

2026 CATAMOUNT PROJECT

Beyond Community Needs:

Exploring Data, Responsiveness, & Priority Area Frameworks For Funders

June 2026

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As a settler on Turtle Island, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and hold space for Treaty 7, the land I currently call home. I believe it is my responsibility to pursue a deeper understanding of this Treaty so that I may respect and honour Indigenous peoples’ legal and inherited rights. Through my words and actions, I seek to honour the traditional territories and peoples of Treaty 7, including the Siksika Nation, Kainai Nation, and Piikani Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, as well as the Tsuut’ina Nation, and the Îlethka Stoney Nakoda Nations, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney Nations. I also recognize the homelands of the Métis Nation within Métis Nation Battle River Territory, Nose Hill Métis District 5, and Elbow Métis District 6.

As this project engages with topics related to data collection, knowledge, and systems, I also want to recognize the ways these processes have historically been used as tools of colonial control and harm against Indigenous and racialized peoples and communities. Data collection has often occurred without consent, context, reciprocity, or respect for Indigenous sovereignty, contributing to harmful narratives, surveillance, and the extraction of knowledge from communities. As a settler, I believe it is important to remain critically reflective of how information is gathered, interpreted, and shared, and to approach this work with humility, accountability, and an ongoing commitment to decolonizing practice.

It is with gratitude and reciprocity that I share this land with Indigenous peoples, honouring their histories, cultures, and continued presence. In the spirit of reconciliation and changemaking, I commit to ongoing learning, reflection, and action that supports Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and well-being.

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01 Introduction



THE WICKED PROBLEM

The Calgary Foundation identifies as a 360° grant-maker, meaning that rather than focusing on a single aspect of community well-being, this approach recognizes that the many interconnected aspects of community life all contribute to the overall prosperity of our community (Dekuyper, 2025). For the past 10 years, Calgary Foundation has also used the Vital Priorities framework, which highlights important issues within Treaty 7 territory such as poverty reduction and pursuing a sustainable future (2026). With the Vital Priorities framework sunseting, Calgary Foundation has identified an opportunity to explore more flexible approaches to understanding community priorities and needs, while still remaining responsive to emerging issues in the community. From this exploration, a wicked problem has emerged:

How might a Calgary-based funder leverage existing community data to identify and support priority areas for collaboration?

THE PURPOSE

This project brief brings together the research and conversations that have emerged throughout this work in a clear, accessible, and easy-to-navigate way. Each section is focused on the identified system challenges, the observed impact gaps, and the potential opportunity areas, including what is already working in this complex system.

THE PROCESS

The findings presented throughout this project draw on both academic and grey literature, as well as on conversations with Calgary Foundation staff. Together, these sources highlight the challenges currently present within the system and identify opportunities that may help shape future approaches to this work.

THE PROJECT OVERVIEW

One major aspect of this project was identifying the core questions embedded within this larger wicked problem. Over time, 3 specific questions emerged:

1. How might a Calgary-based funder effectively use existing community data to identify and understand evolving community needs?
2. How might a Calgary-based funder remain responsive to community needs while still measuring their impact in community over a period of time?
3. How might community foundations determine whether it is necessary to define community-identified needs into broad priority areas?

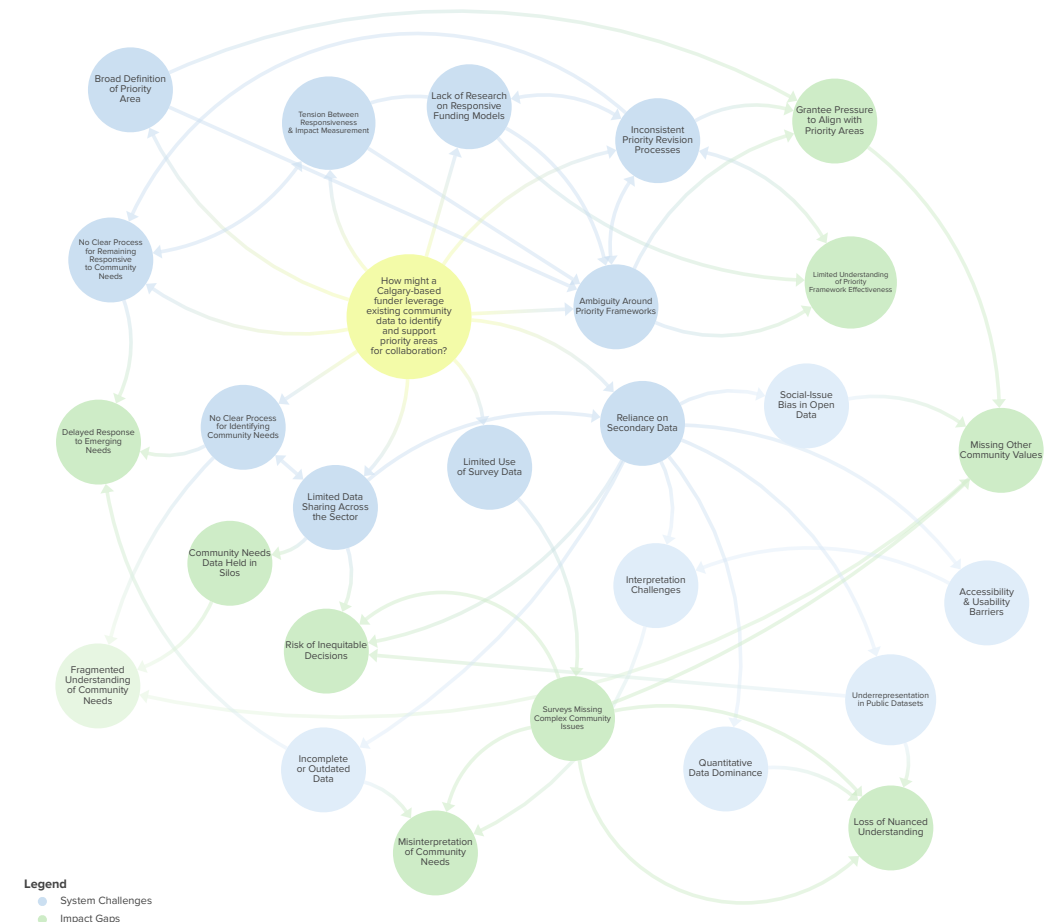
3. How might community foundations determine whether it is necessary to define community-identified needs into broad priority areas?

The emergence of these 3 questions can be further understood through the [System Map](#), below, which illustrates the relationship between the identified system challenges and the resulting impact gaps.

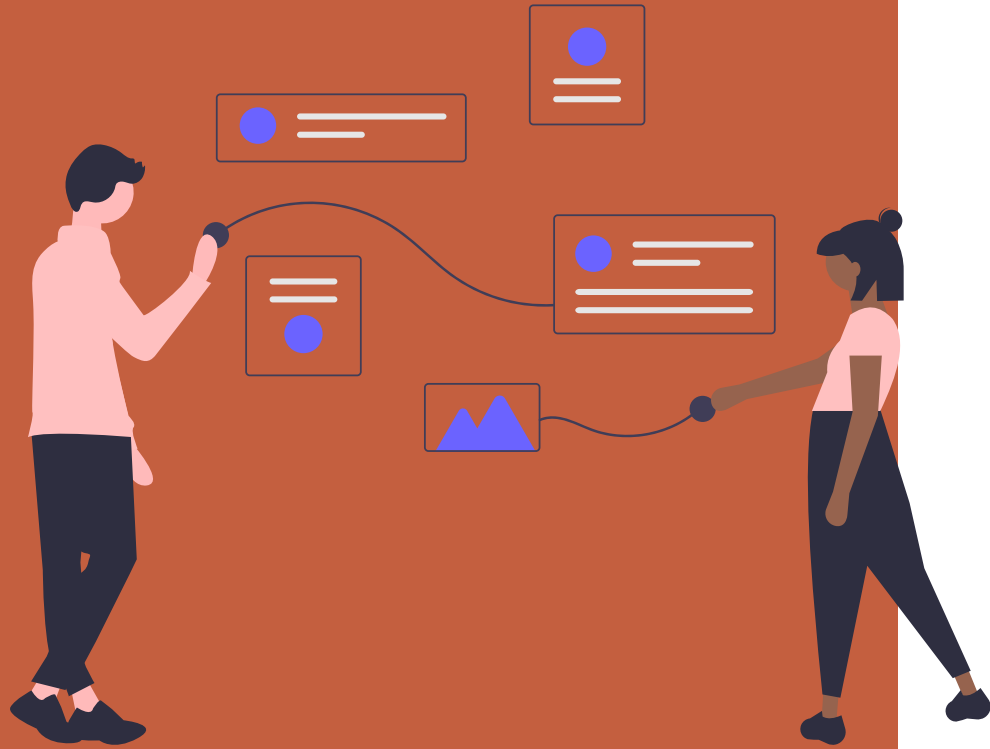
THE OUTCOME

Rather than presenting solutions, this deliverable aims to support further reflection, conversation, and exploration around how community foundations understand community needs, remain responsive, and make decisions about priorities and impact.

THE SYSTEM MAP



02 System Challenges



These system challenges can be understood as what is currently being observed in the system, as seen through conversations with Calgary Foundation staff and the literature. While these challenges are discussed separately, they are highly interconnected and collectively shape the understanding of the wicked problem posed. It is recommended to read this section while also viewing the completed System Map to follow and understand the interconnected nature of these complex challenges.

The Observed Challenges

TENSIONS AROUND PRIORITY-AREA FRAMEWORKS

The use of the Vital Priorities framework created some tension alongside the Foundation's identity as a 360° grant-maker, as the Foundation aims to remain responsive to evolving community needs while also demonstrating community leadership and measurable impact over time. The question that comes from this tension is, if we have priority areas, how do we remain responsive to emerging community needs?

The use of a priority area framework requires some level of definition around which identified community needs fit within each priority area. However, because priority areas are informed by what is happening within

the community, and community needs are constantly evolving, these definitions may be less relevant over time. Priority areas can also carry broad or flexible definitions, meaning that understandings of what community needs "fit" within a given priority area may vary depending on the individual interpreting them. As priority areas evolve to remain responsive to emerging community needs, their definitions and interpretations may also broaden over time.

These two system challenges lead to another challenge around the need for a priority area framework at all as a community foundation.

GAPS IN RESEARCH

Through conversations with Calgary Foundation staff, a clear challenge was highlighted around the gap in internal systems about what data is used to understand community needs and how to remain responsive to emerging community needs. To review how other community foundations and funders are addressing these issues, a literature review was conducted. Much of the existing literature focuses on how community foundations can utilize data to understand community needs (Major et al., 2024), why utilizing community data is important for understanding what is happening within communities (Ridzi & Prior, 2023), and how collecting data can help community foundations identify and define community priorities (Timmers & Sidney, 2021). While the literature has provided insight into the use of community data, it has offered limited information on how funders remain responsive to evolving community needs while measuring long-term impact, highlighting a broader research gap.

DATA LIMITATIONS

Calgary Foundation currently uses a survey called the Quality of Life Report to understand the state of community members' overall well-being, a common approach utilized by community foundations (Ridzi & Prior, 2023; Azevedo & Bell, 2025). This survey could be used to understand community needs, but alone it is not enough to capture the experience of all Treaty 7 community members. Therefore, the use of publicly available datasets was proposed within this larger wicked problem as one possible approach to understanding community needs. However, across academic literature, several limitations and challenges in using secondary data sources emerged.

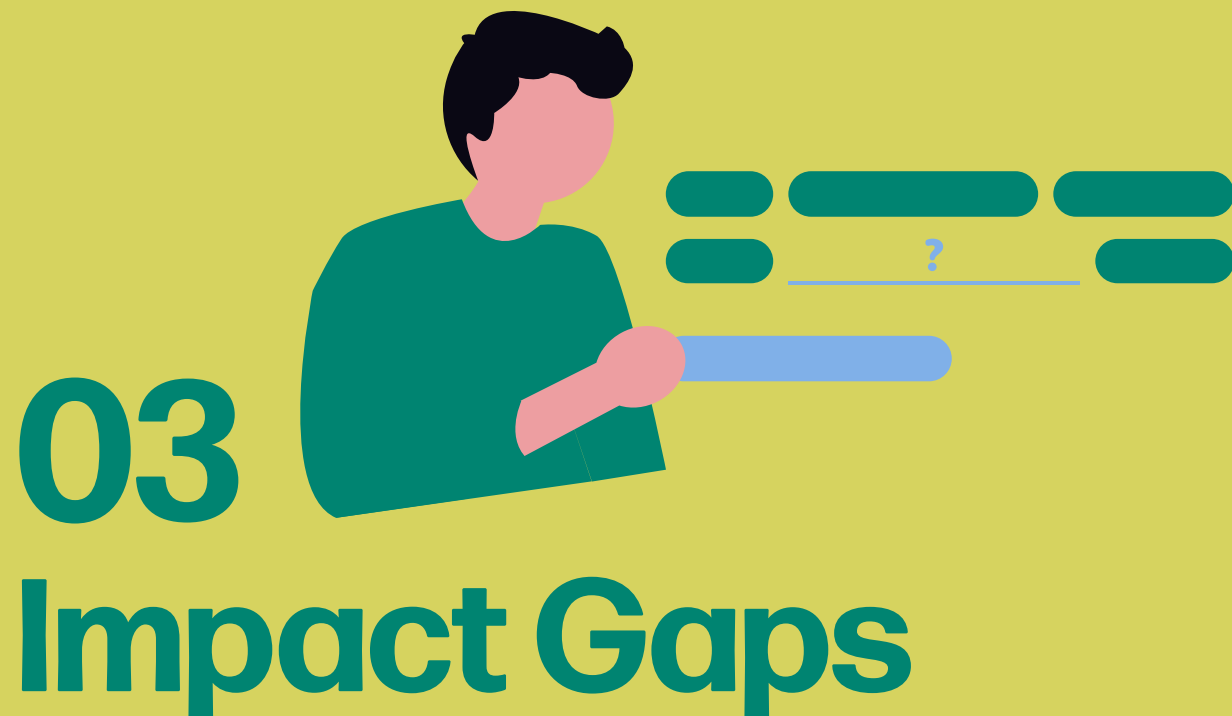
Ridzi & Prior (2023) suggest that publicly available and government datasets alone may not provide a complete understanding of community well-being. Furthermore, there are difficulties accessing recent data, with findings that some data on certain areas of interest is not collected at all. This finding was echoed by Calgary Foundation staff, who noted that most publicly available datasets focus on social issues and do not include other areas of interest, such as arts and culture.

Concerns also emerged around representation and complexity within publicly available datasets. Masefield et al. (2020) suggest that marginalized and hard-to-reach populations may be underrepresented within mainstream or national data systems. Ridzi (2022) further highlights that quantitative datasets can flatten complex experiences into broad categories, limiting the ability to capture nuance within community experiences. This challenge raises important questions for funders about how to ensure all voices in our community are heard and how to capture the nuances of lived experiences without reproducing harm.

Issues related to data usability were also noted throughout the research (Ridzi & Prior, 2023). In conversations with a Calgary Foundation staff member, this challenge also raised broader questions around data interpretation and objectivity. It was discussed that different stakeholders may interpret the same dataset in very different ways, highlighting that data is not entirely neutral or objective. Rather, meaning is shaped by who is interpreting the data, the context in which it is being analyzed, and the assumptions that influence how conclusions are drawn from it.

Lastly, Ginsberg (n.d.) states that non-profit data-sharing initiatives are a great place to start for secondary data use. However, as stated by Pohar Manhas et al. (2017), non-profit data sharing is somewhat limited in Canada and also raises ethical concerns around the privacy of information. This understanding may reinforce the above challenge around gaps in research.

Together, these observed system challenges contribute to several broader impact gaps within the system. The following section highlights what is happening as a result of these interconnected challenges.



The following section highlights the observed impact gaps that emerged as a result of the identified system challenges. These impact gaps reflect the broader effects and implications that may occur within the system when challenges related to responsiveness, data use, research limitations, and knowledge sharing exist . While each impact gap is discussed separately, they are interconnected and may collectively influence how community needs are understood, prioritized, and responded to in practice. It is recommended to read this section while also viewing the completed System Map to follow and understand the interconnected nature of these complex impact gaps.

The Impact Gaps

LIMITED KNOWLEDGE SHARING ACROSS THE SECTOR

With a lack of knowledge sharing and limited research around data systems and responsive funding structures, it may be difficult to understand how different funders approach priority-area frameworks, including the successes, limitations, and lessons learned. This may also create information silos, a need to rely on publicly available datasets, and create potential gaps around making informed, equitable decisions.

FRAGMENTED UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY NEEDS

Due to limited data sharing and a lack of systems surrounding identifying community needs, one observed impact gap is that community needs data may be held in silos within organizations and across the sector, creating fragmented or inconsistent understandings of community needs within the broader system. Masefield et al. (2020) state that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have copious amounts of underutilized data; however, to use this data effectively, sector-wide collaboration is needed. Limited knowledge and data sharing may make it difficult to develop a more comprehensive understanding of emerging issues, community priorities, and overlapping areas of need.

LACK OF RESPONSIVENESS TO EMERGING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Without remaining responsive to evolving community needs, community foundations may risk prioritizing issues that are no longer the most urgent or current within the community. This may also contribute to delayed responses to emerging or shifting community needs over time. Additionally, organizations applying for funding may try to adapt their work to align with existing funder priority areas, particularly when emerging community issues do not fit neatly within established frameworks.

INEQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING

The potential for inequitable decision-making also emerged as an observed impact gap throughout this project. The following highlights several factors that may contribute to this gap.

- **Data Interpretation:** One observed impact gap relates to how data is interpreted within practice. As data requires interpretation, stakeholders may interpret the same dataset differently, potentially leading to diverging conclusions about community priorities and needs. Stakeholders in this context may include community foundation staff, board members, non-profit organizations, and community members, each of whom may bring different perspectives, values, and priorities to the interpretation of data.
- **Limitations of Surveys:** While survey use is common within community foundations (Ridzi & Prior, 2023; Azevedo & Bell, 2025) and may provide valuable insight into community experiences, it may not capture more complex or deeper community issues. The potential impacts include a loss of a nuanced understanding of community needs, the potential to miss other community values due to a specific set of questions, and the misinterpretation of community needs.

While not directly identified within the reviewed literature, one additional consideration that emerged through this analysis was the concept of intersectionality in relation to survey use. While

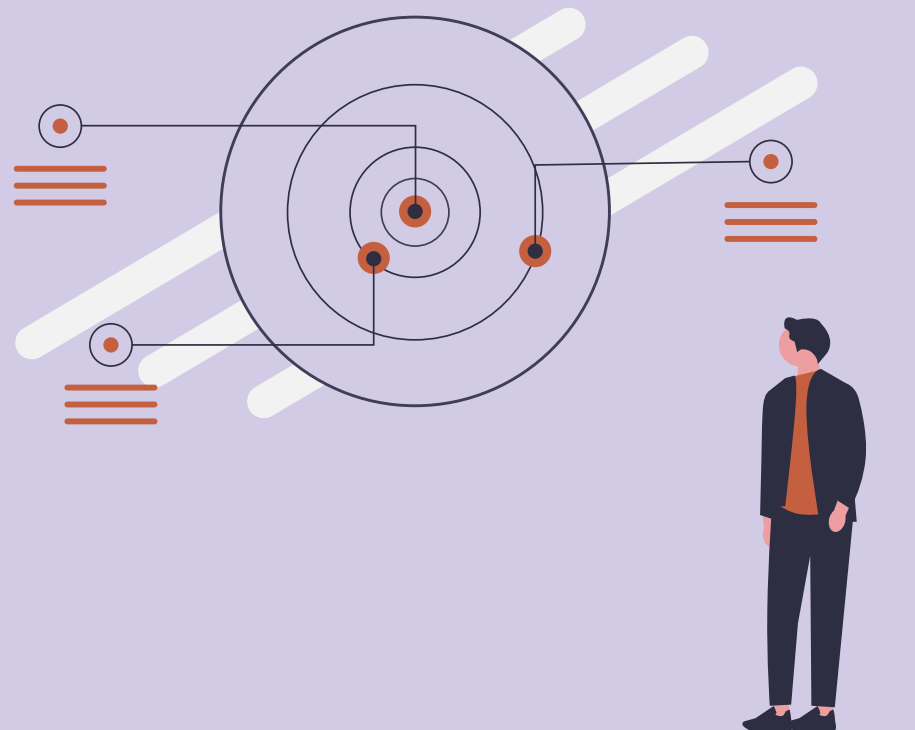
surveys may collect demographic information about participants, their structure may not fully account for the multiple and interconnected aspects of a person's identity and how these experiences shape how individuals experience community, thereby highlighting the loss of a nuanced understanding of community needs.

- **Missing Perspectives in Secondary Data Use:** When marginalized or underrepresented voices are missing from datasets, there is potential for inequitable decision-making due to incomplete understandings of community experiences and needs. Additionally, because these datasets focus mostly on quantitative data, this may result in the loss of lived experience and nuanced community perspectives. Lastly, when datasets focus primarily on social issues, other aspects of what the community values may be overlooked.

Because of these observed impact gaps, several opportunity areas emerged throughout this project. The following section highlights existing approaches, emerging ideas, and areas for further exploration related to understanding community needs, responsiveness, and community data use.

04 Opportunity Areas

The following section highlights aspects of the system that are currently working, as well as potential opportunities for future work. This section is not intended to provide an exact roadmap for addressing this wicked problem, but rather to introduce ideas, approaches, and areas for further reflection and conversation.



What Is Already Working

Within this wicked problem, several areas emerged as existing strengths or approaches that are already supporting understandings of community needs within the system.

UTILIZING EXISTING DATA

At the Calgary Foundation, existing datasets are already being used as insight tools to understand community needs, including grant applications and other publicly available datasets such as the Calgary Open Data Portal (2026), and the Enough for All Wellbeing Dashboard (2026). This approach is echoed in research conducted by Azevedo & Bell (2025), who state that utilizing multiple data sources can support more equitable decision-making. Therefore, Calgary Foundation's use of multiple forms of community data may help support a broader and more equitable understanding of community needs and experiences.

Another important factor within this system is the recognition that a significant amount of community data already exists. Rather than reproducing additional datasets, Calgary Foundation understands that the challenge lies in locating, analysing, and interpreting existing data to better inform understanding of community needs, rather than assuming the data does not exist.

Although this project identified several limitations and gaps within secondary data sources, these limitations do not necessarily negate the usefulness of the information. Rather, these tools may still provide valuable contextual information when understood alongside their limitations and interpreted alongside other forms of knowledge and community insight.

BROADER UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNITY NEEDS

Another strength identified throughout this work was the consideration of community well-being beyond social issues alone. This includes recognizing the importance of areas such as arts and culture, sports, and recreation in contributing to individual and collective well-being. This reflects Calgary Foundation's broader identity as a 360° grant-maker, recognizing that community prosperity is shaped by many interconnected aspects of community life.

The Opportunity Areas

COLLABORATION AND DATA SHARING

One emerging opportunity identified throughout this project is increased collaboration and data sharing across the non-profit, charitable, and community foundation sectors. Throughout conversations and research, it became clear that community data often exists across multiple organizations and systems but may not always be connected or easily shared. This creates opportunities for greater collaboration both within Calgary Foundation and more broadly across the community foundation system and charitable sector.

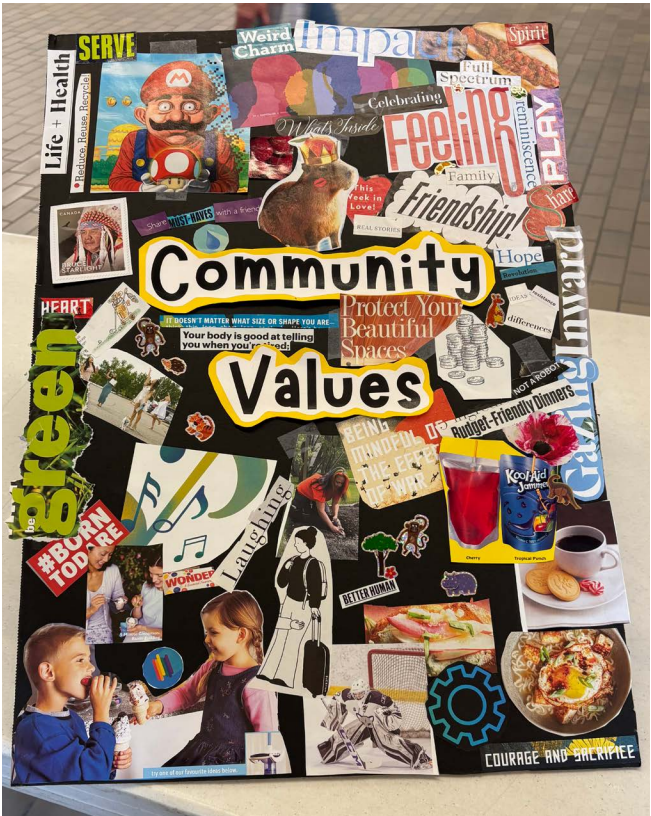
Another emerging opportunity in this area is the concept of data philanthropy, which refers to companies and organizations sharing their data to address social issues (Motyka et al. 2025). Masefield et al. (2020) also suggest that non-profit data already exists but is often underutilized within research contexts. Within the context of this work, both articles highlight an opportunity to think differently about how existing partnerships could work together to effectively share, interpret, and use data to support a more robust understanding of community needs.

However, these opportunities also raise important ethical considerations related to privacy, consent, ownership of information, and the potential misuse of this data (Motyka et al. 2025). Additional reflection is also needed around how data-sharing practices may unintentionally reproduce harm toward marginalized communities, particularly when communities have historically experienced extraction, surveillance, or exclusion within research and data collection practices. As a result, while collaboration and data sharing may create opportunities for broader understandings of community needs, they also require thoughtful consideration around ethical data practices and relationship-building.

EXPANDING UNDERSTANDINGS OF
COMMUNITY AND DATA

Another emerging opportunity identified throughout this project is expanding how both community well-being and data are understood within practice. An article written by Major et al. (2024) described work being done within a community foundation and discussed community needs through the lens of community values. From this research, a new perspective emerged regarding changing the vocabulary used from community “needs” to community “values.” This reframe may create an opportunity to think beyond only identifying deficits or problems that exist within communities and instead consider what strengths and assets may already exist, shifting away from a scarcity mindset and moving towards recognizing community resilience.

Throughout this project, quantitative and publicly available datasets were frequently discussed; however, this work raises broader questions around how lived experience, storytelling, relationships, qualitative insights, and community knowledge may also be understood as valuable forms of data and community insight. To explore this idea further, a community engagement activity was completed on the Mount Royal University campus, where participants were invited to cut images from magazines that represented what they believed their community values. The intention of this activity was not to use participant responses as definitive representations of what communities value. Rather, the activity was intended to create a visual example of a different way of thinking about data, both in how information can be gathered and how community needs and priorities may also be understood through a values-based lens.



REIMAGINING PRIORITY AREA FRAMEWORKS

Another emerging opportunity identified throughout this project is rethinking how priority-area frameworks are structured and utilized within community foundation work. Throughout the research and conversations with Calgary Foundation staff, ongoing questions emerged around whether defining broad priority areas is necessary and, if so, how these frameworks can remain flexible and responsive to evolving community needs over time. The research highlighted that community foundations approach priority-area frameworks in different ways. Some organizations were identified as aligning their priority framework with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Timmers & Sidney, 2021), while others appeared to be moving toward fewer or singular priority areas (Ridzi & Prior, 2023). These differing approaches suggest that there may not be one singular or “correct” way to structure community priorities within community foundation work.

To think more deeply about this opportunity area, staff members from a variety of teams across the Calgary Foundation participated in a collaborative arts-and-crafts activity where new ideas were brainstormed and visuals were created to explore different ways of thinking about the priority-area framework.

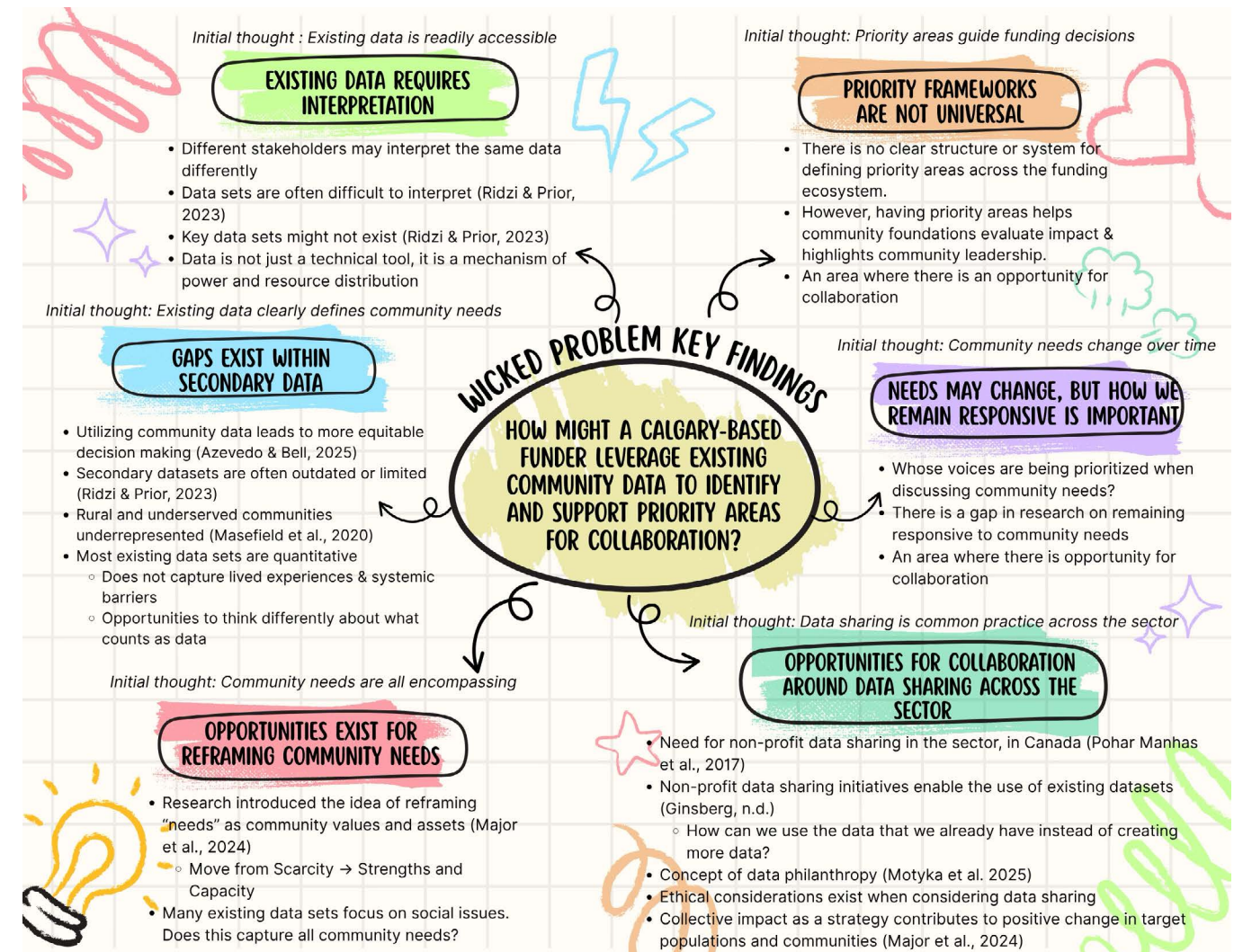


This activity highlights not only how funders can reimagine priority areas, but also gives an example of how collaboration can come together to think about this larger, wicked problem.

05 Summary of Key Findings



This poster was created to provide a high level summary of the work completed throughout this project.

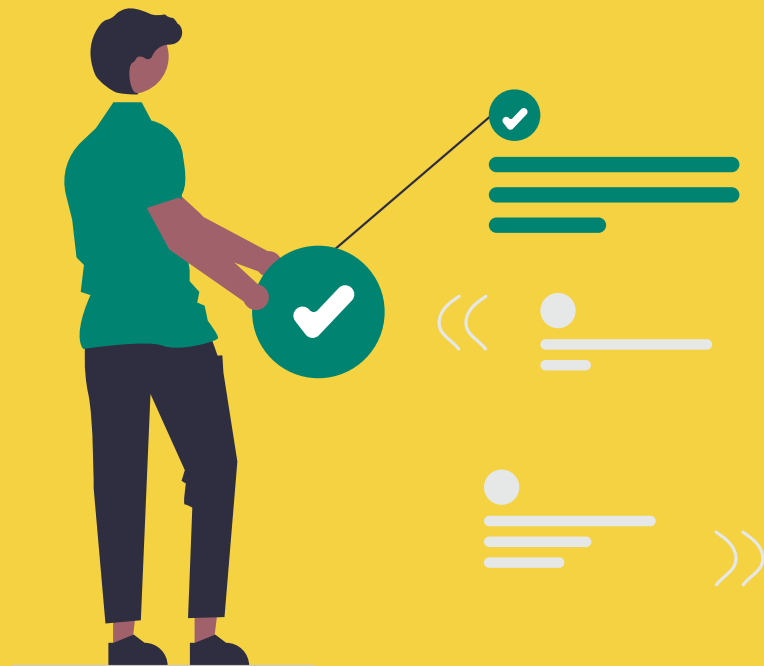


Throughout this project, it became clear that understanding community needs is far more complex than initially thought. Conversations and research highlighted ongoing tensions around responsiveness, priority-area frameworks, impact measurement, and the use of community data within community foundations work.

This work raised important questions around whose voices are represented within community data, how data is interpreted, and what forms of knowledge are valued and considered when trying to understand community needs. While no single solution emerged from this project, several opportunities for continued reflection, collaboration, and exploration are visible throughout this project.

06 Recommendations

The following observations and ideas have emerged from this project and are intended to act as starting points for further conversation and exploration for funders and/or interested stakeholders.



→ UTILIZE MULTIPLE FORMS OF COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

Funders may benefit from utilizing multiple forms of community insight to support more holistic understandings of community well-being. This includes looking for data in different forms than just traditional quantitative datasets.

→ APPROACH COMMUNITY DATA CRITICALLY & ETHICALLY

Organizations that utilize secondary or publicly available datasets should remain reflective when utilizing these datasets and consider representation, interpretation, and equity within community data practices.

→ PRIORITIZE COLLABORATION & KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Reflect on where collaboration and knowledge sharing within your organization could be strengthened to support a more comprehensive understanding of emerging community needs and to reduce potential information silos.

→ EXPAND UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Future work may benefit from expanding understandings of community well-being beyond deficit-based or issue-focused approaches and consider community strengths, values, and assets as well.

→ RECOGNIZE THE LIMITATIONS OF SECONDARY DATA

Publicly available and quantitative datasets may provide valuable insight into community trends; however, they should be understood alongside their limitations and interpreted within broader social and relational contexts.

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This project utilized Grammarly's AI-assisted technology to support the review of sentence structure, clarity, and grammar.

