



Tree Equity Handbook

A Practical Guide to Closing the Canopy Gap Between Neighborhoods

ACTIVITY 1.3

→ **In-Person Observation**

Toolkit 1: Collect Baseline Data

Issued November 2025



Activity 1.3: In-Person Observation

Toolkit 1

Collect Baseline Data

Trees are essential to public health and well-being. You probably recognize the need for more tree infrastructure in your community — maybe you've even explored Tree Equity Score — and now you're ready to chart a course of action that leads to greener, safer and more resilient neighborhoods. So where do you start?

Begin by establishing a strong data foundation. In this toolkit, you'll use Tree Equity Score to gather data about trees in your community, identify areas with the greatest need and set priorities for the future. At every step, you'll gather robust data that can help you make the case for investment, policy change and strategic action in pursuit of Tree Equity.

Let's get started!

Activity Map

→ [Basic Data Gathering](#)

→ [Priority Area Mapping](#)

In-Person Observation

In-Person Observation



Overview & Basic Steps

Data is a powerful tool, but it doesn't tell the whole story. Once you've identified areas in your community with the greatest need for investment in tree infrastructure, visit these areas in person to supplement the data with real-world observations.

How does tree canopy change the way one street feels compared to another? What does a 5° heat disparity really feel like in the height of summer? How many children do you see playing outside? Take a walk or drive through your selected priority areas to gain a more nuanced understanding of the lived environment in these neighborhoods.

This activity doesn't have to be exhaustive: Even basic observations will help you to ground your understanding of the data in real-world examples, refine your selection of priority areas and share a more compelling story about Tree Equity to stakeholders.

Before starting this activity, you might need:

- A list of Tree Equity priority areas → [Activity 1.2](#)

Instructions

- 1 Visit priority areas when tree leaves are fully developed — during the late spring, summer or early fall — to observe how the canopy cover affects the feel of each neighborhood. If you can't visit in person, use Google Street View.
- 2 Make observations — use the Neighborhood Field Notes Worksheet as a guide. Engage all five senses to observe tree coverage and environmental conditions (temperature, shade, sounds, scents, etc.).
- 3 Optionally, take outdoor temperature readings during the summer to quantify heat disparities.
- 4 Take photos as a visual record of the extent and quality of the tree canopy.

Suggested Time: 1–2 weeks

Level of Difficulty: Low

Participants: Individuals responsible for project planning, advocacy or communications; volunteers; classrooms

After you complete this activity:

- Form a coalition around shared goals. → [Toolkit 2](#)
- Collect insights and local knowledge from community members. → [Toolkit 3](#)

TOOLKIT 1: In-Person Observation | Activity 3 – WORKSHEET

Observation Tips

A little detail goes a long way.

This is not a tree inventory! Try to focus on the overall feel of the area you're visiting — what the majority of trees look like, how they're distributed etc. Your objective is to capture high-level observations that will help you briefly summarize overall conditions in each neighborhood in later presentations, conversations and reports. Close your eyes to create a mental picture of what you're feeling with all your senses, then make a few high-level notes.

Take tree canopy photos.

Photos are best taken in the summer when leaves on trees are fully developed and green. Aim to capture the overall feel of the canopy in the neighborhood rather than taking close-ups of individual trees. Be truthful: Most neighborhoods with low Tree Equity Scores neighborhoods do have trees! They simply tend to be more sparse, smaller and potentially in worse health. Consider placing similar shots of different neighborhoods next to each other to provide a side-by-side comparison of streets with and without good canopy cover. The visuals you collect will be useful in presentations, grant and project reports, communications materials, media pitches and more.



Left: Willow Street in Providence, Rhode Island has a Tree Equity Score of 100 with 36% canopy cover. Right: Ohio Avenue in Providence, Rhode Island is in a neighborhood with a Tree Equity Score of 60 with only 9% canopy cover. Eben Dente / American Forests.

Get temperature readings.

You should take qualitative notes of the heat disparities you feel between neighborhoods, but it may be useful to support your observations with numbers. Use a reliable thermometer (digital for air temperature or infrared for surface temperature) to record the temperatures

in priority neighborhoods during the summer. Take readings in the full shade and full sun, averaging multiple readings in each location for accuracy. Make sure to record the date and time — ideally, temperature readings for different areas should all be collected on the same day for maximum comparability. Aim for daytime readings during the hottest part of the day, between noon and 3:00 PM.

Get to know your trees.

Down the line, it may be helpful to understand which species of trees are common in priority neighborhoods. Are they species that are susceptible to disease or pests? Are they well-suited to the local climate? Get help from knowledgeable community members or download a free app like iNaturalist to identify the trees you encounter.

See next page for the fillable
Neighborhood Field Notes Worksheet

Sarah Schmid / American Forests



American Forests' tree planting event in Phoenix, Arizona for GreenBiz 2020 with Microsoft employees

Neighborhood Field Notes Worksheet

On-site visits are best done when leaves on trees are fully developed – depending on your location, this is typically late spring, summer, and early fall. Make observations with all five senses. Don't forget to take tree canopy photos! Save them with your field notes, giving them names or labels that include the date and location.



Block Group ID and Neighborhood Name:	Tree Equity Score:
	Tree Canopy Cover:
Address or Street(s) Visited:	Date & Time Visited:

Describe the types of development you see

- Single-Family Residences
 Multi-Family Residences
 Commercial Uses
 Industry
 Recreation
 Institutional Grounds (e.g., hospitals, schools, government or corporate campuses, places of worship)

Notes:

Describe the canopy coverage (select all that apply)

- Abundant
 Lush
 Continuous
 Moderate
 Patchy
 Sparse
 Fragmented
 Isolated

Notes:

Describe the size of urban trees (select all that apply)

- Large
 Moderate
 Small
 Young
 Mature

Notes:

Describe the environmental conditions for people (select all that apply)

- Shady
 Sheltered
 Pleasant
 Lush
 Green
 Exposed
 Barren
 Desolate
 Calm
 Busy
 Quiet
 Noisy
 Natural aromas
 Chemical odors
 Vehicle odors

Notes:

Describe tree health conditions (select all that apply)

- Dry
 Leaf discoloration
 Wilting
 Sparse foliage
 Broken branches
 Dead limbs
 Exposed roots
 Insect infestation
 Stunted growth
 Bark damage
 Strangling vines
 Green and vibrant
 New growth
 Healthy bark
 Flowering

Notes:

Temperature Surface Temp (infrared thermometer) Air Temp (digital thermometer)

Full shade reading(s):

Full sun reading(s):

Sample Neighborhood Field Notes Worksheet

Block Group ID and Neighborhood Name:

Oak Grove, census block group 517600607001

Tree Equity Score: 65

Tree Canopy Cover: 19%

Address or Street(s) Visited:

Maury Street

Date & Time Visited:

July 3, 2024, 1:14PM

Describe the types of development you see

- Single-Family Residences
 Multi-Family Residences
 Commercial Uses
 Industry
 Recreation
 Institutional Grounds (e.g., hospitals, schools, government or corporate campuses, places of worship)

Notes:

Describe the canopy coverage (select all that apply)

- Abundant
 Lush
 Continuous
 Moderate
 Patchy
 Sparse
 Fragmented
 Isolated

Notes:

Mostly individual trees standing alone, some large patches of trees where weeds are heavily overgrown. Very few trees along the street – all small and straggling. The entire length of the street and sidewalks are very exposed. Most larger trees are on private property off the street – but there aren't many.

Describe the size of urban trees (select all that apply)

- Large
 Moderate
 Small
 Young
 Mature

Notes:

A few large trees scattered throughout Maury cemetery, but the few street trees are mostly moderate to small, with sparse leaves.

Describe the environmental conditions for people (select all that apply)

- Shady
 Sheltered
 Pleasant
 Lush
 Green
 Exposed
 Barren
 Desolate
 Calm
 Busy
 Quiet
 Noisy
 Natural aromas
 Chemical odors
 Vehicle odors

Notes:

Walking along the street is a sweltering experience in the summer. There is no shade on the sidewalks.

Describe tree health conditions (select all that apply)

- Dry
 Leaf discoloration
 Wilting
 Sparse foliage
 Broken branches
 Dead limbs
 Exposed roots
 Insect infestation
 Stunted growth
 Bark damage
 Strangling vines
 Green and vibrant
 New growth
 Healthy bark
 Flowering

Notes:

While some of the trees in the cemetery look healthy, most trees bordering along Maury St. are stunted, with some areas being overtaken by vining weeds.

Temperature Surface Temp (infrared thermometer) Air Temp (digital thermometer)

Full shade reading(s): 89.9F 90.4F 90.3F

Full sun reading(s): 90.6F 89.8F 91.1F



Activity 1.3: In-Person Observation

Toolkit 1: Collect Baseline Data

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Suggested citation:

American Forests. “Activity 1.3: In-Person Observation.”

Tree Equity Handbook Toolkit 1: Collect Baseline Data.

Version 1. 2024. Washington, DC: American Forests.

<https://treeequityhandbook.org/tree-equity-handbook/collect-baseline-data/#activity-in-person-observation>



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