community involvement in interpretation.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how leadership emerges through communication in community contexts that are often overlooked by traditional leadership research. By centering storytelling, collective sensemaking, boundary negotiation, and practices of care, the study offers

a process-oriented account of leadership as something that is grounded in everyday interaction rather than formal roles or prescribed models. In doing so, it responds to calls within the literature on leadership communication for a sharper focus on how leadership is enacted—both collectively and relationally—in lived community spaces.

The study's findings challenge the longstanding assumption that leadership is most visible in authority, action, or resolution by showcasing the steady emergence of leadership through communicative practices. Storytelling functioned as an entry point for engagement, sensemaking supported shared orientation, boundary work protected community-defined priorities, and care sustained collective capacity. Together, these practices show leadership to be an adaptive and context-sensitive process that unfolds through communication, not individual control.

Beyond the study's contributions to scholarship, the study also offers a way of thinking about leadership that may resonate with practitioners engaged in community-based work. By identifying leadership in practices of storytelling, sensemaking, boundary-setting, and care, the findings expand the very notion of what counts as leadership and who should be recognized as leaders. This perspective affirms the leadership already present within communities and highlights the communicative work through which collective capacity is built and sustained.

Civic engagement is often framed as something that communities need more of, but this study poses and answers a more foundational question: What makes civic engagement possible in the first place? By documenting how Block Talks reshaped participation in one community, the study offers a hopeful reminder that civic engagement may be redesigned to meet people where they are.

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Appendix A - Narrative Interview Protocols

This appendix presents the narrative interview protocols used with Block Talk hosts, participating neighbors, and community partners. The protocols were designed to elicit stories pertaining to civic engagement, leadership, participation, safety, and meaning-making, not to collect standardized responses. The interview approach was adapted based on participant role and conversational flow, so the questions were posed flexibly.

Appendix Figure A.1. Block Talks Interview Protocol

Section 1: Opening Narrative Questions (All Participants)

1. Can you tell me the story of how you first became involved with Block Talks?
2. What was happening in your life or neighborhood at that time?
3. What stands out most to you when you think back on your early experiences with Block Talks? A moment, a conversation, or a feeling?

Section 2: Civic Engagement Background

4. Before Block Talks, how did you think about civic engagement or being involved in your community? What did “being involved” look like to you then?
5. How, if at all, has that understanding changed since participating in Block Talks?
6. Can you describe a moment during a Block Talk that felt meaningful, challenging, or important to you? What made it stand out?

Section 3: Storytelling and Meaning-Making

7. How do stories get shared during Block Talks, from your perspective? What feels different about these conversations compared to other meetings or spaces?
8. What is it like to listen to other people’s stories in this space? Has anything surprised you or shifted how you see your neighborhood?
9. Have you ever shared a story during a Block Talk that you might not have shared in another civic space? Why or why not?

10. What do you think storytelling makes possible in Block Talks that might not happen otherwise?

Section 4: Safety, Trust, and Belonging

11. How safe or comfortable do Block Talks feel to you as a space for participation? What contributes to that feeling?

12. Have your experiences in Block Talks affected your sense of trust—either in neighbors, in yourself, or in community processes more broadly?

13. Do you feel a sense of belonging in Block Talks? What helps create that? Or what makes it difficult?

Section 5: Civic Agency and Participation

14. In what ways, if any, do Block Talks make you feel more able to participate in your community?

15. Have Block Talks influenced how you see your role in your neighborhood or community? If so, how?

16. Do you feel that your voice matters in Block Talks? What tells you that?

Section 6: Tensions, Limits, and Reflection (All Participants)

17. What doesn't work perfectly in Block Talks?

18. What feels hard or unresolved?

19. Are there people you think Block Talks might not reach? Why do you think that is?

20. If Block Talks were to continue or grow, what would you hope stays the same?

21. What might need to change?

Section 7: Closing Questions (All Participants)

22. Is there anything about your experience with Block Talks that you think is important but that I haven't asked about?

23. What would you want someone studying civic engagement to understand from your experience?

Additional Questions for Block Talk Hosts

24. Can you tell me about the moment you decided to host a Block Talk?

25. How would you describe your role as a host?

26. What has felt most challenging about hosting Block Talks?

27. How do you think about creating space for others to share their stories?

28. Has hosting changed how you see leadership or civic responsibility?

Additional Questions for Community Partners

29. How did you first become involved with Block Talks as a community partner?

30. How would you describe your role within Block Talks? How is it similar to or different from other community engagement roles you've held?

31. What have you learned from listening to residents' stories in this space?

32. How do Block Talks challenge or reinforce your understanding of civic engagement?

33. How do you navigate your institutional role while participating in a resident-led space?

Appendix Figure A.2. Interview Notes, Block Talk Host

Core Narrative Questions - Host

Can you tell me the story of how you first became involved with Block Talks? What was happening in your life or neighborhood at that time?

The first one that I went to was at the community center and it was more just a meet and greet. I had just started working and Mary Flin wanted me to go and get an idea of how you were doing the tables because she wanted us to start doing something similar. I had seen some other things around the neighborhood that you guys had done and had heard about it but it was not reaching my street much yet until around that time. I was just starting to work and just got my feet on the ground with a house and steady job.

What stands out most to you when you think back on your early experiences with Block Talks? A moment, a conversation, or a feeling?

Honestly, it was meeting you (Isabel). You just have a natural way of getting people excited to get involved. You make it really easy to talk too. I remember the very first time I had no idea what I was getting into and I really did not expect much yet by the end I had shared my entire life story. I never do that. I remember saying oh my gosh I am so sorry I don't know why I just said all of that and all you did was smile and tell me thank you for sharing it, that is what we are there for. You really make people realize how much we can do just by talking about things.

Before Block Talks, how did you think about civic engagement or being involved in your community? What did "being involved" look like to you then?

At that point, Mary and I had already started working together and I had gotten the job as Health Navigator so working in the community for the community is what I do. It gave me a better connection and another view on what that could be.

How, if at all, has that understanding changed since participating in Block Talks?

When I was asked to host Block Talks for the neighborhood, I was very excited at the thought of being able to bring more resources to the community, and building Central Park up. We need more here and people always either forget about us or they pretend to help. A lot of us here do not trust many organizations around town because we have been burned before.

Can you describe a moment during a Block Talk that felt meaningful, challenging, or important to you? What made it stand out?

It was during the 2nd one that I went to where I was asked to host them. I felt very honored to be able to work with you (Isabel) and help strengthen the neighborhood. I do not always feel like I could be doing this or like I know how to do it. At first I was excited but I am still nervous a lot too i want to do things right. I think seeing how i can be viewed as someone who can be in charge and who can make a difference and is smart enough was so important to me.

Storytelling and Meaning-Making

How do stories get shared during Block Talks, from your perspective? What feels different about these conversations compared to other meetings or spaces?

I really don't have anything to compare them to, but, at the one when we were able to voice our opinion and tell our stories to people about police and how that all can be put together to be able to make a difference, it really empowered me. It was also nice to see how many people showed up who i know never would have showed up to something with the police before.

What is it like to listen to other people's stories in this space?

It gives us a chance to see a different side to our neighbors, it allows us to see that, hey they are just like me, they have the same fears and needs. I think everyone needs to do that.

Have you ever shared a story during a Block Talk that you might not have shared in another civic space? Why or why not?

The first time that I talked about earlier was the most meaningful time and I seem to always be sharing stories now that i would not share in other spaces. It is because of how comfortable it is.

What do you think storytelling makes possible in Block Talks that might not happen otherwise?

Being together with neighbors that are very similar to you allows you to put down walls and be more direct because all of a sudden these people are not strangers they are family. When your neighborhood is your family everything can change from being safe to getting help to whatever you can think of.

Safety, Trust, and Belonging

How safe or comfortable do Block Talks feel to you as a space for participation? What contributes to that feeling?

Being at the Church is a very familiar space for a lot of us in central and because of that it allows you to put your guard down, relax, and open up. The church is a safe space and a spot where anyone can go even if they are not religious. It is somewhere that we all use and trust and they always let us do what we want and need and take our ideas into consideration.

Have your experiences in Block Talks affected your sense of trust—either in neighbors, in yourself, or in community processes more broadly?

At the one with the Officer, we started seeing immediate results of the things that we brought up to her. That has raised a level of trust. Everytime we have meetings and get to see that the things we are asking about or trying actually happens and sometimes even happens over night is game changing.

Do you feel a sense of belonging in Block Talks?

I feel a sense of family.

Civic Agency and Participation

In what ways, if any, do Block Talks make you feel more able to participate in your community?

When we realize that we all have a common goal, and that is to mend the cracks in our neighborhood so that we can all grow together, we see that no one is going to fix us but us.

Have Block Talks influenced how you see your role in your neighborhood or community?

Being able to host the Block Talks will give the neighbors someone that they can come to when they need things they can come to me and I can do everything possible to help.

Do you feel that your voice matters in Block Talks?

I feel that EVERYONES voice matters.

Host Questions

Can you tell me about the moment you decided to host a Block Talk?

I agreed to do it before I actually knew that I could. All I knew is that I seen this as one of the great ways to reach out to the community and get them involved. It cares about working with other people and other ideas and spaces.

How would you describe your role as a host?

The person that (with PARS assistance) I will be able to bring educational sources to the neighborhood, feed them, and build a solid team of people willing to do just a little extra to make a difference.

What has felt most challenging about hosting Block Talks?

Not getting sick so that I can't go. I have a lot of health issues so I have had to miss in person things lately which is hard. With how flexible it is though I still have been able to be very involved.

How do you think about creating space for others to share their stories?

I believe this will be a powerful way to give this community the extra strength that it needs so we can grow strong together, join together to be there for each other, and drop the crime rate even lower than it has making Central Park one of the best neighborhoods in Topeka and erasing the title of the worst.

Has hosting changed how you see leadership or civic responsibility?

Not really.

Tensions, Limits, and Reflection

What doesn't work perfectly in Block Talks?

Honestly, this is a question that I should answer in a few months. So much is still changing.

Are there people you think Block Talks might not reach?

Same as the above question. I need to be able to get a few more months under my belt. I am still constantly working to reach more people.

If Block Talks were to continue or grow, what would you hope stays the same?

The overall goal to help one another. More funding so that you guys could hire me. It would be amazing if hosts could be paid.

Closing Questions

Is there anything about your experience with Block Talks that you think is important but that I haven't asked about?

I feel that because these were created with nothing but honest love for one another, this will catch on, people will start to talk about the improvement in their neighborhoods', about the level of comradery among each of us, and true presence of God's work growing at an incredible pace. When place that are not doing this see, they are going to want to know what we are doing, how we are doing it, and what would it take for them to start. Then here we are Heaven on Earth.

What would you want someone studying civic engagement to understand from your experience?

That it is all about the people in the neighborhood. Every one of them, and that we are all equal, we all really have the same common goal to live peacefully. The only way we are going to achieve this is put God back in it and to love one another.

Appendix Figure A.3. Interview Notes, Community Partner

Core Narrative Questions

Can you tell me the story of how you first became involved with Block Talks?

I first got involved with Block Talks as a partner and really that is the extent of how I am involved only because my neighborhood has a close partnership already and i do not live in one where something is already started. I have thought about getting one going eventually, but for now i enjoy participating this way. Back to the actual question, though, my first time getting involved was through a Silverbackks board meeting where you (Isabel) introduced the need for food at meetings. We already do Sunday meals at a hot spot location and serve dinner to kids only in the two core neighborhoods Monday through Thursday from 5:30 to 6:00 PM. The community center in the neighborhood that Block Talks was kicking off is one that we serve at so at first we all thought that makes no sense. But after hearing more detail about how it could reach more people and the parents need this food too we realized it was worth a try. I am so glad we started the partnership because we really have reached so many more people.

What was happening in your life or neighborhood at that time?

In our communitywewereseeing lower numbers sometimes. It seemed like our time and location werenotasaccessible as we wanted so we were having more food and more money than we couldveruse. Themain issue was we had no volunteers. It was really hard to want to expand anythinginavolunteer run company, not a single person at Silverbackks is paid. We knew there wasanneedforfood but yet nobody was really coming to get it, that felt really confusing. Thenallofthesudden this idea came out and it felt impossible at first because how would we getvolunteerstomake and serve these meals, even if we have funding for it? Well, turns out if youworkwiththe community more people from the community show up and show up to volunteertohelpwithit. It changed a lot for us and the food we were getting out.

What stands out most to you when you think back on your early experiences with Block Talks? A moment, a conversation, or a feeling?

The first time we did a big event with donations, we provided really simple items like hot dogs and chips just easy lunches for a neighborhood clean up engagement type of event. They said they wanted enough for 400 which sounded so crazy because we just do not see engagement even close to that level ever. It is nice to get 25 people at something even with food. Also, how could we ever get enough volunteers to keep up with making that much food and making it outside! All of it seemed unreasonable, but I trusted you (Isabel) and knew you got everything you were doing from the neighbors so i trusted them. We got the donations and the rest was in the hands of the Block Talk. That event was amazing. All of the food was used, volunteers brought grills and things to make it, helped cook and serve and clean up the trash, everyone worked together and seemed to really enjoy it. Food can do wonders for bringing people together. Many people were there for the event, but having food made it so they could do something like this over lunch. It also made it so some people really only came for the food but stayed for the community building experience and fun once they got pulled in by some free lunch!

Before Block Talks, how did you think about civic engagement or being involved in your community? What did “being involved” look like to you then?

I have always thought of myself as someone who is great at being civically engaged honestly. I vote, I am on boards, I go to city council meetings and NIA meetings and sit through them all and write my notes and continue on. This all opened my eyes to two things, how privileged I am and how much I am missing from engagement. I am so privileged to be able to show up in these spaces without any issue, always be listened too and viewed as if I know what I am talking about and I always have felt comfortable. I can go to these meetings and just go out for a late dinner after and I don't even think twice about it. I have realized how much that is not the case for a lot of people. The other thing is we have gotten so used to showing up, making food, rushing people out with food to then clean up and get home to our fun weekends and evenings. Well, that is not how any of this goes with Block Talks. The food is there as an add on and a necessity, but the experience is the focus. More people come because they can eat but there is no pressure or weird feeling showing up for free food, you show up to engage with each other. That allowed a lot of people who never felt comfortable picking up free dinner from shame to not have to feel that way and it allowed it to all be so much more meaningful. I guess my biggest thing is realizing how being involved means building community and actually getting to know people and space at a deeper level.

How, if at all, has that understanding changed since participating in Block Talks?

Sorry, I answered that kind of in my other answer so I guess my answer is yes it has changed a lot.

Can you describe a moment during a Block Talk that felt meaningful, challenging, or important to you? What made it stand out?

Watching how many people show up to have free food but also to help each other. Every person seems to find ways to be involved in each end of the work being done which is beautiful thing to see. Everyone really shared their stories and opened up to each other which built some important communities.

Storytelling and Meaning-Making

How do stories get shared during Block Talks, from your perspective? What feels different about these conversations compared to other meetings or spaces?

I feel like they happen the entire time. You can look any direction and you see everyone sharing their stories and building relationships. They are sharing because they feel like they can, they feel safe with each other, they are also sharing because they are constantly coming up with new ideas and for some people it is the first time their ideas are being encouraged which is sad but also wonderful to see.

What is it like to listen to other people's stories in this space? Has anything surprised you or shifted how you see your neighborhood?

I do not live in this neighborhood so I never knew much about it, but I learned a lot from just listening. A lot about the struggles people are facing that they never talk about and how these struggles are so much more common than I could ever imagine.

Have you ever shared a story during a Block Talk that you might not have shared in another civic space?

At first I thought it was not my space and I should not be one sharing but as I got a bit more involved and people welcomed me I started to get to share my own stories. It was a different type of feeling I am guessing but it was nice. I actually shared some details about my childhood that I have barely ever talked to someone about but it just came out naturally and they are not even my actual neighbors. It is something about the space that gets created with these block talks and how everyone just really listens and even can understand you without judging you at all.

Civic Agency and Participation

In what ways, if any, do Block Talks make you feel more able to participate in your community?

Block Talks make engagement feel kind of fun, which you would think the two could not go together. It feels easy, maybe that is still my privilege, but that is one of the best ways i can put it.

Have Block Talks influenced how you see your role in your neighborhood or community? If so, how?

Yes, I learned that I need to do more than check boxes when i chose to be engaging in spaces, people need to be treated like people not numbers and i never realized i had been doing that.

Do you feel that your voice matters in Block Talks? What tells you that?

I do feel that my voice matters in Block Talks, but I do think I should only have so much of a say in other neighborhoods. If i start my own it would be way different!

For Community Partners (Silverbackks)

How did you first become involved with Block Talks as a community partner?

That is the only way I am involved as of now so i answered that with the first one. I really do think i will start one at some point don't worry.

How would you describe your role within Block Talks? How is it similar to or different from other community engagement roles you've held?

I would describe my role in Block Talks as a resource. I help connect them to food which does make a huge difference in block talks. I do not serve it or make it so much of the credit still stays in the neighborhood, but i work to help and keep things easy as possible.

What have you learned from listening to residents' stories in this space?

Listening to residents' stories in Block Talks has taught me that people really know a lot more than you would think.

How do Block Talks challenge or reinforce your understanding of civic engagement?

Block talk makes me see how engagement can be quieter and more about relationships. People can slow down, listen, and connect before trying to act on anything and you actually get better plans. That challenges the idea that "doing" is the only way of participating.

How do you navigate your institutional role while participating in a resident-led space?

I navigate my institutional role in Block Talks by being intentional about how I show up. I'm always aware of my position and take things a step at a time. I do not ever go in with plans to try to push an agenda i go in prepared to listen and support and that is all.

Tensions, Limits, and Reflection

What doesn't work perfectly in Block Talks?

I would say just needs to keep expanding across Topeka!

What feels hard or unresolved?

Some people do not know about it we need to get more neighborhoods involved.

Are there people you think Block Talks might not reach? Why do you think that is?

I think that Block Talk tries to understand the need of everyone and does a really good job at it, it is still new.

If Block Talks were to continue or grow, what would you hope stays the same? What might need to change?

I really hope a lot stays the same they just reach even more people and create even more partnerships.

Closing Questions(All Participants)

Is there anything about your experience withBlock Talks that you think is important but that I haven't asked about?

The questions were good!

What would you want someone studying civic engagement to understand from your experience?

I hope people can see that even though it is hard to track and show this kind of work it is important.

Appendix Figure A.4. Interview Notes, Community Member

Core Narrative Questions

Can you tell me the story of how you first became involved with Block Talks?

I first got involved and heard about Block Talks when there was a lot of fear around how my family would pay rent, keep our home, have dinner, prepare for the holidays. There was so much uncertainty in our lives and we felt really alone and even ashamed about everything. It was hard. Then we had someone knock on our door to tell us about Block Talks and about the Mutual Aid form they were sharing with everyone. This basically allowed anyone to ask for help but not have to let anyone know they needed it. We did not have to have anything broadcasted or let the world know people were helping us we just got to ask for help and share as much information about why we need it as we were comfortable with. It doesn't feel good to need help and many times when I have tried to use resources it hasn't gone well so I was not sure at first if I could trust it all. I started by just asking for food help to see how it would go and I got food right away, brought to me with the times I could be home, no judgement, and the people who came really got to know me. After that everything continued quickly and we really felt like we belonged in the neighborhood for the first time.

What was happening in your life or neighborhood at that time?

We had just went from being homeless the year before. I got a okay job but it was commission and my husband worked really weird hours so it was hard to ever make it to the things we would need to go to get help. I also was pregnant and we already have four other kids it takes a lot of our time. We were just trying to survive and not let our kids feel all of the pain.

What stands out most to you when you think back on your early experiences with Block Talks? A moment, a conversation, or a feeling?

What stands out to me the most is that no matter what was going on I was always just treated like a neighbor and so was my family. When people were helping us get winter clothing they also brought kids personalized toys, not something we asked for or ever would have expected but because we all had gotten to know each other they wanted to do that too. They made it fun when they dropped off things we needed help with. They even told the kids they were great helpers and let them help carry donations and thanked them and us. They thanked me. It was such a weird feeling to be seen and heard and viewed like a person not part of a job.

Before Block Talks, how did you think about civic engagement or being involved in your community? What did “being involved” look like to you then?

Honestly it felt very out of reach, i did not even think about it. There was no way we could afford to be involved. On top of that i never felt like i would be of value if i was involved. It is not like i knew anything about what was happening or how to write proposals or things like that i just live there. I could never make it to something even if i wanted to my kids need me home and i couldn't bring them and their dad would be at work. That was something I always picture is for people who are retired and wealthy or do it as part of their job but not for people like me.

How, if at all, has that understanding changed since participating in Block Talks?

I learned that it looks very different than what i ever thought. I learned that i could be valued and so could my kids. People care and do want to hear what i think and experience and i am not just some burden. I learned that we can all help each other a lot and we do not have to find these complicated resources to get help but can actually find a lot of help in our neighborhood with each other. It feels good to get help from friends and find ways to help them back.

Can you describe a moment during a Block Talk that felt meaningful, challenging, or important to you? What made it stand out?

One time that stood out to me was when a neighbor got really hurt and sick and had to be in the hospital for a long time. He was always helping everyone and never needing anything and he took great care of his house and yard and everything. Well everyone came together and set a time to go to his house, clean up his yard and do it really nicely. Some people brought different things to help get it done, some did different types of jobs, kids helped, and some people made food or drinks and setup an area for everyone to sit and take breaks. It became like an event it was fun. We all were doing jobs and helping someone but it felt like a fun time. It was so cool to see how everyone came together and made a difference while also talking about things going on and finding even more ideas for the future. Somehow we just always seemed to be learning from each other and coming up with new ideas for our neighborhood even if we were not at actual meetings.

Storytelling and Meaning-Making

How do stories get shared during Block Talks, from your perspective? What feels different about these conversations compared to other meetings or spaces?

The conversations we would have at meetings or events or whatever would feel really easy. I didn't ever feel like i had to change what i was saying in any way i could just talk and talk freely. Everyone always cared about what each person said and we also always seemed to find ways what we were saying or hearing would relate to each other. We knew our stories and things we were saying were being kept in record and stuff but that did not ever feel weird it actually felt good. We were using our stories to make a difference and i never knew that could be real. It also did not feel like we were there and used for what we were saying it felt natural.

What is it like to listen to other people's stories in this space? Has anything surprised you or shifted how you see your neighborhood?

When I would listen to other stories i always would feel surprised. I would get surprised by things i never would have guessed people were going through and by how much i would have in common with people. It was sad sometimes but also always made me feel better. It even felt like therapy sometimes.

Have you ever shared a story during a Block Talk that you might not have shared in another civic space?

All the time. Pretty much every time i speak i think about how good it feels but how i never would have had this anywhere else.

What do you think storytelling makes possible in Block Talks that might not happen otherwise?

I think that our stories help us get to know each other which makes us able to help each other more. We trust each other and want to keep working on helping each other because we know so much and learn so much together. It is like we are all a team. We would not have that if we did not get chances to know each other so well through stories we tell and hear.

Safety, Trust, and Belonging

How safe or comfortable do Block Talks feel to you as a space for participation? What contributes to that feeling?

I have always felt really safe because everything i say is always considered. People make sure everyone is comfortable and heard which is nice. I think everyone contributes to creating the feeling and the space does too. We meet in different places but it is always somewhere that feels homey or safe and comfortable, not big tables in formal places where i feel like i should not be or do not have the right clothes for.

Have your experiences in Block Talks affected your sense of trust—either in neighbors, in yourself, or in community processes more broadly?

Definitely, but i feel like i kind of said this in many ways already. I never really cared to get to know people around me or anything so i definitely did not trust anyone before.

Do you feel a sense of belonging in Block Talks? What helps create that, or what makes it difficult?

Yes! Every interaction and time people keep showing up makes a difference. You can count on the people around you to care which makes it feel like you matter and belong there.

Civic Agency and Participation

In what ways, if any, do Block Talks make you feel more able to participate in your community?

It makes it so there are different types of ways to participate i guess is the best way to say it. I do not have to go to every meeting or do every job but there are ways i can help when i can. And ways my kids can. It is all just really flexible and no matter how much you do or do not help everyone sees you as just as important.

**Have Block Talks influenced how you see your role in your neighborhood or community?
If so, how?**

Yes, i think i should be here and that i help make it better, every person here really does.

Do you feel that your voice matters in Block Talks? What tells you that?

I always feel like my voice matters because people ask me questions, remember details, and even have conversations later on about things i talked about before. People listen to each other and want to know each other.

Tensions, Limits, and Reflection

What doesn't work perfectly in Block Talks?

Sometimes it can be frustrating when people do not show up. I get it though but when i have been there and it has been a small group sometimes i think it means it is not working. I know that is part of the process but still.

What feels hard or unresolved?

I think it is hard to solve this because we want it to be flexible and everything but we also want people to keep showing up. I think it is worth it.

Are there people you think Block Talks might not reach?

I think we need to do better finding ways to connect with people who speak spanish but I know that is hard too.

Why do you think that is?

I think we have to find people who speak spanish but we also want those people to be from the neighborhood. It is just something that once it happens it will work fast but until then it is harder.

If Block Talks were to continue or grow, what would you hope stays the same?

I hope it is always about the neighbors and nobody else. We need to always be in charge of it for it to work right.

What might need to change?

More people which i think will keep happening. It would be great if every single person connected in some type of way.

Closing Questions(All Participants)

Is there anything about your experience with Block Talks that you think is important but that I haven't asked about?

Not that i can think of.

What would you want someone studying civic engagement to understand from your experience?

That it is hard to understand until you really experience it and it does not have to be very complicated.

Appendix Figure A.5. Overview of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Role	Context	Interview Length
Host	Block Talk Host	Central Park neighbor	~60 minutes
Community Member	Community Member	Resident, parent, and mutual aid participant	~65 minutes
Partner	Community Partner	Food access organization	~70 minutes

Appendix Figure A.6. Coded Interview Excerpts

Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Analytic Theme
“I never really thought about civic engagement because there was no way we could afford to be involved.” (Community Member)	Civic engagement as unaffordable	Civic engagement as privilege
“It felt really out of reach... I thought it was for retired or wealthy people.” (Community Member)	Engagement for “other people”	Exclusion through institutional norms
“I had shared my entire life story, and I never do that.” (Host)	Unexpected vulnerability	Storytelling as emotional safety
“People showed up who never would have showed up to something with the police before.” (Host)	Reduced institutional fear	Safety through informal space
“No one person is in charge... It feels natural.” (Community Partner)	Decentered authority	Collective leadership
“The food is there, but the experience is the focus.” (Community Partner)	Food as facilitator	Relational engagement
“I don’t have to go to every meeting to matter.” (Community Member)	Flexible participation	Redefining participation
“It felt like therapy sometimes.” (Community Member)	Emotional processing	Storytelling as healing practice

Appendix Figure A.7. Cross-Interview Theme Table

Theme	Host	Community Member	Community Partner
Civic engagement as inaccessible	✓	✓✓	✓
Storytelling creates safety	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Flexible participation matters	✓	✓✓✓	✓
Informal leadership	✓✓	✓	✓✓
Food as entry point	✓	✓	✓✓✓
Trust built through follow-through	✓✓	✓✓	✓

Appendix B - Composite Fieldnotes

This appendix presents the composite fieldnotes derived from participant observations during Block Talk gatherings, outreach activities, and informal engagements. Rather than documenting isolated events, these fieldnotes synthesize recurring interactions, language, and relational dynamics observed across different contexts at different times. Composite fieldnotes served to ethically represent collective experience while protecting individual identities.

Composite Fieldnotes from Block Talk–Related Civic Engagement Activities

(July–December 2025)

Overview and Scope of Observations

This appendix presents composite fieldnotes derived from sustained participant-observation of civic engagement activities related to Block Talks conducted between July and December 2025. Observations were gathered across a wide range of engagement formats, including door-to-door outreach, neighborhood events, community clean-ups, volunteer activity meetings, Block Talk meetings held in multiple community spaces, and informal follow-up phone calls and conversations.

During this six-month period, engagement efforts reached approximately 27,382 individuals through informal interactions, supported 40 meetings designed in direct response to neighborhood-identified priorities, facilitated 182 resource connections, responded to 73 requests for informal activities, and included collaboration with the local Neighborhood Improvement Association (NIA). Observations occurred across diverse physical and relational contexts, including front yards, sidewalks, parks, community centers, living rooms, parking lots, and telephone-based communication.

The fieldnotes presented here synthesize repeated observations, patterns, and language across engagements. Rather than documenting isolated events, these notes reflect saturation across settings and time. The stories reflected in these composite fieldnotes were shared with participants' knowledge and permission, with care taken to synthesize and anonymize details to protect individual identities while representing collective experiences. Quotations are presented in two forms: verbatim quotations, where contemporaneous notes captured exact phrasing, and

composite illustrative quotations, constructed to represent recurring language and shared meaning across engagements. Unless explicitly labeled as verbatim, quotations should be understood as composite. These composite fieldnotes function as an analytic data source, capturing recurring communicative practices, relational dynamics, and leadership processes observed across engagements rather than serving as a chronological record of individual events.

Note on Documentation and Representation

Fieldnotes were recorded contemporaneously when possible and expanded immediately following engagement activities. In many cases, notes were documented after leaving the engagement space to preserve relational trust, safety, and the informal nature of participation. Given the scale and diversity of interactions, documentation prioritized patterns of meaning, recurring language, and relational dynamics rather than exhaustive transcription.

These composite fieldnotes function as an analytic data source, capturing recurring communicative practices, relational dynamics, and leadership processes observed across engagements rather than serving as a chronological record of individual events. Composite fieldnotes are used intentionally to ethically represent collective experience while protecting individual identities. This approach aligns with narrative inquiry and community-engaged qualitative traditions emphasizing relational accountability, saturation, and analytic memoing.

Everyday Barriers to Civic Engagement: Time, Care, and Exhaustion

Across nearly all engagement contexts, expressions of fatigue and time scarcity appeared immediately and consistently. Participants frequently began conversations by apologizing for limited availability, even during brief or informal interactions.

“I will probably have to leave early, but I wanted to come to see what this was like and who was here. I am sorry I just have to get home to my family. I am sorry I just have to get home ”

These statements were rarely framed as disengagement. Instead, they reflected careful negotiation of capacity. Participants assessed what they could offer in the moment rather than what they could commit to long-term. This pattern was especially visible during door-to-door outreach and phone-based engagement.

Caregiving responsibilities were present across nearly all observed settings. Children accompanied adults to meetings and events, remained in vehicles during conversations, or moved in and out of shared spaces. Participants routinely apologized for interruptions.

Verbatim quotation:

“I am sorry my kids are being so loud. I am listening to you I just want to also make sure they are not causing any problems while we are talking.”

Participants frequently explained the absence of others without prompting.

“They had wanted to be here, but we thought one of us should stay with the kids.”

“They just couldn’t make it tonight, but they asked me to take notes and to give you guys some of their information they wanted to have shared today.”

“It’s not that they don’t care about this meeting, they really could not make it out tonight.”

These explanations were often delivered defensively, suggesting prior experiences where nonattendance had been interpreted as apathy. Within Block Talk contexts, participants expressed relief that presence was not monitored or penalized.

“It doesn’t hurt my chances if I miss some meetings?”

Trust, Institutional Memory, and Avoidance of Civic Spaces

Mistrust of formal civic engagement structures surfaced quickly, particularly during door-knocking and informal outreach. Participants frequently referenced prior experiences with city meetings, neighborhood forums, or institutional processes where input was solicited but outcomes were unclear or absent.

Verbatim quotation:

“We’ve done meetings like this before, and nothing came from it we never even heard from them again afterwards.”

Questions regarding affiliation were common.

Verbatim quotation:

“Are you with the city or the police?”

Participants described avoiding formal civic spaces altogether, citing past experiences of being talked over, dismissed, or used to legitimize predetermined decisions.

“They already knew what they wanted, it just looked good for a news article.”

“They just wanted to say they talked to us and put out a paper saying they got input when really what they put out did not even make sense with what we had tried to say.”

A noticeable shift occurred when participants learned that Block Talks were neighbor-led and shaped by local priorities rather than institutional agendas.

“Oh, so this is being run by other neighbors?”

“We can actually decide what happens, are there goals we have to work with? Can we really create everything?”

Following this realization, conversations frequently deepened in both length and substance.

Safety as Ambient Condition: Violence and Daily Vigilance

References to violence appeared across nearly all engagement contexts, even when safety was not the stated focus. Participants referenced gunshots, sirens, or recent incidents casually, often without elaboration.

Verbatim quotation:

“It’s been bad lately, it feels normal sometimes.”

Participants described altered routines shaped by safety concerns, particularly regarding children.

“I don’t let my kids play outside like I used to. I miss how neighborhoods used to be when we all would hang out and spend time together outside”

Violence functioned as an ambient condition rather than an isolated topic, shaping behavior, movement, and participation.

Safety as Absence: Police, ICE, and Surveillance

Discussions of safety consistently extended beyond concerns about crime to include fear associated with police presence, immigration enforcement, and surveillance. Participants described avoiding events, meetings, and formal civic spaces specifically because law enforcement or city representatives were present.

Verbatim quotation:

“I don’t go to those meetings because the police are always there and I do not trust them. Last time I went to a meeting and police were there they were trying to take a person who was there to talk because of a warrant or something.”

“One time police gave someone a ticket after a meeting we all were at because of a bike light.
That does not make us want to go back.”

Fear of immigration enforcement was raised both directly and indirectly.

“I don’t want to be anywhere ICE might show up and I am a citizen.”

“I can’t risk being seen, that is not worth it to put my family at risk.”

Participants described choosing not to attend NIA meetings, city-hosted events, or public forums
due to fear of exposure.

Verbatim quotation:

“I’d rather stay home than risk my future.”

For many participants, institutions framed as sources of help were experienced as sources of
danger.

“The places you’re supposed to call for help are the ones that we are scared of.”

Within Block Talks, safety was described as control, predictability, and trust.

Verbatim quotation:

“It feels safer knowing they’re not here unless we ask, it is nice to be the one to decide it not the
other way around.”

Over time, participants described a shift when institutions were invited into Block Talk spaces
under neighbor-defined conditions.

Verbatim quotation:

“This is the first time it feels like they’re here for us, we are in charge of it all.”

Mutual Aid, Informal Help, and Neighbor-to-Neighbor Support

Across engagement activities, participants frequently described relying on neighbors rather than formal systems to meet immediate needs. Requests for help were often framed cautiously and accompanied by hesitation.

“I didn’t know if it was okay to ask.”

“I don’t usually talk about this it never feels like people would want to know and sometimes i even feel like it is embarrassing.”

Relief was visible when requests were met without judgment.

Verbatim quotation:

“I didn’t think anyone would help. Everyone is having a hard time not just me.”

Participants consistently redefined contribution outside of traditional civic expectations.

“I can cook.”

“I can drive.”

“I can check on people.”

“I cannot help with yardwork, but I can make the food while everyone else helps.”

Mutual aid practices were described as reciprocal rather than hierarchical, even when needs were unequal.

“I have some bread I made for you, thank you for dropping off this for me.”

“Next time, I’ll bring something.”

Storytelling, Silence, and Relational Shifts

Personal storytelling consistently altered the tone of meetings and activities. When one participant shared a lived experience, others frequently followed.

Verbatim quotation:

“That happened to me too.”

These moments often moved conversations away from abstract problem-solving and toward shared recognition.

“I thought I was the only one that had this happen.”

Silence following disclosures was common and generally unbroken, functioning as collective acknowledgment rather than discomfort.

Leadership Fatigue and Distributed Responsibility

Many participants identified themselves as long-standing helpers within their families or neighborhoods. These roles were described with pride but also visible exhaustion.

Verbatim quotation:

“I’m always the one people call.”

Participants expressed relief when leadership expectations were lowered or shared.

“So I don’t have to be here every time?”

“So I don’t have to run this?”

Block Talks were frequently described as spaces where presence alone was sufficient.

Shame, Visibility, and the Risk of Being Seen

Shame emerged as a persistent but often unspoken barrier to participation. Participants frequently minimized need or delayed asking for help.

“I’m okay, really.”

“I don’t usually ask for help.”

Verbatim quotation:

“I hate having to ask.”

Participants expressed discomfort with being publicly associated with assistance.

“I don’t want people knowing my business.”

Composite quotation:

“I’ll talk to you, but not in front of everyone else.”

Within Block Talks, participants expressed relief that participation did not require disclosure.

Verbatim quotation:

“I like that I don’t have to explain myself here.”

Cognitive Load and Decision Fatigue

Participants frequently encountered engagement spaces while already managing multiple stressors. Open-ended questions sometimes produced hesitation or deferral.

“I don’t know.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

Verbatim quotation:

“My brain is just fried. I am exhausted.”

Decision fatigue was especially evident when participants were asked to prioritize needs or imagine long-term plans.

Composite quotation:

“I make decisions all day, it can be nice to not have to do that all the time.”

Reduced cognitive demand appeared to support engagement within Block Talks.

“I like that we don’t have to decide everything tonight, even us just showing up is still productive.”

Paperwork, Literacy, and Form Avoidance

Participants frequently hesitated when engagement required written forms or documentation.

“Do I have to fill that out?”

“Is this required?”

Verbatim quotation:

“I don’t want to put my name on anything.”

Forms were associated with surveillance, judgment, or consequences.

“Paperwork always leads to more questions. It feels repetitive.”

Participants consistently preferred verbal, relational exchanges.

Verbatim quotation:

“I’d rather just talk to someone.”

Prior Harm from Helpers and Short-Term Programs

Participants referenced prior experiences with programs that appeared briefly and disappeared.

“They said they’d help and then we never heard back.”

Verbatim quotation:

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Block Talks were described as different due to consistency, follow-through, and honesty about limitations.

Verbatim quotation:

“At least you’re not telling us you can fix everything. It is okay to not have answers but not okay to pretend you do.”

Grief, Loss, and Emotional Withdrawal

Grief surfaced quietly across engagement contexts.

Verbatim quotation:

“We lost a lot of people.”

Some participants attended meetings without speaking.

Verbatim quotation:

“I like that I can just sit here.”

Grief shaped engagement timing rather than eliminating participation.

Transportation Instability Beyond Access

Transportation barriers appeared as instability rather than absence.

“I have a car, but it doesn’t always work.”

Verbatim quotation:

“I can come if I have gas.”

Local, familiar spaces increased accessibility.

Verbatim quotation:

“I can come because it’s close.”

Synthesis: Intersecting Barriers to Engagement

Taken together, shame, cognitive load, safety concerns, grief, transportation instability, and prior institutional harm intersected to shape participation. Disengagement often functioned as a protective response rather than apathy. Block Talks mitigated these barriers by reducing visibility, lowering cognitive demand, and centering relational trust.

Analytic Summary

Across engagement formats and neighborhoods, consistent patterns emerged. Civic engagement was not absent but constrained by time, trust, safety, grief, and structural instability. Block Talks functioned as intermediary civic spaces where participation could occur incrementally and relationally. When institutions were invited in under neighbor-defined conditions, power dynamics shifted toward listening and collaboration.

Appendix C - Analytic Memos

This appendix presents analytic memos drafted over the course of the research process. These memos document reflexive observations, emerging analytic patterns, and decisions related to the interpretation and representation of findings, supporting the iterative analysis across the interviews, fieldnotes, and community-generated data.

Analytic Memos

Analytic Memo 1: First Block Talk – Establishing Storytelling as a Leadership Practice

This memo reflects on the first Block Talk convened in the studied neighborhood and examines how leadership emerged through storytelling and relationship-building early on. This was the first gathering in the neighborhood, so a majority of the interactions were centered around establishing trust, clarifying purpose, and signaling that community knowledge would be valued. There was a lot of uncertainty going into the first Block Talk. A lot of work and passion was poured into the creation of this first gathering, but there is no way to really know how it will go until it starts.

There were 26 people at the first gathering; they came from all different ages and backgrounds ranging from children under five all the way up to 70 years old. There were men and women from all races and ethnicity. The group was full of mostly people who had not met before even if they lived on the same street. You could tell right away that some people felt more comfortable than others, but that all changed as the meeting went on.

Neighbors initially shared stories with caution. Each person was framing their comments around immediate concerns rather than their personal experiences. As the conversation progressed, however, the stories became more detailed and relational, with neighbors responding to each other instead of directing comments solely to the facilitator. The role of the researcher at the first meeting is to teach the host and neighbors how they can facilitate meetings to be productive when it comes to creating action plans but also for creating welcoming spaces to build their community. As everyone started to get up and get food more natural conversations started occurring. Once we pulled out paper and things to get “working” neighbors started to

worry they needed to be more formal, but I ensured everyone that these very moments and stories are what matters. This is when there was a shift from individual comments to actual shared dialogue, everyone needed reassurance that their stories matter and the information they have about their lives and their neighborhood is needed. This shift marked an early instance of leadership emerging collectively, as neighbors began to shape the tone and direction of the conversation themselves.

People shared stories about how they wanted to grow their community, clean the streets and neighborhoods, and help each other. One neighbor even mentioned that this meeting helped relieve their social anxiety by the end of it as they feel closer to their community and can see how it will continue to grow. Connections were made right away in ways of helping each other with fixing patios, mowing lawns, tutoring kids, and even helping with financial planning. Mutual aid was something that did not even take much planning or effort, once stories were shared and trust was built they quickly learned how to naturally create forms of mutual aid.

From an analytic perspective, this Block Talk shows how leadership can surface through communicative practices rather than formal roles. No single individual assumed authority; instead, leadership was distributed across participants as they affirmed each other's experiences and identified shared concerns. This moment established storytelling not only as a method of expression, but as a foundational leadership practice that would continue to shape future engagements.

**Analytic Memo 2: Community Collaboration Following Multiple Shootings – Leadership in
Contexts of Fear and Trauma**

This memo focuses on community engagements held after multiple shootings occurred in the neighborhood over a very short period of time. The emotional tone of this collaborative effort was different from earlier engagements, with neighbors expressing grief, fear, anger, and exhaustion. This gathering was not a reoccurring Block Talk, but a quick response where neighbors came together to provide each other with immediate resources, connection, and support in the ways they needed.

In this scenario, storytelling acted as both a means of processing trauma and as a way of articulating what safety meant to neighbors. Neighbors were able to use the various forms of communication setup to share information such as phone trees, email threads, door to door access, and social media. They all quickly used these paths to speak out on their immediate lived realities, including fear of being outside, concern for children, and mistrust of institutions. Neighbors first gathered information from each other to learn what they all needed and could do and then acted. Within a 24-hour period it was decided that we needed quick outreach in the neighborhood with resources. Collaboratively with the researcher, a resource document was created, and a team of volunteers went out door to door sharing the resources, listening to neighbors, and taking in any input. Trust had already been being built so people answered doors, spoke freely, and were able to get the help they needed. Leadership in this space involved holding silence, allowing emotion, and resisting the urge to move too quickly toward action- oriented outcomes. There were no plans being made for long-term solutions, just accessible support for each other.

Analytically, this engagement effort demonstrates that leadership in community contexts often involves creating conditions where people feel safe enough to speak at all. Leadership was enacted through choices that prioritized care, validation, and meeting people where they are rather than action planning. This challenges leadership models that equate action with effectiveness and instead highlights leadership as relational containment during moments of collective crisis.

Analytic Memo 3: Community-Policing Input Meeting – Leadership Through Boundary

Setting and Facilitation

This memo analyzes a community meeting where the neighborhood invited the police department into their space to provide direct input about community policing practices. The meeting was intentionally designed as a facilitated working session rather than a debate or town hall, emphasizing listening, shared visioning, and trauma-informed engagement. This interaction was designed by neighbors, for neighbors.

The presence of police did introduce power dynamics that ended up shaping participation, but the neighbors in this context ensured there was careful boundary setting, including clear expectations that officers were present to listen rather than defend or explain. The neighbors explained how they would not typically show up in settings like this due to fear and mistrust with the police. This structure ensured that no actions could be taken by the officer in the space, the officer was a visitor in their community. This structure allowed community members to articulate what safety looked like from their perspective and to name both positive and harmful past experiences.

From an analytic standpoint, this meeting shows leadership as a communicative practice that involves managing power asymmetries. Leadership was enacted through facilitation choices that redistributed voice, protected community participants, and framed institutional actors as accountable listeners. The meeting demonstrates how leadership can function as a mediating force that enables dialogue without erasing historical mistrust or lived experience.

Another key aspect of this meeting was the diverse ways neighbors were able to interact. There was a board where things were being written on to help keep conversations flowing, small

groups within table settings, papers that could be turned in with their points anonymously, and individuals who could not attend were allowed to send the points they wanted to have discussed in and we brought them up at the actual meeting. Regardless of how people felt comfortable and safe to engage their voice was heard.

Conversations started by discussing what safety looks like in their neighborhood in the first place which did not have to do with police. This gave everyone something easier to discuss at first to build a comfortable and relatable space. Common responses were around having strong community connections, having safe physical environments, having their local concerns addressed, and lastly having the police learn to get to know people and be there building trust more than enforcing. This conversation took some time, but got a lot more people involved.

The next conversation at the meeting was around what everyone wants officers to do or not do within their neighborhood. There were various responses and all seemed to surprise the officer. It was not about making arrests or solving crimes, but about having the officers in the neighborhood regularly making connections, following up when they are called, educating the public, and walking not just driving around. One important thing that was clear by this point was that the officer understood her role in this meeting. She was there taking notes, listening, asking questions to get a good understanding of what people mean, and appreciating the input. The officer was not there judging people or making people feel uncomfortable, she truly was there to get their expert opinions and show them she wants to be a partner in the neighborhood.

As the meeting continued, there were discussions around past experiences with police and other people and places that make people feel safe. Neighbors started sharing real stories, details of events that caused them a lot of trauma and they never have felt safe to talk about. It

was some peoples first time feeling safe speaking up about injustice or frustration with the way things are. At the end of this meeting neighbors wanted to invite the police back for more instances like this, they took the officers contact to continue to build on their relationship, and they felt like it was a success. This meeting was a perfect example of how things will work better when institutions sit aside and listen in spaces where changes are being made.

Analytic Memo 4: Summer Resource Fair –Leadership Through Collective Action and Joy

This memo reflects on a community resource fair that the neighborhood created to connect youth, families, and older residents to summer activities, programs, and supports. Unlike meetings centered on crisis or problem-solving, this event had an emphasis on access, celebration, and relationship-building. The community wants to have fun ways to engage with each other just as much as serious ones. It should not always be a task to engage in your community.

The event emerged directly from neighborhood ideas and concerns, with residents identifying gaps in information, access, and connection. Leadership was distributed across community members, partners, and volunteers, with no single individual directing the event. Everyone worked together throughout the event to ensure that regardless of what they were doing to help they also got to be there to enjoy the experience. Storytelling was taking place informally through conversation, shared experiences, and collective presence rather than structured dialogue. Neighbors who had never met before were building connections with their families and new friends, finding ways to ensure they stayed connected and even supported each other through the rest of the summer while childcare would be hard to find.

This event had resources ranging from summer camps, health assistance, job opportunities for young adults and teens, and free giveaways for attendance to pools, events, and fun family friendly local locations. The resources were hand picked by neighbors so they were actually being engaged with. It is not uncommon to see a resource fair and not really see anyone interested in talking or learning anything at the tables, but here everyone was engaged and excited to learn about it all. There was intentionally no police presence, aside from the officer

who had built trust already and she attended in plain clothes. Everyone felt safe and comfortable. Kids were running around making new friends and even helping some of the older people at the event with getting their food or throwing their trash away. A common conversation that was happening was around how nice it felt to be in the neighborhood hanging out with each other, kids running around, adults talking and sharing meals, and everyone just being free and comfortable.

Analytically, this event highlights leadership as something that also emerges through joy, care, and mutual support. It challenges deficit-based narratives of community engagement by illustrating how leadership practices can foster belonging and resilience. Including this event as data underscores that leadership is not only visible in moments of crisis but also in spaces where communities imagine and enact alternative futures together.

Appendix D - Survey Instruments and Summary Data

This appendix presents the survey instruments and assessment tools used to contextualize the study's narrative and observational findings. Survey data were used to identify neighborhood-level patterns (e.g., in safety, access, trust, and participation) and triangulate themes emerging from the interviews and fieldnotes. Presenting these instruments in full bolsters the transparency of the study.

Appendix Figure D.1. Block Talk Neighborhood Assessment Survey



Block Talks

Neighborhood Assessment

Thank you for being a part of PARS and Block Talks' 2025 Neighborhood Assessment. Your input is invaluable to the work of Block Talks, which directly impacts the health and wellbeing of your neighborhood and greater community. All of your answers and feedback will be anonymous. Block Talks and PARS would love to be a resource and answer any questions or concerns you may have about the data, results, or this assessment at any time.

Thanks for being our neighbor!

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. Please select your age.

- ☐ Under 12
- ☐ 13-17
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65 and over

2. Please select your gender identity. Select all that apply.

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Genderqueer / Genderfluid
- ☐ Two-Spirit
- ☐ Transgender Woman
- ☐ Transgender Man
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Agender
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Page 2 of 27

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

3. Please select for race. Select all that apply.

- ☐ White, Non-Hispanic
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Bi or Multi Racial
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

4. Please select your highest level of education completed.

- ☐ No school completed
- ☐ Nursery school to 8th grade
- ☐ Some High School, no diploma
- ☐ High School diploma, GED
- ☐ Some college credit, no degree
- ☐ Trade, Technical, or Vocational training
- ☐ Associate Degree
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Professional Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree

Page 3 of 27

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

5. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6+

6. How many children (under 18) live in your household?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4+

7. Employment Status. Select all that apply.

- ☐ Employed full-time
- ☐ Employed part-time
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unemployed, looking for work
- ☐ Unemployed, not looking for work
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Unable to work
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Page 4 of 27

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

8. How many jobs do you currently hold?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3+

9. What is your annual household income (before taxes)? *(This helps us understand typical income in the neighborhood. Please estimate if unsure.)*

- ☐ Less than \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,000 - \$34,999
- ☐ \$35,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 or more
- ☐ Prefer not to say

10. What is your housing situation?

- ☐ I own my home.
- ☐ I rent.
- ☐ Staying with family/friends (temporary)
- ☐ In transitional housing.
- ☐ Experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Page 5 of 27

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

11. Have you experienced difficulty paying for any of the following in the past 12 months? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Rent/Mortgage
- ☐ Utilities
- ☐ Food
- ☐ Childcare
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Healthcare/Medicine
- ☐ Internet/Phone
- ☐ None of the Above
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

12. Do you or your children currently receive assistance from any of these programs? Select all that apply.

- ☐ SNAP (Food Assistance)
- ☐ WIC
- ☐ Medicaid/KanCare
- ☐ CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program)
- ☐ Section 8/Housing Assistance
- ☐ TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)
- ☐ Unemployment Benefits
- ☐ Free/Reduced School Lunch
- ☐ Utility Assistance (LIEAP, etc)
- ☐ None
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Page 6 of 27

785.266.8666



ihuckins@parstopeka.org



Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 1: Demographics

13. What type of transportation do you use? Select all that apply.

- ☐ I have my own vehicle.
- ☐ I rely on public transportation and it meets my needs.
- ☐ I rely on public transportation and it doesn't meet my needs.
- ☐ I rely on friends/family for rides.
- ☐ I walk/bike.
- ☐ I do not have transportation.

14. Does anyone in your home speak a language other than English as their preferred language?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

15. What resources or supports do you or your community need?





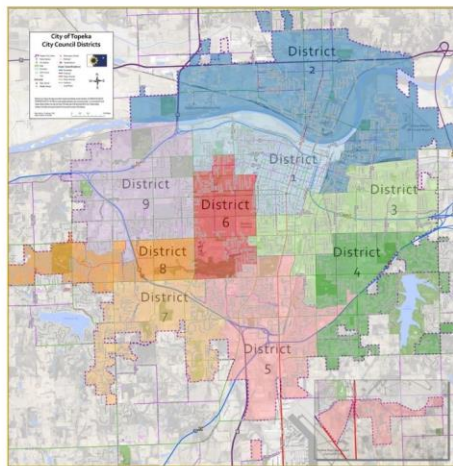
Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 2: Neighborhood Identification

Select answer that best describes your current situation.

1. Which part of the neighborhood boundaries/city council districts do you live within?

- ☐ District 1
- ☐ District 2
- ☐ District 3
- ☐ District 4
- ☐ District 5
- ☐ District 6
- ☐ District 7
- ☐ District 8
- ☐ District 9



Page 8 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 2: Neighborhood Identification

Select answer that best describes your current situation.

2. Have you connected with your neighborhood Block Talks before?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

3. Have you every shared your story in a Block Talk community space?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

4. What kind of stories or voices do you think need to be heard more in your neighborhood?

5. What year did you move into this neighborhood?

Page 9 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 2: Neighborhood Identification

6. How often do you interact with neighbors (e.g., conversations, helping each other, attending community events)?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ A few times a week
- ☐ A few times a month
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

7. How hopeful are you about the future of your neighborhood?

- ☐ Very hopeful
- ☐ Somewhat hopeful
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat worried
- ☐ Very worried

8. Do you believe that neighbors working together can improve safety and wellbeing in your community?

- ☐ Yes, absolutely.
- ☐ Yes, but it will take time.
- ☐ Maybe, I'm unsure.
- ☐ No, I don't think it will make a difference.





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 2: Neighborhood Identification

9. What do you think are the greatest strengths of your neighborhood? Select all that apply.

- ☐ People look out for each other.
- ☐ Diversity of people and experiences.
- ☐ Community events and gatherings.
- ☐ Local resources and organizations.
- ☐ Strong families and friendships.
- ☐ Resilience during hard times.
- ☐ I don't see many strengths right now.
- ☐ Other (please list):

Section 3: Sense of Community Scale

Please select your answer to the given statement from a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree.

1. I can get what I need in this neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 3: Sense of Community Scale

2..This neighborhood helps me fulfill my needs.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. I feel like a member of this neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. I belong in this neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. I have a say about what goes on in my neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

Page 12 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 3: Sense of Community Scale

6. People in this neighborhood are good at influencing each other.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

7. I feel connected to this neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

8. I have a good bond with others in this neighborhood.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 4: Sense of Belonging Scale

Please select your answer to the given statement in regard to your neighborhood or larger community from a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. In general, I feel a sense of belonging.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

2. I don't feel really accepted.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

3. Overall, I feel valued by others.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 4: Sense of Belonging Scale

4. I feel disregarded.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

5. I feel like I fit in.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

6. I feel like I don't really fit in with others.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

7. I feel connected with others.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Page 15 of 27

785.266.8666



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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 4: Sense of Belonging Scale

8. I feel so distant from others.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Section 5: Living Situation

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. What is your living situation today?

- ☐ I have a steady place to live.
- ☐ I have a place to live today, but I am worried about losing it in the future.
- ☐ I do not have a steady place to live (I am temporarily staying with others, in a hotel, in a shelter, living outside on the street, on a beach, in a car, abandoned building, bus or train station, or in a park)





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 5: Living Situation

2. Think about the place you live. Do you have problems with any of the following? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Pests such as bugs, ants, or mice.
- ☐ Mold
- ☐ Lead paint or pipes.
- ☐ Lack of heat.
- ☐ Oven or stove not working.
- ☐ Smoke detectors missing or not working.
- ☐ Water leaks.
- ☐ None of the above.
- ☐ Other (please list):

Section 6: Food

Some people have made the following statements about their food situation. Please answer whether the statements were OFTEN, SOMETIMES, OR NEVER true for you and your household in the last 12 months.

1. Within the past 12 months, you worried that your food would run out before you got money to buy more.

- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true

Page 17 of 27

785.266.8666



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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 6: Food

2. Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.

- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true

3. Within the past 12 months, you utilized a food bank to meet your needs.

- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true

Section 7: Transportation

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. In the past 12 months, has lack of reliable transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 8: Utilities

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. In the past 12 months has the electric, gas, oil, or water company threatened to shut off services in your home?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Already shut off

2. In the past 12 months, have you had to apply for utility assistance and if so, what was the outcome?

- ☐ I have not needed to apply.
- ☐ I applied but was denied.
- ☐ I applied and received assistance.
- ☐ Other:





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 9: Safety

Because violence and abuse happens to a lot of people affects their health, we are asking the following questions. Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. How often does anyone, including family and friends, physically hurt you?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Fairly often
- ☐ Frequently

2. How often does anyone, including family and friends, insult or talk down to you?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Fairly often
- ☐ Frequently

3. How often does anyone, including family and friends, threaten you with harm?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Fairly often
- ☐ Frequently

Page 20 of 27

785.266.8666



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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 9: Safety

4. How often does anyone, including family and friends, scream or curse at you?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Fairly often
- ☐ Frequently

Section 10: Employment

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. Do you want help finding or keeping work or a job?

- ☐ Yes, helping finding work.
- ☐ Yes, helping keeping work.
- ☐ I do not need or want help.





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 11: Family and Community Support

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. If for any reason you need help with day-to-day activities such as bathing, preparing meals, shopping, managing finances, etc, do you get the help you need?

- ☐ I don't need any help.
- ☐ I get all the help I need.
- ☐ I could use a little more help.
- ☐ I need a lot more help.

2. How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always





Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 12: Physical Activity

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. In the last 30 days, other than activities you did for work, on average, how many days per week did you engage in moderate exercise (like walking fast, running, jogging, dancing, swimming, biking, or other similar activities)?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7

2. On average, how many minutes did you usually spend exercising at this level on one of those days?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 10
- ☐ 20
- ☐ 30
- ☐ 40
- ☐ 50
- ☐ 60
- ☐ 90
- ☐ 120
- ☐ 150 or greater

Page 23 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 13: Substance Use

The next questions relate to your experience with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Some of the substances are prescribed by a doctor (like pain medications), but only count those if you have taken them for reasons or in doses other than prescribed. One question is about illicit or illegal drug use, but we only ask in order to identify community services that may be available to help you.

1. How many times in the past 12 months have you had 5 or more drinks in a day (males) or 4 or more drinks a day (females)? One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80 proof spirit.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Daily or Almost Daily

2. How many times in the past 12 months have you used tobacco products (like cigarettes, cigars, snuff, chew, electronic cigarettes, vape)?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Daily or Almost Daily

Page 24 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 13: Substance Use

3. How many times in the past year have you used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Daily or Almost Daily

4. How many times in the past year have you used illegal drugs, including marijuana?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or Twice
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Daily or Almost Daily

Section 14: Mental Health

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. Over the past two weeks, how often have you had little interest or pleasure in doing things?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Several days
- ☐ More than half the days
- ☐ Nearly every day

Page 25 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 14: Mental Health

2. Over the past two weeks, how often have you been feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Several days
- ☐ More than half the days
- ☐ Nearly every day

3. Stress means a situation in which a person feels tense, restless, nervous, or anxious, or is unable to sleep at night because their mind is troubled all the time. Do you feel this kind of stress these days?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little bit
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ Quite a bit
- ☐ Very much

Section 15: Disabilities

Select the answer that best describes your current situation.

1. Due to physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Page 26 of 27

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Block Talks Neighborhood Assessment

Section 15: Disabilities

2. Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No



Appendix Figure D.2. Participant Demographics

Age Distribution

Age Range	Count	Percent
18–24	7	16%
25–34	14	31%
35–44	11	24%
45–54	6	13%
55–64	5	11%
65+	2	4%

Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Count
Black/African American	18
White	17
Hispanic/Latino	2
American Indian/Alaska Native	3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2

Gender Identity

Gender	Count	Percent
Women	37	82%
Men	8	18%

Appendix Figure D.3. Household and Income Context

Household Size

Household Size	Count
1–2 people	10
3–5 people	17
6+ people	18

Children in Household

Number of Children	Count
0	15
1–2	14
3+	16

Annual Household Income

Income Range	Count
<\$20k	4
\$20k–34k	15
\$35k–49k	13
\$50k–74k	12
\$75k+	1

Appendix Figure D.4. Housing Stability

Housing Stability

Housing Situation	Count
Renting	28
Owns home	9
Staying with family/friends	2
In transitional housing	1
Experiencing homelessness	3

Financial Hardship (Past 12 Months)

Expense Category	Approximate % That Identified Category as Source of Hardship
Rent/Mortgage	~70%
Utilities	~75%
Food	~80%
Transportation	~65%
Childcare	~50%
Healthcare	~60%

Appendix Figure D.5. Transportation, Housing, and Food Insecurity

Transportation Access

Transportation Type	Prominence
Owens vehicle	72%
Relies on friends/family	61%
Considers public transportation to be insufficient	68%

Housing and Food Insecurity Indicators

Indicator	Prominence
Worried food would run out	76%
Food didn't last	71%
Used food bank	58%
Threatened utility shutoff	43%
Applied for utility assistance	55%

Appendix Figure D.6. Help, Connection, and Hope

Desire for Help

Type of Help Requested	Prominence
Finding work	63%
Keeping work	41%
Childcare	52%
Transportation	57%
Housing	60%

Hopefulness for Neighborhood

Response	Prominence
Very hopeful	49%
Somewhat hopeful	38%
Unsure	13%

Belief That Neighbors Can Improve Safety

Response	Prominence
Yes, absolutely	92%

Appendix Figure D.7. Likert Scale and Open-Ended Responses

Social Connection and Belonging (Sense of Community Scale)

Strong agreement with:

- People look out for one another (74%)
- Strong families/friendships in the neighborhood (69%)
- Resilience during hard times in the neighborhood (71%)
- Feeling connected to their neighborhood (67%)

Mixed responses about:

- Feeling valued (48%)
- Feeling accepted (52%)
- Having a say in neighborhood decisions (39%)

Open-Ended Response Themes

Theme	Example Responses
Housing instability	“We were homeless last year.”
Transportation barriers	“I cannot get to food drives.”
Childcare needs	“It is really hard being a single mom.”
Rising rent	“Rent keeps going up.”
Desire for connection	“I want help connecting with people.”
Domestic violence	“People leaving DV need support.”
Multigenerational households	“There are 11 people living in our home.”

Appendix Figure D.8. Post-Meeting (End of Block Talk) Survey Results

A brief post-meeting survey was administered at the conclusion of Block Talk gatherings to assess each participant's experience, perceived connections, level of resource awareness, and intentions regarding future engagement.

Sense of Connection After Attending

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree
I felt welcomed at this meeting	96%
I felt comfortable participating	91%
I met someone new	88%
I feel more connected to my neighbors	86%

Understanding and Resource Awareness

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree
I learned about resources available in my community	83%
I now have a better understanding of the issues that affect my neighborhood	89%
I know who I could contact for help or support	81%

Civic Confidence and Empowerment

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree
My voice matters in my neighborhood	84%
I feel more comfortable sharing ideas in the future	87%
I believe neighbors can work together to improve safety	94%

Future Participation Intent

Likelihood of Returning	Percentage
Very likely to attend another Block Talk	82%
Somewhat likely	14%
Unsure	4%

Interest in Taking Action

Action	Percentage Interested in...
Attending another meeting	90%
Helping with a neighborhood activity	72%
Sharing resources with neighbors	68%
Inviting a neighbor next time	74%
Helping to organize or host in the future	41%

Open-Ended Feedback Themes (Post-Meeting)

Theme	Example
Feeling welcomed	“This felt safe and welcoming.”
Food and shared meals	“Sharing food made it easier to talk.”
Relief and hope	“This gives me hope for our neighborhood.”
Desire for more meetings	“We need this regularly.”
Appreciation for resources	“I didn’t know these services existed.”

