



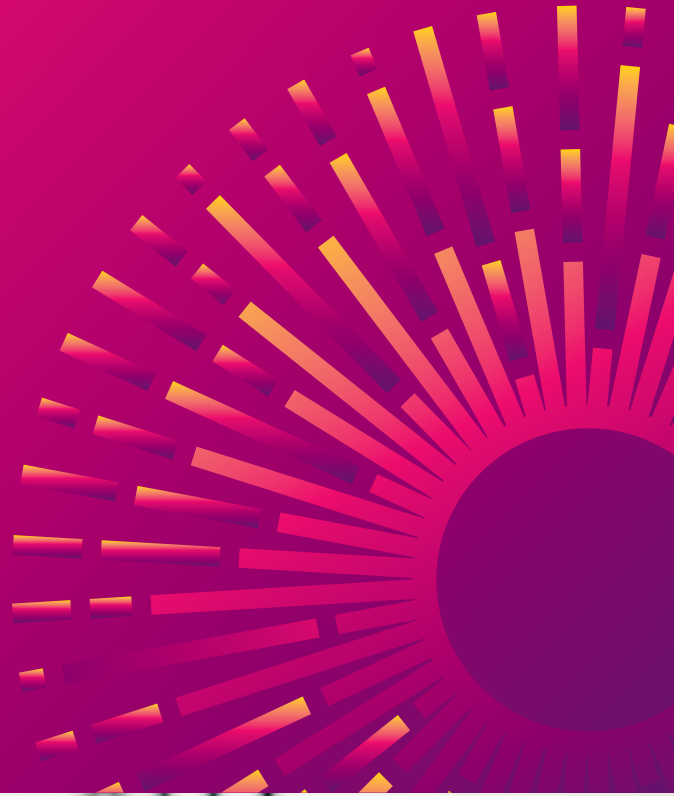
Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies

▼
Discovering what
works for families

Needs assessment

Families and Children Expert Panel
practice resource

Jessica Smart



© Commonwealth of Australia 2019

With the exception of AIFS branding, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, content provided by third parties, and any material protected by a trademark, all textual material presented in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ You may copy, distribute and build upon this work for commercial and non-commercial purposes; however, you must attribute the Commonwealth of Australia as the copyright holder of the work. Content that is copyrighted by a third party is subject to the licensing arrangements of the original owner.



The Australian Institute of Family Studies is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 4, 40 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Internet: aifs.gov.au

ISBN 978-1-76016-203-0 (Online)
ISBN 978-1-76016-204-7 (PDF)

Edited by Katharine Day
Typeset by Lisa Carroll

Cover image: © GettyImages/shapecharge

1902 EXPP Needs Assessment

Introduction

This resource provides a definition of 'needs assessment' and outlines how to undertake one. This resource is for practitioners and policy makers who want to learn more about the needs assessment process or how to conduct a needs assessment. **Part one** provides an introduction to needs identification and assessment and gives some background and theory on why it is important to understand the needs of a particular place or population. **Part two** sets out some steps that can be followed in an assessment that aims to explore and prioritise community needs. Please note, this resource covers needs assessment only and does not describe how to select interventions for use with a specific population or client group.

Part one: Defining needs and needs assessment

What is a needs assessment?

A needs assessment is a systematic process that provides information about social needs or issues in a place or population group and determines which issues should be prioritised for action. The term 'social issue' as used here is intended to be deliberately broad and essentially denotes an identified problem in a place or population. Social issues, or 'needs', can include health-related topics such as the increased prevalence of poor mental health in a population or high smoking rates, or issues such as low levels of literacy or child development. In this context, a social need or social issue is something that can be addressed by service providers (or community members in a community development initiative), so a needs assessment gathers information about the issue that can then inform service provision or policy development.

A needs assessment in this context moves beyond individual assessment and explores the needs of a community. Community is frequently defined in terms of a geographical area but a needs assessment could also explore the needs of a specific population group; for example, the needs of single-parent families. A needs assessment in a geographical area may also have a focus on priority population groups; for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Needs assessment is most often undertaken in order to allocate or redistribute resources and design programs, policies and services. However, needs assessment can also be considered as a form of evaluation, or as a component of program evaluation, because it involves collecting information in order to make an evaluative judgement about what needs exist in a community, what needs should be prioritised and how a particular policy, service, program or suite of activities will address those needs. A needs assessment can also provide baseline data that can be used in an evaluation.

Importantly, a needs assessment is best undertaken as a systematic process (Altschuld & Kumar, 2005; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004):

1. Decisions are made about the scope of the needs assessment.
2. There is a plan to collect information.
3. Data are collected and analysed.
4. These data are used to determine priorities and make decisions about resource allocation, program design and service delivery.

In practice, needs assessments are often done informally. For example, a number of clients might present with similar issues that are not met by current services, a gap in service delivery may be observed, or a new client group becomes known, and something is designed to address these issues. Without a systematic process of needs assessment that includes multiple forms of evidence, this ad hoc method of meeting client need can eventually result in a fragmented service system that may not be making the most effective use of scarce resources. There may also be client or community needs that are less visible and so not being met. Undertaking a systematic needs assessment is a transparent and defensible way of ensuring that resources are being used in the most effective way possible.

Why and when should you do a needs assessment?

It is critical that services, policies and programs are as relevant and effective as possible. Without planning, services and programs are likely to be reactive and fragmented, and not working strategically or with a prevention focus (Baum, 2008). In the absence of a planned and systematic approach, the allocation of resources is subject to political pressures, personal preferences, 'what has always been done' and the intuition of staff (Owen, 2006). While practitioners, policy makers and agency leaders are often skilled and knowledgeable, practice wisdom is only one form of evidence and everyone may have their own biases based on their personal experience. Someone who works in child protection and sees many cases of child abuse and neglect, for example, may consider this the most important issue in a community. In contrast, someone who works in the mental health field may consider mental health the most important community issue (Rossi et al., 2004). A systematic needs assessment ensures that programs, policies and services are cohesive, equitable and informed by multiple forms of evidence, making them truly responsive to community need. Figure 1 shows the three forms of evidence that are understood as making up an evidence-informed approach: lived experience, practice expertise and research evidence. A robust and systematic needs assessment should include each of these three types of evidence.

Figure 1: Evidence-informed approach



Source: Hunter & Carlow, 2018

There are a range of benefits to conducting a needs assessment:

- A needs assessment contributes to the quality and effectiveness of programs, policies and services through ensuring that they are relevant, practical, credible and appropriate (Sleezer, Fuss-Eft, & Gupta, 2014).
- A needs assessment is an important component in an evidence-informed approach because the understanding of community needs provides an evidence-based foundation for a program, policy or service (Hawtin & Percy-Smith, 2007).
- A needs assessment can facilitate more prevention and early intervention work through services, policies and programs being less reactive (Baum, 2008).
- A needs assessment ensures that services and programs are based on accurate and systematically collected information (Sleezer et al., 2014).

- The process of the needs assessment can build relationships among stakeholders and build support for action (Sleezer et al., 2014).
- A needs assessment can support evaluation – through developing an understanding of community needs an evaluation can then measure whether these needs were met (Rossi et al., 2004).
- When community members are supported to define their own needs through a needs assessment process, this can contribute to citizen empowerment (Ife, 2002).

A needs assessment is generally used to plan new work; for example, to determine what should be delivered in a geographic region or with a particular population group. However, needs change over time (Reviere, 1996). It is necessary that programs, policies and services remain flexible and adaptable. A needs assessment can therefore also assess whether current programs or services are still adequate and relevant. If demand for a program or service has diminished or increased, or the characteristics of people accessing a program or service have changed, this could be an indication that needs in the area have changed. Even where demand stays consistent, there may be new needs that are not being addressed by the current suite of programs and services. A needs assessment can ensure that the current program, policy or service is correctly targeted and addressing the most important needs of the community.

Defining ‘needs’

A needs assessment implies there is a gap or discrepancy between the current conditions – ‘what is’ – and the ideal conditions – ‘what should be’ (Sleezer et al., 2014). This gap – the difference between the current condition and the ideal condition – is the ‘need’ (Owen, 2006). However, needs are relative and what is necessary depends on your vantage point (Royse, Staton-Tindall, Badger, & Webster, 2009). As Ife (2016) observes, any identification of need contains an ‘implicit notion of what constitutes an acceptable minimum standard of personal or community wellbeing’ (p. 68). Different people have different opinions about these minimum standards, and ‘what should be’; therefore, a needs assessment is a subjective and value-driven process (Ife, 2002). While using population-level data can provide a more objective assessment of issues in a community, decisions about what data are used and how can have an impact on the needs that are identified and prioritised, and determining the ‘acceptable minimum standard’ of wellbeing and what constitutes a need often remains unavoidably value-driven and subjective.

Box 1: Defining ‘what should be’ – ARACY’s *The Nest*

One example of defining ‘what should be’ is the work undertaken by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to develop a vision and key outcomes for the health and wellbeing of children and young people. They consulted with children, young people and the community and asked people to describe the elements of ‘a good life’ (ARACY, 2012). From this, ARACY (2014) identified six outcomes that make ‘a good life’ for children and young people:

- being loved and safe
- having material basics
- being healthy
- learning
- participating
- having a positive sense of culture and identity.

These outcomes and the accompanying descriptions and indicators provide a clear and agreed upon description of ‘what should be’. Needs can then be defined as the gap between the current conditions in the lives of children and young people and the ideal condition as described by ARACY.

It is important to note, however, that even when there is broad consensus on the ‘needs’ there can be differences in interpretation. For example, definitions of ‘learning’ and ‘participating’ are likely to be vary among groups and areas, and what constitutes the ‘acceptable minimum standard’ of ‘learning’ or ‘participating’ will vary in different contexts and cultures.

In social services, most needs are value-driven and there can be differences of opinion about the ideal condition (Altschuld & Kumar, 2005). When compared with health, for example, needs assessment in social services is complex. In health, the 'acceptable minimum standard' is often more clearly defined and easier to measure; for example, there is a weight range within which newborn babies are considered healthy. If a newborn infant weighs under this range then it is considered underweight and steps are taken to bring the infant up to the healthy weight range. However, a concept such as 'family functioning' is more subjective and harder to define and agree on.

The challenges of identifying and understanding needs have been recognised by theorists and evaluators who have developed different ways to conceptualise needs (e.g. Bradshaw, 1972; Davidson, 2005). One of the most enduring conceptualisations of needs was described by Bradshaw (1972), who identifies four types of need (see Table 1):

- normative
- felt
- expressed
- comparative.

Table 1: Conceptualisations of need

Need	Definition	Example	Strengths and limitations
Normative need	Normative need is measurable against accepted standards, research or expert opinion (Bradshaw, 1972).	There is an accepted range for the healthy birthweight of babies. If there is a large number of babies in a community born outside of this range, this is an area of need for a community.	A normative definition of need isn't absolute, and needs can change over time as a result of gaining new knowledge or shifting social expectations (Bradshaw, 1972).
Felt need	Felt need is what people feel that they need and is often equated with want.	Community members identify a need for more peer support with parenting.	Felt need is particularly important in community development initiatives or in projects with a high degree of community engagement. Felt need is subjective, and is limited by the perceptions of the individual; people may not wish to be seen as 'needy' or lacking, or they may have limited knowledge of what is available and attainable (Bradshaw, 1972).
Expressed need	Expressed needs are those that people have acted on. Bradshaw (1972) refers to expressed need as 'need turned into action' (p.3).	There is a long waiting list for financial counselling and many clients are asking for advice with debt.	Expressed need generally paints a limited picture of need because not everyone will act on their needs.
Comparative need	Comparative need examines the data on a population and compares them with data about service availability and service access to determine need (Bradshaw, 1972).	Data on the numbers of people with a disability are compared with data on the number of disability services. Data between different regions may also be compared. This strategy is often combined with risk profiling; e.g. the characteristics of families deemed at risk of child abuse and neglect may be defined, and then data collected on the numbers of families who meet these characteristics who are not being reached by services.	The presence of services, even where they are being accessed, does not mean that needs are being met.

Needs and power: Who conceptualises and assesses need?

Underlying definitions and conceptualisations of need are questions about power, voice and visibility. Who is making decisions, and who has a 'seat at the table'? There is no right or wrong way to conceptualise need, and each or all of these definitions of need may be relevant to different projects. As outlined above, defining and assessing needs is value-laden and subjective. It is important to consider who is involved in a needs assessment, and how they are involved, as the inclusion or exclusion of different voices may result in the identification and prioritisation of different needs.

The way need is conceptualised will also have implications for the type and method of data collection. What is important is that when undertaking a needs assessment, you give some thought to how needs will be defined and measured and who will be involved, and that this is agreed on by all stakeholders. Each approach to needs assessment, and each way of defining and measuring need has strengths and limitations. Making a conscious and transparent decision about who will be involved, and how need will be determined in your needs assessment, and documenting these decisions, are important steps to ensure rigor and transparency and the ability to justify your findings.

Box 2: Needs versus assets and empowerment

Focusing only on the problems of a community or what is lacking – sometimes called taking a 'deficit approach' – is sometimes perceived as disempowering for communities and can discount valuable information, skills and other 'assets' that communities possess (Baum, 2008). McKnight and Kretzmann (1997) suggest that all communities have resources that can be built on, and that mapping these resources is crucial to improving outcomes.

All communities have assets; that is, resources in the local area that are for the benefit of the community (Hawtin & Percy-Smith, 2007). This can include the skills, time and expertise of community members; local groups and networks; opportunities such as employment opportunities; as well as organisations and spaces such as parks, hospitals, community centres, schools, child care facilities, community centres and buildings (Hawtin & Percy-Smith, 2007). Collecting data and reporting on assets is important when taking a strengths-based approach to needs assessment, and is a central part of approaches such as Asset Based Community Development.

It can be disempowering for community members if their needs or assets are defined without their involvement. A community development approach will facilitate a process in which people are supported to access the information they need to define and measure needs and assets. Any needs assessment, would benefit from gathering information on assets as well as needs; however, this is particularly important in projects with a high degree of community engagement, or projects that use a community development approach. [Asset mapping](#)¹ as part of community consultation and engagement is one form that this could take.

Conclusion

A needs assessment is a systematic and transparent process that identifies and prioritises needs in a community in order to inform programs, policies and services aimed at addressing those needs. A needs assessment can be undertaken to plan new work and to better understand the context for existing work. Determining needs is a subjective process as different people are likely to have different views on what is required for community wellbeing. Using multiple forms of evidence and ensuring that community members, subject matter experts, and holders of practice wisdom are all involved in the needs assessment process will ensure that a full range of issues are identified. Conducting regular needs assessments ensures that programs and services are effective and reflect the best use of resources. Policy, strategy and interventions that have been informed by a needs assessment will be better targeted, planned rather than reactive, and aligned with community need, agency and regional priorities and resources.

¹ www.communityscience.com/knowledge4equity/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf

Part two: How to do a needs assessment

There are many possible ways to conduct a needs assessment, and the type of needs assessment undertaken should be appropriate for the scale of policy or service provision that it is designed to inform. For example, a large-scale service reform or strategy may require an extensive and well-resourced needs assessment whereas planning for a single program might only require a rapid needs assessment completed with minimal resources.

Part two of this resource describes one way to approach a needs assessment. This step-by-step process can be followed or adapted to undertake a systematic needs assessment. This process has been developed based on a synthesis of the research and practice literature and draws from common practice in the social services and public health sectors. Drawing on Altschuld and White (2010) and Rabinowitz (2017), the steps of a needs assessment are laid out in the image below.



Step 1: Scope the needs assessment

Clarify the purpose of the needs assessment, determine the approach, and agree on who will make assessment decisions.

There are several questions that need to be addressed before beginning a needs assessment.



What is the purpose of the needs assessment?

A needs assessment can be conducted for many different reasons: it may be to inform future activities within a program, to explore whether a program or suite of programs are meeting community needs, or it might be to determine the focus of future policy.

What is the scope? What and who will be included and excluded from the needs assessment?

The scope of a needs assessment can vary immensely. A small needs assessment may be used to inform the activities of a single program for the next year, or a larger needs assessment may be used to inform regional or national service delivery or the activities of a whole agency over a period of years. There can also be value in a larger needs assessment to enable organisational or regional priority setting. The latter would require partnering with local agencies and undertaking a joint needs assessment, but would have the benefits of a broader focus, greater resource investment and reducing consultation fatigue in the community.

It is important to limit the scope of a needs assessment to what can be reasonably addressed. For example, there would be little point examining health data or asking community members about health if there is no scope to address health needs. At the scoping stage, it is also helpful to record any other pre-existing priorities or limitations (e.g. funding limitations, geographic boundaries).

The scope should describe the characteristics of the population of interest: is it the whole population in a geographic area or are you funded to work specifically with families who have certain characteristics? If you have a focus on a particular group, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, this should be included in the scope.

It can be useful to write a list or table of what is in scope and what is out of scope for your needs assessment.

Who are the users and how will results be communicated?

A needs assessment can have different users. The primary users may be community members who are planning community development projects, or they may be senior leaders of a network of agencies and government departments who want to improve outcomes for families in a particular region.

Identifying the users of the needs assessment and how it will be used influences the format and the way results will be communicated to stakeholders. It is useful to think about this at the beginning of a needs assessment process because it has implications for data collection. If a needs assessment is being conducted by and for community members, then visual maps and plain language summaries may be the most useful formats for results. More detailed and complex reports may be required if that is appropriate for the users and the scope. It can be beneficial to have conversations with the potential users of the needs assessment to explore their preferences. If there are multiple users then you may need to develop a few different products (e.g. a visual map, a plain language summary and a more detailed report).

What resources are available?

A large needs assessment can be a significant resource investment, and a more modest needs assessment may be more suitable if resources are limited. Consider the resources at your disposal; in particular, it is important to be realistic about the money, staff time and staff skills that are available to invest in the process. It can be beneficial to map out the steps in the process and ensure time is allocated to each task, to ensure that the needs assessment has adequate time for analysis of data, and discussion and prioritisation of needs. This could be done through a Gantt chart, or an [evaluation planning tool](#)² could be adapted.

² aifs.gov.au/cfca/expert-panel-project/program-planning-evaluation-guide/evaluate-your-program-or-service/how-develop-evaluation-plan

How will the community be involved?

Engaging community members with lived experience

It is good practice to include the community in the needs assessment process. A needs assessment that engages with community members will have a more comprehensive understanding of community needs and assets and can build the skills, knowledge, networks and confidence of community members. It can strengthen relationships between community members, and between community members and service providers. People with lived experience of social issues are rich sources of expertise about how those social issues are experienced. In saying this, the social issues that people experience can make it difficult to engage in processes such as a needs assessment. Agencies who wish to engage community members who are experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage should consider the barriers people face to inclusion, and how these can be addressed. Partnerships, providing support for people to participate, and flexible and responsive facilitation can promote participation (Lightbody, 2017). Community engagement and participation occur on a spectrum, and different degrees and methods of engagement are likely to be suitable for different projects. The [IAP2 framework](#)³ is one possible way to think through the role of community participation. When planning to engage community members, consider how much they will contribute to the project and whether payment for their time and expertise is appropriate.

For further reading on engaging people who experience inequality, see '[Hard to reach](#)' or '[easy to ignore](#)'? [Promoting equality in community engagement](#)⁴ by What Works Scotland (Lightbody, 2017).

Identifying and building community readiness

Community engagement can bring to light the degree of momentum or community readiness to address particular issues. For example, the needs assessment may show that early literacy is only one of several areas of need within a community but there may be a great deal of momentum and support to address early literacy that is not present for other issues. Having momentum or 'readiness' in the community to address an issue enhances 'buy-in' for interventions and increases the chance that a need can be successfully addressed. The process of conducting a needs assessment can also build momentum to address a particular social issue, resulting in increased buy-in for programs or activities. The assessment can also indicate how much effort might be required to build community support and momentum to address needs that are important but where there is currently no momentum.

There are a number of factors to take into consideration when conducting community engagement or consultation. Done properly, community engagement is genuinely consultative and community member views will have a clear influence on the outcomes of the needs assessment. Community consultation that does not have a tangible purpose beyond 'ticking the box' or appeasing community members can damage relationships and trust. It is essential to be clear about the scope of community members' influence within the needs assessment process and to communicate this clearly. It is also important to avoid contributing to 'consultation fatigue' where community members have been repeatedly consulted without seeing tangible outcomes from their consultation. Communicating with other agencies in the region and collaborating on a needs assessment, or sharing data, can be a better alternative to individual agencies conducting separate needs assessments. Community engagement requires additional time and resources, and this should be factored in.

Community engagement is discussed in more detail in the CFCA paper [Community engagement: A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families](#).⁵

Who has the final say on what needs are prioritised and selected for action?

Criteria for decision making is discussed in Step 2, but during the scoping phase it is important to consider who will be involved in decision making, and how they will be involved. Box 3 identifies three different approaches to need definition and decision making. Who is represented in discussions and who has authority over decision making is vitally important, as this has a significant influence over which needs are prioritised. Decision makers

³ www.iap2.org.au/Tenant/C0000004/00000001/files/IAP2_Public_Participation_Spectrum.pdf

⁴ whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/hard-to-reach-or-easy-to-ignore-promoting-equality-in-community-engagement-evidence-review/

⁵ aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/community-engagement

could be senior agency staff, community members, funders, program staff or a combination of different people. Often committees or steering groups are developed to work on a needs assessment. If this is the case, there may be senior leaders in each agency who will also expect to have input into decisions. It is critical to establish and document expectations during this scoping phase of the needs assessment.

How decisions will be made, and how data will be used to make decisions should be communicated during data collection. It is particularly important to be transparent with community members and partner agencies about what influence their input will have on the process.

Box 3: Three approaches to needs assessment

Jim Ife (2016) identifies three different approaches to undertaking a needs assessment, with needs being defined by a different group in each approach.

In the first approach, needs are defined by the community and consumers of a service. This is a community development-informed approach that views need definition by professionals as disempowering for community members.

In the second approach, needs assessment is viewed as a process that requires technical expertise; therefore needs are defined and assessed by professionals such as community workers or research and evaluation professionals.

The third approach combines the first two approaches, seeking to bring together professionals and community members. Community members are provided with resources to make more informed decisions, and through working with community members, professionals gain a more informed and sensitive understanding of local issues.

None of these approaches are inherently right or wrong. Ife recommends the first approach. This paper describes a method of needs assessment most in line with the third approach.

Step 2: Determine assessment criteria

Develop a list of criteria that are meaningful for your context.

These criteria will enable you to evaluate and prioritise needs.

A clear set of criteria will enable you to systematically and effectively evaluate different needs in order to determine which ones should be prioritised (Rabinowitz, 2017).

Assessment criteria are factors that you will use to judge which needs are the highest priority and which needs can or should be addressed. A needs assessment is likely to identify a range of social issues, and there are different and sometimes conflicting ways to determine the order in which they should be addressed. For example, an issue could be deemed a high priority based on how many people are affected by it or it could be deemed a high priority because of its impact on people's lives. Issues that are not being addressed by other agencies may be prioritised, or, it might be the opposite – issues that are currently 'hot topics' in the community might be prioritised. Criteria should be determined and agreed on before data are collected.

You will also need to have a plan for how the criteria will be applied. This is covered in Step 5, although it is good to have agreement on this before data are collected. Developing and applying criteria legitimises decision-making processes (Barnett, 2012) and makes the process rigorous and transparent. Table 2 includes some sample criteria (Rabinowitz 2017; Witkin & Altschud, 1995). Not all of these criteria will be applicable to all needs assessments, and there may be others that are important in your context and for your needs assessment. Selecting and agreeing on relevant criteria, and the process for assessment, before data are collected and analysed will focus the needs assessment, shape the data collection and analysis, and simplify the prioritisation and selection process.



Table 2: Sample criteria for assessing needs

Criteria	Description
About the issue itself	
Equity	Who the issue is affecting. Whether different groups are being affected differently or disproportionately by the issue
The long-term impact of the issue	The impact of the issue on individuals and the community if the issue remains unaddressed
The feasibility of affecting the issue	How complex the issue is, and how amenable the issue is to change
The severity of the issue	How people are affected as individuals, how the community is affected, the financial and social cost of the issue
The frequency of the issue	How many people are affected and how often
How the issue intersects with other issues	The effect on other issues, or other parts of a system. The potential for unintended consequences when taking action on the issue
About the context and community	
Other related work	Whether other groups or agencies are working to address the need. Opportunities for collaboration and shared funding
Public and political support to address the issue	Is the issue of interest to the community, or conversely, is it an issue that is being overlooked?
Agency, regional or national goals and priorities	How the issue aligns with existing goals and priorities
About the agency and resources	
Staff expertise	Whether there are existing skills and experience among the agency workforce to address the issue
Managerial support	The presence of support from senior leaders to address the issue
The resources required to address the need	The scope and scale of the issue and resources that would be required to address it. The availability of funding or other resources (e.g. community assets) that can be used to address the issue
The existence of programs or interventions to address the issue	The presence of interventions that are known to be effective to address the issue

Step 3: Plan for data collection

Identify the data you will need – qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods?

Identify any existing sources of data.

Develop a plan for collecting and analysing data.

There are many different methods for collecting data. As with all forms of research and evaluation, the best method of data collection depends on:

- the purpose of the needs assessment
- the available resources.

Needs assessments frequently collect both qualitative and quantitative data (this is often referred to as 'mixed methods'). Although there can be challenges bringing together different types of data, using mixed methods is a good option because it combines the best of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Quantitative and qualitative methods

Quantitative data are about numbers and counting and are likely to include population-level administrative data such as demographic data on the local area and community. For example, population size; number of children and families; CALD groups; employment data; languages spoken; rates of people with disability; and socio-economic information. Information on crime, education, personal safety, health or community attitudes may also be available and relevant. This data can be compared with that of other regions in order to assess the relative scale or importance of social issues; for example, rates of school attendance may be lower than



in comparable regions, so this could be a potential issue requiring attention. To ensure equity, it is useful to disaggregate this data – to understand how life experiences and outcomes differ by geographic location, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other factors. See Box 4 for a description of primary and secondary data sources.

Qualitative data focus on participants' perspectives and experiences. Stakeholder consultation is often a central part of a needs assessment. Data can be collected from community members, community leaders, practitioners and service providers. As described in section one, data on lived experience is a key element of an evidence-informed approach and a good quality needs assessment, so data should be collected from people who experience issues of interest or who belong to population groups of interest. Engaging people with lived experience in the needs assessment process more broadly, rather than simply as a source of data, may be preferable (see 'How will the community be involved' under Step 1 above).

Commonly used methods in qualitative research and evaluation are interviews, focus groups and observation. These can be rigorous methods that can produce rich data but they require considerable time and skill. Other methods that can be used to collect rich data on community views include community forums or consultations and activities such as [visioning workshops](#) or [asset mapping](#).

Box 4: Primary and secondary data

Primary data

Primary data are data that are collected by you for the purpose of the needs assessment. Primary data will therefore be up-to-date and can address the questions you want to explore in your needs assessment. However, it is time consuming to plan and collect data and requires specific skills. You should also consider the burden on respondents (the people you are collecting data from), particularly if they are from a frequently researched population group such as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Primary data could be qualitative or quantitative, for example, from a survey or interviews developed and conducted for your needs assessment.

Secondary data

Secondary data are data that have already been collected by someone else and can be analysed for your needs assessment. Using secondary data is a more cost-effective method of data collection; however, there are many considerations in using secondary data – are they recent enough to be meaningful, can you track trends over time, and are they from a reputable source? It is important to examine the sample (how many people data were collected from, and who was and was not represented) and the methodology (how data were collected). Secondary data are more often quantitative and possible sources of secondary data include the census or other datasets from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, or [data.gov](#).⁶ Some local governments also have information available on the local community.

Choosing methods

The data collection methods you choose for your needs assessment will depend on a range of factors unique to your context and purpose. This resource will not cover data collection methods in detail; however, there are many resources that describe different data collection methods. These two CFCA resources describe some of the basic principles of evaluation, including data collection:

- [Planning for evaluation I: Basic principles](#)⁷
- [Planning for evaluation II: Getting into detail](#)⁸

The process for data collection and analysis very much depends on the scale and approach of the needs assessment as well as the amount of data collected. A community development approach or an approach with a high level of community engagement will include community members in the collection and analysis

⁶ <https://search.data.gov.au>

⁷ aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/planning-evaluation-i-basic-principles

⁸ aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/planning-evaluation-ii-getting-detail

process, whereas a project using a large amount of qualitative or quantitative data is likely to require specialist analysis skills.

The key is to plan for how you will collect and analyse data before you start.

Consider:

- Who has the skills and capacity to collect data?
- Who has the skills and capacity to analyse data?
- How will the data be analysed and presented?
- What information do you need in order to apply the criteria and make decisions about prioritising needs?

Regardless of the type of data you collect and the methods you use, it is important to have a documented plan describing what data will be collected, from who, and how it will be analysed.

Step 4: Collect, analyse and present data

Collect and analyse your data.

Synthesise and present data to your decision makers.

Once you have a plan, data collection and analysis can be undertaken. Be prepared to be flexible; it may be that nobody turns up to a community meeting and you need to do some more outreach or community engagement or adapt your methods. Or perhaps during the data collection or analysis process you realise that you do not know enough about a specific population group, or a new issue emerges and you might need to collect further data.

Once data have been collected you should have a list of different needs and/or assets that have been identified. It is likely that you will have a large list of different issues and may need to collate and group similar needs so that you have a manageable amount of data to present. One way of doing this is to group needs into domains. For example, you may have identified needs for children in the areas of literacy, language, and peer relationships, and these could be grouped into a 'school readiness' domain. If you are undertaking a needs assessment with a high degree of community engagement, consider how community members can lead or participate in this analysis. Although it depends on the scale of your needs assessment, presenting and assessing more than 10 or 15 needs is likely to be very time consuming and unwieldy, so it is better to consolidate needs during this step. Needs that have been identified through multiple sources of evidence should be noted here as well; this is important information to present as part of the decision-making process.

The final stage in this step – presenting these data – will change depending on how decisions are being made in your needs assessment, particularly the scale of the needs assessment and the number of people involved in decision making. For example, in a large needs assessment with a steering group, you might put together a presentation and brief summary of each need that has been identified, with a description of the need and a summary of the findings. In a smaller needs assessment you are likely to have less information and fewer stakeholders, so you may hold a less formal meeting where you present your findings visually or on a single page. The format for presenting the identified needs will depend on the audience. Consider who is making the decisions and the best way for them to receive information. If you are unsure, check in with the people who will be making decisions about how they would prefer information to be presented.



Step 5: Apply the criteria and prioritise needs

Determine your decision-making strategy.

Meet with the decision-making group and apply the criteria.

Prioritise needs.

You have now identified a set of community needs through data collection and analysis and presented these needs to your steering group or the people who will be making decisions. It is highly likely that you have a list of competing needs. In this step, these needs are assessed. That is, the criteria identified in Step 2 are applied in order to prioritise needs for action. This is essentially a decision-making process so there are different decision-making strategies that can be employed. Smaller



projects could use [consensus decision-making](#)⁹ processes whereas needs assessments with larger groups of stakeholders will have to employ other strategies.

Rating and ranking strategies are commonly used. For example, Witkin and Altschuld (1995) suggest rating each identified need as high, medium or low against the criteria and then prioritising the need/s that rank the highest. Rabinowitz (2017) suggests a more detailed process that could be undertaken with a steering committee or stakeholder group:

1. Review the criteria to make sure that everyone understands and continues to agree on them.
2. Discuss the issues that have been identified through the needs assessment and make sure that everyone understands the issues and their implications.
3. Discuss each issue: Is it feasible to address this issue? What are the larger implications of addressing it? Does this issue tie in to other issues and strategies that are currently employed or planned? Will there be other benefits to addressing this issue?
4. Individually or in small groups, rate each issue in terms of its importance and the feasibility of having an effect on it.
5. Discuss the ratings as a group, examining whether any issues can be eliminated or consolidated (by addressing two issues together).
6. Rank the issues according to the agreed criteria, and select the highest issues for action.

There are many other decision-making and prioritisation processes that can be used. The Community Tool Box describes [five other methods](#)¹⁰ that can be used to make decisions.

The scale of the needs assessment you've undertaken and the data sources you have used will influence the degree to which your results can be generalised to the broader population. Generally, the greater the number of people you have collected data from, and the more diverse they are, the more you can expect that your findings would apply to the wider community. Similarly, if you have used mixed methods and different sources of data have returned similar findings, you can be more confident that the needs you have identified are shared across the community. Smaller-scale needs assessments are still useful, but may be better used to inform specific program delivery or development rather than large-scale policy or program development.

Step 6: Identify next steps and report back

Identify issues for the prioritised needs; risk/protective factors, causes and consequences.

Explore the evidence for effective interventions/approaches.

Report on your findings to stakeholders.

The aim of this step is to work towards selecting interventions to address the issue. Step 5 may have prioritised a single issue or a few key issues but it is likely that further exploration is required in order to build a deeper understanding of the identified issues. This may include gathering further information about an issue and reviewing the evidence for different interventions – for example, if the needs assessment identified school readiness as a priority issue, then it would be necessary to review the literature on school readiness and examine the evidence for effective interventions. You may also consider what approaches to intervention design are most likely to be effective (e.g. co-design or collaborative approaches).

Questions you might ask at this stage include:

- What are the risk and protective factors associated with the issue?
- What are the causes and consequences of the issue?
- Who should be the target group for interventions?
- What evidence exists about effective interventions to address the issue?
- What evidence exists about effective approaches to this issue and with this target group?

It is vital at this stage not to lose momentum. A needs assessment can build community readiness for action, so it is important that this final stage of evidence gathering and decision making happens relatively quickly.



⁹ www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/consensus_decision_making

¹⁰ ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/criteria-and-processes-to-set-priorities/tools

If research or consultation was done with community members or other stakeholders, it is good practice to report back what you found and what you intend to do as a result of the needs assessment. While you should have outlined prior to data collection how people's contributions would inform the needs assessment, it is important to outline this again when you feed back the results. This is particularly important if there were issues that resonated strongly with a particular group (e.g. practitioners or a segment of the community) that were not prioritised for action. Ensure that your communication back to stakeholders clearly and transparently outlines the reasons why issues were prioritised and the criteria that were used to select these issues. Respectful and transparent communication will ensure that people can see tangible results from their participation, help build support for interventions and ensure that community members feel valued and respected (and so be more likely to participate in future research, evaluation or community consultation).

Conclusion

Needs assessment is a systematic and reproducible process of determining and prioritising needs in a community for the purpose of taking action. There are many benefits associated with undertaking a needs assessment, including building more relevant and effective programs and services and enabling a more systematic and transparent distribution of resources.

Needs assessments can be small or large, and the scope and methods of a needs assessment depends on the purpose and the available resources. It is important to develop a plan and have clear criteria for assessing needs before data are collected. While this resource has presented a set of steps that can be followed, in practice a needs assessment may not always be a structured, linear process as presented here; the process is likely to be more iterative and flexible to reflect the complexities of working on the ground (Royse & Badger, 2015).

Further reading

Community Tool Box by the Centre of Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas have a [suite of easy to read resources](#)¹¹ on needs assessment.

Author and acknowledgements

This resource was written by **Jessica Smart**, Senior Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The author would like to acknowledge Lauren Kerr of Moonee Valley Council, Deb Chapman, formerly of Brimbank City Council, and Rebecca Armstrong from the Australian Institute of Family Studies for their thoughtful reviews and contributions to this resource.

¹¹ ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment

References

- Altschuld, J. W., & Kumar, D. D. (2005). Needs assessment. In S. Mathison (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Altschuld, J. W., & White, J. L. (2010). *Needs assessment: Analysis and prioritization* (Book 4). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2012). *The Nest consultation: Findings from consultation with children, young people, parents and other adults conducted between March and September 2012*. Canberra: ARACY.
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2014). *The Nest action agenda: Improving the wellbeing of Australia's children and youth while growing our GDP by over 7% (2nd ed.)*. Canberra: ARACY.
- Barnett, K. (2012). *Best practices for community health needs assessment and implementation strategy development: A review of scientific methods, current practices, and future potential. Report of proceedings from a public forum and interviews of experts*. Oakland, CA: The Public Health Institute.
- Bradshaw, J. R. (1972). The taxonomy of social need. In R. Cookson, R. Sainsbury, & C. Glendinning (Eds.), (2013), *Jonathon Bradshaw on social policy: Selected writings 1972-2011*. York: University of York.
- Baum, F. (2008). *The new public health*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press
- Davidson, E. J. (2005). *Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation*. California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hawtin, M., & Percy-Smith, J. (2007). *Community profiling: A practical guide* (2nd edition). Berkshire, England: McGraw Hill, Open University Press.
- Hunter, C., & Carlow, M. (2018). Knowledge translation strategy: Emerging Minds National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies [unpublished. internal document only].
- Ife, J. (2002). *Community development: Community-based alternatives in an age of globalisation*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia
- Ife, J. (2016). *Community development in an uncertain world: Vision, analysis and practice*. (2nd edition). Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press
- Lightbody, R. (2017). 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement. Evidence review. Edinburgh: What Works Scotland
- McKnight, J. L., & Kretzmann, J. P. (1997). Mapping community capacity. In M. Minkler (Ed.), *Community organizing and community building for health*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Owen, J. M. (2006). *Program evaluation: Forms and approaches*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Rabinowitz, P. (2017). *Community Tool Box: Section 23. Developing and using criteria and processes to set priorities*. Lawrence, KS: Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas. Retrieved from ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/criteria-and-processes-to-set-priorities/main
- Reviere, R. (1996). *Needs assessment: A creative and practical guide for social scientists*. Washington D.C.: Taylor & Francis.
- Rossi, P. H., Lipsey, M. W., & Freeman, H. E. (2004). *Evaluation: A systematic approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Royse, D., & Badger, K. (2015). Needs assessment planning: Starting where you are at. *Australian Social Work*, 68(3), 364-374.
- Royse, D., Staton-Tindall, M., Badger, K., & Webster, M. (2009). *Needs assessment*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sleezer, C. M., Fuss-Eft., D. F., & Gupta, K. (2014). *A practical guide to needs assessment* (3rd ed.) Wiley: San Francisco.
- Witkin, B. R., & Altschuld, J. W. (1995). *Planning and conducting needs assessments: A practical guide*. California, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.