



The Health DATA List Serve January 2002

Mapping Community Needs? What about Community Assets?

From the standpoint of a practicing public health professional, measuring “Community Needs” and “Community Assets” can provide similar information about the community that you serve. The planning and organizational assessment required to begin to measure community needs and assets are, for the most part, identical and the methods used to map the needs or assets of the community are also very similar. So, is there really a difference in mapping community needs and community assets?

Many professionals in the field of public health have written about the role of mapping community needs and assets. In chapter two of “Community Organizing and Community Building for Health,” John McKnight provides one view of the differences between these two types of community assessment. McKnight champions the use of community capacities (assets) over community deficits (needs) by arguing that the later does not promote community building. He explains that by magnifying the capacity and assets of the community it is possible to enable citizens to solve problems. In contrast, focusing on the deficits and needs of a community can burden citizens into believing that their community lacks characteristics required of “healthy communities.” In chapter nine of the same book, Trevor Hancock and Meredith Minkler discuss the importance of McKnight’s approach, noting that it has two important implications:

1. “...it underscores the importance of assessing capacity not merely “needs,” and
2. “...it reminds us that the process of that assessment should itself contribute to the capacity of people and communities and to community health.”

Essentially, measuring community assets allows you and your community to begin to contribute to community improvement from a positive standpoint. By focusing on the things the community has versus the things the community lacks the public health practitioner and the community resident can begin to improve community health without dwelling on things the community lacks. Instead, this approach allows assessment to be guided by the powerful association of people and things that make communities thrive.

For more information on the articles discussed here, refer to:
Community Organizing and Community Building for Health. Meredith Minkler, Ed.
Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey. 1997.

Health DATA Internet Quick Picks

The Orange County Health Needs Assessment (<http://www.ochna.org>) is a collaborative effort between the Healthcare Association of Southern California and the County of Orange Health Care Agency. The website provides an excellent resource to those looking for an example of a large-scale community assessment.

The Monterey County Department of Social Services Farm Workers Housing and Needs Assessment Study of the Salinas and Pajaro Valleys (http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/dss/af_caa_survey.html) provides another example of a community based assessment. The website includes participant opinions regarding their workplace, housing and health.

The Northwest Center for Public Health Practice (<http://healthlinks.washington.edu/nwcphp/>) at the University of Washington provides an array of excellent resources. Included in their list of “Completed Products” is the “Profile and Training Assessment of Community/Public Health Professionals in Washington State,” which provides another example of a formalized assessment report.