Coping with Growth

Community Needs Assessment Techniques

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Responsiveness to citizen preferences, concerns, and needs is a basic fundamental of American democracy. In many situations, law requires that the needs of a community be studied prior to the development of policies and programs in areas such as land use, transportation, and health care planning.

This introduction to community needs assessment provides background information on the purposes for conducting a community needs assessment; guidelines for determining which techniques are most appropriate; and a brief description of 13 different needs assessment techniques, including the advantages of each method and a list of references to which the reader can go for further information. It should be helpful to local government officials, agency personnel, and members of citizen groups involved in the planning process for a rapidly growing community.

Purpose

There are several reasons why citizen groups, public officials, and agency representatives should secure accurate information about the needs of a community.

All communities are in a continual state of change—through births and deaths of citizens, through people moving in and out, and through the natural growth and development of each individual citizen over time. As a consequence, what once may have been an appropriate policy or program can soon become inappropriate. The character or mood of a community can make many shifts as a result of the interplay of social, cultural, and economic changes.

The needs of different groups of people in a community are difficult to identify—and frequently interrelated. In many instances, people do not express their attitudes and feelings openly; sometimes community needs are not revealed until a crisis occurs. When public concerns appear to correspond with the responsibilities of several agencies, no one agency may identify specific concerns or needs as high priority, and the result may be no action.

The needs of people in rapidly growing communities may be overwhelming. Local government resources may be limited and public demands may be high. This makes priority setting and long-range planning essential. However, such planning and action cannot be carried out effectively without accurate and up-to-date information about citizen needs and preferences.

A community needs assessment is an excellent means of involving the public in problem solving and developing local goals. There is a tendency for people to resist change—frequently because they have inadequate information, or because they have not been involved in making decisions. A needs assessment can therefore be viewed as a process of citizen involvement whereby people not only learn more about the situation, but they also feel that they have had a voice in the outcome.1

In a rapid growth situation, needs assessments can help local leaders ease the impacts of growth. This information can be especially helpful for:

- Learning more about the present residents and how they will be affected by growth—newcomers in their neighborhoods, new or expanded job markets, crowded schools, new leadership responsibilities, changing traffic patterns;
- Learning more about newcomers—who they are, their specific needs and concerns, how they may be affected by moving into the community;
- Identifying needs for new or expanded public services;
- Assessing public opinion about community goals and priorities;
- Systematically evaluating existing programs and services and planning for improvements;
- Providing justifications or explanations for budget and grant requests;
- Increasing citizen understanding of community problems and their effects on people and organizations in the community;
- Building increased citizen support for public decisions, in that citizens develop a greater "sense of ownership" through involvement;
- Increasing citizen awareness of community planning, including availability of resources.

Selecting a Technique

The quality of information about a community is only as good as the technique or combination of techniques used. A single technique may be too narrow in the information it provides, using too many methods may be costly in terms of time and dollars. Different information-gathering techniques are appropriate for different needs. Analyze the situation and the most significant questions being asked, then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of several techniques. Combinations of several techniques will provide a reasonable picture of:

- What your community is like—characteristics of people, types of organizations, values, beliefs, goals, concerns, and problems.
- Comparison with other communities.
- What is unique about your community.

When gathering information about impacts of a particular project or population change, remember to include data on both the local setting and the sources of impact. In a sense, information must be obtained about two communities—the permanent local residents and the newcomers with a new development. How will the change affect or continue to affect people in the community?

The following guidelines should be helpful in choosing one or a combination of several needs assessment techniques.

The problem. Narrow the focus. If the problem is not well defined, the study may become unmanageable. The next step is to identify techniques such as a citizens' advisory group, a steering committee, a community forum, or a mail questionnaire. These can provide a sharper perspective on local concerns. Define the problem and assess its manageability.

- What do we want or need to know?
- Why do we want to know it?
- How will the information be used?
- Where can we find the information needed to answer our questions?
- How can we obtain this information?
- What useful information sources already exist at local, regional, state, or federal levels?
- How can the data be obtained, organized, analyzed, and presented?
- What people and organizations should be involved in "gathering the information"? Why? How?

The cost. Try to determine how much it will cost in time, dollars, and other resources to obtain the needed information. Consider what money is available, or where financial help could be obtained. Also, estimate the availability of human resources—for planning, compiling, analyzing, and presenting information. If citizen volunteers are the primary means of carrying out the study, they may need to be reimbursed for their expenses, their time may be limited, and they may need guidance and support. On the other hand, highly skilled researchers can be found in the volunteer community. Do not overlook agencies, organizations, and businesses that may be interested in the problem. The total community is a potential resource.

The leader. Even though the needs assessment project may have a capable steering committee or the support of local officials, it needs leadership. Someone who is responsible for all the tasks associated with planning, defining the problem, monitoring the expenditure of funds, organizing a plan of operation, guiding the data collection, and serving as liaison. Leadership also includes overseeing data analysis, its presentation, and its use.

The leader does not need to have all the answers. What does he/she need to be able to organize? Know how to maximize the involvement of all community resources, and understand the research methods used in conducting a needs assessment. At no time is it a leader's substitute for community participation. With the right kind of leadership, occasional consultant help, and willing citizens, a community can produce a useful needs assessment for very little money.

The population. When deciding which assessment is best, take into account the population or organization. It is necessary for the study and conduct the assessment. Some methods are more suitable for obtaining information about minorities while others may have a tendency to encourage responses only from highly educated people. For example, the key informant method, whereby a few local people serve as long-time informants about the community, may be a way to build trust over time in a culturally isolated community. Although it is time-consuming, this method may be the only way to find out how a Native American community really feels about a proposed new industry. It is critical that care be taken to anticipate who the people are that the needs assessment will describe. Community researchers should use caution in generalizing that all people in the community are alike. Specific groups are unique in the way their members will respond to an interview, an observer, a group discussion, or a mail questionnaire. Human sensitivity provides the best clues for determining the most appropriate methods for a specific use—how respondents will react to the needs assessment method and the person conducting it. This consideration alone may justify the use of more than one technique. The method selected should be "more like an umbrella of activity beneath which any technique may be used for gathering the desired information, and for processes of thinking about this information."1

Techniques Using Existing Information

In every community there is wide variety of information available if you know where to find it. Before new data is collected, a thorough check should be made of what is already available. This may not only add to your early understanding of the problem, but it could save time and money later. Existing records often provide insights into the community that cannot be observed or noted in any other way. This information can be found in document form, as reports, historical accounts, minutes of meetings, letters, records, and photographs.

The Census and vital statistics records

The U.S. Bureau of the Census conducts a population census every 10 years. Four volumes are published about each state's population, including statistics about townships, municipalities, counties, and metropolitan areas. These volumes contain information on the structure of a population (size, distribution, and composition) and on demographic processes such as fertility, mortality, and migration. General social, economic, and other descriptive information is also presented. Besides the decennial information, monthly and occasional data is available in Current Population Surveys, available from a library or by subscription from Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

Census information is available for public use in a population growth, including bound publications, microfilm, and computer tape. In addition to the Census of Population, there are also Censuses of Agriculture, Housing, Business and Manufacturing, Government, and Transportation.

County and City Data Books are available from the U.S. Bureau of Census in computer tape and bound form. These contain manageable data from the censuses of population, housing, governments, and manufacturing.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of the Census and vital statistics records for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Readily available at minimal cost.</td>
<td>• Data reflecting only information that the respondent has been asked to share with the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data tends to be descriptive and may require the user to determine cause and effect.</td>
<td>• Some figures may represent estimates or projections as opposed to actual accounts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some figures may represent estimates or projections as opposed to actual accounts.</td>
<td>• Does not reveal individual values behind or reasons underlying current trends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Great quantity of data may overwhelm the user unless selectivity is exercised.</td>
<td>• Local community data is frequently limited and not always current.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Sources of additional help:


County and City Data Books, Federal, state, and county vital statistics reports.


Local: Public libraries, offices of county, or regional planning commissions.

County Extension offices.

School district offices.

College or university departments (sociology, demography, political science, planning, public health, library).

Financial institutions.

Utility companies.

Chamber of Commerce.

Agencies and organizations responsible for health, rehabilitation, low enforcement and protection, recording vital statistics.

Content analysis

The aim of content analysis is to take existing documentary information, particularly that which is not statistical, and organize it into a more useful form. Content analysis can be applied to personal documents such as letters, diaries, private papers, or photographs; or to administrative records such as reports, proceedings of meetings, or hearings proceedings. It can also be applied to the analysis of newspaper articles or editorials, photographic collections, political records, or historical documents.

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of content analysis for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Allows study of subjects that otherwise might be inaccessible.</td>
<td>• Time needed for locating suitable documents and for analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Useful for determining value-interest positions, political climate, public attitudes, historical trends or sequences.</td>
<td>• Lack of availability of material suitable for analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research atmosphere is free of personal biases and other human biases.</td>
<td>• Difficult to detect possible bias by original author.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information is reliable—locally—libraries, archives, agency files, or offices.</td>
<td>• Analysis categories may not accurately represent important ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research may be low-cost.</td>
<td>• Possibility of recording irrelevant information, or omitting relevant information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Requires skills quite different from field observation, questionnaire construction, interviewing, etc.</td>
<td>• Requires ability to scan information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides opportunity for study of trends over time.</td>
<td>• Information represents only verbal behavior (in the case of printed documents).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Material to be analyzed may be of high quality compared to poorly written questions or responses to poorly conducted interviews.</td>
<td>• Not verbatim behavior.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Sources of additional help:


Local: Museums, libraries, church records.

Newspaper archives.

County offices that record land tenure, titles, sales, marriages, divorces, deaths, criminal offenses, employment.

School and hospital registers and files.

Planning commissions.

Political institutions and organizations.

Utility companies.

Financial institutions.

Business associations.

Community organizations with special interests: individual photographs albums, diaries, collections, family clipping, obituaries, manuscripts.
Techniques Using New Information

It may be necessary to go beyond existing information to assess the needs and concerns of the community, particularly under the conditions of rapid change associated with growth. Depending on the kind of information desired, there is a variety of approaches or combinations of approaches that can be used.

Techniques for collecting new information generally fall into one of three categories:

1. Those mainly dependent upon observation combined with documentation;

2. Those mainly dependent upon some form of questioning of individuals;

3. Those mainly dependent upon some form of gathering information from a group of people.

No one method of collecting information should be viewed in isolation, for each can be strengthened by drawing on the qualities of the other methods. The persons designing the needs assessment must develop the best possible technique or combination of techniques to suit the need.
Participant observation

True participant observation requires the investigator to immerse him/herself in the life of the community being studied. The aim is to participate in the people’s day-to-day activities, thereby sharing experiences, activities, language, and all community conditions. The observer’s aim is to see the world through the eyes of the subjects.

The longer the participant/observer is able to share the life of the subjects, the better the chances are to accurately sense residents’ perspectives. However, time and circumstances may create a short, intermittent observer role, or some adaptation of the participant-as-observer and the observer-as-participant follows.

Information can be collected in a number of ways by watching, listening, and documenting what is seen and heard; by asking questions and entering into discussions; by sharing activities with residents and noting comments, behaviors, and reactions—or a combination of these. The great usefulness of this technique is its natural style and flexibility which, over time, can build sufficient trust to reveal insights that might otherwise not be obtained. It is essential, however, that observation and documentation be carried out systematically so that the information obtained is free of bias and relevant to the focus of the study.

Participant observation can be especially useful in the following needs assessment situations:

- Assessment of long term effects on local residents of a new industry or development.
- Determining reasons for community or organizational conflicts or misunderstandings.
- Finding new solutions to community problems.
- Learning how minorities or culturally different people feel about a community issue, and finding acceptable ways of involving them in problem solving.

Sources of additional help:

Local: College or university departments (anthropology, history, sociology, etc.).

Case study

The case study is a needs assessment method that can do two things: (1) it can provide in-depth information on a single unit, group, or organization; and (2) it can serve as a learning experience for a group of people who analyze the case situation. It involves the description of a few cases for the purpose of stimulating ideas, defining regularities, or reaching consensus about what is happening. Through personal discussion, mutual interaction, observation, or review of existing documents, the reporter captures the total sense of the situation. The outcome should tell a story or convey a picture about what is occurring. The case study should include:

- History and background;
- A picture of the present;
- An indication of relationships between people;
- Stated or actual situation;
- No judgmental feelings by the reporter.

After the case study is developed, it must be analyzed and diagnosed. Maximum insight will be derived from group analysis in which individuals interact with one another to answer underlying questions.

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Sources of additional help:


Local: Caseworkers or counselors who work with families or other subject groups (Employment Security, Department of Social Services, etc.)

Business or industry personnel

Criminals, crisis centers, rehabilitation agencies, community action centers, human service organizations

Attorneys, law enforcement agencies, judicial departments

Social network analysis

Social network analysis is a means of learning more about informal relationships between people. It involves the systematic recording of who knows whom and the continuous activity and interaction patterns that bind two or more people together. Using this approach, it is possible to map, over time, social links between people, groups, offices, or organizations that might otherwise not be accounted for when observing formal relationships in a social system. Maping is based on data taken from interviews, observations, documentary analysis, or a combination of these sources.

In a rapidly changing community, social network analysis could be used for the following reasons:

- To learn whether friendship patterns and helping relationships are being established between newcomers and long-term residents;
- To look at changes in community leadership—who are the respected authorities, who is sought for advice, what are the problem-solving networks, who participates in volunteer organizations;
- To study how a migrant population adapts to the new community—support relationships, friendships, ties to old communities, barriers to integration, type of community issues they become involved in and how;
- To gain insight into a formal organization and how informal social systems operate within it, for example, the planning commission, the planning office, the city council, special interest boards, advocacy groups.

Sources of additional help:


Local: Professionals trained in sociology, human relations, anthropology, medical science, social geography, and research.

Survey

The survey technique is unique in that it is the only needs assessment method—other than talking to each citizen—that has the potential of representing all people in the community. In this respect, it is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number of people. If a survey is well-designed and implemented, the results can be generalized to a larger population.

The survey is based on information collected from a sample of the total community population. On the other hand, a survey can be administered to all people in a community or organization to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to express themselves. The most commonly used survey methods are person-to-person interviews, drop-off and pick-up questionnaires, mail questionnaires, and telephone interviews. While each approach is somewhat different, the format is similar. Each asks an individual to supply attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and attributes in response to specific questions.

Survey forms flexibility in the types of questions that may be asked—ranging from structured yes-no undecided responses to unstructured, open-ended responses. Therefore, the survey can be sensitive to psychological barriers, such as length of survey, wording, type of person administering it, and confidentiality, that might affect response.

In some situations, there may be opposition to the use of surveys as a tool for community and continuous misuse of the method. People may not be interested in participating in surveys because there have been too many surveys conducted, many of which may have been poorly designed. Another objection might be that people are afraid to talk to interviewers (for fear of fraud, robbery, or assault); or that people do not want their privacy invaded. Minorities, in particular, may feel that they have been surveyed to death with few results.

The focus of the survey must be kept in mind, and questions limited to specific and clearly defined informational needs. For example, a community needs assessment survey could be used to:

- Search for alternative solutions to community problems;
- Solicit citizen reactions to specific solutions to community problems and proposals for action;
- Solicit citizen opinions concerning proposed goals for community development;
- Gather information on citizens' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions in order to identify and prioritize community problems;
- Measure changes in attitudes about an attempted solution to a community problem;
- Attempt to make citizens more aware of community problems and their ramifications;
- Assess citizens attitudes about spending public funds on specific programs.

Community researchers are advised to delay the construction of a survey until enough is known about the social and cultural context within the community.

Sources of additional help:


Locals: Health, social, and health service or planning agencies.

College or university departments of sociology, community development, extension review educational community surveys that have been done.

Table 5. Advantages and disadvantages of social network analysis for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can provide accurate, detailed information concerning informal relationships over time.</td>
<td>Can be time-consuming in that data should be collected over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can provide additional insight into values, beliefs, social interaction, and lifestyles.</td>
<td>Confidential observation and questioning may make respondents uncomfortable; may inhibit natural conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A combination approach—participant observation by survey, interviews, use of existing documents, and use of family networks.</td>
<td>Requires a high degree of accuracy and planning in advance.</td>
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Table 6. Advantages and disadvantages of the survey for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can be inexpensive—especially if volunteers are available to conduct the survey—or records and data exist to draw from.</td>
<td>May require time and expense to develop the survey, train interviewers, conduct interviews, and analyze results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques—mail survey, telephone survey, personal interview, drop-off and pick-up survey—may be selected in relation to desired cost or response rate.</td>
<td>Subject to misinterpretation depending on how questions and response categories are designed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be used to survey an entire population and provide an opportunity for many persons to be involved in decision-making processes.</td>
<td>Tendency for scope of survey to be limited—omission of underlying questions and actual behavioral patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be used to record behaviors as well as opinions, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and attributes.</td>
<td>To assure statistical meaning, random samples must be carefully selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful if combined with another method—such as participant observation or case study—that will provide an interactive perspective or detail.</td>
<td>Results may not be valid if survey is not designed correctly.</td>
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12

13
The key informant method is based on obtaining information, over time, from a community resident who is in a position to know the community well. The person or persons selected to be key informants must therefore have a broad knowledge of the community, its services, and its people. It is an excellent way to recover information about past events or ways of life that are no longer observable.

The objectives of the needs assessment can help determine the most appropriate kind of person(s) to act as key informant. The researcher might consider public officials, longtime residents, business managers, administrators, church leaders, and persons representing a variety of life styles, ages, viewpoints, or ethnic backgrounds. Few people in a community will be able to speak about everything; therefore, the problem should be in focus before the informant is selected.

The key informant method requires sufficient time to build a good relationship between investigator and informant. The value of the method is the type of data that can be elicited as a result of the communication and trust that develops between the two. The quality of information obtained is dependent on the ability of the investigator to draw out the key informant's capabilities in perceiving and communicating the information needed.

A variety of methods can be derived for working with a key informant. Questions can be developed in advance, as on a questionnaire or outline, or the approach can be totally unstructured and spontaneous. Several methods applied in combination may produce the best results, involving survey, participant observation, and citizen advisory group discussion. Because of its intensive and personal nature, the key informant method is especially useful for:

- Obtaining a deeper knowledge of minority viewpoints, or of silent majority opinions;
- Involving citizens in public problem-solving who would be less inclined to answer a questionnaire;
- Raising citizen consciousness about a community problem;
- Shifting formal community leaders that a citizen organization is committed to obtaining their viewpoints.

### Sources of additional help:

- **Library:**

- **Local:**
  - People trained in anthropology or ethnography—might be found in libraries, museums, schools, universities, or human service organizations.
  - Knowledgeable local people—such as local officials, religious leaders, bankers, administrators, leaders of public service organizations, professionals, ethnic group leaders—who have the respect and acceptance of residents.

### Life history

The life history method usually involves the collection of biographies or detailed histories on a few selected members of the community. It can also be applied to the histories of families, organizations, or agency departments. Through intensive interviews with individuals, supplemented by documentary evidence, it is possible to obtain rich data about past events and customs, and individual perspectives of what the community is like and how his/her life has been affected by it. It is a unique way of seeing the community through the eyes and feelings of a resident.

The life history approach can reveal a vast amount of information about such things as community opportunity structures, social norms, unacceptable patterns of behavior, significant life cycle events, valued community activities and rituals, individual or family mobility patterns, effects of development, trends in leadership, power structure, and community factors that might foster social and economic problems—barriers to employment, neighborhood vandalism, teenage depression, child abuse, family stress, and marital problems.

The use of the life history to study an organization or group should not be overlooked. For example, the detailed history of a planning commission, city council, or merchants' association can reveal a lot about the character of the community, residents' social and economic backgrounds, patterns of power and influence, and possible problem-solving strategies.

### Sources of additional help:

Nominal group process

Nominal group process is a structured problem-solving or ideas-generating strategy in which individuals' ideas are gathered and combined in a face-to-face nonthreatening group situation. The process is used in health, social service, and education fields, as well as in industry and government to maximize creative participation in group problem-solving. It assures a balanced input from all participants and takes advantage of each person's knowledge and experience. In a needs assessment, it is useful for generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, prioritizing, and making decisions on proposed alternative actions.

Table 9. Advantages and disadvantages of nominal group process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requires a skilled leader</td>
<td>May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless a leader's assistance is available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless an effective leader is available.</td>
<td>Necessitates a leader's assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of ideas on paper can be done by a computer.</td>
<td>Lack of face-to-face interaction may reduce the spontaneity of ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides an opportunity to discuss ideas in a face-to-face setting.</td>
<td>Ideas may be lost or not considered if not shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual ideas can be evaluated without being influenced by others.</td>
<td>Ideas may be lost or not considered if not shared.</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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A community advisory group or task force might consider using a nominal group process technique under these circumstances:

- To determine which community problems are of greatest immediate concern.
- To develop a clear assessment strategy for dealing with the identified problems.
- To design improved community services or programs.
- At a community forum or town meeting where broad citizen input is needed on a proposed plan for land use, transportation, public services, or school expansion.

Sources of additional help:


Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique is another way of obtaining group input for ideas and problem-solving. Unlike the nominal group process, the delphi does not require face-to-face participation. It uses a series of carefully designed questionnaires interspersed with information summaries and feedback from preceding responses.

In a planning situation, the delphi can be used to:
- Develop a number of alternatives.
- Assess the social and economic impacts of rapid community growth.
- Explore underlying assumptions or background information leading to different judgments.

Table 10. Advantages and disadvantages of the delphi technique for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allows participants to remain anonymous.</td>
<td>Judgments are those of a selected group of people and may not be representative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive.</td>
<td>Tendency to eliminate extreme positions and force a middle-of-the-road consensus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free of social pressure, personality influences, and individual dominance.</td>
<td>More time-consuming than the group process method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A reliable judgment or forecast.</td>
<td>Should not be viewed as a total alternative to forecasting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows sharing of information and reasoning among participants.</td>
<td>Requires skill in written communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducive to independent thinking and gradual formulation.</td>
<td>Requires adequate time and participant commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A well-selected respondent panel that includes knowledgable individuals, members of impacted community, regional officials, academic social scientists, etc.—can provide a broad analytical perspective on potential growth impacts.</td>
<td>(About 90-45 days)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources of additional help:


Local: College or university departments of sociology, political science, planning, economics. Major businesses and industries that do forecasting, innovative planning. Government offices where task forces and commissions have been initiated to look at the future.
Advisory groups and task forces
Advisory groups and task forces are called together for a variety of purposes—to represent the ideas and attitudes of a community, group, or organization; to make suggestions; to generate new ideas; to advise and recommend; or to carry out a specific task. Members of such a group may be specially selected or recruited because of their unique skills or backgrounds; they may volunteer; they may be nominated or elected; or the group may be formed by a combination of these processes.
Because advisory groups and task forces are formed in a variety of ways, a number of things should be considered in advance:
- Composition and selection. Will it be made up of experts, lay persons, or a combination of both?
- Will membership be determined? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each person to the function of the group?
- Purpose. Will the group be formed for the purpose of information dissemination, information collection, planning, policymaking, technical assistance, legitimizing or building support, or creating public awareness?
- Duration. Will there be a beginning and an end to the group’s responsibilities? How long will members’ services be required?
- Method of operation. Will there be regular and frequent meetings, occasional meetings, delphi-type communication by mail, problem resolution calls, or a combination of these? Who will assume leadership? How will recommended actions or plans be implemented?
- Motivation and reward. How will participants be rewarded for their input? How will their interest in the group’s task be developed and retained?
Advisory groups and task forces, especially those of a short-term or specific task orientation, can be invaluable to a community needs assessment.

Table 11. Advantages and disadvantages of advisory groups and task forces for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to involve a variety of professionals and lay people from diverse backgrounds</td>
<td>Maximizing the skills of group members may take considerable time and consuming organization, planning, and training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay people may see alternatives that are overlooked by experts</td>
<td>Requires a skilled facilitator or leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local residents may have technical expertise or knowledge, particularly about the community in which they live, that professionals do not have</td>
<td>May result in frustration if participants’ advice is not taken or if they have no justification for participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing numbers of people are demanding to be involved in planning, yet they cannot be ignored</td>
<td>Members may become disillusioned if they have not had clear instructions for the reason for participation in the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When programs go wrong, people who have been involved in planning them have less reason to blame officials for the problems</td>
<td>Depending upon selection, members may not necessarily represent all points of view or all members of the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be an artifact for feelings of alienation, distrust, and powerlessness</td>
<td>May threaten decision-making processes and planning officials, and others in formal organizational roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in the planning process often assures acceptance in the community</td>
<td>Sometimes there is a tendency to overwhelm advisory committees with busy work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes the pressure off the experts; they do not need to have all the answers</td>
<td>Viewed from perspective of a citizen advisory committee, there may be a tendency to regard it as the only means for obtaining citizen input. Should be considered as one of several methods to obtain public participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually results in more creative, problem-solving</td>
<td>May help solidify relationship between a broad group of professionals, politicians, and lay people. Communication barriers are broken down and mutual trust increases.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A community forum is based on one or more public meetings to which residents are invited to express their opinions about community problems and needs. With advance planning and the assistance of a steering committee, an enormous amount of information can be obtained in a short time at minimal cost. Skilled leadership and advance organization is needed to motivate a representative public turnout, to assure maximum participation, to collect information, and to know what to do with the information once it is collected. Usually, the format incorporates a number of information-gathering techniques, such as nominal group process, lay informant, advisory committee, panels, and possibly a follow-up survey. It has the potential to narrow the problem on which a later technique may elaborate; to build public awareness of the complexity of an issue; to legitimize the need for further study; to design improved programs and services; or to test public views of proposed solutions to community problems.

Sources of additional helpful information:
- Local: See citations under needs assessment techniques that will be used in the community forum.
Community impressions

Table 13. Advantages and disadvantages of the community impressions technique for community needs assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides input directly from people most likely affected by a development, such as neighborhood associations, teachers, business people, the elderly, minorities.</td>
<td>Does not provide a representative sample of attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows for probing behind conclusions, resulting in a better understanding of causal relationships.</td>
<td>Process for eliciting the data requires skilled planning and facilitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be combined with statistical data in a community forum, providing a richer data base and a greater validity of findings.</td>
<td>Time is needed for completing data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If individual appointments are made, allows the possibility of obtaining input from busy, knowledgeable, and influential people.</td>
<td>In a face-to-face setting, wide variation in participants' background may suppress contributions of quieter, less confident people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can provide a comfortable, supportive atmosphere in which friends discuss an issue together, where it might not be possible to interview the same individuals alone.</td>
<td>Data is dependent on willingness of people to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The community impressions approach is a small-group strategy for obtaining opinions or impressions of what the larger community is thinking. It is rather like applying nominal group process or delphi techniques to a group of key informants. Because the informants do not necessarily have to meet as a group, the community impressions approach can also provide opportunity for extensive taped discussions, by appointment, with leaders and influencers.

In a rapidly growing community, the community impression approach could be used to solicit expert opinion about anticipated social and economic impacts of a development; how to solve a technical problem such as inadequate transportation; or how to test the feasibility of a new program or facility. Ideally, the community impressions approach should be combined with another technique that draws upon more representative data, such as survey, community forum, or existing community documents.

Sources of additional help:

Context:
- Legislation
- Social change
- Economic change
- Other external forces

Needs Assessment Techniques:
- Existing information
  - Census and vital statistics
- Content analysis
- New information
  - Participant observation
  - Case study
  - Social network analysis
  - Survey
- Key informant
- Life history
- Nominal group process
- Delphi technique
- Task force
- Community forum
- Community impressions

As a means of summarizing our discussion of needs assessment techniques, we will apply selected methods to a community setting where rapid growth is being anticipated. We will build upon an approach developed by Dillman (1977) and later applied by Garkovich (1979). Our model is based upon the use of multiple needs assessment methods as a key component in making data-based policy decisions.

In 1978, the Washington Water Power Company announced their plans to hopefully begin construction in 1983 on the first of four coal-fired generating plants in a rural area of eastern Washington near Creston. Over the decade of 1963-1973, a sizable construction force would be working on the four projects, which represent an anticipated investment of 6-3 billion.

Creston is an agricultural trade center located in Lincoln County, which has a primarily agricultural base. Creston is on a state highway approximately 56 miles from Spokane, a major eastern Washington city.

As shown in the figure, the context for policy discussions with regard to the impacts of growth upon towns like Creston also includes legislation and other forces, such as the increasing demand for energy, in an external environment. In the case of Creston, the National Environmental Policy Act and Washington state legislation provided a context for generating needed information and a framework for negotiating with the energy developer.

Historically, Creston and the county in which it is located are quite typical of most American communities which have a primarily agricultural base. Lincoln County reached its population peak in 1910 with 17,529 residents, and then consistently declined in population to a low of 9,300 in 1975. Creston, which is one of several small municipalities in Lincoln County, has had a fairly stable population base — growing from 308 in 1910 to its present level of 360. Creston is 20 miles from Davenport, a community of approximately 1,600 residents, which is the county seat and location of the hospital and major shopping area for northern Lincoln County.
Creston residents appear to enjoy life in their community and in rural Washington. There is some concern, however, about the proposed new energy facilities, the threat of railroad abandonment to their present agricultural economy, the need for more paved streets, the need for improved mall service, and the need for an improved water system. In addition, prior to 1979, the community did not have a comprehensive plan which could be used as a guide for local decisionmaking about the community's future.

In 1979, the mayor of Creston, working in cooperation with members of the Creston Planning Commission, approached the area Extension agent serving Lincoln County about doing a needs assessment survey. Such a survey, they reasoned, could be a means for getting a broad base of citizen input into the planning process and provide objective indicators of human needs within a community that is anticipating rapid growth. Using the resources of Washington State University Cooperative Extension and other educational institutions, a survey was completed in 1979. The survey provided substantial information on citizen attitudes about proposed goals for the community, perceptions about possible and actual community problems and knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about the proposed energy development, as well as other changes occurring in the area. The survey helped citizens become more aware of problems and possible solutions, and provided information to help planning commission members and elected governmental officials make better policy decisions.

The survey is only one method of generating useful information about citizen needs in communities where rapid growth is expected or occurring. In the case of Creston, a committee of persons representing a cross-section of community members was formed to help with the process of impact assessment and mitigation. The Creston Project Committee, as it has been called, was set up to function as both an advisory group and a task force. Although impact committees of this type can be extremely helpful, it is prudent to review the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches. For example, while many professionals and laypersons may be involved on the impact committee, it may be possible that members will not have the necessary time or the expertise to thoroughly assess and understand the critical fiscal and sociocultural impacts which may occur as a result of the proposed energy development.

As stressed above, information generated by advisory groups and task forces can be supplemented using other methods, and such groups can employ many different techniques for generating the information which they will then evaluate. The summary figure emphasizes combining existing sources of information such as census and vital statistics data with new sources of information to aid in the process of policy analysis in communities like Creston. In addition to the use of surveys, several other methods provide essential supplementary and complementary new information for decisionmakers. The Delphi method can be very useful for obtaining expert opinion on needs and problems related to the impacts of rapid growth, while the key informant method will be useful for identifying the unique needs of minorities, the youth, or the elderly. Community forums will be helpful for informing people about growth-related issues and generating further information about needs and perceptions, while nominal group process methods will be helpful in small-group settings for obtaining lists of problems, ideas, and proposals for action.

In the case of Creston, the results of these needs assessments as well as the results of the earlier survey could provide the information base for developing subsequent and more refined surveys which can be useful when tightening up policies and making specific recommendations (see Dillman, 1977, and Garkovich, 1979). The bottom line is that multiple methods should be used when carrying out a needs assessment—or many people and potential problem areas will fall through the slats.

Sources of additional help:


This publication is part of the "Coping with Growth" series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:

- Evaluating Fiscal Impact Studies: Community Guidelines
- Minimizing Public Costs of Residential Growth
- Coping with Rapid Growth: A Community Perspective
- Interagency Coordination and Rapid Community Growth
- The Public Policy Process: Its Role in Community Growth
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