

SASSE ST. FOCUS GROUPS

COMMUNITY VOICE THEMATIC ANALYSIS REPORT



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Introduction

This report presents a qualitative thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews conducted in Clarksdale, Miss., as part of the Sasse Street Wealth Plan. Participants included seniors, youth, and adults, all African-American residents, representing a cross-section of the Sasse Street neighborhood and surrounding areas. The goal of the Sasse Street Wealth Plan is to help residents build wealth, improve financial stability, and foster a community that young people are proud to call home.

The focus groups' objective was to deepen understanding of the issues raised in earlier survey results and uncover how housing, mental health, community safety, healthcare, financial literacy, and civic engagement intersect to affect well-being.

Participant Overview

- **Total Participants:** 27 across 6 sessions
- **Demographics:**
 - 13 Seniors
 - 6 Youth (Middle and High School)
 - 8 Adults (18–64)

- All participants identified as Black/African-American
- **Location:** Focus groups held at a public senior housing facility in the Sasse Street neighborhood and the Aaron E. Henry Community Health Services Center administration building.

Cross-Cutting Themes Across Focus Areas

As shown in Table 1, residents' concerns cut across multiple dimensions of community life. For example, transportation barriers affected not only access to healthcare but also employment, housing choice, and mental health care. Similarly, institutional mistrust permeated discussions about banking, healthcare, and local government. The table highlights how these issues are interconnected, emphasizing the need for coordinated, cross-sector solutions. Many of these themes also reflect broader systemic inequities — economic, racial, and geographic — that cannot be addressed through single-issue interventions. Residents consistently advocated for holistic, locally rooted strategies that strengthen trust, transparency, and resilience.

Table 1. Cross-Cutting Themes Identified Across Focus Group Discussions

Cross-Cutting Theme	Description	Areas Affected
Access Gaps & Transportation	Lack of transportation limits access to healthcare, mental health providers, and job opportunities.	Healthcare, Mental Health, Youth Engagement
Information Silos	Many programs exist but are not well-publicized or coordinated; benefits are only accessed by the "in the know."	Housing, Financial Literacy, Institutional Trust, Healthcare
Stigma and Cultural Barriers	Fear of judgment prevents people from seeking help, especially in mental health and financial challenges.	Mental Health, Financial Literacy, Healthcare
Trust in Institutions	Widespread distrust in landlords, banks, healthcare systems, and government agencies.	Financial Literacy, Housing, Healthcare, Institutional Trust
Financial Constraints	Poverty and low wages limit choices—whether about home repair, therapy, transportation, or basic care.	Housing, Healthcare, Financial Literacy, Mental Health
Impact of Blight and Disinvestment	Abandoned properties and closed public spaces affect safety, health, pride, and youth engagement.	Housing, Community Engagement, Youth Retention, Mental Health
Generational Disconnect	Youth and seniors face different but compounding challenges, with few shared spaces or programming.	Youth Retention, Mental Health, Housing, Community Engagement

Role of Faith-Based Institutions	Churches are trusted hubs but lack resources/training to fully support mental or physical health needs.	Mental Health, Healthcare, Community Engagement
Need for Hands-On Learning	Both youth and adults request more practical, visual, and experiential learning — especially around finances and careers.	Financial Literacy, Youth Engagement, Community Education

Emerging Themes

Housing Quality and Affordability

Key Findings:

- "Good" housing meant safe, sanitary, and decent. Poor housing meant issues with safety, cleanliness, and disrepair.
- Persistent blight due to abandoned, inherited homes and absentee landlords.
- Roughly half of rental agreements are informal. Many renters don't know their rights.
- Single women and seniors struggle with repairs and lawn care due to cost and health constraints.

Quotes:

- "Safe, sanitary, and decent. Poor housing would be... not safe, not clean, stuff out of order."
- "The house just set up and dried up... Should be a program to renovate and rent those properties."

Suggested Solutions:

- Programs for home repairs (e.g., USDA grants) with better outreach.
- Renovation initiatives for abandoned properties.
- Tenant rights education.

Mental Health and Stigma

Key Findings:

- Fear of judgment, especially in small communities.
- Confusion over what constitutes mental illness vs. emotional distress.
- Reluctance to accept prescriptions.
- Pastors/churches are first points of contact but lack mental health training.
- Peer support groups preferred but concerns about confidentiality.

Quotes:

- "People fear being labeled... They don't realize this is something you could seek help for."
- "People seek the pastor first, but he's not qualified. This should be an introduction, not the end."
- "They offered me drugs first. I just wanted someone to talk to!"

Suggested Solutions:

- Community awareness campaigns (e.g., "Mental Health First Aid").
- Church partnerships for counseling referrals.
- Non-stigmatized branding (e.g., "stress reduction clubs" vs. "therapy").

Healthcare Access

Key Findings:

- While residents value the Aaron E. Henry Clinic, gaps remain in specialty care access.
- Seniors and others cite transportation as a major obstacle when having to travel out of town for care.
- Residents preferred seeing a healthcare provider in person rather than via telehealth.

Quotes:

- "You can't be tested over telemedicine."
- "You have to go to Memphis, Oxford, Cleveland ... everywhere but here."

Participant-Driven Solutions:

- Mobile health units and community pop-up clinics.
- Recruit more specialists.

Financial Literacy and Economic Challenges

Key Findings:

- Youth lack basic understanding of credit, savings, and budgeting.
- Adults express deep distrust of banks and frustration with hidden fees.
- Digital payment apps are used but misunderstood and risky.

Quotes:

- "We don't know how credit works. What's 'good' credit? How do you build it?"
- "Banks are worse than payday loans now — fees pile up like crazy."
- "I got scammed — \$209 gone. No separate account for spending, just my savings linked."

Participant-Driven Solutions:

- School-based financial education: field trips, mock businesses.
- Workshops on building credit and avoiding predatory loans.
- Public campaigns on app safety and budgeting tools.

Community Engagement and Youth Retention

Key Findings:

- Youth leave due to crime, lack of jobs, and no entertainment.
- “The Pit” and other parks are underused or closed.
- Youth crave meaningful school investment and career exploration.

Quotes:

- "Nothing positive happens here. It's boring, no jobs, no sidewalks... Why stay?"
- "The Boys & Girls Club closed. Now there's nowhere to go after school."
- "If I could start a business doing what I love, maybe I'd come back. But you need money and customers."

Suggested Solutions:

- Field trips to colleges and employers.
- Entrepreneurship training and youth microgrants.
- Reopen or renovate youth spaces.

Systemic and Institutional Barriers

Key Findings:

- Residents expressed disillusionment with local government, landlords, and banks.
- Programs exist but are poorly advertised.
- Long-term fatigue undermines participation.

Quotes:

- "Programs are a 'well-kept secret.' Only people in the know benefit."
- "People hit their head on the lid so many times, they stopped standing up."

Participant-Driven Solutions:

- Central directory or hotline for local services.
- Transparent communication from public officials.
- Co-design solutions with residents, not for them.

Conclusion

The findings from the Sasse Street focus groups underscore the deeply interconnected nature of the challenges faced by residents, from housing insecurity and healthcare access gaps to financial literacy barriers and systemic distrust. These issues do not exist in isolation; rather, they compound one another, creating cycles of disadvantage that require holistic, community-centered solutions. Participants voiced a clear desire for actionable, locally rooted strategies that prioritize transparency, education, and empowerment. Key opportunities include:

- **Strengthening trust in institutions** through better outreach, co-designed programs, and transparent communication.
- **Expanding access to resources**, such as mobile health units, tenant rights education, and youth-focused entrepreneurship training.
- **Addressing stigma** around mental health and financial struggles by leveraging trusted community hubs like churches and rebranding support services to reduce barriers.
- **Revitalizing community spaces** to foster pride, safety, and intergenerational connection, particularly for youth.

Moving forward, the success of the Sasse Street Wealth Plan will depend on aligning systemic reforms with grassroots efforts — ensuring that residents are not just heard but actively engaged in shaping the solutions. By addressing these themes collaboratively, Clarksdale can build a more equitable, resilient community where all generations thrive.

This report serves as both a call to action and a roadmap, emphasizing that sustainable change begins with listening to and investing in the people who call Sasse Street home.