

Community Needs Assessment

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The section “Integrated Community Development Corporations (CDCs)” updated. Bibliography expanded and revised.

Updated on 8 January 2015. The previous version of this content can be found [here](#).

Abstract and Keywords

Current approaches to community needs assessments should reflect the changing nature of communities themselves and new thinking relative to their assessment. First, geographically bounded communities, neighborhoods, cities, and regions have been affected by the external forces of economic globalization with its transnational flow of capital, outsourcing of jobs, and shifting demographics of immigration and refugee resettlement. Second, as Kretzmann and McKnight made clear in 1993, assessing only needs is not enough; it results in an incomplete picture of a community. An assessment should also be conducted through the lens of strengths so that community residents can articulate what they perceive the assets to be and how they propose to use the assets to shore up the deficits. Third, local, national, and international community building endeavors by non-profit organizations have introduced the concept of assets-building into the community practice domain. The purpose is to increase the social capital and social capacity of communities in the long term through the empowerment of local residents via improved schools and effective community-level social networks and institutions.

Keywords: needs assessment, assets assessment, community assessment, community

It is important for social work practitioners to conceptualize the wholeness of rapidly changing communities wherein problems and unmet needs are identified and carefully appraised, relative to existing strengths and assets. This approach offers a wider range of evidence—a balanced framework—from which to base practice decisions and help create innovative solutions. The purpose of this entry is to focus on locality-specific, geographically bounded communities, and to conceptualize the new strengths-based community assessment framework and integrate into it the most salient elements from traditional, problem-focused approaches.

The Five Principles of Assessment

The following principles guide the conduct of a community assessment. They reflect a combination of those used in traditional needs assessments that still hold (Tropman, 1995), with those derived from the community building movement (Louie, Mehta, Reardon, & Wolfe, 2012; Brower, 2011).

- 1. *Value participation from diverse constituencies***— Multiple voices need to be included in a community assessment, particularly the perspectives and experiences of those who are perceived to be excluded or disadvantaged. It must be recognized that multi-constituencies will quite likely create discord, as the larger the number and diversity of groups participating, the more conflict is likely. This is balanced by organizing and managing the interface among participants to make constructive use of diverse perspectives (Louie, Mehta, Reardon, & Wolfe, 2012; Brown, 1986).
- 2. *Use multiple methods***—Both quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to balance the strengths and limitations of each.
- 3. *Encourage civic participation and technical elements***—Participation is encouraged in the design of technical elements (research questions, surveys, selection of indicators, focus groups, and public meetings), the collection and analysis of data, and formulating solutions, when indicated. What are the needs? According to whom? What already works? What does not?
- 4. *Keep the assessment realistic***—Community stakeholders want usable knowledge as evidence for local decision-making and community improvement. Large, overly scholarly assessments may never get implemented.
- 5. *Value asset-building***—Identify and appraise evidence of asset-building activities. These initiatives (individual development accounts, micro-enterprises, community banks, locally owned businesses) are intended to increase the individual-level and collective assets of a community as financial capital flows into, not out of, the neighborhood. The goal is to empower residents and strengthen the community through local control of resources (Naimark, 2012).

New Areas of Assessment

The use of a community building framework provides new areas for community assessment.

Partnerships and Collaborations

The goal of building social capacity and healthy communities has brought together people who cooperate to achieve common purposes, from diverse disciplines and domains. Identification and appraisal of such partnerships can help to analyze the “horizontal patterns” or linkages among community-based organizations, initiatives, and institutions. That is,

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are local entities known to one another? Are they partnering together, and with what effect?

Public and Private Investment

Government programs as well as large private philanthropies have invested revitalization resources in many distressed urban and rural communities. What has been the effect of these “vertical links” on local community-based organizations and residents? In what ways has the target community been strengthened? Which needs have been met or ameliorated, and which remain unmet?

Large Systems

Community building intends to change social institutions such as public schools, police departments, and child welfare bureaucracies so they are more responsive to residents and consumers in their localities. What evidence is there of systems change?

Integrated Community Development Corporations (CDCs)

The traditional role of CDCs as housing and retail developers for financial gain has shifted to include a social commitment to provide service, in addition to economic development. Some examples include family support, workforce development, housing counseling, financial literacy, individual development accounts (IDAs), and public education. The shift reflects the realization among CDCs that investment in the built environment alone will not reduce neighborhood poverty. Any strategy must include both place-based and people-based interventions. By paying attention to local resident needs a San Diego area CDC and a St. Louis area CDC each came to realize they couldn't meet their missions of strengthening communities without addressing academic improvement for the children living in those communities. They began to work closely with public school districts and added school reform to their agendas (Naimark, 2012).

Capacity of Nonprofit Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Unmet needs may be a reflection of the resources available to residents in a given low-income community. A community may be resource-rich or resource-poor. The presence, location, and financial stability of nonprofit CBOs are resources known to strengthen communities. Examples of nonprofit CBOs include settlement houses, health clinics, resident associations, recreation centers, legal aid offices, and child and family centers. To what extent are these civil society organizations increasing or decreasing in numbers, size, and organizational capacity?

Approaches to Assessment

The purpose of an assessment, the research questions posed, and methods selected, may be influenced by who the sponsor is and what its goals are. Irrespective of that political reality, the study should be carefully designed using a problem-solving approach with a clear *objective*, conducted in a systematic way, and in accordance with the NASW Code of Ethics. Six steps are recommended: (1) review the evidence, (2) assess local knowledge, (3) select methods, (4) conduct studies, (5) process and study the data, (6) report findings (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005).

Some salient factors bear on the assessment process. First, social workers are encouraged to engage in *evidence-based practice* (Mulroy, 2007). Therefore look for theories of change as guideposts in community studies. What have previous studies found? Track the evidence. An annotated bibliography is useful to summarize findings. Established and emerging theories can be used in addition to related research findings to help guide the development of each new assessment of needs and assets.

Second, clearly specify the units of analysis to be studied, such as a newcomer population, a bounded geographic area served by a senior center, city-wide CDCs, or some combination of units.

Third, use technologies such as geographic information systems (GIS) with which social workers can map and analyze census and other data, to enhance the depth and substance of traditional methodologies. Traditional methods may include community indicators, surveys, or community processes. Recent practice-driven studies identify the following indicators as building blocks for strong communities: (a) healthy families and children, (b) thriving neighborhoods, (c) living-wage jobs, (d) safe neighborhoods, and (e) viable economies (<http://www.pew-partnerships.org/newdirections>). Surveys may be used to collect administrative data on rates of school drop out, teen pregnancy, or child abuse and neglect, for example. These data and related indicators such as affordable housing, public transportation, diversity, arts and culture, and safety are now tracked through city-based affiliates of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (<http://www2.urban.org/nnip/whatsnew.html>). Community processes include community visioning of an ideal future, using the Charette model and traditional uses of community impressions (key informants) and public forums.

Fourth, local residents and local agency personnel increasingly want to participate in the collection of data and also want the findings reported back to them, not just to the outside funder. Principles of participatory action research can help achieve these expectations (Brown, 1986).

Trends and Future Directions

The recent trends and future direction of community assessment point to the study of both needs and assets. This wider lens invokes more comprehensive studies than those on need alone. They emphasize development of indicators that measure individual well-being and community well-being (Teschauer, 2014). The result provides a more complete understanding of the community, its limitations and its future possibilities. A participatory approach acknowledges and values local knowledge from multiple constituencies.

Social Work Roles

The role of social work therefore shifts from the top-down expert planner or researcher to bottom-up partner who uses assessment knowledge to work cooperatively with a myriad of involved community workers who may be doctors, nurses, lawyers, developers, educators, small business owners, planners, politicians, teachers, interested parties, or residents.

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