



Community Assessment: The Path to Effective Community-Based Prevention

By Sarah Potter

Community assessment is a process of gathering and analyzing information to better understand the detail and context surrounding an issue within a particular population or geographic area (*Improving the Health of Adolescents & Young Adults*, Centers for Disease Control, 2004). It helps create a unique picture of what happens in the community to support or prevent substance use, the particular strengths and challenges that exist, and how ready the community is to embrace prevention efforts. Community assessments help answer the questions: Who is using substances? Where are prevention services most needed? How can we collaborate with other community partners? What are the best strategies to meet the needs in my area? How does our community compare to others? What does the community want to see change?

The assessment process ensures prevention programming matches the nature of the problem in the community. It forms the basis for selecting programs, practices or policies appropriate for your target area. Community assessment is a process, rather than a single event, resulting from the efforts and input of multiple community stakeholders. A collaborative approach encourages community involvement in prevention efforts.

Overview of Assessment Steps

Recruit Your Assessment Team

A community assessment should never be performed by a single person or agency! Take time to recruit community members to participate. Local coalitions often serve as valuable resources for recruiting key stakeholders and can help gain access to essential data and information. Involving community stakeholders in the assessment builds partnerships that will be important for planning and implementation later, and ultimately increases the sustainability of prevention efforts.

Define Your Goals and Scope

Activities should be purpose-driven from the outset. The goals and scope must be agreed upon before the assessment begins. Clearly defining a geographical area is a crucial first step. Parameters can be defined by county, ZIP code, city, neighborhood or school district. Data is collected along those lines. Consider how the community will use the findings and what is needed to inform prevention.

Assess the Magnitude of the Problem

Don't become overwhelmed with the amount of data collection needed. Before beginning, identify existing sources of information. Local government offices, police departments, hospitals and school districts often collect local data. Regional or state data, such as the Illinois Youth Survey, are often available online.

Identify Risk and Protective Factors

Data collected to document the magnitude of problems will give you clues about which risk and protective factors to explore. These factors are organized around targeted prevention domains – community, family, school and individual/peer. Comparing local statistics with regional or state data will indicate areas of higher local prevalence, which can then be matched with associated risk and protective factors.

Prioritize the Issues

Often, alcohol, tobacco and other drug issues become very apparent in a community, and priorities are easy to identify. The community assessment will present more issues than can be tackled reasonably at one time, so focusing on high priority areas is essential. Weighing available time, resources and the level of community support for prevention will determine which issues can be addressed now, and which issues should be addressed later.

Identify Available Resources and Gaps in Existing Services

A central part of the assessment is identifying what is already in place to support prevention efforts. Local social service agencies or health departments may already have resource directories. Listing all available programs and agencies that can help prevention efforts is the first step in identifying resources. Resources also include community leaders and any other non-monetary sources that can help prevent substance use – so think broadly here! After reviewing resources, determine where there are gaps in services or capacity.

Explore the Prevention Landscape

Understanding the history of prevention in your community is a valuable piece of your assessment. Talking with key leaders to figure out what's been done in the past and the community

response to prevention efforts will help you select successful strategies and mobilize prevention partners. When examining the history, take time to research community response to critical incidents related to substance use. How have local media covered events, often tragedies, related to substance use? How has this impacted community perceptions?

Assemble the Assessment Findings

Now it's time to put the information together! Assemble a small team to compile the data and organize the content of the assessment report. While there are many ways to organize the report, using a succinct format is essential. The report should be easy to understand and used to expand the community's knowledge of the issues. The report format can be organized beginning with the most prominent problem, along with the influence of each identified risk and protective factor. Summarize information about the community's readiness to address issues and current perceptions regarding causes. Always include community assets available to address the issue and some recommendations for action.

Share the Results

Finally, work with your assessment team to share the results of your findings. Widespread distribution of this information lays a foundation for action. Present your findings to community residents, policy makers, other agencies or collaborators, local coalitions, and the media. Organize information around a few key points using visual representations to make the information easy to understand. When talking to a group, be sure to discuss specific things the group can do to help address these issues.

Community assessments can be long, involved and complex – but they don't have to be! Tailoring your work to inform programs, practices and policies regarding substance use prevention will help narrow the scope of the assessment. Working with community partners and drawing on existing data will help you avoid getting stuck in the data swamp. It is much better to scale down the scope of the assessment and produce meaningful and targeted information than to tackle an unmanageable project. Good Luck!

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Tips for Conducting a Community Assessment

- ✓ Actively engage community members and key stakeholders.
- ✓ Emphasize community assets.
- ✓ Collect data around each of the domains: community, family, school and individual/peer.
- ✓ Use existing tools, resources and data sources before generating new data.
- ✓ Use the assessment to show how the community *can* tackle substance abuse issues.

Resources for Conducting Needs Assessments

Data Collection Sources

Illinois Youth Survey: www.illinoisyouthsurvey.org

Office of National Drug Control Policy:
www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/sources.html

Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/scientific.htm

Monitoring the Future Survey: www.monitoringthefuture.org

Assessment Guides and Tools

Pathways to Effective Programs and Positive Outcomes
Developed by the National Center for the Advancement of Prevention. Conference Edition 2003; Chapter 1.
http://captus.samhsa.gov/southwest/resources/documents/Pathways_8-03.pdf

Achieving Outcomes: A Practitioner's Guide to Effective Prevention
Developed by the National Center for the Advancement of Prevention. Conference Edition 2002; Chapter 1.
<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/pdfs/achievingoutcomes.pdf>

How Do We Know We Are Making a Difference?: A Community Alcohol, Tobacco and Drug Indicators Handbook
Join Together, 2005.
www.indicatorshandbook.org

Community How To Guide On Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, March 2001.
www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/alcohol/community%20guides%20html/guides_index.html

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Prevention Platform
<http://prevtech.samhsa.gov>

Western Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (CAPT)
<http://captus.samhsa.gov/western/resources/bp/index.cfm>

Community Toolbox
Online learning community for "Assessing Community Needs and Resources"
http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/tk/en/tools_tk_content_page_151.jsp

Community Toolbox
"Assessing Community Assets and Resources" Instrument
http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_tools_1043.htm#tools1