Methods of Community Assessment

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Many times elected officials, business leaders and community groups want to improve their community, but they do not have a good handle on where to begin. It may be that they don't know how the general public feels about a particular issue, or they don't have an understanding of past and current trends that are shaping the local community. Without this information, communities may start projects that are not appropriate or acceptable to the public or that do not address real issues.

Community assessment is one strategy to help community groups learn more about their community, local issues and assets, and potential directions before planning projects and activities. Simply put, it is the process of learning more about the social, economic and physical aspects of a community as well as the interrelationships among these elements. The information can be quantitative (something you can put a number to) or qualitative (information in descriptive form such as past history or a list of local leaders).

Community assessment is an important tool in community development because it helps local groups understand important background information before programs are undertaken. Each community is unique with its own set of goals, preferences, assets, issues, resources, past history, and potential for the future. A proper assessment can help a community make decisions that are appropriate to its unique set of circumstances. It is useful in:

- Identifying community assets, opinions and goals
- Planning for the future
- Identifying local resources
- Encouraging local participation
- Marketing your community
- Identifying community needs

Community assessment is a general approach to learning more about a community; there is no single method that works best in all cases. In fact, many successful assessments use multiple methods. The following is a brief introduction to several different community assessment methods. Along with an overview of the technique is a discussion of strengths, weaknesses and resources needed to carry it out.

Secondary Data

There is a tremendous amount of existing information about cities, towns and counties that is available for public use. Secondary data are simply information collected by someone else that may be useful for community assessment. Sources include the Censuses of Population, Housing, Business and Agriculture; vital records (births and deaths and disease); data collected by state agencies (public school finances and enrollments or tax records); local administrative data (housing starts); and any other data collected for administrative or governmental purposes. There is a great deal of secondary data related to health as well. Most of this information is available for free or at minimal cost, and it can provide excellent background information for community assessment. For example, the Census of Population can be used to find out the age composition of the population in a particular community which might indicate particular age groups, such as the elderly, that require special services. Most grants require some type of secondary data analysis to justify the local situational statement.

Secondary data are relatively inexpensive and easy to use, although there are peculiar aspects about different data sources that may require the assistance of a trained consultant. We are fortunate that there is a tremendous amount of information available to us. However, since secondary data have been collected by someone else for other purposes, it may not be the exact information we are looking for. The information may be dated, missing key bits of information that we would like to have, or covering larger geographic areas than we would like. The exact definitions of what numbers actually mean are also very important. Because of this, secondary data are best used as background information and as supplements to other community assessment methods.

Comparative Secondary Data

One variation in the use of secondary data is to use it as a comparative tool. It is often difficult to determine if a particular number is too large or too small or good or bad unless there is a reference point. Thus, one strategy is to compare secondary data of a community with that of surrounding communities, the state or the nation. For example, one can use data from secondary sources to compare health care or disease statistics with similar communities or with state or national averages. These data can be used to determine strengths and weaknesses in the local health care situation. Another comparative approach is to look at data over time to determine if and how things are changing. Trend analysis often reveals important information for planning purposes.

As with the use of secondary data in general, comparative studies are relatively easy and inexpensive provided data are available. Using a comparative approach can greatly enhance the insights and provide better direction for what to do next. However, while the information is based on factual numbers that are often viewed as being more legitimate, it cannot always provide the deeper insights as to why things are different in one community compared to another or why things are changing. As a result, this approach is also best used as background information or as a supplement to other methods.

Primary Data Collection Methods

- **Focus Groups**

  A focus group is a structured interview of a group of 6 to 12 people that has been successfully used by marketing researchers, community developers and others to obtain insights and reactions to products, programs or needs. Participants can be selected at random or chosen to represent different groups within the community. The strategy is to begin with a set of pre-selected questions but allow for flexibility so that the group can expand upon ideas. Five or six questions are usually enough, with the more direct and detailed questions coming later in the session. Focus groups are very effective in getting participants involved in an issue and making them feel that their viewpoints count. Experience has found that the group interaction often stimulates discussion and produces data and insights which may be difficult to secure through individual interviews, surveys or secondary data.

  Focus group interviews are relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct. All that is required is a moderator, someone to record the discussion (it could be taped), a predefined set of questions, an adequate meeting room, and some refreshments or light snacks. One group interview could be completed within a two hour session, and for some issues more than one group may be interviewed. Focus groups work best for getting good feedback on alternative approaches to an issue or in exploring a new topic area; they are least effective in dealing with difficult or technical issues. The key to the success of a focus group is a skilled moderator; he or she must have the ability to keep the discussion flowing and encourage participation relevant to the subject without influencing or intimidating participants.

- **Key Informant Interviews**

  Key informant interviews are conducted with selected individuals in a community who are involved with or have knowledge of particular situations. Key informant interviews are a way to get "insider information" about an issue, situation or problem. It is the technique often used by journalists when they are preparing to write a story. These interviews can be used to define the nature and extent of an issue, to explain important issues related to a particular situation, to identify community groups or organizations interested or involved in an issue, to get an insider's view of the situation, or to describe possible goals or approaches from the perspective of those who are involved with or affected by the issue.

  Key informants are persons who are either involved with an issue as a regular part of their job or volunteer role or are knowledgeable about the community and its citizens and history. As one might expect, key informants may change from issue to issue. A "snowball" approach is often used to identify key informants; each interview with an informant asks for others who know something about the issue until the list of potential informants grows like a snowball rolling down a hill.

Key informant interviews are a quick and relatively inexpensive way to define the nature and extent of an issue and to identify potential solutions. These interviews help you to see the community situation from several different perspectives. Key informant interviews are also a way of identifying who are the movers and shakers in a community related to a particular issue. However, key informant interviews are useful only if you have been able to identify persons who can offer multiple perspectives on the community. Moreover, it is possible that the views of key informants may not reflect the views of all citizens or groups in the community. Key informant interviews also require a fair amount of time to make contact, arrange meetings and conduct interviews. Key informant interviews are most reliable when only one or two persons conduct the interviews since this helps to insure that the same kinds of questions are asked of all informants.

❖ **Expert Presentation and Testimony**

Expert presentation or expert testimony involves having an expert, or someone who is particularly knowledgeable or experienced in a certain topic, make a presentation to a community group or decision-making body. This type of information provides an in-depth analysis of a given issue from people who have technical backgrounds or experiences which give them insights that are not available to the average person. For example, a doctor may be asked to speak about water borne diseases to a group that is meeting to decide whether the public water system needs to be upgraded, or a university professor may be asked to give expert testimony on changing population trends and their implications for small communities. It is common to have multiple experts testify either individually or as part of a panel.

Expert presentations are often invaluable to community groups who are dealing with new or more technical issues. In many cases the testimony is free, although some experts from outside the community may charge a fee or at least reimbursement for expenses. The value of this testimony depends upon the knowledge of the experts, and it is often wise to hear from several speakers, particularly when dealing with controversial issues. Expert testimony can be used most effectively in conjunction with information gathered from other community assessment methods.

❖ **Environmental Media Scan**

An environmental media scan is based upon the assumption that community situations and issues are reflected in the content of local media (newspapers, radio, television, newsletters, etc.). The strategy is to form a scanning team, with each member being assigned a small number of media outlets to review on a regular basis. A common form is developed and used by all team members as they record the topics appearing in their assigned outlets. Results from each team member's scan are then compiled on a periodic basis. Issues within the community that are important to a large number of people should surface more often, and there should be indications of the importance and perceptions of different groups.

Media scans have the advantage of being relatively inexpensive to conduct provided there is enough volunteer help available. This method is effective at capturing changes over time. When media outlets are properly selected, they provide input from a variety of community groups. Media scans are a good means of identifying issues and problems in a community, but this is most effective when there are multiple media sources to scan. This method may miss issues, assets and community resources that have not yet surfaced or are not deemed as newsworthy, so it is best to use this method in conjunction with other assessment methods.

- **Community Forum**

  A community forum is, quite simply, a public meeting held to discuss a certain topic, issue or opportunity. Most commonly, there is a set of short presentations at the beginning of the forum describing the situation or topic to be discussed or outlining several options, viewpoints or approaches to be considered. A moderator then leads the discussions of strengths, weaknesses and outcomes based on the presentations and asks a series of predetermined questions in order to gather the information needed. The moderator makes sure that each person has an opportunity to speak and that the discussion proceeds in a positive and constructive way. A recorder captures the viewpoints and suggestions presented during the forum as well as any conclusions reached and plans for future action. Often, there are a series of community forums held so that follow-up discussion can occur or so that a wider range of individuals in the community have an chance to participate.

  A community forum is an excellent way to assess the viewpoints or opinions of citizens about the topic under discussion. The major advantage of a community forum is the openness that is present by having public discussion in which anyone can participate. It also provides people an opportunity to hear various viewpoints and perspectives explained, which leads to better understanding of others in the community. Disadvantages arise when not all relevant groups are represented at the forum and when not every individual feels comfortable expressing his or her thoughts in front of a larger group. If the topic being discussed is a controversial one, there is a danger of the group being divided into "for" and "against," or the meeting may turn into a shouting match. A strong, well-prepared moderator is a key to a successful community forum.

- **Social Surveys**

  Social surveys are a useful method of obtaining information about knowledge, attitudes, attributes or practices of the general population. It is based on the notion that people know the characteristics and situations of their communities but often lack a way of expressing their views to local leaders or public officials. Surveys can be used to find out how people feel about alternative programs, what services the community needs, and how well current services are meeting public expectations. Surveys are predetermined sets of questions and usually answer options which are asked of all individuals in a group or sample of people. There are different survey methods as well, including surveys distributed and returned by mail, surveys administered by telephone, and surveys conducted in person or face-to-face.

  Social surveys can in some cases provide a method of using results from a sample of people that can be generalized to the whole population. The strategy is to select a representative sample (best done on a random basis); ask questions through a mail, telephone or face-to-face interview; and tally the results for further analysis. If properly done, this approach provides useful and valid information about how the whole population and subgroups feel about situations and issues in the community.

  While surveys can provide detailed information about the population of a community, this approach is one of the more expensive and demanding of the community assessment methods. Unless done properly, the results can be biased and misleading. If results are to be generalized to a larger population, the sample must be drawn randomly from a total list of people. The questionnaire must be designed so as not to be biased, misleading or ambiguous. Finally, analysis should be done by someone skilled in survey work and statistics. Because of these demands, most community groups will require expert assistance in order to carry out a valid social survey. Thus, while surveys provide an excellent source of information, they should not be undertaken unless the group is able to devote the time and resources necessary to conduct a valid survey.

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Terms

There are terms that you may hear during an information gathering exercise that describe the type of information being collected. Here are just a few; you may add more to this list as you go through an assessment process.

- ❖ Primary data are those that are directly collected by an individual or group during the assessment process. Information collected by a survey or interviews is an example of primary data.

- ❖ Secondary data are those collected by some other individual, group, or agency, often at some other time of for another purpose. Census data are perhaps the most commonly used secondary data.

- ❖ Quantitative data are those which can be represented by a number. Examples are the population of a community, or the percentage who answered "yes" to a question on a survey.

- ❖ Qualitative data are more descriptive data, and are often presented in verbal or written form. Qualitative data provide in-depth explanation, such as the history of a community or a description of a set of opinions of community citizens.

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