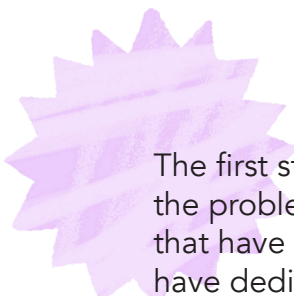



FINDING NEW INROADS TO WICKED PROBLEMS



Organizations often look to design to carve new inroads into complex challenges that they've been tackling for a long time.



The first step to designing a solution is defining the problem itself. Oftentimes these are problems that have been studied extensively, that experts have dedicated their careers to understanding, and that their own frontline staff have deep experience and knowledge in.



By grounding ourselves in human truths and helping problem owners see the challenge in a new way, the design process can help us identify actionable leverage points to the original question.

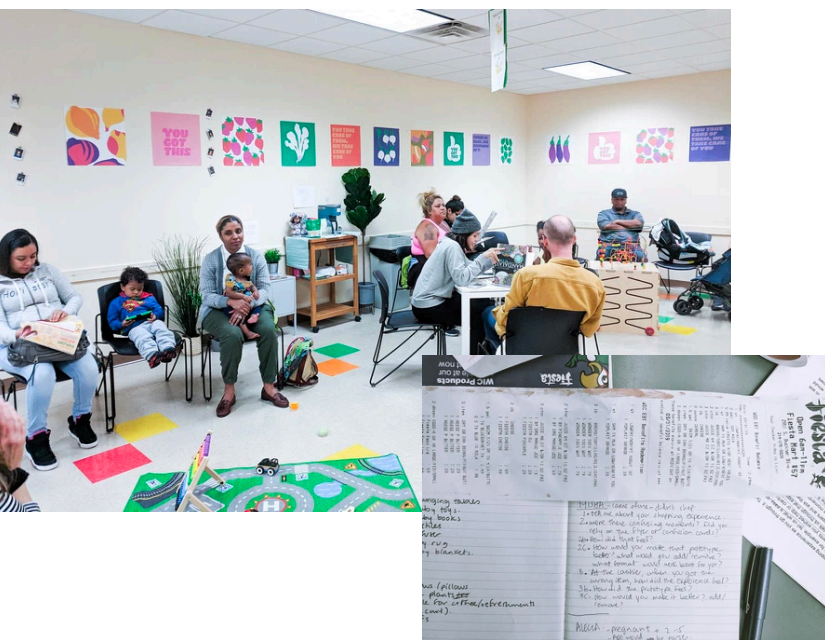
In 2018, the Childhood Poverty Action Lab (CPAL) partnered with IDEO.org to understand why low-income mothers in Dallas were not accessing food and health benefits for their children. These benefits were part of WIC, a decades-old federal program that grants food benefits, healthcare referrals, and dietary education to low-income parents, infants, and at-risk children in the U.S.

Despite the overall success of the program nationwide, WIC uptake in Dallas was only at 40% among the families who could benefit from it most. CPAL wanted to see more participation in the program but didn't know why mothers weren't coming in the first place or how to diverge from their current roadmap.

01 Anchoring in human needs, truths, and motivations

CPAL had a hunch that enrollment was low due to lack of awareness. Together with CPAL, we invited mothers, WIC staff, Dallas administrators, and grocery store workers to a series of collaborative workshops. The WIC and government leaders were used to being in board rooms together, but this process brought moms in on an equal footing. We quickly learned that many mothers did in fact know about WIC—but the system was time-consuming and often humiliating. When parents wanted to visit the clinic, they often had to take time off of work and travel long distances, only to get generic, culturally irrelevant advice from a nutritionist. Mothers described feeling untrusted and needing to prove their eligibility. The grocery store experience was similarly taxing. There was a lot of ambiguity about what grocery items were actually approved by WIC. Mothers would often go to check out, only to realize that they'd picked up a non-eligible item or that they'd been charged an amount they couldn't afford—while people at the store watched. The emotional and practical costs of the WIC experience outweighed the benefits, and the people who needed the WIC service the most had the least time to spare.

Beyond simply asking people about their experiences, human-centered design actively seeks to create the conditions that promote the comfort, safety, and creativity of its participants, so that we can begin to pinpoint the human pain points and aspirations that can help us design a truly resonant solution.



02

Reengaging with the problem from a different vantage point



Design research goes deep into human experience and simultaneously invites those working on the problem to step back and contemplate it from different vantage points. Sometimes those most invested in a challenge are too close to the problem, too finely attuned to an evidence base, or too aware of previous solution failures to approach it in a new way and move forward unencumbered.

“What this process does is set out a distinct problem and doesn’t divide people into sides—we’re focusing on a problem statement rather than an advocacy position and coming together on that and encouraging exploration of multiple opportunities. When you create that trust, governments are much more likely to let go of some of the power, and allow that power to be in the hands of residents to self-determine solutions that will best meet their needs. That is to us a hypothesis for impact that we want to explore.”

— Alan Cohen, President & CEO of CPAL

By layering these human experiences with that existing body of knowledge, the design process creates the space to reframe the problem. It welcomes the vulnerability to admit and accept what’s not working and represent a familiar landscape in a way that feels invigorating. CPAL found that integrating insights from design research with established evidence about welfare programming generated trust between residents and government officials. They were able to orient the partners’ and parents’ attention towards the problem statement, instead of towards each other, and thus begin surfacing potential solutions.

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— Alan Cohen, President & CEO of CPAL



03

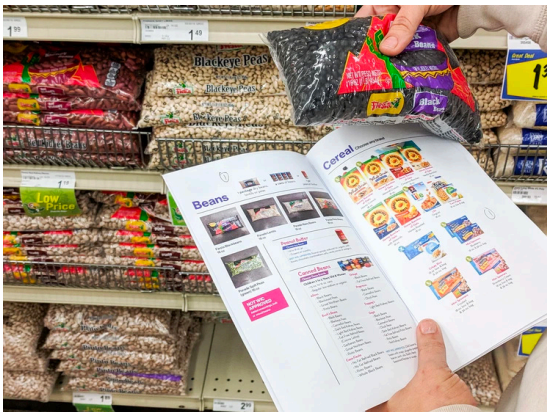
Catapulting insights into action

The research phase doesn't end in an elegantly articulated statement of the problem but in a set of opportunities that translate into clear action. Parallel to our interviews and conversations, we try to test certain hunches and hypotheses. Prototyping is itself an extension of the research, where we continue to learn what users need and how they, and others in a system, will behave by testing tangible versions of early concepts.

In the case of CPAL, to better understand the barriers mothers faced when shopping with WIC, the team ran a scrappy prototype for a day with a few WIC shoppers. Customers experience frustration and embarrassment when they mistakenly present a non-approved item for purchase with their WIC benefits. The design team created clarification cards to go next to items that have historically been the most worrisome for shoppers, such as milk and eggs.

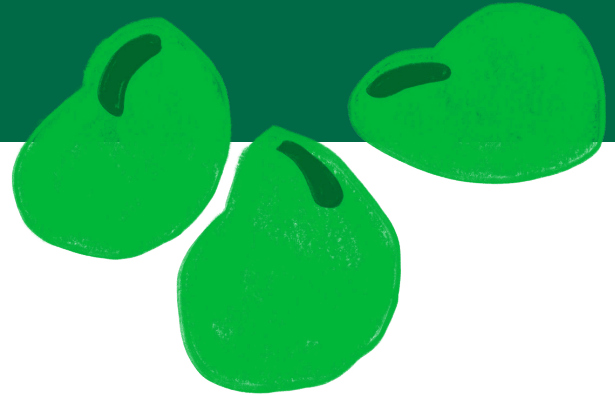
“While we had hunches from what we heard from women, with prototyping we validated that the shopping and checkout experience was riddled with confusion. But we also saw how unsupported and ill-informed the grocery staff and managers are about the WIC benefits. This gave us a clearer sense of what was driving the problem and how to create a more seamless experience for all those involved. We needed to have clear yet subtle signage to anticipate common pain points as well as a more robust technology system for clerks.”

— Hitesh Singhal, Designer at IDEO.org

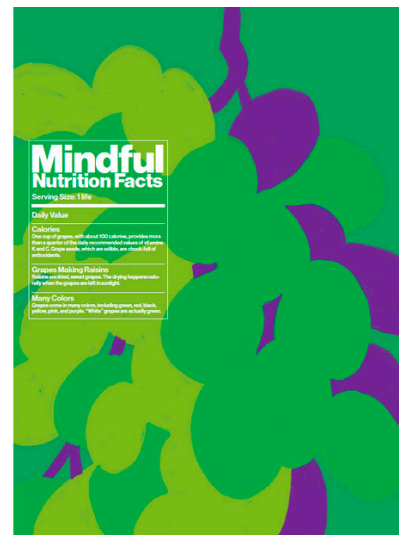


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— Hitesh Singhal, Designer at IDEO.org



By the end of our engagement with CPAL, there was already an undercurrent of action. Since then, CPAL has made significant progress in making the grocery store experience more human-centered and trying to bring services within two miles of eligible mothers and children, with three pop-up clinics already launched. Most importantly, CPAL has been listening to the individuals the program is serving in deeper and more authentic ways as they carve new pathways forward.



04

Shaping a new era of inquiry

Accurately understanding problems is the bedrock upon which great solutions are built. It's how we identify leverage points and paths forward. Over the last 10 years, we've evolved our process, with some critical changes to how we approach this stage of the design process.

We're beginning to shift towards more collaborative methods that bring community members in not only to tell us what they want and need but to contribute to decision-making about the solution itself. Programs like The Billion Girls CoLab in our Nairobi studio optimize for the comfort and joy of girls and young women, inviting them in as lived-experience experts to shape the products, services, and experiences that will affect their lives the most.

Similarly, as we tackle increasingly complex systemic issues, such as health inequity in the U.S., we've learned about the value of building coalitions, to diagnose barriers, surface hypotheses, and advance ideas for change that a single organization or design team alone could not achieve. In 2020, with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we supported the creation of The Health Equity Collective—a group of health equity activists, scholars, and medical practitioners who together have crafted a new vision for health justice and developed prototypes to bring that vision to life in health institutions across the U.S.

Finally, we're learning more and more about how to harmonize data and established evidence with design insights drawn from lived experience. In our Women and Money program, over the past two years we've collaborated with gender experts, behavioral scientists, and data scientists to understand the barriers that keep women in six different contexts from accessing financial opportunities. Integrating these diverse disciplines and perspectives has pushed us to be more ambitious in what we must create for women while nudging us to more critically assess and validate our design decisions along the way.

We're beginning to see that these more participatory and cross-disciplinary practices take us much further in truly getting to the roots of the challenges we seek to tackle. Importantly, they're also ensuring that we are building local ownership and advancing the rigor of our approach along the way.

Read online at:
<https://impact.ideo.org/newinroads-wickedproblems/>

