

Families and Work Institute (FWI) is a nonprofit center for research that provides data to inform decision-making on the changing workforce, changing family and changing community.

What Are the Steps in Assessing Community Needs?

1. Knowing how to use needs assessments

A needs assessment involves collecting and analyzing information to better understand a community's resources and needs. Simple or complex, a needs assessment can: document needs and gaps in services, identify potential resources, help establish a vision and the goals and strategies to meet community needs, build consensus and buy-in to the change process, increase a community's capacity for change by fostering collaboration among stakeholders and be used to identify benchmarks to measure your progress in reaching stated goals.

2. Knowing types of data to collect

Four categories (or "buckets", as Sharon Lynn Kagan of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy has termed them) of data can be used to assess needs of children, families, services and systems. These include: 1) what children know and can do; 2) child and family conditions; 3) service provisions, access, and quality; and 4) systems capacity.

3. Finding existing data

Some initiatives have a solid base of existing data while others piece together information from diverse sources. In addition, initiatives go to sources of secondary data -- data that have been compiled by someone -- which include: national reports and data bases, public libraries, federal, state and local government agencies and on-line services.

4. Gathering data

There are a wide variety of data gathering methods. These include surveys of representative groups, population surveys, surveys of key informants, interviews and participation in the field with users of services and focus groups.

5. Analyzing your data

If you don't have the capacity to do complex analysis, you may choose to team up with others who do. Look to a nearby college or university and to researchers in various agencies.

6. Communicating the results of your needs assessment

Because data have so much power to shape your efforts, it is critical to share your findings in a form people will find useful. Use your most important data to tell a meaningful story that helps spur people to action.

<http://www.familiesandwork.org/forums/f01.html>