Community Needs Assessments

How to Better Understand Your Community

PREVENTION RESEARCH CENTER
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
Promoting Health & Wellness Throughout the Lifespan

CDPHE

COLORADO
Prevention Services Division
Department of Public Health & Environment

Intro

This research to practice tool is designed to help your agency or team understand best practices for conducting community needs assessments (CNAs). Ideally, this tool will help you better understand the unique needs of your community.

Outline:

Purpose

Community Needs Assessments (CNAs) involve data collection processes to gain insight into a community's culture, such as:

Community perspectives regarding program target outcomes

Community statistics & demographics

CNAs are an important piece of program evaluations. Be advised that this involves several steps and could be beyond the capacity of your organization. Consider working with a program evaluator for high-quality CNAs!

Colorado State University Prevention Research Center

OMNI Institute

Program Evaluation Providers

CNA

Why and When?

To identify community strengths and needs

To gather perspectives that are representative of the community as a whole

For a collaborative approach to local prevention and intervention initiatives

Ideally **BEFORE** program planning & development - CNA results will be used to inform program planning steps, such as program selection

Prior to adapting programs - if done right it will allow diverse perspectives to be represented

Defining the Social "Problem"

Begin with identifying the social problem or asset that your program intends to alleviate or promote

Next, consider narrowing your social problem to specificity (EX: refining the broad topic of mental health difficulties to a specific topic, like depression)

Ask Questions & Compare Perspectives:

- How do you define this social problem compared to other professionals?
- How does the targeted community or culture perceive this social problem? Is it considered a priority?
- How might program goals align with the goals of the community?

All cultures and communities should not be treated the same when considering social problems. (EX: assertiveness may be considered a protective attribute in some cultures but can be inappropriate in others).

Defining the Social "Problem"

As you gain insight into defining the social problem across various settings and perspectives, then data collection processes will come next. When analyzing data you may find new meanings about how the community views the social problem. *For example, is the social problem identified as a priority by the community?* The CNA results will help to answer this.

You may need to RE-DEFINE the social problem or adjust the target outcomes/program goals according to the findings of your CNA results.
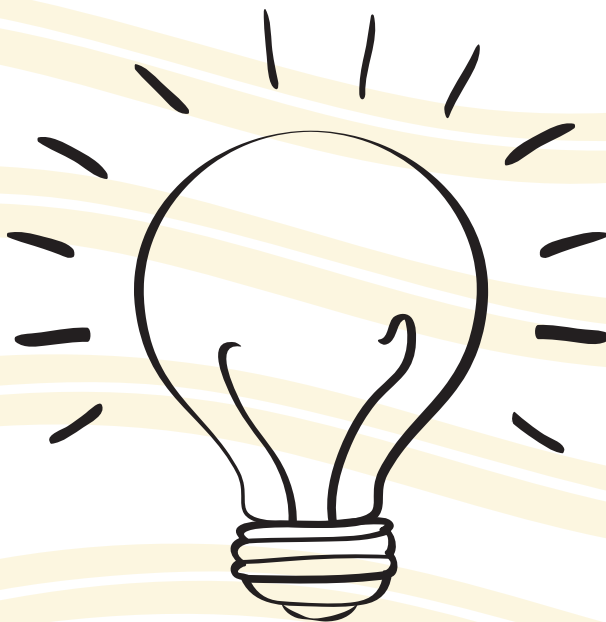
Use this **Community Assessment Toolbox** as an in-depth resource for conducting a CNA

Types of CNA Data Collection

Quantitative

Existing Data
Ideally, this will be the **first step** in a CNA after defining the problem. Reflecting on current statistics and prevalence can help to determine the scope of the targeted risk or protective factor.

New Data
If existing data do not meet your needs, then consider this step. Often through the use of surveys, this type of data collection involves data that can be statistically analyzed.
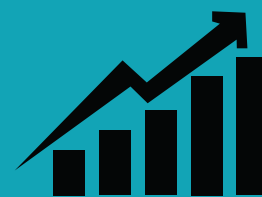
Qualitative

Focus Groups
Small group-style interviews with diverse stakeholders.

Key Informant Interviews
Interviews with diverse (including underrepresented) individuals in the field relevant to the social problem or working in the community (e.g., human service agencies, teachers, officers, board of commissioners)

Quantitative Data
Existing Data

① Scope of the problem

Identify the past and/or current prevalence rates of your target outcome, risk factors, and/or protective factors using a reputable source, such as:
Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System
Monitoring the Future; NIH
Kids Count Data Center
US Census Bureau
SAMHSA

When local statistics are difficult to find, try accessing information from:
- Hospital Needs Assessments
- Local Agencies & Schools

Identify a need or gap ②

Consider these questions:
- What will happen if this "problem" is ignored? (look to the research & literature)
- Is there a gap in services that your agency can fill?
- Is there an unmet need? Maybe this is for a specific demographic or culture in your community.

Use existing data to identify the extent of the social problem in your region, and decide how your team can meet a specific need.

Quantitative Data

New Data

If existing data are not enough, your team may need to collect new information through surveys. Using the right survey is critical in reaching true and accurate results. Use reputable and tested surveys and survey methods. Surveys should be identified as both valid and reliable. When interpreting survey results, it is recommended to work with a program evaluator when possible.

Validity:
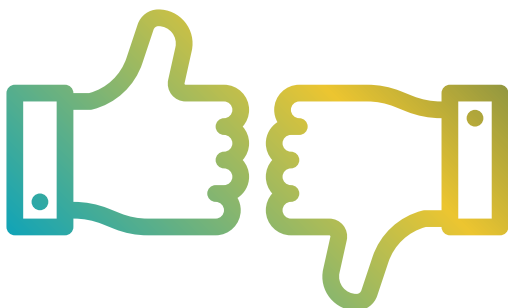Is the survey actually measuring what it is intended to measure?

Reliability:
Does the survey yield consistent results across items, observers, and time?

Both are documented through statistical testing

Cloud Research: What Are Survey Validity and Reliability?

This is Important!

For assistance in identifying OR developing valid surveys, contact **The Prevention Research Center (PRC) at CSU**

Qualitative Data
Focus Groups

A Focus Group is a great tool to help understand the perspectives, strengths, and needs of your local community.

Ideal Groups

- 6-10 people per group
- People who do not necessarily know each other
- Diversity in various identities (EX: gender, race)

Ideal Setting

- Roughly 1 hour
- In Person: Round tables or circles
- Online: Setting guidelines (muting, raising hands, etc.)

Ideal Facilitators:

- 1 facilitator and 1 record keeper
- Strong moderator skills & flexibility
- Someone with whom participants are comfortable

Qualitative Data
Focus Groups

TIPS: Execution

Introduction
- Set the Tone & Purpose
- Confidentiality Expectations
- Agenda & Boundaries

Set Ground Rules (Examples)
- No right or wrong answers
- The goal is to understand everyone's unique perspectives
- Talk one at a time

Asking Questions
- Keep them open-ended (not yes or no)
- Have a logical sequence with follow-ups
- Avoid "Why" questions

Closing
- Answer questions from the group
- Consider sharing contact information to continue questions and conversations

Qualitative Data
Focus Groups & Interviews

- Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the main issues facing this demographic in our community?
- What root causes come to mind when considering these issues (such as mental health being one possible root cause of homelessness)?

Interpreting Results

Coding and Thematic Analysis Explained in 5 Minutes

After focus groups or interviews are completed, it is best practice to identify common themes across responses. This is similar to making an outline. For example, use your notes to:

1. Identify common topics that arise at each focus group/interview and organize into key points
2. Combine and refine key points into common themes
3. Compare themes among multiple focus groups/interviews
4. Use the final themes to inform future decon-making

Qualitative Data
Key Informant Interviews

Who Are Key Informants?

Individuals who have experience in the area of interest
- Often professionals in the field
- Someone who has the "inside scoop" in the focal community; lived experience (e.g., a high school teacher or guidance counselor may be a helpful key informant when addressing teen health)

Search for diverse voices

How Should I Interview?

- Seek expertise from underrepresented groups
- Aim to learn about the experiences of folks from underrepresented groups as well as the experiences people have had with the specified program outcomes
- Ask open-ended, pre-written questions
- Ask follow-up questions if applicable
- Be flexible in the flow of the interview
- Take notes or a recording with consent
- Compare findings across multiple key informants to identify commonalities and differences

Using CNA Results to Inform Decisions

The results from your CNA can be used as a stepping stone toward the next phase on your agenda. This often includes program selection, planning, and/or adaptations, and it will be different for each community. *The following pages include lessons learned from a statewide CNA in Colorado. Key findings and takeaways include:

- A common theme of staff holding a "status quo bias"
- The benefits of promoting a Growth Mindset that allows time for professional growth while allowing room for making mistakes and growing from them; keeping an open mindset
- It is really important to commit to best practices and make good use of the data
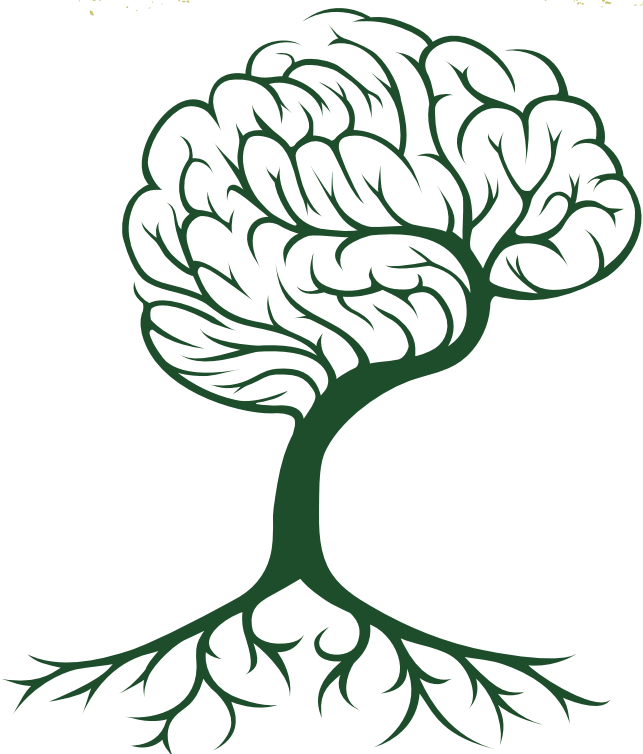
Keep reading for more about these findings and potential supports & suggestions that can be helpful along your CNA journey.

Colorado Community Needs Assessment for CSU Extension

Full Article Pending Review

Lessons Learned

From a Statewide CNA in Colorado

Status Quo Bias

i.e., Holding a preference for the way things have been

This was revealed as a fear of the risks associated with changes: Mainly the perceived threat to job security when a need for internal changes arose. This has led to, for example:

- Agencies mismatching between an identified community need and the focal topics of a program plan
- Teams selecting focal social issues based on current staff resources rather than selecting more pressing social issues that would require more resources and risk
- Individuals expressing resistance to change or to hearing other perspectives

These are not ideal

Opportunities to Promote Growth Mindset & Counteract Status Quo Bias:

- Mentoring opportunities
- Paid training and workshops
- Verbal communication & support between staff and leadership
- Space for sharing concerns and brainstorming new ideas
- Reassurance of job security
- Outsourcing professionals for tasks that are beyond your team's capacity (EX: data collection and analytics)

Lessons Learned

Keep in mind that challenges often arise when conducting a CNA. The following are examples of challenges expressed by local agencies. We suggest to **normalize** these challenges, **listen** to staff needs, offer **guidance**, and utilize an **advisory board**.

Challenges for Agencies	Suggestions for Leaders
Limited experience and knowledge in the CNA process, primarily in **data collection** of both new and existing data	Offer opportunities for professional development and support in reaching goals. "Scaffold" or guide staff by providing clear instructions and examples of quality work.
Utilizing best practices for working with **diverse** groups, especially in data collection processes & Identifying **diverse** key informants	Connect staff with training opportunities in diversity, inclusion, and data collection. Offer a clear step-by-step guide for practical use in your community if possible. Promote collaboration with local partners for combined efforts towards a common goal.
Overcoming the **Status Quo Bias**	Improve staff buy-in through the emphasis on the benefits of a well-conducted CNA. For example: the power to identify true community needs that warrant support from agencies such as yours. These results can increase local buy-in or funding and could justify the need for your prevention efforts on a larger scale.
Blending **existing statistics** with **new statistics** to paint a larger picture of a community need	Provide guidance and examples of how to combine findings from multiple sources. Also communicate realistic expectations and deadlines.