

Civic Muscle Index – County-Level Scoring

Building Stronger Communities: Measuring Civic Muscle

The **Civic Muscle Index** empowers communities by quantifying their "civic muscle" – the capacity for belonging, contribution, leadership, and vitality – that drives thriving places. Developed for Missouri counties, this index draws from diverse public data sources to create actionable, comparable scores on a 1-100 scale. Higher scores signal robust community fabric; lower ones highlight opportunities for growth.

Metrics are selected for their adherence to framework concepts and ties to well-being outcomes. Metrics are standardized against outliers and weighted to reflect real-world impact.

Step 1: Select & Gather Metrics

- **Categories and Concepts:** We identify measurement concepts across the domains of Belonging (bg), Contribution (cn), Leadership (ld) and Vitality (vt). We then identify and operationalize metrics within each domain (e.g., census response rate for civic engagement, % population with access to parks for neighborhood amenities).
- **Data Sources:** We collect county and ZIP-code level data from current, public, national data sources (e.g., US Census Bureau) to allow for fair comparisons across all of Missouri's 114 counties and the city of St. Louis. Using national datasets allows for scalability, should the index be expanded to other states in the future.
- **Criteria:** Each metric is vetted for reliability, adjusted for directionality (so that higher scores are always better), and weighted based on evidence of community impact.

Step 2: Standardize & Generate County-Level Metric Scores

- **1-100 Scale Standardization:** We use Interquartile Range (IQR) z-scores to handle skewed data – median-centered and outlier-resistant.
- **Direction Adjustment:** We flip certain metrics (e.g., poverty rates), so higher standardized values always mean positive civic muscle.
- **Outlier Handling:** We clip data at ± 2 standard deviations to reduce the impact of extreme values.
- **Missing Data Guardrails:** We exclude counties missing >3 metrics per subcategory to ensure reliability and comparability.

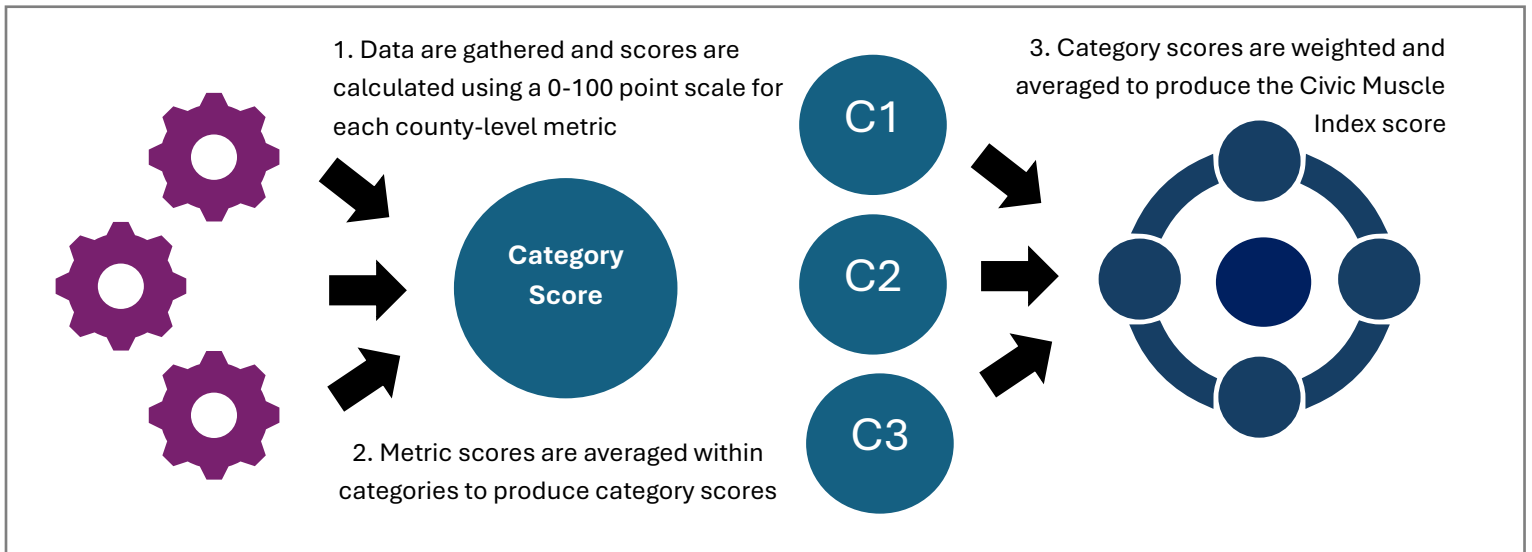


Figure 1: Civic Muscle Index Calculation Flow Chart – From Data to Insights

Step 3: Aggregate to Actionable Insights

- **Subcategory Scores:** We average metric scores within categories, assigning weights based on relative importance and measurement strength.
- **Final Index:** We calculate the weighted average of category scores to generate a holistic Civic Muscle index score for each county with a 1-100 theoretical range.
- **Peer Context:** We pair with Mahalanobis distance analysis to compare counties with similar social and economic contexts (view at <https://civicmuscleindex.org/peer-counties/>).

Why It Matters

This index isn't just numbers – it's a compass for investment. Counties scoring 70+ thrive with strong networks; those below 30 may need targeted support to improve. Programs like MU Extension's Engaged Neighbor Program and the Neighborhood Leadership Academy offer training and roadmaps to help communities flex their civic muscle. Explore interactive results and find programs to build community civic muscle at <https://civicmuscleindex.org/>.

For deeper details (indicator dictionary, full math), see the Technical Methodology Document.