

Observing Civic Engagement Lab

Studying Civil Society Organizations
with Systematic Social Observation

Lab Directors

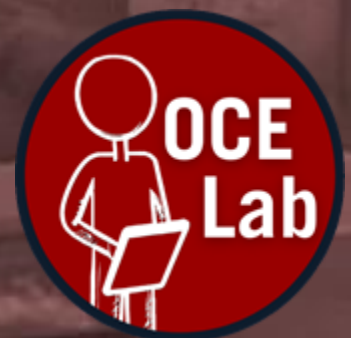
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Civil Society Organizations

What are Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)?

CSOs are formal organizations whose participants voluntarily assemble to pursue common purposes. They are also known as voluntary associations, civic associations, or membership-based organizations. CSOs include hobby clubs, business associations, religious congregations, advocacy groups, and more.

Why should we care about CSOs?

Scholars and observers from Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1800s to Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol today have argued that citizen participation in CSOs is a crucial part of what makes democracy work. CSOs can also strengthen local communities and provide opportunities for connection, service, growth, and leadership.



What do we know about CSOs?

Scholarship has shown that there are lots (and *lots*) of CSOs, that they do many different things in many different ways, that many people affiliate with them, and that some people actively participate in them. Some of those participants develop new or improved civic and political skills and interests—and then go on to participate more in politics and create new civic ventures in their communities.

What do we *not* know about CSOs?

We do not know *how much* internal dynamics vary across CSOs. How many people actually attend CSO meetings? How often do participants interact with people different from themselves? How often do they talk about politics? How often do meetings start and end on time? How often do groups make clear decisions—and plans to act on them? How often do participants shout at one another or sing together or hug each other? How often do they meet in public spaces (like libraries), private spaces (like homes), or commercial spaces (like cafes)? Answers to these questions of *frequency, intensity, and distribution* have eluded scholars for nearly 200 years.



Systematic Social Observation

What is systematic social observation (SSO)?

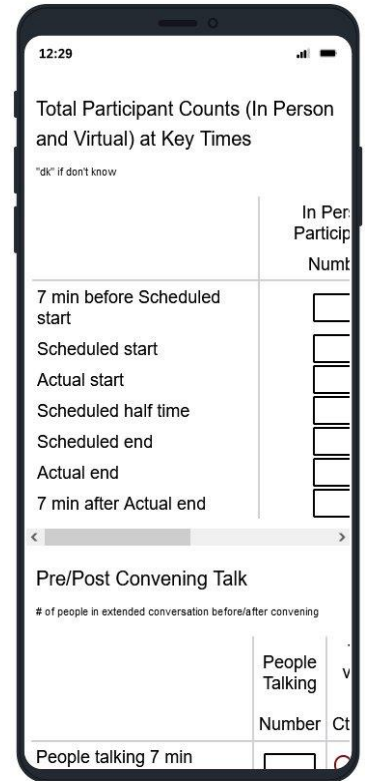
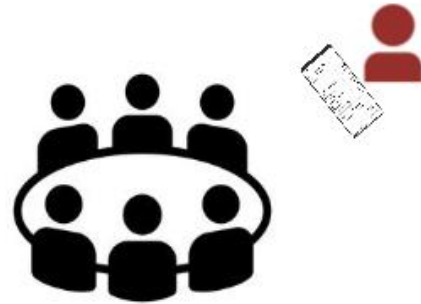
SSO is a data collection technique that uses trained observers and standardized protocols and forms to collect detailed, comparable, quantitative data from many similar settings. It allows scholars to get more fine-grained detail on social and spatial dynamics than surveys, interviews, or documents can provide, while also examining more social settings than ethnography can reach.

SSO has a long but sporadic history of use in social science. Developed originally in developmental psychology, it has been used in a variety of sociological field settings including studies of police-citizen interactions, the use of public parks and plazas, retail shopping behavior, and urban disorder.

A New Approach: SSO for CSOs

How does systematic social observation work in civil society organizations?

Over 15 years, we have developed an SSO approach to studying CSOs. We study convenings—meetings, events, and activities held by CSOs. Our trained observers attend convenings hosted by CSOs that participate in our studies. Observers arrive early and measure the convening space. They then sit apart from participants and watch the convening unfold. They tally and categorize the people, interactions, and activities they see as they happen. Data are entered on the fly into a survey form loaded on a tablet computer.



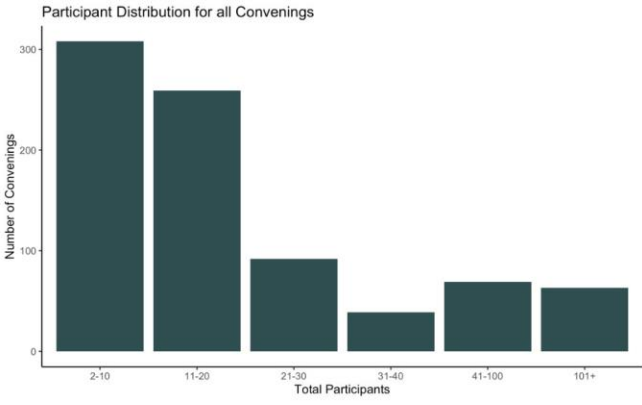
What can SSO for CSOs reveal about CSO convenings?

Our SSO tool includes more than 100 items that capture more than 700 variables. The primary thematic areas are:

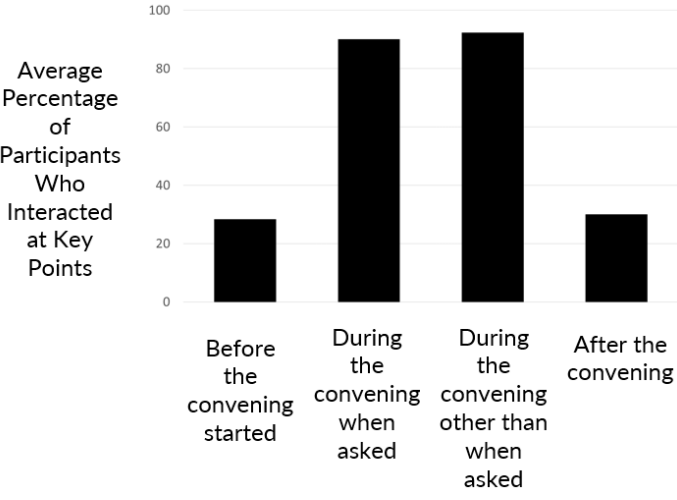
Convening Type	Formats & Spaces	Times & Participants	Procedures & Norms
Activities	Leaders	Decision Making	Social Boundaries
Planning & Strategizing	Organizing & Mobilizing	Public-Sphere Discussion	Interactions & Interaction Styles

CSOs in Bloomington, Indiana

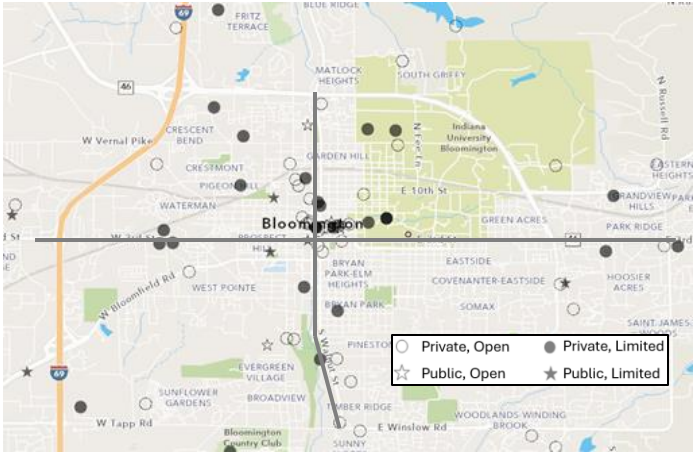
We are in the midst of a multi-year study of CSOs in Bloomington, IN. As of spring 2026, we have observed more than 2500 convenings held by 53 CSOs in the community with the help over 50 trained research assistants. We continue to collect data to see trends over time and are working toward observing 60 organizations in the community. We have conducted initial analyses of about several data points and include a few findings here.



Most CSO convenings are very small—just 2-10 participants. A few, however, are quite large; the largest we observed had over 2000 participants. Mid-sized convenings where participants might be most likely to interact with people they do not already know are least common.



At the average convening about 90% of participants interact during the convening and about 30% interact before or after. While interaction is common both when conveners ask participants to interact and during unstructured moments when participants interact spontaneously, about 10% of participants do not interact—even when asked—and at a few convenings, *no one* interacts when asked.



More than 80% of convening spaces are privately owned and operated, but a majority of those are open for anyone to enter (like cafes or churches). Less than 7% of convening spaces are in publicly-owned spaces with open access. Spaces are clustered downtown along primary transportation axes. Those located farther from the urban core appear more frequently in lower-wealth neighborhoods.

Projects

About 60 million Americans live in rural areas—and civil society organizations play important and distinctive roles in rural communities. In the summer of 2025, we launched observations in three rural communities: Dubuque, Iowa; the Adirondacks, New York; and Kootenai County, Idaho. Each new community has 30 participating organizations and small research teams of 2-4 observers. We have observed more than 800 convenings in these areas as of spring 2026.

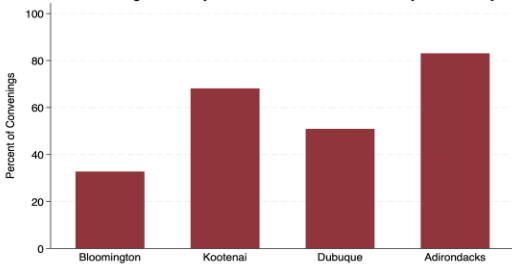


Photo: [Dirk DBQ](#) (CC)

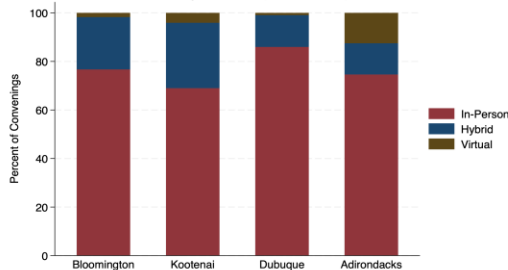


Photo: [Ken Lund](#) (CC)

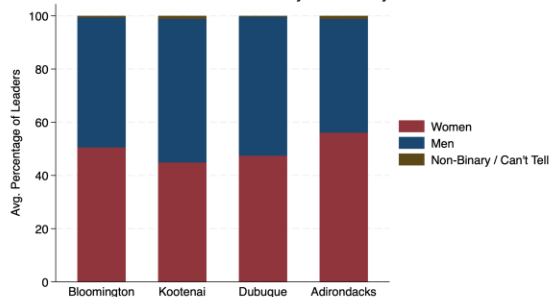
Convenings with any Collective Action Practices by community



Convening Format by community



Gender Distribution of Leaders by community



With this expansion, we can see how different variables show up across our participating communities, such as...

- **Collective action practices** (including organizing and mobilizing practices) occur at quite different frequencies across communities (*from 20% of all convenings in Bloomington to 80% in the Adirondacks*).
- **The majority of convenings occur in-person**, though many communities offer virtual or hybrid participation options as well.
- All four communities show relatively balanced distributions of **practiced leadership across gender**.

We can learn much about different aspects of organizations and communities through our data as well as work toward larger questions about civic life across the United States.

Benefits of Participating

Participating organizations help contribute to our understanding of varying facets in community life. We keep individual organization data confidential from the public but do share organization-specific findings belonging to respective organizations as well as findings about larger community trends. **Our research is a collaborative process and we work with organizations to share data that can be of most help to them.**



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