CHAPTER 9

# Needs Assessments

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Needs assessments are a form of research conducted to gather information about the needs of a population or group in a community. One of the more practical types of research, needs assessments are used to develop new services or to evaluate the relevance of existing programs. They may also be used to establish a need to revise or create policy.

This chapter begins with a definition of needs assessment, how we define "needs," and how we determine who to ask about needs. Common methodological approaches to needs assessments are described and evaluated using examples primarily from the social work literature. The benefits of triangulation, or using more than one source or method of gathering information, are presented, followed by a discussion of who should digest and weigh information about needs once the information is gathered. Finally, we consider the importance of developing a plan to implement recommendations so that the work of assessing needs is used to clients' benefits, not relegated to the shelves occupied by other dusty and neglected reports.

## What Is a Needs Assessment?

Needs assessments have not changed much over the years. In 1982, Kuh (cited in Stabb, 1995) listed five general purposes commonly served by needs assessment research that remain relevant today:

1. Monitoring stakeholders' perceptions of various issues, which can guide the development of new programs or policies
2. Justifying existing policies or programs
3. Assessing client satisfaction with services
4. Selecting the most desirable program or policy from several alternatives
5. Determining if needs have been met, a purpose closely akin to program evaluation

Two key questions are addressed when needs assessments are undertaken: "Who?" and "How?" The "who" question requires the researcher to be clear about the membership of the group whose needs are to be assessed. Often, a study entails gathering information from a variety of respondents, from individuals who may never have been clients to those

receiving multiple services. In almost every case, however, at least one set of respondents will be the individuals who are most immediately affected by gaps in services or supports, rather than relying solely on the opinions of service providers, academics, or funders.

The "how" question addresses the methods used to gather information from the group whose needs are of interest. These are not unique; rather, needs assessments borrow familiar techniques such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, all of which are highlighted in other chapters in this book. Quantitative methods such as surveys or standardized measures may be used, as may qualitative methods such as in-depth individual interviews or focus groups. Combinations of both are increasingly popular since each method has its advantages and limitations.

## Defining *Need*

When we invoke the concept of *needs*, we may easily assume that we share with others a common understanding of what it is we are talking about. However, it is worthwhile looking more closely at the definition of the term since useful characteristics and distinctions are highlighted when we do so.

The concept of *need* is not new: Researchers have been defining and redefining the term for decades. Stabb (1995) distinguishes between *met* and *unmet* needs. "Met needs are necessary or desirable conditions that already exist in actuality. Unmet needs arise when there is a discrepancy between desirable conditions and current actuality" (p. 52). Both met and unmet needs could conceivably become the focus of needs assessment research, although unmet needs will be the main concern in the vast majority of cases.

A different distinction (perhaps more useful for our purposes) is provided by Witkin and Altschuld (1995), who define a need as "a discrepancy or gap between 'what is,' or the present state of affairs and 'what should be,' or a desired state of affairs" (p. 4). In this analysis, *needs* equate with *unmet needs*, the most common focus for needs assessment research. Revere, Berkowitz, Carter, and Ferguson (1996) add the suggestion that need is defined by "community values, [and is] amenable to change" (p. 5).

From these perspectives (and with reference to considerations introduced earlier), a needs assessment gathers information about gaps between real and ideal conditions, the reasons that these gaps exist, and what can be done about them, all within the context of the beliefs of the community and available resources for change.

Another distinction introduces the question of degree. Some needs are stronger or more important than others. Fundamental needs with relevance to people's survival, safety, or basic comforts are not the same as "wants" or less compelling needs. A social work professor's desire for a week in Mexico as a break from winter is qualitatively very different from a homeless person's need for food and shelter in the face of the same cold conditions. While it is often difficult to draw the line between relatively important needs and less important wants, it is still important to do so. Needs assessments are focused on needs that affect individuals' abilities to function well in important areas of their lives. Wants associated with perceived quality of life (but not to the same extent with life's real essentials) are more the purview of market research.

Social workers generally find Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs useful when considering the needs and priorities of their clients. It is also a framework that can inform needs assessments. Maslow's five levels of need are physical and life-sustaining needs (such as air, water, food, warmth, and elimination of bodily wastes), physical safety (e.g., protection from physical attack and disease), love and support, self-esteem and self-worth, and self-realization (e.g., needs to be productive and creative). Maslow contended that these

basic needs must be attended to before attempting to address higher level needs (or "wants"). Needs assessments can gather information relevant to any one or more of these five levels, but the hierarchy of priorities provides useful criteria for deciding on what to focus first in data collection and recommending changes.

Finally, some authors argue that once an "expressed need" is verbalized, it becomes a want or a demand (Stabb, 1995). This is not the same as differentiating needs from wants on the basis of the strength of the potential impact on someone's well-being and is probably less useful for our purposes. However, a related point is noteworthy: Verbal demands are not always the direct expression of need. Just because someone expresses a want does not mean that it represents a need. Thus, in needs assessments, it is important to gather information from members of a population beyond those publicly advocating for specific demands.

## Who Do We Ask About Needs?

The term *stakeholders* is often used to refer to clients or potential clients or the people who actually experience the need that is being studied. However, Revere and colleagues (1996) suggest broadening the definition to refer to "service providers and management, community members, certain politicians, the funding source, business/trade associations and the actual research workers" (p. 7) since each of these has a vested interest in the study and its outcomes. This flexible use of the term is helpful, suggesting a range of potential sources of data and recognizing that needs assessments have ramifications for people beyond those normally surveyed.

Needs assessments traditionally look to three groups as sources of data: the target group (i.e., clients or potential clients), key informants such as community leaders or service providers, or a sample of all members of the relevant community. Each is described in more detail below.

The *target group or population* comprises the very individuals about whom we are concerned and whose needs we wish to assess. Common sense suggests that these are the voices we most wish to listen to in our quest to gather the best and most current information. However, engaging with individuals to encourage them to share their needs and opinions is not always easy. Highly disadvantaged, socially marginalized individuals and groups, the typical focus of social workers' interventions, are not always accustomed to being asked their opinions and may not easily articulate their needs to a researcher when invited to do so. Furthermore, they may have understandable reasons for not trusting members of those who have more power in society, a group to which researchers belong. Consider the homeless as an example, especially the subpopulation that has been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders. With any such group, the researcher cannot simply approach and invite them to enumerate their needs. Strategies (and time) for building trust, rapport, and for encouraging engagement in the research process are prerequisites for successful data gathering.

McKillip (1998) defines another group serving as a common source of data, *key informants,* as "opportunistically connected individuals with the knowledge and ability to report on community needs. Key informants are lawyers, judges, physicians, ministers, minority group leaders, and service providers who are aware of the need and services perceived as important by a community" (pp. 272–273). An advantage of gathering data from key informants is that they may have a broader knowledge of services available in the community than the target population, and they may be better at articulating what needs must be effectively addressed. One disadvantage is that key informants sometimes have a vested interest in developing new services or preserving established resources even

though they are less than adequate (we all develop loyalties, and these can affect our judgment). McKillip (1998) also notes that key informants may underestimate the willingness of members of the target population to participate in programs while overestimating the extent of the problems.

The third group, *community members*, comprises the entire citizenry of a community. This group encompasses members of the target population but also includes those not directly affected by these needs. Approaching community members for information has the advantage of identifying how broadly based the needs are, rather than assuming that they are restricted to the target population. It also offers the opportunities to learn about how needs (and the strategies to ameliorate them) are perceived in the community at large and to think about how that will affect efforts to implement changes. A disadvantage, though, is that community members may be relatively unaware of the needs of its more marginalized citizens.

In summary, each of these groups may be the focus of the needs assessment methods documented in the next several sections. The choice of whom to engage may be based on access to the group or limitations of time and resources. If possible, representation from each of the target population, key community stakeholders, and members of the general public is worth considering as each provides valuable but somewhat different information.

## Methods of Needs Assessment

As mentioned previously, one can conduct needs assessments using a variety of strategies. We will discuss methods in two broad categories, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methods gather data that are translated into numerical form and described using statistics. Using such methods, it is possible, for example, to conclude that in a sample of 102 shelter residents, 70.5% of these women abused by intimate partners were abused themselves as children and described 73.7% of their partners as also having been abused (Tutty & Rothery, 2002). Such high proportions may be interpreted as suggesting the need for early intervention with children in shelters in the hope of preventing the cycle of violence from affecting a new generation.

Providing statistics about the extent of a need can be a powerful method of raising awareness of the severity of gaps in services. The section on quantitative needs assessment will describe three such methods: surveys, standardized needs assessment measures, and using existing statistical databases.

In contrast, qualitative needs assessments ask questions that are more open-ended and allow the research informant to describe in detail the complexities of the issues at hand. For example, a qualitative needs assessment conducting interviews with another group of 63 abused women residing in a shelter noted that providing for their basic needs such as safety and food was of great importance (Tutty, Weaver, & Rothery, 1999). However, some women expressed concerns about the fact that a few residents were difficult to live with, and some mothers did not manage their children's aggressive behavior or ignored them. These results suggest a somewhat different focus for intervention by crisis counselors and the need to provide parenting programs for some residents.

Results from qualitative needs assessments often lack statistical data that could convey the extent of the problem, but they tend to be rich in detail that conveys the complexities and uniqueness of the experiences of different individuals. The qualitative needs assessments methods described in the chapter include interviews (either face-to-face or by telephone), focus groups, nominal groups, and town hall meetings.

## Quantitative Methods of Needs Assessment Surveys

Although surveys may ask open-ended qualitative questions, the great majority are developed for quantitative data analysis. Quantitatively oriented surveys, particularly those employing questionnaires, are the most frequent method of assessing needs. The tasks involved in developing a survey to assess needs are identical to those undertaken when surveys are developed for other purposes, so they will not be detailed here. The major steps involve

1. Deciding who to survey (e.g., target groups, key informants)
2. Selecting a method of sampling (e.g., random or systematic sample)
3. Determining the content of items (through reviewing the literature or holding focus groups with key informants, as only two examples)
4. Choosing what type of question to use (e.g., open-ended, multiple choice, or scaled with respect to the extent of agreement)
5. Selecting a method of distribution (e.g., the Internet, mail, or telephone)

The advantages of surveys include the ease and flexibility with which they can be administered compared to other methods and the relative lack of expense to collect a considerable amount of data. Disadvantages include the extent to which a set questionnaire can predetermine the issues that respondents address and the consequent danger of not hearing about needs that would emerge in a more open-ended process.

With such risks in mind, Witkin and Altschuld (1995) recommend being cautious about assuming that a written questionnaire is the most appropriate tool when considering conducting a needs assessment. While a questionnaire can be an important tool, they suggest that it should not be used until after more exploratory methods have been employed to ensure that the factors measured by questionnaire items are as well chosen as possible.

Furthermore, some cultural groups find surveys strange or difficult (especially if English is not one's first language) and respond negatively to them. Weaver (1997), for example, described a questionnaire developed to assess the needs of an off-reservation Native American community in an urban area. A large number of questionnaires were mailed out, with virtually no returns. The alternative of a qualitative approach including focus groups and individual interviews was adopted with considerably greater success.

An example of a needs assessment that employed survey methods more appropriately is Brennan Homiak and Singletary's (2007) study that surveyed Christian clergy members from 15 denominations in central Texas with respect to their perceptions of the number in their congregation experiencing intimate partner violence and what clergy needed to better address this serious concern. Of the 100 surveys mailed, 44 were returned, a somewhat low but not unusual return rate for mailed surveys.

The clergy members estimated that less than 10% of their congregation members experienced partner violence—low when compared to incidence studies in Texas that cited lifetime rates of 47%. Only about one third of the clergy had received domestic violence–specific training; they were more likely to have resource materials in their churches and were familiar with local agencies and shelters for abused women. While a small proportion of the clergy considered themselves very equipped to counsel victims of domestic violence or make referrals, the majority did not. The authors recommend that social workers take the lead in offering training to assist the clergy in promoting violence-free congregations.

As mentioned previously, surveys may use both check-list type, predetermined responses and open-ended questions that allow for more contextual detailed responses and are analyzed using qualitative methods. A recent example of using open-ended questions is a survey with 206 agency-based social work field instructors, querying their initial awareness, personal and professional needs, and field issues that arose in response to the World Trade Center disaster of September 11th, 2001. The field instructors had clearly been weary but retained sensitivity to student and client needs. The results suggest the importance of developing an integrated crisis plan to better link the school, students, and field instructors in the event of future disasters.

## Standardized Needs Assessment Measures

A relatively new needs assessment methodology entails developing standardized measures to assess the needs of a specific population group. For example, Wancata and colleagues (2006) initially used focus groups and in-depth individual interviews to develop a measure comprising 18 common problems experienced by caregivers of adults diagnosed with schizophrenia. The difficulties were translated into items such as "not enough information on the illness, its symptoms and course," "fear of stigmatization and discrimination," and "burnout or illness of the carer."

Using such a measure in other needs assessment research has the advantage of building on the work that has gone into identifying and conceptualizing potentially important needs and of using a measure for which reliability and validity will often have been established. A possible disadvantage is that needs proven relevant to caregivers of adults diagnosed with schizophrenia in one location may not have the same importance in others. Conversely, items about other needs that are important in a new locale may be missing from the standardized measure.

## Using Existing Statistical Information

Another quantitative method of conducting needs assessments is using data that have been previously collected. Existing data may be available in agency files or government data banks, for example. Such secondary analyses have the advantage of sparing researchers the time and expense of gathering new data. A disadvantage is that one is limited to data that someone else considered worth gathering, and potentially important variables may be absent or may need to be inferred indirectly from the data that were recorded.

Reviewing case files can be challenging. As a follow-up to a previously completed study on the outcomes of a specialized domestic violence court (Tutty, McNichol, & Christensen, 2008), we are using district attorney files to collect a number of variables, including the demographic characteristics of the accused and the victim, whether the victims testified or provided a victims impact statement to the court, and how the trial was resolved.

In contested cases, the files can be very large, literally inches thick! The files are created for the criminal justice system, not researchers, so there is no consistent organization. As such, collecting data from one file can take several hours. Considerable information may not be recorded. Lawyers are not necessarily as interested in demographic characteristics such as ethnicity or age as most researchers are, and so little of this can be found in the files. Despite these challenges, if we are to evaluate the specialized courts, paper file reviews are our only option to assess whether the courts are meeting the needs of both the victims and the accused.

The following needs assessment used case records to assess whether the needs of abused and neglected children were adequately addressed by the child welfare intervention. Tracy,

Green, and Bremseth (1993) reviewed case records of supportive services for abused and neglected children in one U.S. state. Five hundred child welfare cases were sampled to explore factors associated with decisions to offer one of two services, family preservation if children at risk were still at home, or reunification for families with children who had been placed. The authors collected information on demographic variables, presenting problems, service history, service needs, services planned and provided, service characteristics, and service outcomes. This enterprise, the authors noted, consumed thousands of hours.

The analysis uncovered significant stresses affecting the children sampled, parental substance abuse, economic difficulties, and poor living conditions, which were infrequently addressed in case plans, which emphasized indications of child abuse. The authors concluded that "there was little one-to-one direct correspondence between the service need and the service offered" (Tracy et al., 1993, p. 26), raising serious questions about the quality of service planning (and the training of child welfare workers).

## Qualitative Methods of Needs Assessment

Qualitative needs assessment research may be conducted via individual interviews, small group discussions, or even large town hall meetings, each of which allow for more open exploration of issues than the quantitative methods previously outlined. Such studies tend to involve a greater time commitment from respondents but offer much more opportunity to identify and discuss issues in depth.

### Individual Interviews

Face-to-face and telephone interviews are one method of gathering in-depth information about the needs of particular groups. Preparation involves thinking through the purpose of the interview, constructing an interview schedule, and training interviewers (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). When a good rapport develops between interviewer and respondent, the result can be disclosure of information and ideas about sensitive issues that would not emerge when more formal, structured approaches are used. Also, in a more open-ended process, respondents may identify needs that no one had anticipated.

The disadvantages of this approach include the fact that it is notoriously labor intensive. Interviews are time-consuming to conduct, often lasting one to two hours, especially if asking individuals to reveal their personal stories. As a result, often only a relatively small sample of individuals may or can realistically be interviewed. Training the interviewers also takes time, and the job of transcribing and analyzing interviews is normally a lengthy, complex task. The following needs assessment is an example of using face-to-face interviews.

In the past 30 years, intimate partner violence has become an issue of significant societal concern, resulting in specialized justice and physical and mental health shifts to more adequately safeguard the women and children who are the primary victims. Yet certain ethnocultural groups, including immigrants and refugees, are underrepresented among those seeking assistance from formal supports such as the police and emergency shelters.

With respect to the question of what would constitute culturally appropriate responses to domestic violence, Pan et al. (2006) conducted 120 face-to-face interviews with members of three ethnic communities in San Diego: Somali, Vietnamese, and Latino. The interviews were provided in the appropriate language, and within each cultural group, 10 women, 10 men, 10 boys, and 10 girls participated.

Because of the sensitive nature of the issue, the topic of domestic violence was introduced using vignettes, rather than asking interviewees whether they had personally been abused. This allowed the respondents to speak about abuse in their culture in more general terms and to suggest possible resolutions to the problem.

The analysis of the interviews highlighted six core issues, including "varying definitions of violence, specific definitions of family harmony, strict gender roles, varying conflict resolution strategies, cultural identity and spirituality" (Pan et al., 2006, p. 42). The differing perspectives from the three ethnic communities suggested the need to develop diverse culture-specific services.

### Focus Groups

Focus groups are relatively unstructured small group experiences, typically with about 8 to 12 participants. The group composition is usually homogeneous in that members share a particular experience or interest, like the members of what we described earlier as the target population. Focus group interviews typically take from one and a half to two and a half hours, and a number may be conducted for a given study.

Witkin and Altschuld (1995) summarize the process of a typical focus group. Initially, members hear a general statement of the purpose of the session and are given a question related to this purpose designed to elicit perceptions about important needs. Often, participants are asked to write down the ideas that the question stimulates and then to share them with the group. The leader typically writes ideas as they are shared, summarizing them and making sure that there is agreement among members with what is being recorded. This process is then repeated with other predetermined questions.

Leadership is important to a focus group's success, especially since there is no highly structured agenda (except for the posing and answering questions aspect). According to Witkin and Altschuld (1995), "The leader must be nonjudgmental, create a supportive group atmosphere, be able to keep the interview process going, be a good listener, and be alert to sense when a group is deviating from the prescribed question route in meaningful and non-meaningful directions" (pp. 172–173). These are by no means easy demands.

One advantage of group approaches over individual interviews can also be a disadvantage. While participants do not have the same opportunity to explore their own perceptions or experiences in depth as in individual interviews, a group approach can elicit information that would not emerge without the stimulus of interacting with others and reacting to their ideas. When group discussions detour in innovative ways, this may lead to original and creative ideas. Brainstorming, or encouraging members to present any solution to a problem without prejudging it, is one way to encourage such innovation. Alternatively, without effective facilitation, the groups may pursue unproductive tangents, and there is a heightened risk of interpersonal conflict detracting from the effectiveness with which research goals are pursued. The following study used focus group methodology.

A relatively new role for social work graduates is working with seniors and their families to assist these clients in a number of ways. Yet, how readily are social workers perceived as resources to this population? Naito-Chan, Damron-Rodriguez, and Simmons (2004) used focus groups to explore what skills social work practitioners need to adequately address the needs of older persons and their families. The four focus groups included older adults and caregivers of older adults (consumers) as well as providers of care and recent social work graduates, both working in gerontology settings.

Notably, the analysis highlighted that a number of the consumers had little understanding of how social workers could assist them. Key among the consumer needs was resource finding, which the consumers did understand as a social worker role. However, other social work competencies such as assessments and case management were not mentioned by the consumers. The results suggested the need for public education about the roles of social workers in the field of aging.

### Nominal Groups

An alternate group approach to needs assessment has been developed (McKillip, 1998). Nominal groups are more structured than focus groups: The agenda allows group discussion but with a more consistent attention to the goal of achieving consensus about needs. Fewer needs assessments that use a nominal group approach can be found in the literature. Although more than a decade old, the following study provides a model of nominal groups with respect to issues that remain current.

It is commonly acknowledged that interpersonal and social problems, whether at home, in the neighborhood, or on school grounds, can seriously affect students' ability to learn. Gerdes and Benson (1995) used a nominal group process to assess problems experienced by inner-city African American schoolchildren. The goal was to identify the most serious problems faced by students from their own perspectives. The authors used a stratified random sample of students from Grades 1 to 9 who were assigned to groups based on whether they were from primary grades (1–3), middle grades (4–6), or junior high grades (7–9). Ninth-grade students who had experienced the nominal group process acted as facilitators.

The group members were first asked to list the problems that they faced at school on a sheet of paper. Using a round-robin format, every student identified one problem, adding a new item to a list on a flip chart, until it was agreed that the list was complete. From this list, each student identified the seven most serious problems and rated their severity. The facilitator then calculated the group ranking of the items.

The rankings of concerns varied across the different age groups. Fighting and problems with teachers were priority issues for Grades 1 to 3, fighting and drugs were the most serious to Grade 4 to 6 students, and pregnancy, drugs, and drug deals were the strongest concerns for the junior high students.

Teachers from the students' schools also participated in nominal groups, registering additional concerns about student issues such as low parental support, parental problems, and lack of motivation. Both students and teachers expressed a sense of powerlessness in addressing the problems that they were identifying. While the nominal group identified needs very effectively and in a way that encouraged partnership, it was but the first step in the process of change.

### Community Forum Approach

Large open public hearings or community forums may be used to gather information from the diverse individuals comprising a community whose needs are being assessed (McKillip, 1998). Similar to a town hall meeting lasting for several hours with large numbers of participants (sometimes 50 or more), this method aims to ensure that the broadest possible sampling of opinions results in a data set reflecting a community consensus regarding the issues being scrutinized. Clearly, this approach aims to give a voice to all community members, including many who are immediately affected by the problems of interest.

Witkin and Altschuld (1995) note that special leadership skills are vital to the success of this approach. Not everyone has the skills to facilitate large meetings that encourage group members to participate actively and trust that they can openly share ideas that may be different from the majority view.

The advantages of community forums include the fact that they are a relatively inexpensive way to hear from large numbers of interested individuals. Another advantage is that public meetings serve to sensitize the general public to the problems or to highlight potential resistance to proposed solutions. Also, engaging a cross section of community

members may have valuable secondary benefits. For example, when the time comes to implement recommendations, important people may have bought into the changes being suggested.

A primary disadvantage to this method is that there is no means of ensuring that the participants are a representative sample of their community. Indeed, this will normally not be the case: The ideas and perceptions collected will be those of people who, for some reason, are motivated to influence what happens. Citizens who are less interested will not attend and will not be heard, even though they may have reactions to the needs being assessed and the eventual recommendations for dealing with them.

Needs assessments using a community forum approach were rarely described in the literature. The following study is an intriguing model of using the forum to both present the results of a previously conducted needs assessment to the research respondents, which subsequently used the forum to further refine and develop action plans arising from the initial study.

The author included a community forum as one aspect of a study of the relative contribution of social class and ethnicity to the differential functioning of Puerto Rican elders in Springfield, Massachusetts. The first phase of the study consisted of individual interviews with 591 elders. The purpose of the community forum was both to present a number of the research respondents with the interview results and to ask subsequent questions. A total of 41 elders participated in the forum.

The forum discussion questions grew from the quantitative survey findings. Two of the five forum questions were, "Why are cultural support systems not playing a more active role in helping elders with their needs?" and "Why are churches not playing a more active role?" The author highlighted the extent to which the forum participants assisted in interpreting the previous quantitative needs assessment findings, resulting in recommendations that fit closely with this unique and previously marginalized community.

## Triangulation of Needs Assessment Information

To obviate risks of bias from using limited sources of information, Yegidis, Weinbach, and Morrison-Rodriguez (1999) recommend "triangulating" or "collecting data from three (or more) sources, each having different perspectives." Witkin and Altschuld (1995) argue for this step more strongly, suggesting that studies using only one method should be considered seriously flawed.

To illustrate, suppose one is researching the need in a community for a shelter for women. One could conduct a survey of key informants (social workers, the police, women's organizations, self-help group leaders, etc.), host a community forum, and perform a secondary analysis of existing data in police and social service agency files about the incidence of women requiring shelter. Congruence in the perceptions obtained from each study aspect would clearly represent a stronger case than if only one source was accessed. If the results contradict each other, however, the researcher has the difficult task of assessing which set of perceptions enjoys the greatest credibility.

A number of the examples provided in this chapter illustrate the use of more than one method of data collection. An assessment of the health needs of transgendered individuals in Philadelphia (Kenagy, 2005) is a case in point.

Transgendered individuals have or are in the process of undergoing medical procedures to change their gender. While this process entails considerable involvement with the medical system, it is not clear what health needs transgendered people experience

afterwards. Kenagy (2005) used face-to-face interviews or self-administered mail surveys with 182 individuals (113 male-to-female and 69 female-to-male individuals).

The responses to queries about health needs were primarily concerns with respect to HIV/AIDS status (6% were HIV positive), risk of HIV infection or reinfection (60% had engaged in unprotected sex within the past year), suicide (30% had attempted), their experiences of violence (54% had been forced to have sex; 52% had been physically abused), and access to health care (about two thirds had a doctor or primary care physician). Importantly, though, more than one quarter of the informants had been refused medical care because they were transgendered. The results were used to argue the need for prevention services specific to the transgendered population.

It is not uncommon for various constituents to have different views about needs. As noted by Revere et al. (1996),

> It is relatively easy to decide that a starving man needs food or a homeless person needs shelter. But what if an assessment points to areas of need that are not acknowledged by the individuals themselves, who may believe they need something else altogether? What if the target population and the service providers in the community recognize different areas of need or disagree as to what will best meet that need? (p. 4)

For example, a needs assessment standardized instrument was developed by M. Carter, Crosby, Geertshuis, and Startup (1996) to assess the needs of people with a chronic mental illness. Thirty-two questions measured perceptions as to whether clients needed assistance with a variety of tasks and issues, such as shopping and cooking, family relationships, making use of spare time, and motivation.

Two forms were developed, one for clients and one for staff members, so that the perceptions of the clients and the key informants could be triangulated. The results showed poor agreement between workers and clients on many items, suggesting critical differences in perceptions. The issue in such a case is not who to believe but how to address the discrepancies so that they do not negatively affect services.

Another sense in which discrepancies can be problematic has to do with who prioritizes needs once they are identified. How and whether research results get used is often a political decision, and different social issues are given importance at different times. For example, child abuse has existed throughout recorded history, but its perceived importance as a problem varies considerably over time and place, and the resources available to reduce it and ameliorate its effects fluctuate as well.

Over the past several decades, we have come to recognize the surprisingly large number of children who have been sexually abused. Identifying this problem entailed measuring its prevalence and also clarifying the needs of child victims, for child welfare intervention and psychotherapeutic help and so on. As these efforts absorbed scarce research resources, some have argued that our push to assist sexual abuse victims has been given such a strong priority that we have not attended sufficiently well to the needs of other mistreated children, those who are neglected or who witness violence between their parents, for example.

## Implementing the Results of Needs Assessments

Although needs assessments are, by definition, research with practical implications, ensuring that the results are implemented is frequently challenging. Several issues are part

of this general problem. First, the results must be presented in a form in which the suggestions and how to implement them are clearly outlined. This has been problematic in the past, as C. Carter (1996) noted in her review of needs assessments from the late 1970s through 1989. She found that, while authors usually detailed the research process, they offered few suggestions about how to carry out the required changes. Second, Carter observes that researchers often write for other academics. Important as the academic audience is, with needs assessments, the people we want to influence with our work include service providers, policy makers, and the target population. These groups may require a report different from professors and their students. The organization of material and the style of presenting findings and recommendations should be sensitive to the likely interests and priorities of nonacademic readers. Researchers might even consider writing more than one report, in the interests of effective communication with diverse audiences.

Amodeo and Gal (1997) recommend another strategy for facilitating utilization of needs assessment research, which is to involve the sponsor organizations in all steps of the study. This ensures that the sponsor is knowledgeable about the research and committed to following it up effectively. In their discussion of this theme, Amodeo and Gal propose that researchers should allot a generous amount of time after data collection to help the sponsor agency digest the findings and plan a response to them.

## Conclusions

The examples we have offered illustrate that needs assessments are a practical research method with vast potential usefulness to social work. The results can be especially meaningful in our work because they document the needs of people experiencing problems, rather than addressing the more esoteric interests of social scientists bent on testing or developing theory. Needs assessment can raise important questions, identify what aspects of services or policies are useful, indicate what needs to be improved, and highlight gaps or misapplications of services. The results can challenge us in the same ways that all good research does, inviting us to test our assumptions against evidence gathered from the clients and communities we serve, changing our beliefs and interventions in beneficial ways as a result.

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## Useful Web Sites

http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/

This Web site by the Iowa State University Extension Division provides a primer on five types of needs assessments: existing data sources, attitude survey approaches, key informant approaches, community forums, and focus groups.

http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/section_1042.htm

The Community Tool Box is a service of the Work Groups for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. This comprehensive Web site presents information on numerous evaluation methods for use in the community, with needs assessments being only one.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the disadvantages and advantages of quantitative as compared to qualitative needs assessment methods?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of asking key informants about the needs of an identified population versus speaking to those affected by the problem themselves?
3. Compare community forums and focus groups. For what purposes might one be preferred over the other?
4. Discuss the concepts of "needs" and "wants." How can those developing needs assessment ensure that the needs that are being identified are necessary and important?
5. What are the best strategies to ensure that needs assessment recommendations are implemented?