

Strengths and Needs Assessment in Impoverished Communities

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"We want you to document how bad things are here so that we can decide what to do." Almost 30 years ago, the first author was given these instructions as a part of a community project resulting from the War on Poverty. More recently, while developing another prevention program, this same advice was given. Although both of us have been involved in needs assessment work and understand the importance of understanding needs, we do not feel we can enter new communities with a focus on what is wrong. By only paying attention to the problems, we believe we could inadvertently intensify feelings of powerlessness and despair.

Assessing Strengths

Being assigned this task led us to suggest an alternative strategy-to ask questions about concerns and about strengths and resources in the community. Our intuitions told us that this strategy would help us not only determine needs, but also identify the resources within the community that could address those needs. Shortly after staff began collecting information through neighborhood interviews, one staff member commented, "I have lived in this community for many years, but this is the first time I ever really noticed all the organizations and resources that we have in this community." This insight was continually confirmed during our experience collecting information-and why you should ask not just what is wrong, but what is right.

The importance of assessing strengths is outlined in a recent book by Kretzman and McKnight (1993). In *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, they emphasize the importance of building on a community's strengths rather than on its deficits. They also propose that only through knowing the strengths can you address the difficulties. Kretzman and McKnight minimize, however, the need to assess concerns. Although we agree with many of the ideas expressed by these authors, we continue to uphold the importance of understanding both resources and needs. Only asking about assets may deny people the opportunity to discuss legitimate difficulties and frustrations.

Considering Both Strengths and Concerns

Information about both strengths and concerns has been helpful to us in developing programs. By understanding the needs we could identify where to begin to solve those problems. In one community, for example, we found that many residents, particularly the children, were concerned about trash and litter. By focusing on this specific concern we were able to get the community involved in a clean-up program. This effort demonstrated the program developers' interest in the residents' concerns and provided an immediate success for both the community

and the program. Likewise, by asking questions about resources and strengths, we were able to identify community organizations and residents likely to contribute to the clean-up's success. To obtain information about resources and needs we asked open-ended questions about what people liked and disliked about living in the neighborhood. In cases in which we were interested in parenting, we asked what their concerns were as parents and what helped them succeed. Additionally, we followed these questions with a series of rating scales for problem areas (e.g., child neglect, teen pregnancy, gangs) and resources (e.g., employment, schools, youth agencies).

Sources of Community Information

When assessing strengths and concerns, talk to a wide variety of community residents, such as parents, youth, and personnel from a variety of agencies, businesses, and community groups. Each has a unique perspective on the community. All too often evaluators talk only to one or two groups (e.g., parents and social service providers). While their perceptions are valuable, they provide only two of many perspectives in the community. There are two major dangers of not seeking diverse perspectives: (1) you will not truly understand how the community functions, and (2) you may overlook many valuable resources. For example, the interview with children enabled us to recognize a higher incidence of violent crime in one community than another. Similarly, talks with sanitation workers helped us to understand the importance of block groups in keeping neighborhoods clean. Conversations with local apartment rental agencies helped us to find an important resource for helping families locate housing. The interviews also provided clues about what types of social and economic information might be important to obtain. For example, residents' pride in how well homes were maintained led us to compare property values across communities. We discovered that housing was indeed a strength in one community compared with other communities. We were also able to tie one community's pride in their housing to getting residents to band together and lobby the city to tear down an abandoned building where drug dealers gathered. Looking at changes in economic and social information over time also provides valuable clues on potential strengths and problems. For example, we found that in the past, two communities had the same number of low-income families. Over time, the number of low-income families in one community increased while the other community's low-income population decreased, leaving the two communities in different situations at the present time.

Summary

To conduct effective programs in communities with high rates of poverty, you must thoroughly understand the community. Although program developers commonly collect information about the problems in a community, they rarely obtain information about strengths and resources. Both of these types of information, especially when obtained from a variety of sources, provide insight into the types of issues on which to focus prevention strategies and the kinds of resources necessary to address these concerns. Finally, you should always present information back to the community for their analysis and insight.

Kretzman, J.P., & McKnight, J.L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out*. (Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2040 Sheridan Rd., Evanston, IL 60208.)