
CIVIC PROBLEM-SOLVING AND PUBLIC IMPACT

Tools, guides, and activities for framing public problems, understanding stakeholders and careholders, exploring root causes, strengthening public trust, and designing community-centered responses.

Framing Public Problems

Tools for turning a vague sense that something is wrong into a sharp, evidence-based problem statement everyone can recognize.

Resource	Description & Application	Source
Design Thinking Bootleg	A free deck of cards covering all five modes of design thinking — Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test — usable as a flexible toolkit rather than a rigid sequence; the "Define" mode specifically offers concrete methods for turning messy observations into a sharp, actionable problem statement.	<i>Stanford d.school — dschool.stanford.edu/tools/design-thinking-bootleg</i>
National Issues Forums Issue Guides	A structured, nonpartisan format for framing a public problem as several distinct, value-based approaches (rather than a for/against binary), each with honest trade-offs spelled out — used nationwide as the basis for deliberative forums on issues from immigration to political polarization.	<i>National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), in partnership with the Kettering Foundation — nifi.org</i>
Defining and Analyzing the Problem	A step-by-step guide to writing a clear, evidence-based problem statement for community work, including a group activity for merging many individuals' framings of a problem into one statement everyone can recognize as accurate.	<i>Community Tool Box, University of Kansas — ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/analyze/analyze-community-problems-and-solutions/define-analyze-problem/main</i>

Understanding Stakeholders & Careholders

Frameworks for mapping who has power over a decision, who is affected by it, and who gives or receives care that a conventional stakeholder map tends to miss.

Resource	Description & Application	Source
<u>Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interests</u>	A framework distinguishing primary, secondary, and key stakeholders, and mapping each against a power/interest grid — useful for seeing at a glance who has been left out of the room relative to how much the decision will actually affect them.	<i>Community Tool Box, University of Kansas — ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main</i>
<u>Caring Democracy</u>	An argument that democratic institutions systematically under-value the people who give and receive care — parents, caregivers, care workers, and those who depend on care — and that a healthy public process has to make their perspective a formal part of decision-making, not an afterthought. A useful theoretical anchor for why "careholders" deserve a seat distinct from conventional stakeholder analysis.	<i>Tronto, Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice, NYU Press (2013) — nyupress.org/9780814782781/caring-democracy</i>
<u>Turning Outward and the Aspirations Interview</u>	A practice built around asking residents just a few open questions about their aspirations for their community — not their complaints or their opinions on a specific proposal — as the starting point for public work, on the theory that most public engagement skips straight to solutions without ever really listening.	<i>The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation — theharwoodinstitute.org/approach</i>

Exploring Root Causes

Techniques for pushing past the first, most obvious explanation to the cause a group can actually do something about.

Resource	Description & Application	Source
Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique	A guided version of the 5 Whys technique adapted specifically for community problem-solving: starting from a surface-level problem, repeatedly asking why it happens until the group reaches a cause it can actually act on, rather than stopping at the first, most obvious explanation.	<i>Community Tool Box, University of Kansas — ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/analyze/analyze-community-problems-and-solutions/root-causes-but-why-technique/main</i>
Force Field Analysis	A technique for mapping the forces actively driving a problem toward change (public opinion, policy momentum, dissatisfaction with the status quo) against the forces restraining change (entrenched structures, lack of resources, ideology) — useful for identifying which lever is actually movable rather than which one is most visible.	<i>Described within Community Tool Box's community problem analysis materials — ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/analyze-community-problems/main</i>

Public Trust & Community-Centered Design

Approaches for designing a response that starts from residents' own aspirations and builds trust through small, visible wins.

Resource	Description & Application	Source
The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design	A complete, freely downloadable methodology for designing a response to a public problem starting from deep empathy with the people affected — organized into Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation phases, with 57 concrete methods and real social-sector case studies.	<i>IDEO.org — designkit.org</i>
The Civic Index	A self-assessment tool built around seven components of a community's "civic capital" — including engaged residents, inclusive leadership, and collaborative institutions — with 32 specific questions a community can use to identify where its capacity to solve shared problems is strong or thin before starting a new initiative.	<i>National Civic League, 4th edition — nationalcivicleague.org (search "Civic Index")</i>
Public Innovators Lab	A training model that equips community leaders and residents to practice "Turning Outward" together, moving from a shared understanding of community aspirations into a coordinated chain of small, concrete actions rather than one large master plan — designed to build trust through visible, near-term wins.	<i>The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation — theharwoodinstitute.org</i>

Sources & Further Reading

Community Tool Box, University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development. ctb.ku.edu

IDEO.org. The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design. designkit.org

Kettering Foundation. kettering.org

National Civic League. The Civic Index (4th edition). nationalcivicleague.org

National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI). nifi.org

Stanford d.school. Design Thinking Bootleg. dschool.stanford.edu/tools/design-thinking-bootleg

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. theharwoodinstitute.org

Tronto, J. C. (2013). Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice. NYU Press. nyupress.org/9780814782781/caring-democracy