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Community Research Institute-Johnson Center

Community Research Institute

Empowering communities with quality research and data

Nonprofits and Data:
A How-To Series

5

Using Data to Establish Priorities and Plan Programs

Johnson Center

at Grand Valley State University

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

This report was written by the Community Research Institute (CRI) at Grand Valley State University. RI provides innovative applied research to West Michigan communities. CRI gathers, analyzes, interprets and shares national and local data through partnerships with nonprofit and neighborhood groups, and assists local and regional nonprofit leaders with decision making, grant writing, and program evaluation. This research makes a difference through a distinctly valuable blend of university rigor and community relevance.

Research for this guide was provided by Cori Scholtens.

For additional information visit our website at www.cridata.org or contact us directly by calling (616)331-7585.

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INTRODUCTION

This How-To Series is designed to demonstrate six ways in which data can be used to enhance the work of nonprofit organizations and community groups. These include using data to:

1. Support Grant Applications and Other Funding Opportunities
2. Monitor Trends & Identify Emerging Problems
3. Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers
4. Evaluate Progress in Meeting Goals
5. **Establish Priorities and Plan Programs**
6. Characterize Disparities Across Sub Populations/Communities

The information contained within each guide has been developed by combining our community knowledge with that of a variety of evaluation and data experts. More specifically, within each series installment, you will find an introduction to the topic, guidelines for using data to achieve the specified outcome, good practices and pitfalls with corresponding examples, and resources to find data.

WHY USE DATA TO ESTABLISH PRIORITIES AND PLAN PROGRAMS?

Are you a program planner or on a taskforce to establish priorities? Perhaps you are creating new programs, adjusting old programs, expanding successful programs, ending no longer needed programs, or prioritizing community need. No matter the task, it is implied that planning should go before any kind of program implementation or priority establishment. Using reliable data in the planning process increases the success of the endeavor.

Several authors have suggested the same general systematic process for program planning: problem analysis, needs assessment, determination of goals and objectives, planning and implementation of program, and then monitoring and evaluation.[1,2,3] Essential for the planning process is research; practical research that provides useful information, customized to meet the needs of the program planners.

Data collected during program planning research usually occurs during the problem analysis and needs assessment stages. This research is essential for planners, and improves their probability of success. It provides them with:

- In-depth information about the problem, its causes, and characteristics of those affected, including how many and location.
- Statements of actual and perceived unmet needs in the community, not just those perceived by program planners.
- Data that demonstrates need to funders, community members, and board of directors.
- Information to direct priority setting and resource allocation decisions.
- Usable information to determine advantages and disadvantages of alternative program options.

Using data in the priority determination and program planning processes provides timely information for decision making that allows an organization to understand the demand for services current and potential services. It also provides information that helps planners be proactive rather than reactive in the planning process.

GUIDELINES FOR USING DATA TO ESTABLISH PRIORITIES AND PLAN PROGRAMS

Pawlak and Vinter [2] suggest the following framework for program planning:

I. Initiating a Planning Project
II. Analyzing Problems and Assessing Needs
III. Setting Goals and Objectives
IV. Design Stage of Planning
V. Documenting the Completed Program Plan

The guidelines listed below will focus on the "Analyzing Problems and Assessing Needs" stage of the planning process. Pawlak and Vinter's eleven tasks during this stage of program planning have been condensed, through the help of other authors, into the six listed below.

Analyzing Problems and Assessing Needs

Once a planning group has reviewed and interpreted the charge before them and created an initial work plan, they are ready to begin examining the problems and conditions at hand in order to create options for programming alternatives. The information gathered during this stage guides the planning process. It proves especially helpful in the formulation of program goals and objectives, program design, resource distribution, proving that the problem and need exist, and legitimating requests for funds.

1. Problem analysis: Find out what is already known about the problem and what more needs to be discovered.

"Problem analysis is a discovery and learning activity directed at understanding and describing the nature of the problem that is of concern to planners."[2 (p.73)] Why is a discussion of the problem significant? "How you think of the problem influences how you deal with it." [2 (p.90)] When a problem is not well defined it is likely to never be adequately solved. Problem analysis, then, focuses on understanding the problem—not on jumping to solutions.

Questions to ask during this stage include:[1,2]

- How is the problem expressed in the community, including its features, consequences, magnitude, and distribution?
- Who (in socio-demographic terms) is affected by the problem?
- In what ways are those experiencing the problem affected by it?
- What issues compound the problem or keep it from being solved?
- Who considers the condition a problem and how widely is it recognized?
- What are the causes of the problem?

Often, planners already know a significant amount about the problem based on their experience, expertise, education, and training. While a full study may not be needed to analyze the problem of interest, it is important to determine ways to confirm what is already known. If a group does not know a lot about the problem, it is wise to explore what other organizations, experts in the field, comparable programs, government agencies, or researchers have previously learned through problem analysis. In addition, if the planning group is preparing to submit proposals for outside funding, they should be aware of what specific information requirements the funding sources list for the proposal's problem statement. They should tailor the analysis to meet these needs as well as those of the planning group.

2. Plan approaches to needs assessment.

"Needs assessment is directed at interpreting what is necessary or desirable for a particular set of persons based on these factors: knowledge of a problem or experience with a problem, the findings from the problem analysis, or direct measures of need." [2 (p.73)] The United Way of America suggests that a needs assessment look at the following questions:[4]

- Who is in need? Determine in detail what segment of the population is experiencing the need.
- What is needed? Find out what specific goods or services are not being offered in the community.
- Where are the goods and/or services needed? Explore the geographic region in which the need exists. Is it, for example, neighborhood based, community-wide, or statewide?
- How much of each good and/or service is needed? Compute a reasonable estimate of how large the demand is for the good or service in question.
- Is the need one of demand and supply or one of access and distribution? Research if the need exists because the service is not available in the determined area of need or if it is more an issue of accessing the services already available in that geographic area.

Needs assessment, then, requires a planning group to determine the standard of need and then count the number of people in the geographic region of interest who fall below that standard and thus are in need.[1]

3. Choose methods for problem analysis and needs assessment.

There are various methods that can be used to gather data during the problem analysis and needs assessment process. The differences are not so much in the methods used to gather the data, but in the source of the data, whether it is primary data or secondary/tertiary data. Planners should also take various factors into consideration when choosing data collection methods, including the purpose of the problem analysis and needs assessment, available resources (both staff and financial), time restrictions, competencies of data collectors, accessibility and availability of data, and the level of detail required.

Existing Organizational Data. The first place to look and exhaust is the information already easily available within the organization itself. These sources may include: service statistics, staff activity reports, recipient records, staff members and recipients as key informants, exit interviews, internal and external reports, and satisfaction surveys.

Public or Semipublic Records from Existing Surveys. One of the most efficient strategies for gathering data is to access secondary data sources (data already collected by other groups for other purposes). A primary resource for demographic and statistical profiles are records available to the public by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Bureau of the Census is one of many statistical agencies of the federal government through which data is collected, analyzed, and published for use by the public. Over 100 federal agencies collect and publish official statistics. FedStats gives the public access to the information gathered by these agencies without having to know which group produces what data.

FOR ADDITIONAL SECONDARY DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG, WWW.CENSUS.GOV, OR WWW.FEDSTATS.GOV

Other Sources of Public or Semipublic Records.

- School districts
- Law Enforcement agencies
- FBI Uniform Crime Reports
- Local juvenile courts
- State offices dealing with the aged
- State departments of: mental health, welfare, correction, vocational rehabilitation, health, etc.
- Local and regional planning agencies
- Chambers of Commerce

Literature Reviews. A survey of available literature reported in professional, health, and social science journals that relates to the topic of interest. A literature review often reveals a better understanding of the problem or common needs experienced by those affected by it.

Resource Inventories. Taking an inventory of services that are currently available in the community allows planners to map the total system of adequate solutions already available for the targeted problem and population.

Social or Community Surveys. Conducting community surveys can provide powerful insight into the perceived needs of a community and their knowledge about existing services. It focuses on collecting original data from people in the targeted geographic area of interest. Before launching a community survey, it is wise for planners to honestly consider their level of expertise and amount of resources available for such an endeavor.

4. Collect and analyze data

Once the methods of data collection have been determined, planners can decide how, by whom, and when data will be gathered. It is important for the sources of all data sets to be accurately documented. After completing the collection of data, it should be sorted, clustered, and then analyzed for patterns, themes, or trends. These initial findings ought to be evaluated by the planning group to determine whether enough information has been gathered to describe the problem and assess needs.

5. Determine priorities.

Data collected through problem analysis and needs assessment add judiciousness to decision making processes and are vital tools for priority setting. "Which parts of which problems and which needs experienced by which people should be the targets of a new or changed service program?"[2(p.115)] Determining such priorities are difficult; most often there is an excess of need compared to the resources available. During this process, planners are encouraged to consider the following:[2]

- ✓ Which factors of the problem are most visible, reachable, and can be feasibly influenced by the organization?
- ✓ Which needs fall within the organization's mission, capabilities, resources and staff competencies?
- ✓ Which factors of the problem have a greater possibility to be improved by the organization?
- ✓ Which needs can best be met by the available funds, staff, equipment and facilities available to the organization?
- ✓ Which problems or needs are of greatest concern to a critical mass of the community?
- ✓ Which needs pose the greatest severity according to the number affected, potential for wide-scale conflict, or conditions that threaten life, health, or safety?
- ✓ Have some of the problems or needs not received sufficient priority in the past and need to be given adequate attention now?

Once these questions are answered, the planning group can decide which needs and community problems take priority and can realistically be impacted by their organization. While determining priorities, be specific in articulating the target client population. For example, instead of defining "youth" as the target group, specifically identify 12-18 year olds in a particular neighborhood. Programs are most effective at meeting client needs when the target audience is well defined.[5]

6. Write problem statement.

As a result of the above processes, a problem statement with a defined client population can be developed. Using quantifiable data in the statement adds strength and credibility to the claims. For example:[5]

- Needs Statement: One in four seniors 65 years or older surveyed in the community indicated that they are in need of assistance with "activities of daily living" (ADL) or "instrumental activities of daily living" (IADL).
- Problem Statement: One third of the seniors who need assistance with ADLs or IADLs are not receiving it and may have to give up living independently because they do not know where to turn for assistance.
- Target Client Population: Residents of downtown neighborhoods over age 65 who live independently in their own home or apartment but need assistance to continue living on their own.

FOR ADDITIONAL SENIOR DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.AOA.DHHS.GOV

PITFALLS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Using data greatly enhances an organization's ability to plan programs and define priorities. Included below are several pitfalls to avoid as well as some related good practices to keep in mind when conducting planning processes. These tips were developed from concepts provided by expert sources in priority development and program planning.

RESIST BYPASSING THE ASSESSMENT STAGE

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Bypass the assessment stage and go directly to program design.	Program design must be directed by the analysis of problems and needs.

Putting it to use…

It is often tempting for program planners to use their experience, insight, training, and intuition to come up with viable solutions before the problem or community need is assessed. This can be appealing an appealing route. Nevertheless, it is important not to short-circuit the program design process. Program design must take into consideration the information learned through the problem analysis and needs assessment processes.

DO NOT ASSUME THE PROBLEM IS A LACK OF RESOURCES

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Needs assessment focuses on assessing the need for more services or resources.	Needs assessment focuses on the needs of the people experiencing the problem.

Putting it to use...

Analyzing need should focus on the needs of the actual people experiencing the problem in the community. The assumption that the problem is a lack of resources or services is based on the belief that the planning group fully understands the problem and its solutions. When this occurs, solutions are often created that do not match the specific characteristics of the target population, or staff's program preferences prevail.

Conducting a new analysis takes into consideration changes that may have occurred, because "times change, conditions change, people change, and problems change."[1 (p.33)] While particular funders may require a planning group to assess the needs of prospective services in their community, it is recommended that they also assess the needs based on the characteristics of the target population.

For example...

A school district asks for data telling them how many students need academic tutoring services. In addition to assessing the need for services, assess what subjects they need help in and what barriers they face to receiving needed assistance. Then decide which service is appropriate, such as one-on-one peer tutoring, group help sessions, or additional teacher assistance.

FOR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.SCHOOLMATTERS.COM

PRACTICE PROACTIVE PLANNING: STAY AWARE OF CHANGING NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Program planning most often occurs because of an emergency or crisis in the community. (Reactive planning)	Program planners are aware of changing needs and opportunities in the community and plan accordingly. (Proactive planning)

Putting it to use…

"The planning that is done by leading nonprofits is proactive. The organizations are alert to changing needs and opportunities."[6 (p.52)] In contrast to organizations that enter program design based on community crisis and then must address issues of inadequate funding and staff resources, leading nonprofits continually monitor the environment for changing need. These nonprofits have established their programming priorities and focus on the issues directly related to their mission and goals. When they consider starting new programs or revising current programs, they conduct need analysis and determine the capacity of the organization to carry out the program effectively. They continually monitor relevant data in their community so they can practice proactive program planning.

FOR REGIONAL TREND DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT NATIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD INDICATOR PROJECTS, VISIT WWW2.URBAN.ORG/NNIP

INCLUDE VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH STAGES

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Research is conducted by only a few people and results are only shared with a few.	Volunteers and staff experience ongoing involvement throughout the stages of research.

Putting it to use…

Top nonprofits regard the involvement of staff and volunteers in the research process as instrumental for research findings to be used in planning and implementation. Both volunteers and staff can be involved in all aspects of the process from determining the focus of the research to collecting data and analyzing results. When staff and volunteers are involved, research becomes a working tool in an organization's toolbox for planning purposes.

Staff and volunteer involvement from the beginning and throughout the process:

- ✓ Minimizes the chance of research findings being a surprise at the time of reporting.
- ✓ Accelerates the readiness of staff and volunteers to use the findings.
- ✓ Provides added credibility to the process and the results.
- ✓ Encourages the rapid application of what has been learned. [6]

ENSURE THAT ALL DATA COLLECTED IS USABLE AND USEFUL

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Expend too many resources while obtaining too much data.	Plan carefully to ensure that all data collected is usable and useful.

Putting it to use…

Data collection is the means by which needs assessment and problem analysis occur. However, care must be taken so that only usable and useful information is gathered within the means of the project's available resources. Research takes time, money, expertise, and energy. It is important that those resources are used efficiently and that you don't end up with a database full of useless information. When data collection is carefully planned and used correctly the information obtained through the research process has the potential to help clarify relevant social needs. In addition, the collected data will create support from both the community and within the organization for the needs assessment process.[7]

WHERE TO BEGIN FINDING DATA

The Community Research Institute (CRI) is working to develop a data sharehouse for the Greater Grand Rapids community. The concept or purpose of a data sharehouse is to develop a single integrated system that can support one-stop data shopping.

To begin exploring community data, visit our website at www.cridata.org. There you will find county, city, and neighborhood level data. Examples include:

- Demographic information on topics such as population counts, poverty rates, race, housing and education from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.
- Crime, housing, and voting data from the City of Grand Rapids.
- Data on regional trends including topics such as: Healthy Youth, Healthy Seniors, Education, Civic Engagement, and Community & Economic Development, Arts & Culture, Poverty, and Philanthropy.
- Various reports on topics that include: the status of women in the workplace, barriers to success for entry level healthcare workers, tobacco and smoking cessation programs, violence in Kent County, employee training needs and practices, communities of support for the aging population, and the working poor.

It should be noted that CRI has more data than we can fit on our website. If after reviewing our website, you haven't found what you're looking for contact Gustavo Rotondaro, GIS/Information Specialist for CRI, for additional data.

For more information on using data to support program planning or priority setting, please contact Korrie Ottenwess, Research Manager for the Community Research Institute, at:

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Web:	**www.cridata.org**

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