

Annie Glidden North Focus Groups

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Methodology

Focus groups were conducted with residents and Northern Illinois University (NIU) students who live in the Annie Glidden North neighborhood. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain a broad understanding of the needs of those who live in the neighborhood.

Focus groups are a type of qualitative research in which individuals with similar experiences come together to discuss a specific topic or group of topics. An advantage of focus groups is the in-depth probing of issues they foster. However, because of the small total number of participants, there is no statistical reliability. Therefore, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results because they may not be representative of the entire population.

Residents and NIU students were recruited to participate in the focus groups via communications by Opportunity DeKalb. Those interested in participating in the focus groups completed an online form and indicated their contact information, including their address, and the dates they were available to participate in the focus groups. Emails were sent notifying them to which focus group they were assigned.

The discussion guide for the focus groups was developed by Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) staff and the Board members of Opportunity DeKalb. The guide may be found in Appendix A.

CGS staff conducted a total of four focus groups.

- August 31, 2022 at 5:00 pm. Held under a tent outside the NIU Nursing building
- September 6, 2022 at 6:30 pm. Held at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church
- September 7, 2022 at 5:00 pm. Held at University Village
- September 7, 2022 at 7:00 pm. Held at Cast Iron Coffee

34 residents and NIU students participated in the focus groups. In addition to notes taken during the groups, all groups were recorded. Dinner was served at each focus group and a \$25 gift card to a local restaurant was provided for participation. Each focus group was approximately 75 minutes in length.

Findings

Perceptions of Living in DeKalb

The focus groups began with two questions about perceptions of living in DeKalb. Participants were asked what they like most about living in DeKalb and why and what they like least about living in DeKalb and why.

The residents provide a variety of reasons why they like living in DeKalb, including it is relatively safe, the location is convenient, it is quiet and peaceful, it is affordable, the schools, the parks, the smaller size of the town, it is a good place to raise a family, and it is a place for “a new beginning.” Most residents believe that DeKalb is safe compared to Chicago. A few residents mention that they feel comfortable letting their children go outside by themselves. They think that Dekalb is close to everything. They state that DeKalb is close to Chicago and other places and family and friends are close. A few residents indicate that they moved to DeKalb from Chicago because they can have a better life, a fresh start in DeKalb.

The NIU students mention they like the new businesses that have opened, downtown improvements, the restaurants, and Corn Fest.

The resident report that the increase in crime is what they like least about DeKalb. The resident comment that ‘crime is out of hand’ and that you can’t go out at night. The residents are pleased that there has been an increased presence of police in the neighborhood recently.

The students also mention the increase in crime as what they like least about DeKalb. They say they receive a lot of safety warnings from NIU. They hear sounds and they are not sure if they are gunshots or fireworks. One student mentions that they are afraid to go out alone at night to put out the garbage.

Perceptions of Their Neighborhood

Next, the participants were asked about their perceptions of their neighborhood, the strengths and assets in their neighborhood, the needs in their neighborhood, and suggestions for a small project that would have a big impact in their neighborhood.

When asked what they like most about their neighborhood the residents comment that it is safe, it is quiet, and a good place to raise children. A few participants also comment they like the improvements that have been made to their apartment complex including apartment renovations and the addition of security cameras.

The students like that their neighborhood is close to the university, has a mix of students and families, and it is peaceful and quiet. They mention that they like seeing all the children in the neighborhood.

The participants do not like the inequities in services, businesses, infrastructure, and housing in their neighborhood versus the rest of DeKalb. They cite the lack of health services, mental health and substance abuse services, and social services, no place for children to go (community or recreation center), no grocery store, no bike paths, no sidewalks, and poor conditions in some apartment complexes as examples.

The participants identify the following assets or strengths in their neighborhood.

- churches
- transportation (buses)
- police
- Northern Illinois University

Most participants comment that the greatest need in their neighborhood are places and programs for children. They would like a community or recreation center and an after-school program. Several participants mention the need for more activities and entertainment for

children, such as bowling and an arcade. Crime prevention is also a need mentioned by most participants. The participants believe the police officers should be engaging with the community more. They indicate the police officers need to build relationships with the community and increase the trust and respect of the community. Another need participants cite is a grocery store. Participants would like a grocery store within walking distance because it is difficult to get groceries without a car. Lastly, the participants state that their neighborhood needs more health services, mental health and substance abuse services, and social services.

The NIU Greek students see a need for a Greek Center to hang out, study, and have meetings at. They state that they don't have a place where they can meet up together. They recommend the Greek Center be in the former Hunter Hillcrest/Blackhawk Theater area.

When asked what they would like to see in their community in the future various answers are provided. Many participants would like to see the housing conditions in the Annie Glidden North area improved. They say that some apartments are poorly maintained and uninhabitable. The participants say that "landlords will rent to anyone." Also, "some tenants do not appreciate what they have" and destroy the apartments. Participants think that standards are needed of what is expected of landlords and tenants. Several participants would like to see an improved relationship between Northern Illinois students and residents. They perceive the university to be a separate entity from DeKalb, with little interaction between students and residents. They would like to see more activities where students and residents can bond. A few participants state that they would like to see more job and education opportunities. They comment that more jobs, especially for professionals, and technical education are needed. One resident says she would like training and financial assistance so she can open a restaurant.

The participants did not have any suggestions on how to leverage the neighborhood's strengths to achieve that future. However, they did mention that their church is building a community center within the next two years and will also have counselors.

The main barrier to change that the participants perceive is the people who live in the neighborhood. According to one participant, “people move to DeKalb to escape, but they bring what they are trying to escape with them.” They state that there are people who have too much spare time (no job or do not attend school) and they hang out and cause trouble. There are also drug addicts, individuals with mental health issues, and individuals who are abusive. These individual need help but are not willing to get it. The participants comment that parents do not care about their children, do not take responsibility for their children’s behavior, and do not supervise their children. They say that there needs to be more supports for parents and suggest that NIU could provide parenting and child development classes.

The participants suggest the following ways they can better engage or get to know each other in the neighborhood.

- Community gatherings, such as block parties
- Community conversations to get to know each other, talk, and address issues
- On an individual basis by seeking conversations and relationships with neighbors

The participants were asked for suggestions of a small project that could make a big impact in their neighborhood. The residents believe that children are their future and a good place to start. They suggest an after-school program for children during which they could receive help with homework and tutoring from parent and NIU student volunteers, an organization that provides field trips, and mentors for children. Other suggestions are to have a cleanup day to make the neighborhood look better, a community garden, and community events and activities, such as jazz music, a barbecue, family game night, and a basketball tournament.

Resident/NIU Student Involvement

Lastly, the participants were asked what is the best way to keep them, friends, and neighbors involved in future work in the neighborhood. The participants say the best way is to communicate using a variety of methods. They cite social media (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok), the City of DeKalb website, newsletters, have schools send home flyers in children’s backpacks, walk through the

neighborhood and talk to people, post flyers on resident's doors, and events as good ways to communicate.

Additional Comments

At the end of the focus group the participants were asked to provide any additional comments they may have. Several participants strongly express they want action to be taken and they want to see change. These participants comment that there have been numerous discussions about the Annie Glidden North neighborhood without action. They do not expect change overnight but do expect progress. They suggest starting small. One participant states "little things give hope and build trust."

Appendix A: Discussion Guide

Annie Glidden North Focus Group Discussion Guide

I. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Purpose of Focus Group

1. Welcome. Thank you for participating tonight. My name is Mindy Schneiderman. I am a researcher from the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University. The Center for Governmental Studies has been asked to conduct focus groups with residents and NIU students about the Annie Glidden North area. The Annie Glidden North neighborhood boundaries were defined in the City of DeKalb's 2018 Annie Glidden North Revitalization Plan and can be found on the City of DeKalb's website. But generally speaking, with some exceptions, the Annie Glidden North neighborhood is all of northwest DeKalb that is north of Lucinda Avenue and west of Normal Road.
2. You have been invited here tonight to share your opinions and ideas regarding the Annie Glidden North area.

B. Moderator's Job

1. My job is:

- to make sure all the topics are covered,
- to keep the discussion on track, and
- to give everyone a chance to voice his or her opinion.

C. Instructions for Focus Group

1. We have some observers listening in tonight who are very interested in what you have to say.
2. Julie Gommel Bailey who works with me is taking notes.
3. Please talk one at-a-time in a voice at least as loud as mine because the discussion is being recorded. The only reason we record the discussion is so I can listen to the recording, if needed, when I am writing my report. **Ask for consent to record discussion.**
4. You do not need to address all your comments to me. You may respond directly to someone else's comment, but please avoid private side conversations.
5. There are no wrong answers, just differing opinions and we want to hear those different perspectives.

6. Before we begin, I would like Dan Kenney Board President of Opportunity DeKalb, to say a few words. (Dan will not be there for the first night so speaking will be Glenn Roby, Board Member of Opportunity DeKalb).

D. Introduction of Participants

- I. Please tell us your first name, whether you are resident, NIU student, or both. If you are a resident, how long you have lived in the Annie Glidden North area and who is in your household (partner, children, etc.)?

II. Perceptions of Living in DeKalb (10 minutes)

- A. What do you like most about living in DeKalb?
 - Why do you like that the most?
- B. What do you like least about living in DeKalb?
 - Why do you like that the least?

III. Perceptions of Their Neighborhood (45 minutes)

- A. What do you like most about the neighborhood where you live?
- B. What do you like least about the neighborhood where you live?
- C. What are the most valuable assets in our community as a whole? What are the most valuable strengths in your neighborhood specifically?
- D. What are the greatest needs in our neighborhood? What ideas do you have for how to address those needs?
- E. If you left our community and came back 5 years later, what would you like to see?
 - Is there a way we can leverage our current strengths to make that future happen?
- F. What are some ways we can better engage or get to know each other in the neighborhood?
- G. What are small projects that could make a big impact in our community?

IV. Resident/NIU Student Involvement (5 minutes)

- A. What are the best ways to keep you and your friends and neighbors involved in future work in the neighborhood?

V. Additional Comments (5 minutes)

- A. Does someone have something about DeKalb or the neighborhood that you would like to bring up that we've not discussed?
- B. Explain how focus group findings will be used.
- C. Thank you and distribute incentive.