



Design Research Method

Design, Place, & Social Innovation Studio:
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Exploring the value of learning about community members' thoughts and feelings about youth safety

This method aims to understand what Pittsburgh community members think and feel about youth safety. Our goal was to demonstrate the value and potential application of information gathered in this way. To do this we have designed two tools to collect qualitative information from the community.

Where we began

As a studio, we started our preliminary research in the area of gun safety and violence. We first conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders in Pittsburgh, read relevant books and articles, and looked at how the issue was represented in the media.


We noticed that many organizations working in this area were relying on large statistical data to inform their decisions, along with many post-violence narratives. We recognized that behavioral and attitudinal qualitative data could complement the abundance of existing quantitative data. This could provide rich insight into the gaps and needs of the community by Pittsburgh residents.

With this understanding, we focused on uncovering the root of what lied beneath the chaos and complexity of the gun issue.



The focus

What are people relying on guns for and why do they need something to rely on? While guns may come up in the conversations we are facilitating, using guns as a starting point makes the assumption that guns are the cause of the problem in relation to safety in Pittsburgh. Starting the conversation with guns also has a polarizing effect, causing many to put up barriers and preventing productive conversation.



*We're talking
about safety,
not guns.*

Initial questions

Our initial design brief explored the two questions on the right. As we moved further along with our process, we focused more on the second question. We had limited access to the change agents in the community, and it made sense to emphasize the qualitative information gathered from the Pittsburgh community. With the gathered information, we could then present its value to community leaders.

- 1 What are the current processes used by change agents in the community to address safety and guns?**
- 2 How can design research be used as a tool to gather attitudinal and behavioral information from the community members?**

Focused questions

Looking closer at one of the initial questions: *How can design research be used as a tool to gather attitudinal and behavioral information from the community members?*, we focused in on the two questions to the right.

- 1** **What factors make someone feel safe and what does safety mean to someone?**
- 2** **How do people envision the future of youth safety in Pittsburgh and what can we do to accomplish this?**

Assessment of existing tools

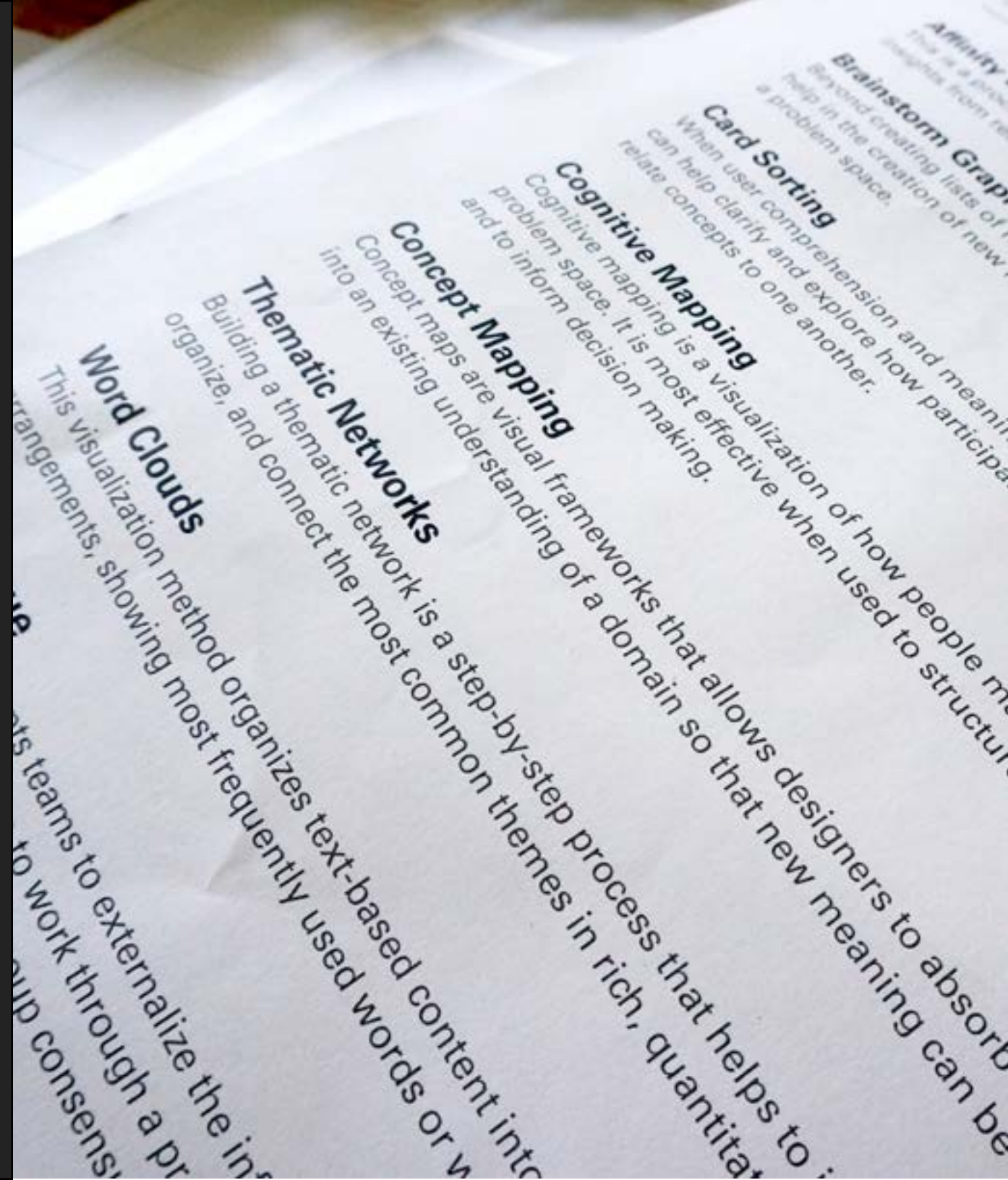
In order to tackle the mentioned concepts, we began with assessing existing tools.

An abundance of applicable design research methods exist, so that's where we started. We first looked through a variety of existing tools to understand what type of insights the tools revealed. We considered what kind of experience the tools would create for the participants.

We then organized a select group of these tools into five categories, informed by what we identified as important qualitative topics related to the issue of child safety and guns. Some categories include emotional probes, possible futures, and representation and analysis.

It was important for us to recognize that these research tools do not serve as an absolute, quintessential method to follow, but instead provide a new lens to look at complex problems and withdraw meaningful qualitative insights.

The design tools in the upcoming pages have been created by considering the context of Pittsburgh and the specified problem space.



Workshop: gathering insights

After understanding the existing tools, we chose three to adapt and strategically arranged them into a workshop. The goal of this workshop was to gather qualitative data about safety and trust in Pittsburgh. We did not mention the idea of “guns” at all because we were trying to uncover the reason why someone feels unsafe or distrustful in the Pittsburgh community — which can potentially start a conversation leading to firearms.

We spent an hour conducting this workshop with four Pittsburgh residents to test our adapted tools.



Image cards

The first adapted tool we used was image cards. They served well as the first activity because it opened up conversations without uncomfortable spotlights on the participants.

Area of focus: What factors make someone feel safe? How are people feeling about safety and danger in Pittsburgh? Why are they feeling this way?

How it works: We spread out about fifty 2.5" x 3.5" image cards that served as a prompt to help draw out stories and reasoning, recall experiences, and evoke conversation at the table. We then asked the participants questions (shown below) and asked them to pick out up to three cards that represent their answer. After a couple of minutes, the participants were asked to share their responses.

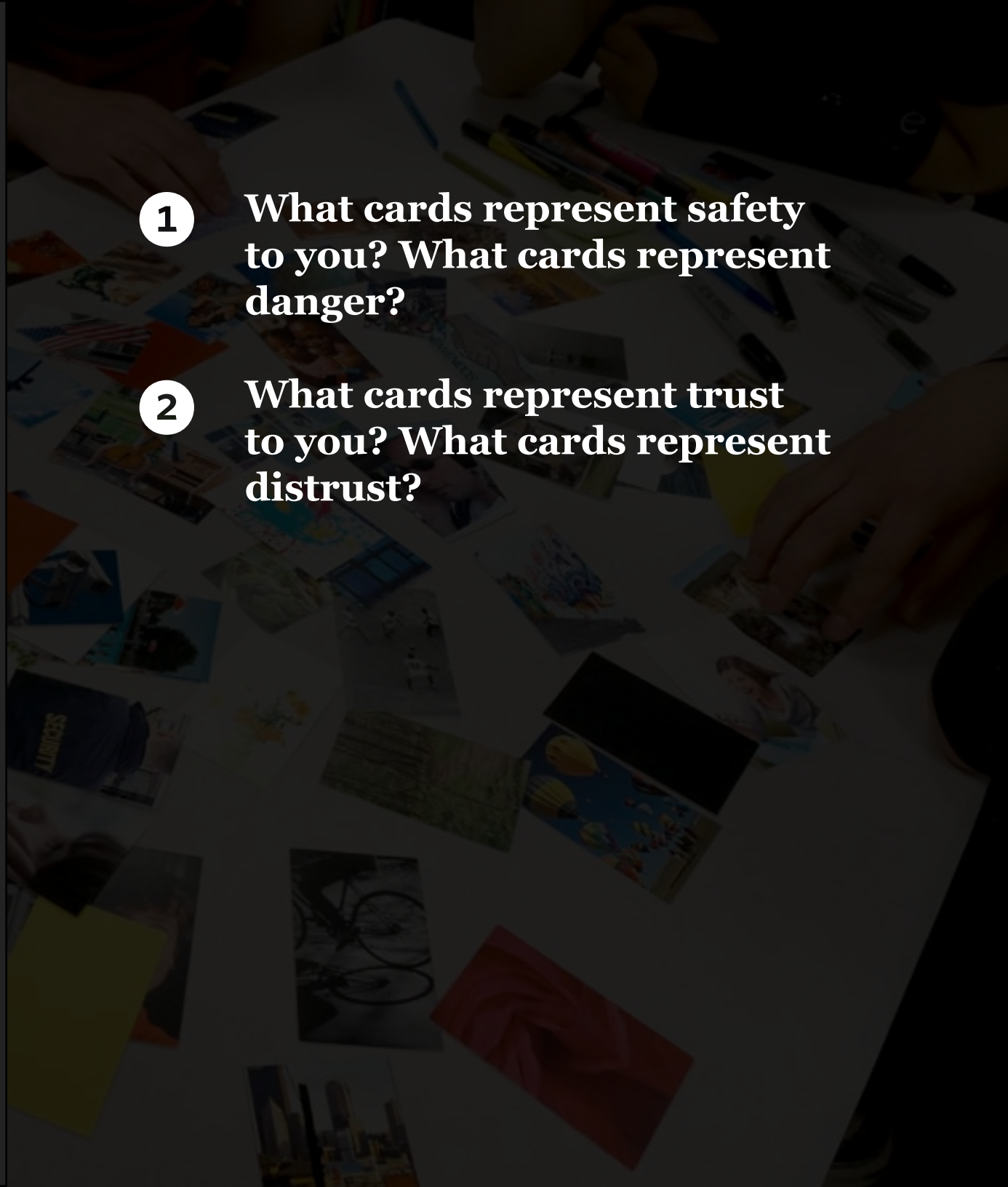


Image cards

The questions we asked were kept broad to avoid directing the conversation into a narrow space. The images on the cards ranged from literal to abstract representations — including words, textures, and shapes.

1 What cards represent safety to you? What cards represent danger?

2 What cards represent trust to you? What cards represent distrust?



Prompt cards

The second tool we used involved prompt cards that we designed.

Area of focus: How do people envision the future of youth safety in Pittsburgh and what can we do to accomplish this?

How it works: The prompt cards were presented in four categories: community, trust, risk & danger, and safety. There were sixteen cards from each category spread out on the table, allowing the participants to pick and choose cards that resonated with them. They were asked to fill out the cards with a variety of statements and questions, such as "I would feel safer on the streets if we had... because..."

The prompt cards served as probes for emotional, attitudinal, and perceptual information. As for the visual design, the cards were designed to be approachable, using handwriting for the questions and simple color blocks to visually differentiate the categories.

trust
do you trust Pittsburgh as your place of living?

love & keeping that in Pitt.
I'll not stay here after school graduation.
don't trust the weather, all the
people are nice and genuine.

My favorite place in Pittsburgh is

Pitt | SHADY SIDE | SHADY

because...

FRIENDS LOT OF PEOPLE COMPASSIONATE
JOB WORKERS
FOOD PLACES

community
community effort I'd like to see is...

OPENING THE STREETS TO
PEOPLE. JUST A BETTER OVERALL
CITY WOULD GO A LONG WAY
TO IMPROVING THE
QUALITY OF LIFE. I FEEL LIKE I
LOVE MY NEIGHBORS

community
The most trustworthy community to me is...

ONE WHERE PEOPLE ARE ENGAGED
WITH THEIR NEIGHBORS. FOR ME, A GOOD
EXAMPLE OF THIS IS HANCOCK PLACE IN
WILKINSBURG WHERE THERE IS AN EMAIL
NEWSGROUP PEOPLE SUBSCRIBE TO. IF
ISSUES ARISE (SUCH AS CRIME, STOPPING
NEIGHBORS ARE IMMEDIATELY ALERTED.

risk + danger
community is cautious of...

WILKINSBURG HAS BEEN MAKING
PROGRESS, IT STILL HAS A LONG
GO. THE COUNCIL MEMBERS
ARE WORKING FOR POSITIVE
CHANGE. YAY!

ACTIVE COMMUNITY
neighborhood
engagement

I wish my neighborhood had a place to...
gather together to enjoy each other's
company and also enjoy nature (eg. a park)

because...

my ~~own~~ neighborhood back home is not
very close. Not many people know each other
and I feel like a neighborhood that has
a communal area is one that is more
intimate.

My community is cautious of...

While Williamsburg has been making
STEADY PROGRESS, IT STILL HAS A LONG
WAY TO GO. THE COUNCIL MEMBERS
AND OTHERS WORKING FOR POSITIVE
CHANGE ARE VERY CONSCIOUS OF
AVOIDING GENTRIFICATION. YAY!

The most useful technology for cities & communities is...
Public transit. as unpredictable
as it may be, you trust that it will
eventually pass by and take you where
you need to go.

I would feel safer if...
People take action when they see
something obviously wrong. Too
many bystanders but no one stepping
up.

Clustering

Finally, we used clustering to group related prompt cards.

Area of focus: What common themes run through the participants' answers? What themes stand out to the participants?

How it works: After the participants filled out the prompt cards, we asked them to share a few that stood out. We then laid out everyone's completed prompt cards to find common themes among them. Participants and facilitators clustered related prompt cards in groups, eventually forming themes. The themes such as "reliable people" were written down on sticky notes so it was easy to move around while making connections.

Clustering helped us understand connections between seemingly unrelated things and to identify recurring themes. These insights, with further analysis and synthesis, would reveal opportunities for improvement and gaps or needs that could be fulfilled.

What makes up a trustworthy person?
one who genuinely cares about your best
well-being. Selfish people are very
to trust, at least for me.

safety

My community plays a
significant role

life because...
my closest friends are part of this
community and I put my full trust in them.
My community has had a huge impact on me, and
I am very comfortable in it.

community

Someone else to supervise my children. I trust...
my own children, but I would probably
trust another family member or a very close
friend because they are people that I know
and trust.

community

had a question about my safety I'd go to...
MY MOM. SHE'S OLDER AND WISER
AND I AM YOUNG, NAIVE AND
NOT AWARE OF DANGER OFTEN.
SHE'S NOT GREAT AT RISK,
THOUGH, SO I TRUST HER

Who do you trust the most?
MY FRIENDS

Why?
I FEEL LIKE THEY WOULDN'T HAVE AN
AGENDA

What makes up a trustworthy person?
Someone who is predictable
in making a good decision. Someone
who is reliable.

community

If I had a problem, the first place or person I'd turn to is...
i) SCHOOL RELATED - SCHOOL OFFICIAL
LIKE HOUSEPARENT OR SOMETHING
ii) PERSOONAL - I'D PROBABLY ASK MY MOM
WHO TO TALK TO
because...
i) THEY ALWAYS SEEM LIKE THEY WANT THE
BEST FOR CAMPUS + INDIVIDUAL STUDENT
ii) SHE'S GOOD WITH THAT STUFF

RELIABLE
PEOPLE

risk + danger

What does DANGER mean to you?

PERSONAL WELL-BEING IS 'IN
JEOPARDY'

Feelings

perception

risk + danger

The biggest danger or threat to me in Pittsburgh is...

walking alone at night. I know someone
who was held at gunpoint in a situation
like this and it's a scary thought that
this person could have been killed.

risk + danger

What does DANGER mean to you?

Possible harm can come to someone,
whether it be physical or mental.

risk + danger

In my neighborhood, I feel uneasy when...

I hear of students being attacked
through official communications and
how students don't know/use services
provided by our school to avoid those
situations.

trust

I would trust CAMPUS POTO more if...

THEY ACCEPTED THE THINGS THAT
COLLEGE STUDENTS DO

Feedback from participants

We asked for feedback following the workshop from our participants. One of the participants expressed that the categories for the prompt cards led him to bias his answers to what would fit best in the category, instead of having his answers be unguided. Participants also asked if they could amend the prompt cards or provide multiple answers.

Others expressed that they felt comfortable in the environment and at ease to share their thoughts. These topics included how much they know and don't know about Pittsburgh, the role of the family unit in talking about safety, comparisons of current neighborhood to childhood neighborhood, and differences between urban and suburban interactions.

The participants also expressed that the prompts led them to think on a deeper level than a normal open discussion they would have, which was enjoyable.

NEIGHBORHOOD: PENN HILLS/PLUM
NEIGHBORHOOD: SQUIBBEL HILL

LOT ABOUT FAMILY UNIT AND WHAT MY
D WAS LIKE BECAUSE I ALWAYS FELT
BE GROWING UP AND I KNOW NOT EVERY-
IS THAT SAME FEELING

FILLING IN CATEGORIES' THING BUT FELT MY
MAY HAVE BEEN BIASED BY THE HEADINGS/

WAS VERY COMFORTABLE AND I FELT
SHARING MY ANSWERS ~~WITH~~

Debrief

The participants tended to avoid the future oriented questions, as these seemed harder to answer.

Additional prompts regarding how people deal with risky and dangerous situations would have also been beneficial. We didn't get as much information about why people feel the need for protection, partially due to our time constraint. With one hour, the depth of our data was compromised because we wanted to learn about multiple areas with multiple tools. In the future we would be more conscious of this balance between depth and time.

Conversations between participants were also limited. People agreed or disagreed with others, but didn't discuss further. We could have played a larger role in pushing conversations deeper as facilitators by asking follow up questions and encouraging participants to discuss as a group.

We also started to cluster and analyze the information, but we needed more time to get deeper into the data and withdraw themes and key insights.



Public insight collection

Our second tool was conducted at a Healthy Kids Day event at YMCA in the Hill District, PA. We set up three boards, each with a questions.

- I wish my neighborhood had...
- I would feel safer if...
- I feel the need to protect myself because...

We invited kids, parents, volunteers, and employees to answer the questions on a sticky note, and post it to the boards.

In contrast to the workshop, this method gathered smaller pieces of information from a larger sample of people, demonstrating how information can be gathered at a public event. It was designed to be approachable and understandable by children as well as adults. It also served as a platform for individuals to see what other community members thought.



I wish my neighborhood had...

More lighting;
Buses and
Security

I like
that there
are alot
of kids
around.

~~More~~ street
lights should
be brighter

More security
officers
out at
night

A jacuzzi
in the Y!

A local Y

Swimming
Pool.

Traffic

more lights
and police
presence

NCA
For
Kids 

more public
buses going
through it

Dog

Cats



more
parks

I wish there
you 910
daise

New.
SAFE
playground

bike paths

A POOL

spray park!

5

I wish my

more

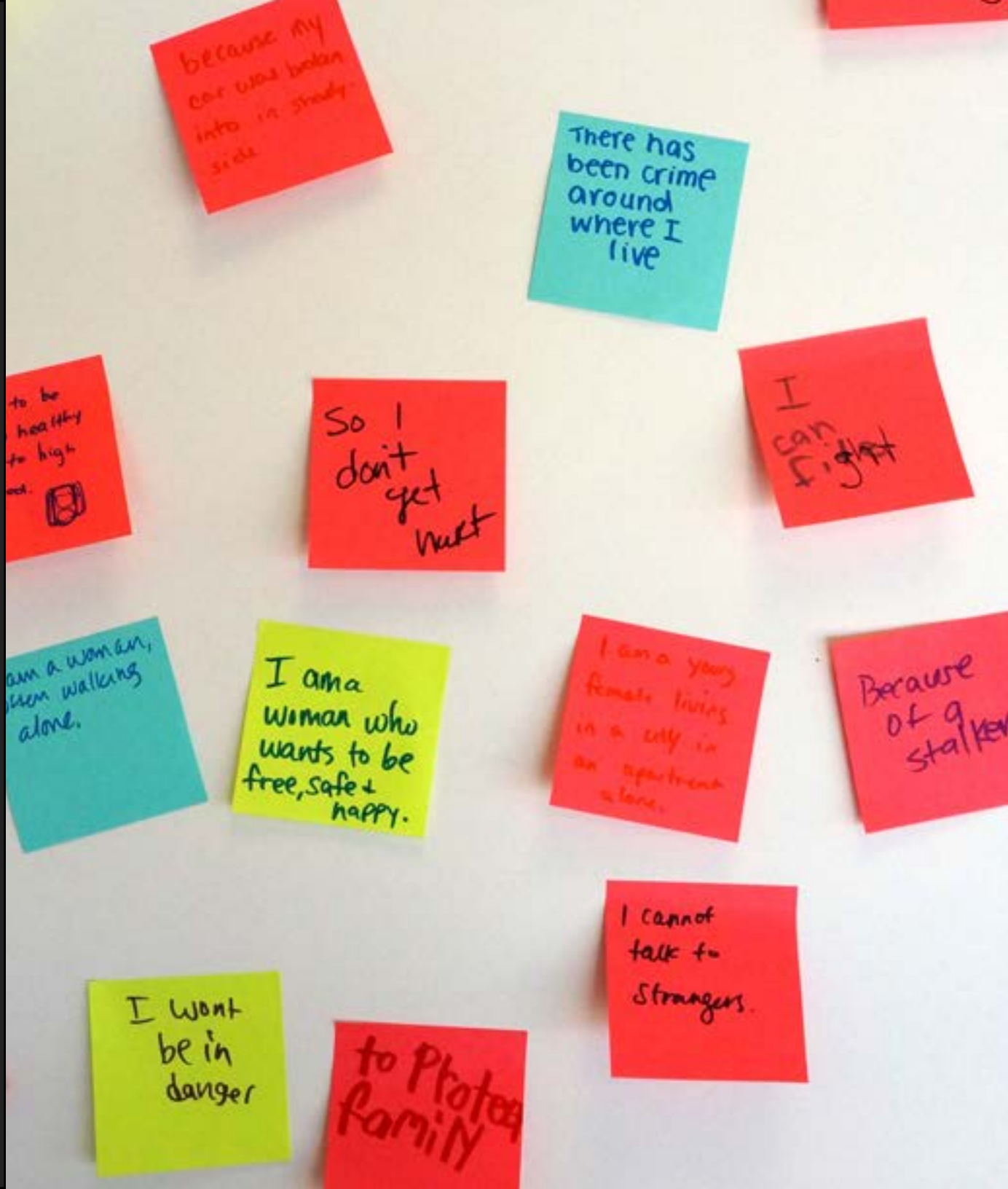
Debrief

What worked well?

Using this tool at this particular event provided a good context, as there were variety of people. There were many kids with their parents, and this tool facilitated a conversation between them. The variety of our questions was also good in that "I wish my neighborhood had" was easy for children to understand, while "I feel the need to protect myself" was thought about more deeply by the adults.

What would we do differently?

We could have asked the participants follow up questions to encourage deeper conversation and for us to better understand what their answers meant. It would also be worthwhile to explore different options of how people interacted with previous answers before writing their own. Since some people read what others wrote first, their answers may have been influenced by them. One option to address this would be to have them answer first, and then reveal answers from others. Another option could be to encourage people to respond to previous answers, such as explaining why they agree or disagree.



Overall strengths

The method we used to gather qualitative information revealed raw and important insights from the community. The data was informed by the context of Pittsburgh and its community because we were getting information from the people we were serving. Statistical data alone does not reveal the holistic picture of complex problems, which is why we believe in gathering qualitative data to complement insights that will inform decisions. Design research tools present a different way to look at a complex issue -- and it's currently an underutilized problem-solving lens.



Overall limitations

One of the difficulties we faced is finding appropriate community members willing to participate. It is often hard for people to see the importance of their contributed time and input, so looking at how we motivate participation is important. It is also crucial to recognize biases in the results because of who is willing to participate.

With this type of method it is necessary to generalize information and make judgments about the applicability of the information to others. We are also unsure if the facilitators for this method need to be trained as a design researcher; can the community leaders themselves hold these workshops?



Potential next steps

With more time and resources, we would like to further explore the possibilities for opening up relationships amongst design researchers, community members and community leaders. By linking people together in the community, there can be a more cohesive and effective effort towards solving problems. It also would have been valuable to learn more about the current processes used by community leaders to solve issues, strategize, and plan.

We can take the workshop to the next step by diving into more focused research, based on the themes we found. We could also use the themes as the topic for further quantitative research to see if these opinions hold true within a larger sample of Pittsburgh residents. There are an infinite number of variations that can be explored, such as holding the workshop with different demographics of people or within different neighborhoods, allowing us to compare the information that comes from people with different experiences and backgrounds.



Value of design

As designers we focus on how people experience things and have a strong sense of empathy for users. This is evident through the workshop experience, as we considered elements that were crucial in facilitating a comfortable environment. Through the way we presented the topic of safety and danger, the conversations took the form of discussions, not debates, allowing us to discuss issues that are highly polarized in a productive manner. Engaging with other community members opened up the opportunity to see things from a neighbor's perspective, and gave context to the space of safety in Pittsburgh.



Value of design

Because design is a method to approach problems, it can be applied to range of domains. The process of design is aware of the context of the issue and considers the appropriate tools and communication for the relevant people involved. Agility is an important attribute of design, especially when working in a complex space. For example, we designed an appropriate visual language for the workshop that was casual and approachable. Clear communication is also a key attribute of design, as it allowed us to ensure that the diverse participants were engaged with a shared level of understanding.

The behavioral and attitudinal qualitative data from this method could complement the abundance of existing quantitative data, providing rich insight for positive change.

