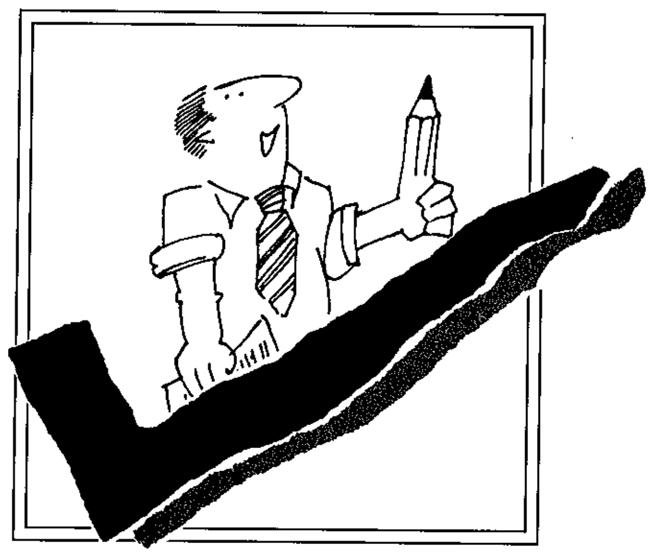
Doing it right!

A Needs Assessment Workbook



PREPARED BY THE EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
IN COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED WAY OF EDMONTON AND AREA

Published and distributed by the:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
#41, 9912 - 106 Street
Edmonton, AB
T5K 1C5

(403) 423-2031

First Printing 1988
Second Printing 1991
Third Printing with revisions 1993

PRINTED IN CANADA

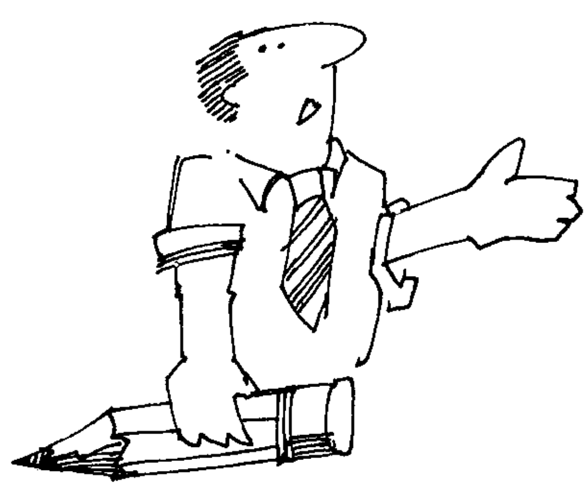
Design: Verne Busby Advertising Design

PREFACE

The United Way of Edmonton and Area supports the efforts of social service agencies to make their programs as effective as possible. One avenue the United Way has pursued is to encourage agencies to evaluate their programs including the needs these programs serve. The United Way supported the preparation of this Needs Assessment Workbook in response to comments from some of its agencies who wished to conduct a needs assessment. The Edmonton Social Planning Council was asked to prepare the workbook. Several agencies were involved in the process, providing suggestions, discussing their experiences, and reviewing and commenting on drafts of the document.

We believe this workbook will be useful to other agencies across Canada. This is why we are distributing it beyond the agencies supported by the United Way of Edmonton and Area. We invite you to use this workbook in your process of identifying important new programs and/or evaluating current ones. We are confident the information you develop in the assessment process will be valuable both for your agency and for the potential sponsors when you seek funding. Good luck.

United Way of Edmonton and Area



INTRODUCTION

This workbook offers social service agencies and community organizations practical, straight-forward information on needs assessment. Most material on needs assessment is academic and technical. It is difficult for most of us to understand what exactly a needs assessment is, what it can do for us and how we go about doing one. We feel sure that this workbook will help you understand how a needs assessment can benefit your agency or group with its planning and what important questions you should deal with in deciding whether to carry out a needs assessment.

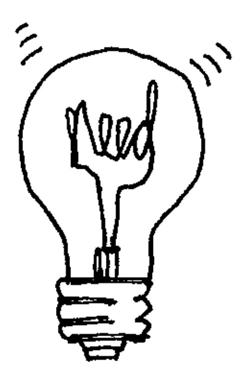
This workbook is based on a learn-by-doing approach. We present "how to" information about the process of doing needs assessment research in seven brief chapters. We also include five follow-up worksheets. By discussing the questions in the worksheets you will be able to work through the process of designing and carrying out a needs assessment study. We have also included some useful references for further information.

March, 1993

Edmonton Social Planning Council
Edmonton, Alberta

CONTENTS

1.	**What A Needs Assessment Is**	6
2.	**Reasons For Doing Needs Assessment Research**	8
	Worksheet Number One: *Thinking About Doing A Needs Assessment*	11
3.	**Planning Your Needs Assessment Research**	13
	Worksheet Number Two: *How Ready Are You To Do A Needs Assessment?*	16
4.	**Choosing Your Approach**	19
	Worksheet Number Three: *Where To Get The Information You Need*	24
5.	**Ways Of Collecting Information**	26
	Worksheet Number Four: *Selecting The Best Way To Collect The Information*	28
6.	**Summarizing And Reporting The Findings**	30
7.	**Using The Needs Assessment Results**	31
	Worksheet Number Five: *Ensuring That Your Needs Assessment Research Gets Noticed And Used*	32
	Appendix: Questionnaire Design	34



CHAPTER ONE
What a Needs Assessment is

1. WHAT WE MEAN BY "NEED"
2. WHAT WE MEAN BY "ASSESSMENT"
3. WHAT NEEDS ASSESSMENT TELLS US
4. DETERMINING WHO HAS NEEDS

Any review of the numerous books and articles available on this topic will show that there are many definitions of needs assessment and just as many approaches to undertaking one. The basic idea of needs assessment is really very simple. Needs assessment does not have to be complex or intimidating. It need not even be "scientific." Needs assessment is an attempt to find out what people need or want and how best these needs and wants can be filled.

1. WHAT WE MEAN BY "NEED"

The term "need" means different things to different people. A needs assessment can be used to find out peoples' needs, wants, preferences, or some combination of these. All three terms are quite similar in meaning but could have different implications for your program planning. Just because there is a need for a program does not mean that people will want to use it.

A recent health survey conducted by Health and Welfare Canada found that although people felt they needed to take steps to improve their health, only 50% actually intend to do so. What implications would this have for a quit smoking program? Similarly, even though people may want a program, they may prefer another one, sometimes for reasons as simple as where a service is provided and at what time. It is important to clarify right at the beginning what information you want about needs, wants, and preferences.

2. WHAT WE MEAN BY "ASSESSMENT"

Assessment goes beyond simply documenting the types of needs. Assessment helps to examine the prevalence and the urgency of these needs. This allows you to make judgements or to assess the relative importance of meeting the needs and to set your agency's priorities accordingly.

3. WHAT NEEDS ASSESSMENT TELLS US

When planning services, assumptions are often first made about people's needs. Attempts are then made to meet these needs using these assumptions as a guide. Our success in meeting the actual needs depends on the accuracy of our assumptions. This is where the value of needs assessment lies. It helps us to "check out" our assumptions. It tests what we "know" about people's needs and tells us how accurate we are in what we have assumed.

> Needs assessment is a systematic process for finding out who has the need, how important it is that the need be filled and how many people are experiencing the need. Needs assessment may also examine why a particular need exists and may point to some possible solutions for meeting the needs which have been identified.

4. DETERMINING WHO HAS NEEDS

One of the first questions to be addressed is: "Whose needs should we be examining?" A needs assessment which is clearly aimed at a specific target group will likely be more effective.

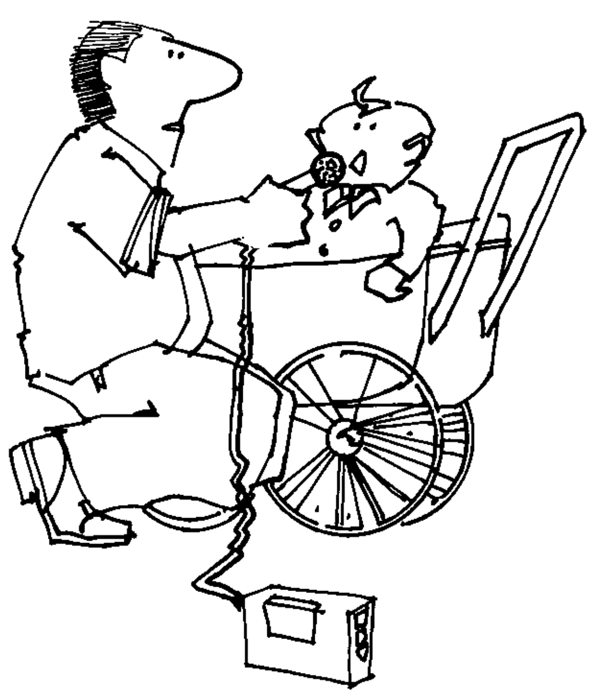
You may focus your needs assessment efforts on people already using your programs and services. In this case, you may be interested in knowing:

- **are you meeting your clients' needs with your current programs?**
- **have the needs of your clients changed?**
- **do your clients have unmet needs that you could do something about?**

On the other hand, you may be concerned with identifying the needs of people not currently served by your agency's programs and services. There are a number of ways you could gather information on people's needs. You could:

- **Assess overall social and/or health needs in a particular community. This is known as a community-wide needs assessment.**
- **Assess the needs of a particular sub-group within the community, for example, youth, single parents, the elderly, the handicapped.**
- **Assess people's needs within a particular service area such as family life education, home care, daycare.**

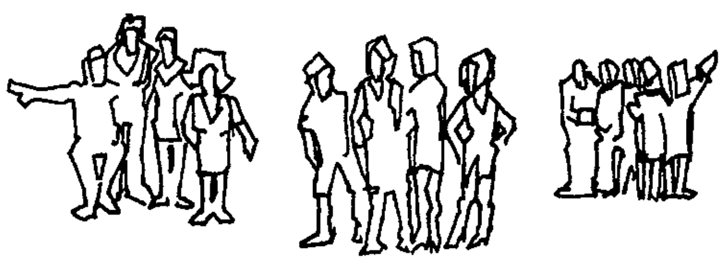
A needs assessment might also be done in two or more steps using these different approaches. You might do a community-wide needs assessment which identifies general target populations most in need. For example, if single parents were found to be a group with unmet needs, you could then focus your needs assessment on examining the problems of single parents in the community.



CHAPTER TWO
Reasons For Doing Needs Assessment Research

1. WHY DO NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH?
2. WHEN TO DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT
3. WHEN IT SHOULD NOT BE DONE
Worksheet Number One: *Thinking About Doing A Needs Assessment*

At a meeting of the Social Services Coordinating Group last year in Rocky Hills, members expressed unanimous concern about the number of teenagers in the town who were getting into trouble. School absenteeism, shoplifting and vandalism all seemed to be on the increase. Clearly, something had to be done.

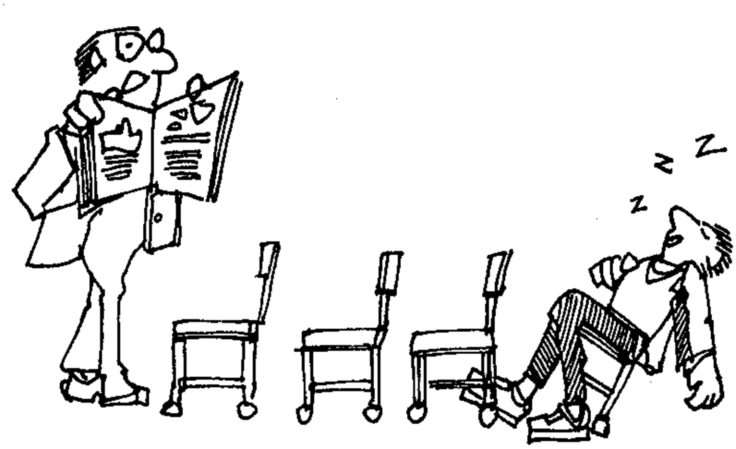


It was noted that many teens were hanging around in groups on the main street, in the local coffee shops or in the shopping mall. "They just don't have enough to do," commented the local high school principal. "That's right, they need some kind of club or organized activities to keep them busy and out of trouble," offered a concerned parent. After considerable discussion, it was generally agreed that some type of organized program for teens was the answer to the teen problem and ought to be developed without delay.

After several months of meetings and fund-raising activities, a teen club was opened in a wing of the Rocky Hill high school. Various activities from table-tennis to movies and driving lessons were planned. A part-time co-ordinator was hired and many people volunteered their time to the centre.

Despite all the planning and organizing, the program was not a big success. Few teens went to the centre and after a few months of sporadic use, it closed down. The teens continued to hang around in their usual spots and the "problems" didn't go away. "It seemed like such a good idea," said one disappointed member of the co-ordinating group. "I wonder what went wrong!"

This example illustrates an all-too-common problem in planning and implementing services – a failure to assess needs. In their enthusiasm and desire to do something for the teens in Rocky Hill, the members of the Social Services Co-ordinating Group forgot to talk to the teens. The teens obviously had other ideas about what the problems were and what needed to be done.



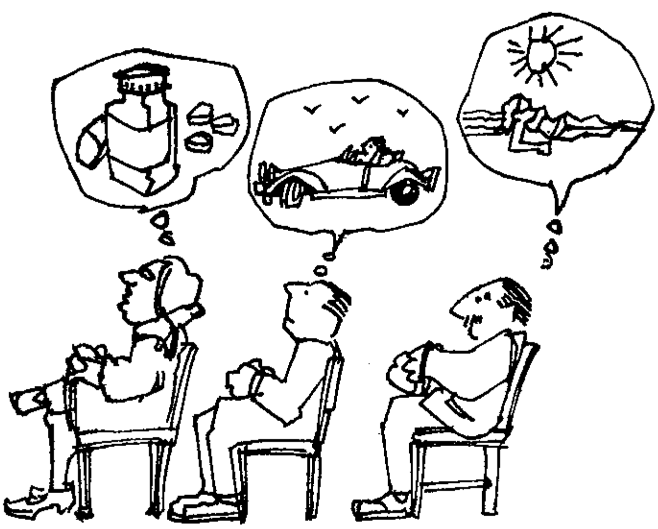
1. WHY DO NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH?

A. Needs Assessment Is Good Planning – It Indicates How Best To Use Resources.

Planning involves establishing priorities. All agencies and service providers are faced with difficult choices about what services to offer and how best to allocate their resources. Information on the needs of your client groups or potential client groups is crucial in providing a rational basis for planning your services and allocating your resources.

B. Needs Assessment Helps You To Match Services With Needs

It makes sense that, before offering any new service, even if it has been offered successfully elsewhere, you have a clear indication of the need for it. Needs assessment can help you to determine what the service needs are and alternatives for meeting these needs.



C. Needs Assessment Takes Some Of The Guesswork Out Of Planning

Too many services, like the one described earlier, are based on professional "intuition" or on people's assumptions about what a particular group needs. Often, a service is offered because it sounds like a good idea or because it worked well elsewhere. It is not unusual for services to be developed in response to current popular causes such as drug abuse or teenage suicide. This is not to suggest that the perceptions of staff and other professionals are to be treated lightly in determining what services to provide. Their perceptions can be an important source of information which should not be overlooked. Needs assessment research provides additional evidence of need and helps to avoid over-reliance on staff perceptions.

D. Needs Assessment Increases Accountability

Both the public, and funding organizations have a stake in ensuring that health and social services are worthwhile. Understandably, they want to know that their dollars are being spent on services for which there is a demonstrated need. In these times of ever increasing competition for scarce resources, decisions are likely to be made in favor of those services which are based on a systematic assessment of needs.

E. Needs Assessment Is An Equalizer

The saying "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" all too often holds true when it comes to service support and funding. Those groups with more political clout and those who are most vocal in making their demands heard are, not surprisingly, the most likely to garner support for their services. Needs assessment efforts can raise awareness and influence public opinion.

F. Needs Assessment Is Effective Consumerism

In our enthusiasm for developing new and innovative health and social programs, we often fail to involve the most important person in the process - the consumer. People are more likely to use and benefit from services when they have been involved in the planning. Needs assessment research is oriented towards discovering the needs of current and potential consumers of a service, usually by asking people directly about their needs. With the increased emphasis in recent years on encouraging citizen participation and on the consumer rights movements, needs assessment must be viewed as one way of allowing consumers to make their voices heard.

2. WHEN TO DO NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH

As well as the reasons just listed, there are a number of more subtle but critical signs that indicate that needs assessment research should be considered.

1. Your clients and their problems change. You begin to suspect that a change in services is needed or you are not sure of the kind and amount of service needed.
2. Your agency is receiving requests for a service it does not provide. This service could be included in the general range of programs your agency provides.
3. Your agency is thinking of extending the geographic area you serve or expanding some programs.
4. You have identified a need that no other agency fills and you wish to form an organization that could provide a new service. You would like to establish your credibility with funders and with potential competing agencies.

3. *WHEN IT SHOULD NOT BE DONE*

One U.S. study found that out of the thousands of needs assessments conducted for federally funded health and human service programs, only a few had ever been used.

The major reasons why few studies were ever used were:

1. The report was not written in plain English. Readers could not understand the jargon and complex analysis.
2. The findings were interesting, but they did not really address the questions the study set out to answer.
3. The report made unrealistic, vague, and/or too many recommendations.
4. The agency did not have the resources to act on the recommendations.
5. There was resistance within the agency to act on the findings.

DO NOT do a needs assessment if:

1. **You are not quite sure what information you need to collect. While the signs may indicate that you should do one, your efforts will be wasted if the purposes and potential uses of the needs assessment have not been specified right from the start. If you are looking for answers, they will not suddenly leap out of the pile of information you have collected.**
2. **There are strong differences of opinion among your staff and/or board on the purposes and uses of the needs assessment. There is no point trying to identify needs if there is no commitment to plan new services or eliminate old ones.**
3. **Your agency lacks the financial resources and/or staff to implement program changes.**
4. **You are not sure whether you need to do a needs assessment, a program evaluation, a feasibility study, or some other research.**

USEFUL REFERENCES

MURRELL, Stanley A. *Procedures for Maximizing Usage of Needs Assessmment Data in Addressing Health and Human Service Needs: Concepts, Methods and Applications.* New York: Human Service Press, 1983, pp. 250-254.

Indicates how to ensure that your needs assessment is useful and used.

SIEGAL, L.M.; ATTKISSON, C.C.; and CARSON, L.G. *Need Identification and Program Planning in the Community Context.* Attkisson, Hargreaves, Horowitz and Sorensen, (Eds.) Evaluation of Human Service Programs, Academic Press, 1978.

Excellent and detailed overview of needs assessment. Includes description and comparison of methods.

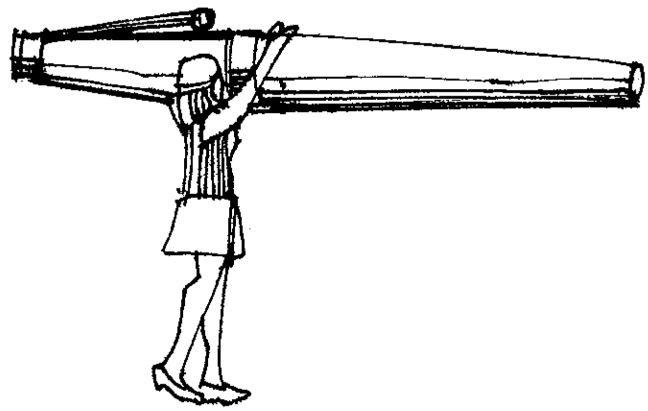
Worksheet Number One

THINKING ABOUT DOING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The decision to do a needs assessment is all too often made before considering all of the reasons why one is required or if the timing is right. This worksheet can help you to decide how useful a needs assessment would be to you at this time.

We suggest that you write out your responses individually and then have a group discussion. Not everyone will necessarily agree to a single response for each question. This is a very common situation. It is better for differences of opinion to arise now rather than when the needs assessment report is being printed.

The responses to these questions will help you clarify your reasons for doing a needs assessment. Once you have reached agreement on the reasons you will be ready to move into the planning stage of your needs assessment.



1. Why do you want to do a needs assessment?
   What signs indicate a needs assessment is required?

2. What do you hope to find out from the needs assessment?

3. Whose needs are being assessed? Is it the needs of the agency or the needs of your clients?

4. Do you really need to do a needs assessment? Maybe you need a program evaluation. Decreasing use of a service, for example, may be due to the times services are given, rather than a lack of need for the service.

CHAPTER THREE

Planning Your Needs Assessment Research

1. MAKING A DECISION: SHOULD YOU DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT?
2. TALKING WITH OTHERS IN THE AGENCY
3. DEVELOPING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT
4. DESIGNING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH PLAN
5. USING OUTSIDE EXPERTISE
Worksheet Number Two: *How Ready Are You To Do A Needs Assessment?*

The information in this chapter will help you draw up a research plan. Once you determine the purpose of the needs assessment and who you will present the results to, you will be in a good position to draw up a preliminary research plan. This plan will give you a broad idea of what information you need to collect, where the information can be found, and how you can get this information. This, in turn, will help you select the research methods and approaches that match the staff and financial resources you have and the time constraints you face.

1. MAKING A DECISION: SHOULD YOU DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

The planning stage of any needs assessment research requires considerable time and thought. Before beginning any needs assessment, it is essential to clearly identify why you want to do the needs assessment. Worksheet Number One helped you through this process. Now you need to consider the scope of the research, and how you will use the results. Just as important is to recognize any factors which will interfere with having it carried out and implemented. Here are some key questions that should be addressed before you proceed:

1. What information do you need and can this be obtained elsewhere or from another kind of study?
2. Do you have the resources to do a needs assessment?
3. What will you do with the information you obtain from the needs assessment?

It is important to also remember that, sometimes, the needs assessment findings come as a real shock. How willing and committed is your agency to make major adjustments? What would you do if the needs assessment that you are now planning indicates that your program is not seen as an essential service by the clients you serve? What if the needs assessment shows that the majority of potential clients live on the other side of the city, making it necessary to move your facilities, and half of your staff oppose the move?

Worksheet Number Two will help you focus your attention on these and other questions.

2. TALKING WITH OTHERS IN THE AGENCY

Assume for a moment that you are the director of a social service agency. You have decided that a needs assessment of a core program should be done. You decide to sound out others about a study.

In talking with the volunteers you find out that they feel the study is being used to evaluate them. The program director feels that his organizing skills are being examined. Board members feel that this program is the cornerstone of the agency and that it should not be tampered with. These reactions are not unexpected. Since these people are involved in this program, they all have an interest in any study of it.

By bringing others in at the discussion stage, they will understand why the needs assessment is being considered and what could result from it. They may also be a good source for information useful to the study. For example, they could provide the most likely places and people where this information might be found. They could also identify specific information that they would like to have when the report is prepared. If you have not done so already, this would be an opportune time to discuss Worksheets One and Two with others who might have a stake in the possible needs assessment.

Depending on the nature of your study, it may be important to do a review of the literature relating to your topic. For example, if you are examining a community's needs with regard to suicide prevention, a review of the literature on suicide could help you to interpret trends which appear in your findings.

3. DEVELOPING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Sometimes information is collected even though it is not needed; at other times needed information is not obtained. Developing objectives helps you to get the information that you really need.

The answers to the questions in Worksheet Number Two will help you to develop the objectives of your needs assessment research. For example, if you have determined that you need demographic information, you may wish to state as an objective:

- to collect information on the age, sex, education and income of people living in your neighborhood.

OR, you may feel that you need to know about the housing preferences of elderly people. One objective in this case might be:

- to determine whether elderly people prefer to live in housing complexes with people of their own age or with people of various ages.

It takes a little time and practice to write clear and concise study objectives, but the payoff comes in the form of clear and usable results.

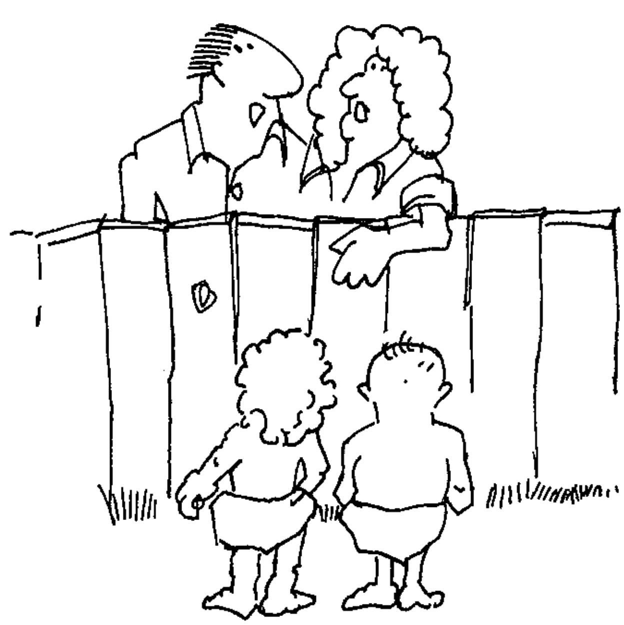
4. DESIGNING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH PLAN

Once you know your research objectives and what information you need to collect, you will have to decide where you will get it and how to collect it. You need to specify:

- **WHAT information you want to collect**
- **WHERE the information can be found**
- **HOW you will collect the information**

Together, these components make up your research plan. In addition, you will probably want to add some time lines, specifying for example, when the information will be collected, when it will be analyzed and when the final report will be completed.

A research plan is not meant to be too rigid a plan. As you begin collecting your information, you may find that you will have to revise it. It is best to view your research plan as a set of broad guidelines that will direct your information gathering efforts.



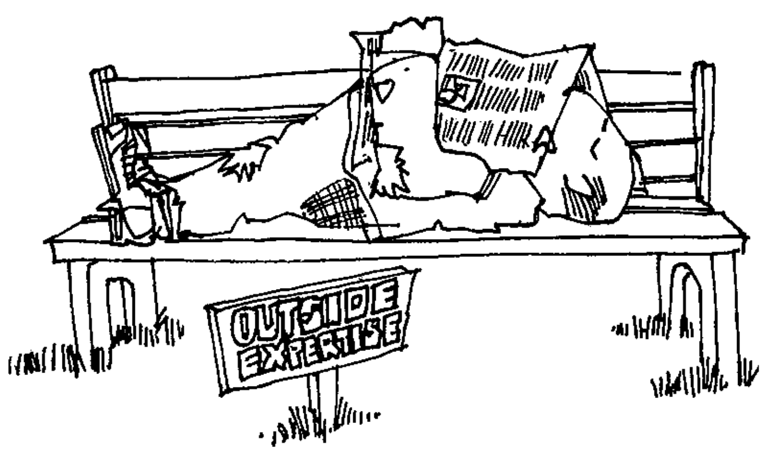
5. USING OUTSIDE EXPERTISE

An advisory committee with the appropriate membership and clear responsibilities can be helpful in ensuring the success of your needs assessment research. A small committee of five or six members set up to guide the needs assessment process can be extremely valuable in generating ideas and keeping the research on track.

A committee might consist of agency staff, a member of the board of directors, a representative from your major funding body, a client (or former client) of your agency and an appropriate representative from another agency or the community-at-large.

Be sure that the committee members understand what is expected of them. Terms of reference should tell them:

- **what their tasks will be**
- **how much time will be required from them**
- **when and where they will meet, and**
- **that their role is advisory only; they are not expected to manage or carry out the study.**



Some agencies and groups choose to do their own in-house needs assessment research. Others may choose to hire a consultant. Even if you hire a consultant it is still wise to develop a research plan. This will save the consultant time and save you money. Better still, it will improve your chances of getting the research that you want.

If you cannot afford a consultant, you might want to consider getting an outside expert to take on the job for free. Universities, community colleges, government departments, and private firms may have people who are willing to help you on a voluntary basis. Your chances of getting someone will be increased if you have a research plan in place before you approach people. It will also help if you can give them plenty of advance notice.

Another option may be to collaborate with another agency or group.

USEFUL REFERENCES

ABBEY-LIVINGSTONE, D. and ABBEY, D.S. *Enjoying Research? A 'How To' Manual on Needs Assessment.* Produced for the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1982.

An extensive but easily understandable manual that explains how to do effective research. Topics range from the planning of your research project, the how's, do's and don'ts of carrying it out and presenting your results.

EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANING COUNCIL. *The Social Research Directory: A Guide To Libraries And Resource Centres In Edmonton,* 1989.

Many libraries have needs assessment materials and bibliographies. This guide is a handy sourcebook of libraries and their primary subject headings. This guide can be purchased from the Council.

GILMORE, Gary. *Needs Assessment Processes for Community Health Education,* International Journal of Health Education. Vol. 20(3), 1977.

Distinguishes between informal and formal processes. Information on specific techniques is included as is a practical, step-by-step process.

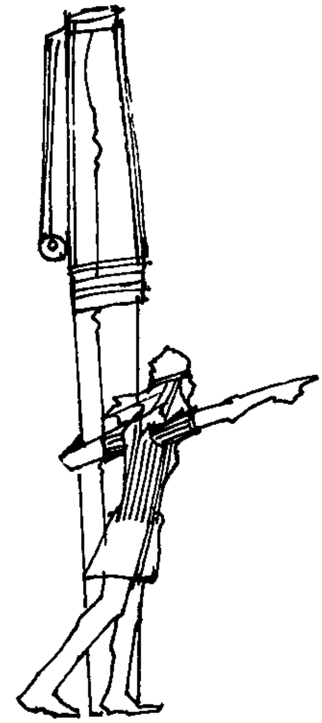
NORTHERN ALBERTA DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL. *Community Impact Assessment Handbook.* September, 1982.

Contains practical advice on hiring and using a consultant. Even if you plan to recruit volunteer expertise, this information would be useful.

Worksheet Number Two

HOW READY ARE YOU TO DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

This worksheet will help you consider the kind of information you need. It can also help you assess whether or not there is a strong commitment by decision-makers to use the information that is obtained. How these questions are answered and by whom will help you design the needs assessment research plan and make its implementation much easier.



1. Have a look at any needs assessments your agency may have done before.

   (a) What were the results?

   (b) Were they implemented?

   (c) What implementation problem(s) came up?

2. Imagine some possible results and think about what the consequences to the agency would be if they actually happened.

   (a) Is that what you want to hear?

(b) Could a new service or program be considered at this time?
If no, why not?

(c) Could some parts of the program or service be modified?
If no, why not?

(d) Could new methods or procedures be adapted? If no, why not?

(e) What is likely to be the commitment of the key people who would have to implement any changes?

3. What do you want to find out from the needs assessment?
Staff, volunteers, and agency clients may give you a pretty good estimate of needs.

4. Who will use the needs assessment? How much influence do they have to implement its recommendations?

5. Does your agency have the funds and/or the people to take action on what is learned from the needs assessment?

6. When does the needs assessment have to be completed?

7. Does your agency have the resources and skills to do a needs assessment?

CHAPTER FOUR
Choosing Your Approach

1. SOCIAL INDICATORS
2. SERVICE USE
3. KEY INFORMANT SURVEY
4. COMMUNITY GROUPS
5. FIELD SURVEY

Now that you know what information you would like, you need to know where to find it. You can either gather information from written records or you can ask people for information. There are five general approaches you can use:

1. Social Indicators
2. Service Use
3. Key Informant Survey
4. Community Groups
5. Field Survey

Which approach is the best? Should you choose the one you are most familiar with? Or should you choose the one that is the easiest or cheapest to do?

- **There is no one right approach. You probably will not be able to get all of the information you want.**
- **Information can be collected many ways. You can use a combination of approaches.**
- **Discuss these approaches with other key people; they will have useful ideas.**
- **More important than collecting information is the usefulness of the information you collect.**

1. SOCIAL INDICATORS

This approach assumes that certain demographic, socio-economic, and geographic characteristics are related to client service needs. By using information such as census data, government statistics, and agency reports from public records and documents, inferences of need are made. Rather than producing new information, this method simply integrates and interprets what is already there.

This approach allows you to compile information on such things as:

- Demographic characteristics - age, sex, education, income, ethnicity
- Social behaviour and well-being - crime, drug abuse, mortality, suicide rate, divorce rate, child abuse
- Family patterns - family size and composition, number of single-parent families, working mothers
- Social conditions - poverty rate, overcrowding, substandard housing, welfare rates

Information is usually gathered for specific geographical areas such as a city, although it is often also available for individual neighbourhoods or communities.

Social indicators can offer useful comparisons with other communities or cities or between one year and another. For example, you may discover that the teen pregnancy rate in Edmonton is among the highest in all Canadian cities or that the rate has changed over the past few years. These would clearly tell you much more about needs than would just the rate for Edmonton itself or the rate for one year.

Using This Approach

The social indicators approach can be useful in providing some descriptive information. However, we do not recommend using it alone. There are risks involved in making inferences of need from statistical data. For example, because a given area has a lot of female-headed single parent families, it does not necessarily follow that a Big Brothers program should be established in order to provide male role models. Without information from other sources to back them up, assumptions made on the basis of social indicators can be risky. This approach is best used along with other approaches.

This approach takes advantage of the fact that many useful data sources already exist in your community. Some common sources of information include:

- census data
- local board of health
- planning departments
- colleges and universities
- law enforcement records
- educational records
- mental health organizations
- public assistance records
- social planning councils
- libraries
- Statistics Canada reports

Strengths

- is relatively inexpensive
- easy to access public records and reports
- requires little expertise to collect information
- information from various sources can be combined
- once a system has been set up, it can easily be maintained and updated

Weaknesses

- indicators can only tell you about needs indirectly
- rates and averages do not always reflect characteristics of individuals in that area. When you average some statistics they often do not tell you a lot about some individuals in the group.
- requires you to make some assumptions which always involves some risk
- statistics can be manipulated to support your position

Activity Checklist

☐ **Clearly define the information that you require. A literature review could be useful.**

☐ **Decide which indicators you will use, where you can get them and how you will assess them.**

☐ **Contact the organizations in the community which have the information and secure their co-operation.**

☐ **Gather the information in a useful format.**

☐ **Interpret the information in terms of needs.**

☐ **Integrate the results with those from other method(s).**

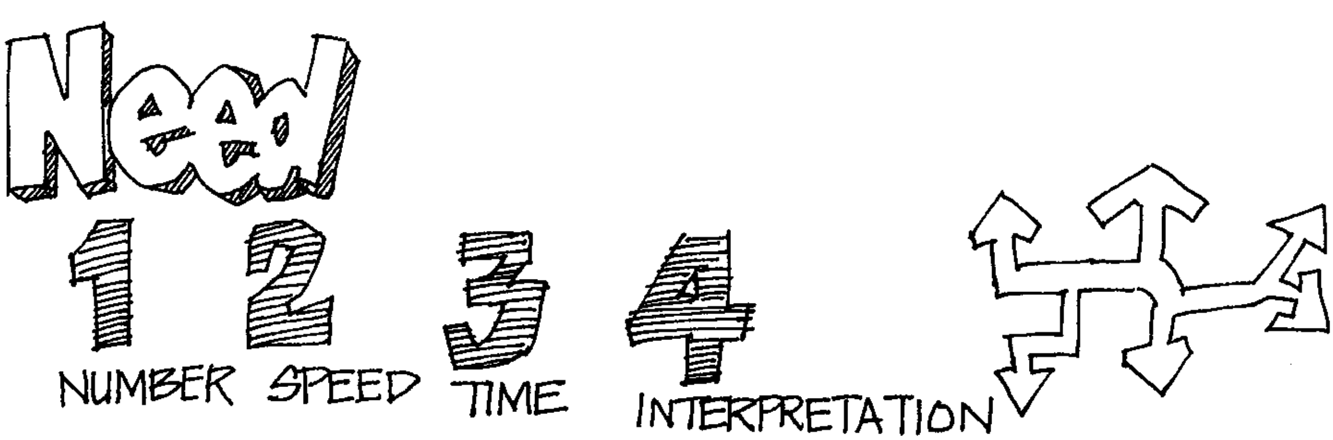
2. SERVICE USE

The basic focus of this approach is on agency records of clients using a service. Client characteristics, the services provided to them, referrals to your agency, registrations, waiting lists, and correspondence, are used as indicators of the need for a service and the type of client who needs it. Where possible this information is also gathered from other organizations in the community who serve the same client group. This baseline information is then used to estimate community needs through a survey of existing agencies and programs. A service use survey can provide two important types of information.

1. Information on people's needs as reflected by the use of and demand for services.
2. Information on those services that are available to meet particular needs.

From these two pieces of information, you may be able to estimate the gap between what exists and what ought to exist.

The service use approach is more useful in examining relatively specific needs. For example, if you are assessing needs related to substance abuse, you would only want to survey those agencies and organizations which offer services in this specific area or which receive regular requests for such services.



Using This Approach

The service use approach can provide information on:

- type and range of services available
- problems addressed by these services
- characteristics of clients (e.g. age, sex, place of residence, income)
- who referred them to the service
- how accessible and affordable the services are
- waiting list for the service

It is also important to ensure that your survey is comprehensive, including such service providers as: community agencies, hospitals and health clinics, court-related programs, government departments, church-sponsored programs and private agencies.

Strengths

- relatively inexpensive to collect and analyze information
- may enhance communication among service providers
- provides a useful inventory of community services
- provides in-depth information about current service usage

Weaknesses

- provides indirect evidence of needs; i.e. service availability and use may not actually reflect needs
- agencies may not keep thorough records
- concerns about confidentiality may preclude use of some records
- provides no information about the population not receiving the service

Activity Checklist

☐ **Identify the information that you require.**

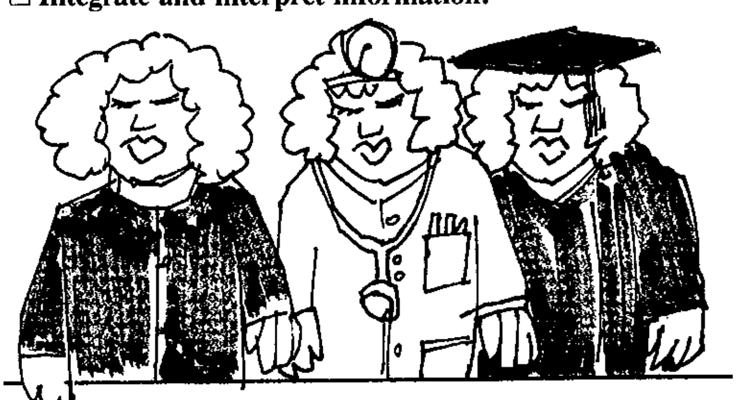
☐ **Identify agencies and organizations to survey.**

☐ **Contact responsible persons in these organizations to secure their co-operation.**

☐ **Prepare worksheets for recording information.**

☐ **Collect information.**

☐ **Integrate and interpret information.**



3. KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

The key informant survey approach is based on the assumption that certain people in a community are in a position to understand social and health needs in that community. Information gathered from a broad cross-section of these key people provides valuable information for a needs assessment study. Depending on the focus of your study, key informants could include any or all of the following:

- service providers from other agencies
- program planners in public or private organizations
- school personnel (teachers, principals, counsellors)
- clergy
- public health nurses
- physicians
- community volunteers
- representatives of funding bodies
- community mental health workers
- public officials

Key informants do not need to be professionals, nor must they be high profile. Many front-line workers and volunteers have valuable insights and knowledge about the needs and services in their communities.

Using This Approach

The first step is to identify those people in the community who are most likely to be helpful in identifying needs. The selection of appropriate informants who represent a variety of perspectives is a crucial part of the process. The views of those selected can be obtained through a face-to-face interview, a telephone interview or a mail-out questionnaire. It is also possible to interview key informants in small groups. The information obtained from using the key informants approach often serves as an excellent basis for designing a questionnaire to be used in a community survey.

Strengths

- relatively inexpensive
- relatively simple to undertake
- requires little time to conduct
- provides a wide variety of perspectives
- can encourage interagency co-operation

Weaknesses

- key informants may represent existing service groups but may not necessarily be representative of the community; therefore,
  - may present biased views
  - may promote conflict if agency mandates overlap or where there is interagency competition for limited funds
  - relies on people's perceptions of needs

Activity Checklist

☐ **Describe the information that you require.**

☐ **Identify and secure the co-operation of a cross-section of key people who are knowledgeable about your community's needs.**

☐ **Prepare interview questions or questionnaire.**

☐ **Conduct interviews or mail-out questionnaire.**

☐ **Tabulate and interpret the data.**

☐ **Follow up, if necessary, with a group meeting of key informants to discuss and clarify the findings.**

4. COMMUNITY GROUPS

This approach is similar to the key informant approach except that a wider circle of informants takes part. Persons in the community interested in the need or service being assessed are invited to attend an open meeting or series of meetings. The purpose of the forum is to provide an opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives of community residents in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of social needs. After a presentation or display, a discussion is held and the comments are recorded. This is a quick and effective approach for gathering information about needs but is best used in conjunction with another approach.

Using This Approach

Community forums are best used for more general needs assessment studies. If your needs assessment is focused on a very specific area of needs, for example, family planning needs or a specific sub-group of the population such as the elderly, this may not be the most effective method for you to use.

For your community forum to be successful, you will need:

1. **Diversity** - Representation from a broad cross-section of the population is essential.
2. **Publicity** - The meeting should be widely publicized to ensure broad representation. Publicity should clearly state the time, place, and purpose of the meeting and the sponsoring group.
3. **Input from the Community** - It is important to work closely with community members in planning, publicizing and conducting the meeting. Their input and co-operation can be invaluable.
4. **Structure** - The meeting should be well-structured to allow for ample and equal opportunity for participants to express their views. The purpose, format and rules should be clearly stated and an effective moderator should be chosen.
5. **Follow-Up** - It is important for people to know that their participation was helpful and that the meeting had some results. Letters thanking participants for attending the meeting and informing them of the outcomes are important as a follow-up measure. Small working groups may also be established as a result of the meeting.

Strengths

- relatively easy to arrange and inexpensive to conduct
- allows opportunity for all persons wishing to state an opinion to be heard
- generates interest among citizens who may then be willing to play an active role, such as sitting on a committee

Weaknesses

- those attending the meeting may not be representative of the community
- information obtained may be based on personal opinions rather than informed opinions
- only those individuals who are comfortable in expressing their views in this type of setting will be heard
- people's expectations may be raised unrealistically
- meetings can be dominated by pressure groups who influence the results

Activity Checklist

☐ **Describe the information that you require.**

☐ **Contact community representatives to plan the meeting.**

☐ **Plan the meeting agenda around the key questions.**

☐ **Choose an appropriate date, time, place and moderator.**

☐ **Publicize the meeting.**

☐ **Hold the meeting and systematically record all opinions expressed.**

☐ **Send follow-up letters or notices.**

☐ **Interpret and present the meeting results.**

5. *FIELD SURVEY*

In conducting a field survey, you are usually seeking:

- *actual information* such as family size and composition, income and ages
- *perceptual information* regarding people's understanding of their own or others' needs
- *experiential information* describing people's behaviour patterns such as use of services or life events

Usually a standardized questionnaire is used with a selected sample in a mail-out survey, a telephone interview or a face-to-face interview. From the responses of the sample, you can estimate the size of the population in need and the services they require. The field survey is most effective when used after need areas have been identified either through service use information or interviews with a few key informants.

While some studies do survey an entire population, this is rarely a feasible approach. Usually, information is obtained from a representative sample of the population or of a sub-population such as the elderly, single parents or the poor. From the responses of the sample group, you can estimate the size of the population in need and the services that they require.

Using This Approach

Regardless of which survey method you choose, it will be necessary to design a questionnaire to gather the information. It is often helpful to have the co-operation of other community groups or agencies to ensure relevance of the questions and, in some cases, to secure access to respondents. The field survey is often most effective when an initial indication of needs has been obtained through another method such as interviews with key informants or analysis of social indicators.

Strengths

- gathers information directly from those experiencing the needs
- provides most valid and reliable information
- is flexible enough to cover a wide variety of topics
- enhances the community's awareness of your agency or organization
- obtains information from a large number of people

Weaknesses

- can be more costly and time-consuming than other approaches
- may be viewed as an invasion of privacy by some respondents
- poor sampling may result in a non-representative sample of the population being surveyed
- requires trained personnel to design the questionnaire and to code and analyze results

Activity Checklist

- ☐ **Describe the information that you require.**
- ☐ **Choose a sample which is most likely to provide the information that you require.**
- ☐ **Choose a survey method (face-to-face interview, mail-out questionnaire or telephone interview).**
- ☐ **Design the questionnaire.**
- ☐ **Conduct the survey (may involve training of interviewers first).**
- ☐ **Code and interpret the results.**
- ☐ **Present the results in a meaningful format (such as tables or graphs).**

USEFUL REFERENCES

NICKENS, John M. *Research Methods of Needs Assessment.* Washington: University Press of America. 1980.

A methods book on the various needs assessment approaches, based on the author's experience and on an extensive literature review.

WARHEIT, George; BELL, Roger and SCHWAB, John. *Needs Assessment Approaches: Concepts and Methods.* U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1977.

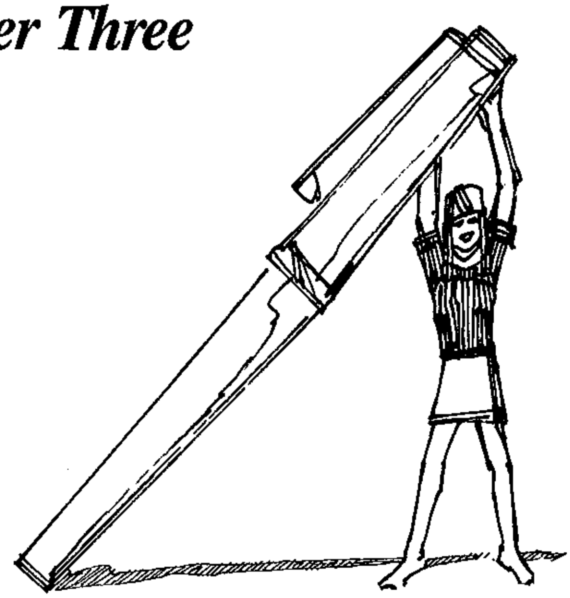
A helpful guide to the theory and practice of needs assessment. Their description of approaches to needs assessment has been widely adopted.

Worksheet Number Three

WHERE TO GET THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

In Chapter 1, we discussed the differences between needs, wants, and preferences and the importance of knowing which one(s) you wanted to find out about. You face a similar issue with choosing your approach for getting the information you need. It is unlikely you will get all the information you need (or think you need). What information do you want? Given your time and financial constraints and the expertise you can draw on, what information would you prefer to have?

In Chapter 4, you read about the various approaches to find the information and the merits of each. This worksheet will help you select the one(s) that best suit your needs.



1. What information do you need to fulfill your research objectives?

2. Where can you get this information?

3. What approach(es) can you use?

4. Given time and cost constraints, what approach or combination of approaches are feasible?

5. Do you need any outside assistance to undertake the activities associated with the approach(es) you have chosen? If yes, what activities do you need help with?

CHAPTER FIVE
Ways of Collecting Information

1. MAIL-OUT QUESTIONNAIRES
2. FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS
3. TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS
4. ANALYSIS OF RECORDS

In Chapter Four, we looked at five approaches you could use to find the information you need. This chapter looks at how you can get this information.

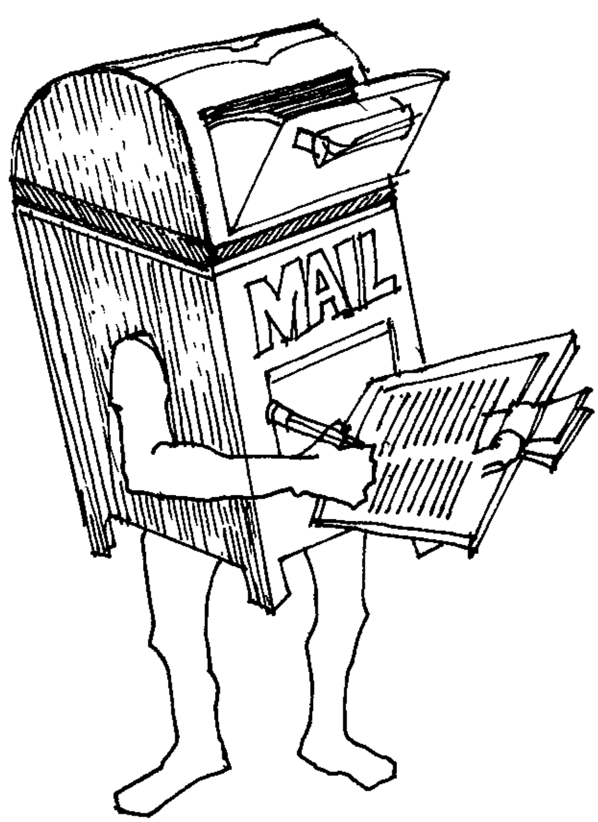
The most common methods involve asking people or analyzing records and other written information. They are:

1. **Mail-out Questionnaires**
2. **Face-to-Face Interviews**
3. **Telephone Interviews**
4. **Analysis of Records**

The appendix provides some basic information on questionnaire design.

In choosing how you are going to collect information, the two major considerations to keep in mind are:

- **the kind of information each method can collect**
- **the time and costs associated with each method**



1. MAIL-OUT QUESTIONNAIRES

The appeal of mail-out questionnaires to researchers is that most people are familiar with them. Mail-out questionnaires are also a relatively easy method for contacting specific groups of people. Questionnaires can provide answers to specific questions and can be particularly effective where there are many alternatives to be considered or rated. They are the cheapest method where a large number of people are sampled or if the geographic area to be sampled is large.

Strengths

- larger sample size more readily obtained
- cheapest of the survey methods
- simplicity of coding and analysis
- less time required
- can cover a large geographic area inexpensively
- increased sense of privacy and anonymity among participants may encourage more frank responses
- can be done with a minimum of skilled people

Weaknesses

- lower response rate
- no assistance provided to respondents in understanding questions; therefore higher possibility of incomplete or invalid responses
- lack of a personal approach may lead to indifference about completing it
- because more highly educated people are more likely to respond, results may be biased
- no guarantee that the respondent you send it to will fill it out

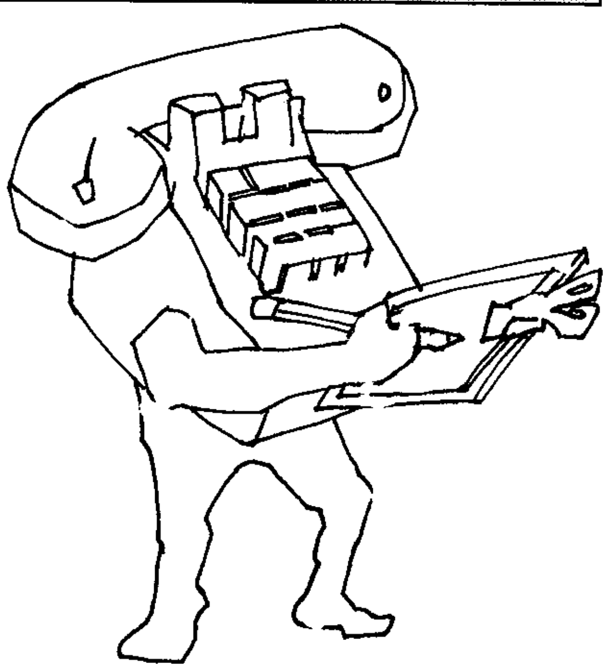
2. FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

This method is probably the least used of the three methods for asking people for information. It is the most costly in terms of time required to set up and the skilled personnel needed.

This method is practical only where a small number of people are to be interviewed. Its biggest advantage, and it is a strong one, is the richness and detail of information that it can provide especially when you want to find out and differentiate between needs, wants, and preferences. Face-to-face interviews allow the interviewer to ask further questions to clarify and probe responses. The interviewer can also watch facial expressions as a cue to probe further or back-off.

Strengths
- more detailed and richer information
- an opportunity to clarify responses and probe for further information
- an opportunity to explain the purpose of the study in more detail and to clarify questions
- more questions can be asked
- higher response rate than other techniques
- avoids problems of illiteracy among respondents
- new issues can be uncovered

Weaknesses
- most expensive survey method
- interviewers may bias the data
- data may be more difficult to code
- more management tasks; have to hire, train and supervise interviewers
- may be hard to contact some people
- takes longer to administer and conduct; the number of people you can sample is small



3. TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

As with mail-out questionnaires, most people are familiar with telephone interviews. They are relatively easy to administer and conduct. Telephone interviews are a kind of compromise between face-to-face interviews and mail-out questionnaires. This method has some of the advantages of each.

Strengths
- less expensive than face-to-face interviews
- call-backs to make contact or obtain additional information are simple and inexpensive
- allows for clarification of questions and responses
- can be done faster than other survey methods

Weaknesses
- must be kept relatively short
- interviewer may be viewed with suspicion because of connection with telephone soliciting
- may not be representative as it precludes people who have an unlisted number or who have no telephone
- several call-backs may be necessary to contact the respondent

4. ANALYSIS OF RECORDS

Analyzing records and other written information can tell you about people's interests, preferences, and patterns of usage of services and service locations.

Strengths
- can give specific information
- is an inexpensive source of information

Weaknesses
- records only existing alternatives, therefore may not show all needs, wants, or preferences

USEFUL REFERENCES

DILLMAN, Don A. *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method.* New York: John Wiley-Sons, 1978.

An excellent and straightforward guide to doing surveys. Very practical.

MERTON, R.K.; FISKE, M.; AND KENDALL, P.L. *The Focused Interview.* Glencoe, Ill.; The Free Press, 1956.

A classic that describes how to set up and carry out a structured interview with a group of people.

Worksheet Number Four

SELECTING THE BEST WAY TO COLLECT THE INFORMATION

This worksheet will help you decide *how* to collect the information you need if you are surveying people.

Is This An Important Consideration?	Yes/No	Mail-Out Questionnaire	Face-to-Face Interview	Telephone Interview	If Yes, Which Method Is Best?
You want to probe or clarify responses		No	Yes	Probably Not	
You have a complicated series of questions to ask		Probably Not	Yes	No	
You have a lot of open-ended questions to ask		Probably Not	Yes	Perhaps	
You want people to rank or rate alternatives		Yes	Perhaps	Probably Not	
You want to survey a large sample		Yes	No	Perhaps	
You want a high response rate		No	Yes	Perhaps	
You need the results soon		No	Perhaps	Yes	
You want a specific person to respond		No	Yes	Yes	
You do not have trained interviewers or the time to train them		Yes	No	No	
(Other considerations)					

ADAPTED FROM: ABBEY-LIVINGSTONE, D. and ABBEY, D.S.
Enjoying Research? A 'How-To' Manual on Needs Assessment.
Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1982.

1. Which method is most appropriate to your needs and your limitations?

____

____

____

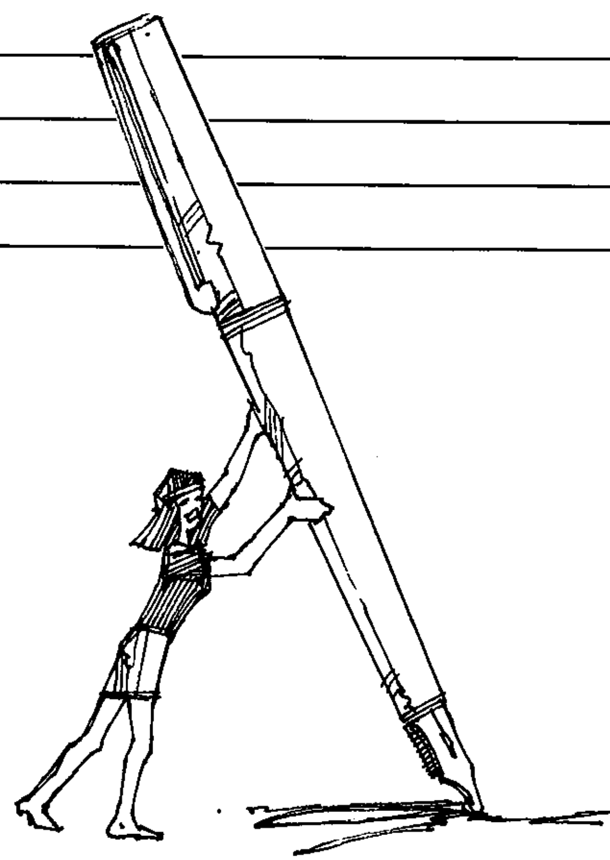
____

____

____

2. Do you need outside assistance to undertake the tasks associated with the method you have chosen? If yes, which tasks? (e.g. drawing up questions, pre-testing, coding, training interviewers, etc.)

3. Who could help you with these tasks? Would they need to be paid? Could you recruit volunteers?



CHAPTER SIX
Summarizing and Reporting the Findings

1. SUMMARIZING THE FINDINGS

2. PRESENTING YOUR FINDINGS

While attention is paid to planning and doing needs assessment research it is surprising how little thought is given to summarizing and presenting findings. In Worksheets Number One and Two, you identified the purpose of the needs assessment research, who was going to use it, and what they wanted to know. Worksheets Number Three and Four helped you think about where the information you needed was, and how you could get it.

In discussing the responses to the Worksheet questions, you probably will have decided what information would be useful to you. It is important that the information you obtain be analyzed and summarized in a way that is useful to those who will receive the needs assessment findings. Will your research plan enable you to get the kind of information you would like to present to decision-makers? This chapter can give you some ideas for revising your research plan.

1. SUMMARIZING THE FINDINGS

If you have a lot of numerical data, you may want to present it as:

- a table
- a graph
- a chart
- a map

There are other descriptive ways of presenting your information. These are generally referred to as qualitative analysis and include:

- written descriptions
- films
- pictures
- tape recordings

Particularly where you have used open-ended questions in your survey, it is important not to lose the personal content of your information. People's verbatim comments are often the most effective evidence of need and should certainly be considered as part of your report. However, it is critical to look for common themes among responses and to highlight these in your conclusion and your presentations.

2. REPORTING YOUR FINDINGS

Your answers in Worksheet Number Two helped you identify who wants or needs this information and how much information you should provide.

There are a number of ways to report your findings, including:

- a written report
- a public meeting
- a presentation
- a discussion group

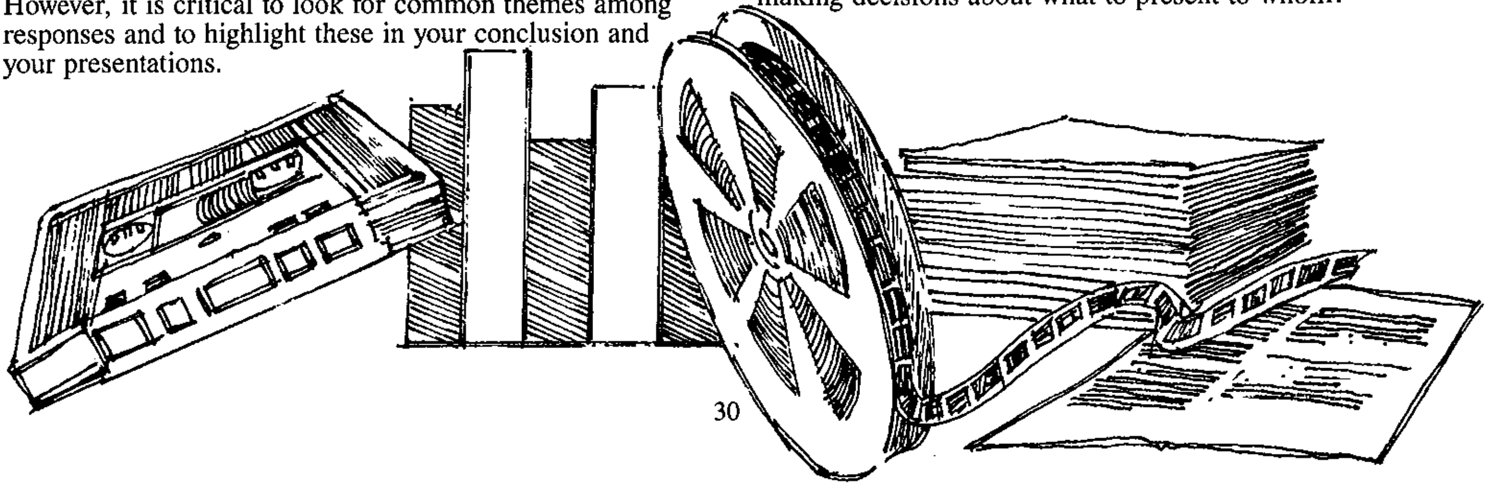
You may wish to choose a combination of these. For example, the people who asked for the research and those who funded it will want a full report. A formal written report would probably be best for this group. If this is your decision, you will probably want to include the following sections in your report:

Executive Summary and Recommendations
Purposes of the Study (Why it was done)
Background (How it came about)
Methodology (How the study was done)
  Approaches chosen
  The method used to collect information
  Description of work done
Research Findings
Analysis and Discussion of Findings
Recommendations

Staff of your agency and residents of the community who could be affected by the recommendations may also want to know the findings.

Other interested people may include those who were surveyed, other members of the agency, the media, other agencies, government departments and the general public. For these groups, a presentation, a public meeting, or a discussion group can be sufficient for reporting your findings.

The project steering committee can be helpful in making decisions about what to present to whom.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Using The Needs Assessment Results

We are fast approaching the end of this workbook. Yet, in a sense, this is only the beginning because needs assessment is the logical *first* step in any process of service planning.

If you think back to the beginning of this workbook, you will realize that we have come full circle. The purposes that we discussed for undertaking a needs assessment study were related to the importance of careful and logical planning as a basis for offering relevant, meaningful and useful services. If you have achieved the purposes set out in your research plan, chances are good that you will have a clearer idea of the type and extent of peoples' needs, you will have assessed the relative importance of these needs and finally, you will have some recommendations for action. Your findings should now be incorporated into your planning process.

It may be that your needs assessment does not support the existence or the urgency of the needs which were assessed in the study. Or your results may indicate a need for a particular program or service for which resources are not available. If your needs assessment study does confirm the existence of particular needs and you have the commitment and resources to address these needs, you will want to plan a program accordingly.

Worksheet Number Five

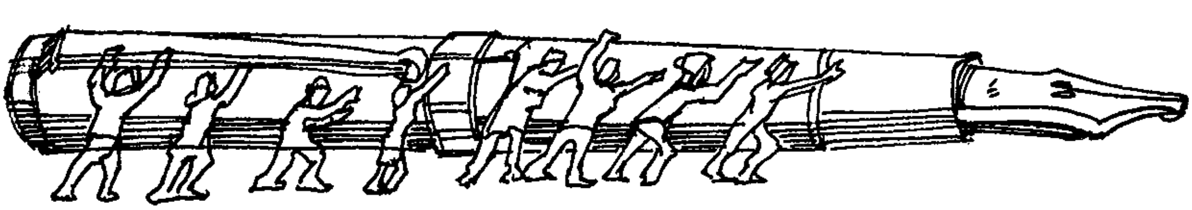
ENSURING THAT YOUR NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESEARCH GETS NOTICED AND USED

Research plans often get put aside as people concentrate on the many tasks and problems of carrying out the needs assessment. This worksheet will help you to determine if you are on track with your research plan. It may well be that your research plan needs some revision.

We suggest that you discuss the worksheet questions or at least keep them in mind throughout your needs assessment research. This worksheet is not meant to be done only after the report is written.

1. Is your report readable?

2. Review your responses to Worksheet Number One. Are your research findings clearly linked to the problems and/or issues you set out to research?



3. Review your responses to Worksheet Number Two.

   (a) Does your needs assessment report state clearly what the findings mean for your programs?

   ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

   (b) Do your findings suggest realistic alternatives for decision-makers to consider?

   ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

   (c) Does your agency have the resources to act on possible recommendations at this time?

   ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

   (d) Are people in your agency willing and able to act on the information from the needs assessment? If not, why not?

   ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

4. Review your responses to Worksheets Number Three and Four.

   Did you get the information you were looking for? If not, is there another approach or method you could use? Which one(s)?

   ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Whether you are developing your questionnaire for use in face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews or a mail-out questionnaire, the design of the questionnaire is of utmost importance. In fact, the information you gather in your questionnaire is only as good as the design and administration of the questionnaire itself.

Designing a questionnaire does not have to be difficult - actually it can even be fun. However, there are some basic rules to keep in mind.

Perhaps the most important guiding principle in putting together a questionnaire is that *you should collect only that information which you need to have to accomplish the goals of the study.* So consider carefully what your survey is meant to accomplish and what information you need to collect. It is often useful to brainstorm a larger number of questions than you need and then to narrow them down to the best questions. Check to make sure that your questionnaire does not contain any unnecessary items.

While most of the information in the following sections applies to telephone, face-to-face and mail-out surveys, there is an emphasis on those questionnaires developed for mail-out purposes. This is, in part, because questionnaires which are not being administered personally need to pay extra attention to design considerations.

FORMAT

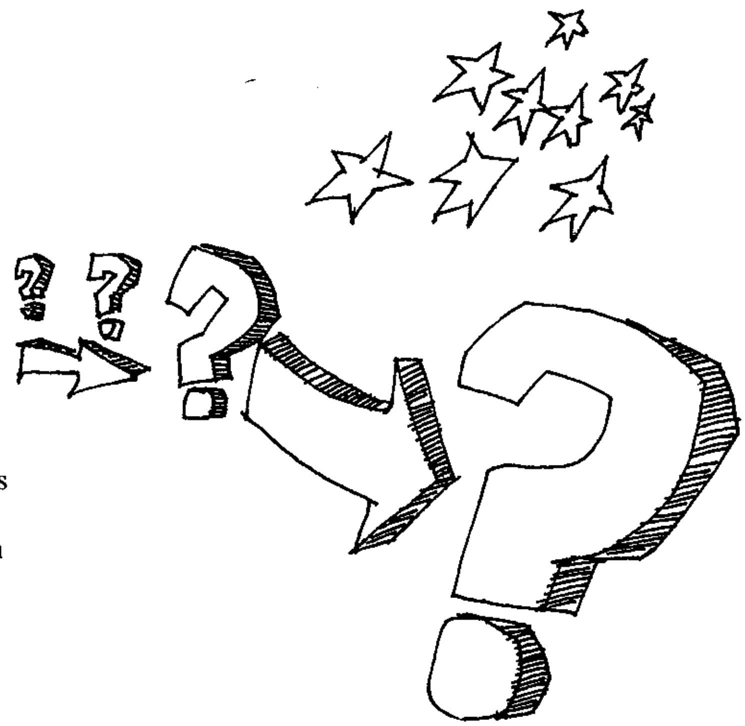
The organization and appearance of a questionnaire are surprisingly important factors in its effectiveness. Too often, questionnaires are unorganized, sloppy looking, unattractive or confusing. It just takes a little extra time and thought to design an effective questionnaire which people will want to respond to.

Here are a few suggestions regarding the format of your questionnaire:

1. **Keep it relatively short**
   While your questionnaire must be sufficiently comprehensive to gather the information that you need, this consideration must be balanced with a concern for length. A questionnaire, which is too long will intimidate respondents and lower your response rate.
2. **Provide clear and concise instructions**
   Instructions on how to respond to questions should not be too lengthy but they should clearly indicate what is required of respondents.
3. **Include an introduction and thank-you**
   Even if you use a covering letter, a brief introduction explaining what the questionnaire is about and stressing the importance of the respondent's participation is essential. It is also a good idea to include a statement at the end of the questionnaire thanking the respondents for their assistance.
4. **Be sure that your questionnaire is attractive**
   People will be more inclined to answer your questionnaire and to answer it carefully if it looks good. You can make your questionnaire more attractive by:
   - using an attractive type
   - using high-quality reproduction
   - leaving plenty of white space so that it does not appear crowded
   - using a cover page if the questionnaire is several pages long

   In addition, it is usually recommended that the type be reduced slightly. This would be fine, in most circumstances, but, if many of your respondents are elderly people, you may wish to use a larger type.

5. **Place more sensitive and more difficult questions closer to the end.**
In general, questions should progress from less sensitive to more sensitive and less difficult to more difficult. Placing difficult or sensitive questions near the beginning may intimidate or alienate respondents. For this reason, it is usually recommended that demographic information (such as income, education and age) be left to the end of the questionnaire. The first question is particularly important as it needs to generate interest and confidence in your respondents.



6. **Group questions by topic**
Questions on one topic should be grouped together, also following the easy-to-hard rule mentioned above. When a change of topic occurs, a transition statement should be used. For example, you may wish to use this kind of statement:

   "Another important purpose of this study is to learn more about which community services people use and how they would rate those services".

7. **Construction questions for ease of response**
It is important, particularly with open-ended questions, to leave adequate space for a thoughtful response. In closed questions, using lower-case lettering for questions and upper-case for response categories increases clarity. For example:

A. What is your present marital status? (circle number)

1 NEVER MARRIED
2 MARRIED
3 DIVORCED
4 SEPARATED
5 WIDOWED

In a question which has two or more parts, it is important to use a clear format. For example:

10. Have you ever taken a parenting course in Rocky Hill? (circle number)

1 NO
2 YES

If YES, where did you take it? (circle number)

1 THE PARENT CENTRE
2 FAMILY LIFE CENTRE
3 COUNCIL FOR PARENT EDUCATION
4 OTHER
(Please specify) ____________________

QUESTION CONSTRUCTION

Questions can be either open-ended or closed.

Open-Ended

The basic feature of open-ended questions is that respondents create their own answers. No answer choices are provided. Open-ended questions are best when you want to explore an issue in some depth or when the possible response categories are too numerous to list. Some examples of open-ended questions are:

- What do you feel could be done to improve community spirit in Rocky Hill?
- All communities have problems. In your opinion, what are the most important problems in your community?
- What do you think are the issues facing the elderly in your community?

Open-ended questions can be very effective in stimulating people's ideas. They are often used to explore issues with the purpose of using the responses to then create closed questions.

A difficulty associated with open questions is that they take more effort to answer than do closed questions. Because they require some thought, as well as communication skills, respondents may find them quite demanding. They are also more difficult to code and analyze than are closed questions.

Closed

A closed question requires that respondents choose their answers from categories provided to them. They tend to be quite specific and consequently, are best used with well-defined topics and issues. Demographic information, for instance, is nearly always collected using closed questions.

Closed questions are of two basic types:

1. closed with ordered response categories, and
2. closed with unordered response categories

Closed questions with ordered response categories measure different levels or degrees of a single fact or event. For example:

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the plan to build a health clinic in your neighbourhood?

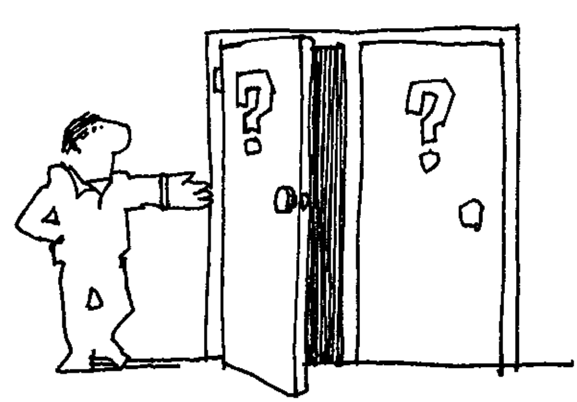
    ☐ STRONGLY AGREE
    ☐ AGREE
    ☐ UNCERTAIN
    ☐ DISAGREE
    ☐ STRONGLY DISAGREE

In closed questions with unordered choices, all of the response categories are discrete; that is, they measure different concepts or items. For example:

A. Which *three* of the following services would you most like to see offered by the Family Centre? (Circle three numbers only)

    1 PARENT EDUCATION COURSES
    2 MARITAL COUNSELLING
    3 COUNSELLING FOR CHILDREN
    4 SUICIDE PREVENTION
    5 DRUG EDUCATION
    6 PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS
    7 OTHER (Please specify) ____________________
    ____
    ____
    ____

In general, closed questions tend to be easier both for respondents to answer and for you to analyze. However, they are also more restricted in the depth of information they provide than are open-ended questions. Ideally, your questionnaire will contain both open and closed questions and your choices will be made according to the type of information you need.



There is always more than one way to ask a question; in fact, there may be dozens of ways. The way that you choose to word your questions will have an important effect on the type and quality of information you get back.

To cover all of the rules on how to write (and how not to write) questions would require a separate workbook. Some of these rules can also be contradictory and confusing. We have chosen to offer a brief list of what we consider to be the most important questions to consider when writing questions. If you want more information, there are numerous books and articles on this topic – some of which are listed in the Useful References section at the end of the appendix.

■ **Is The Question Clear And Simple?**

Consider whether your questions are too vague or ambiguous. For example:

1. Do you need daycare in your community?

☐ YES ☐ NO

This question may be difficult to answer because "you" is not defined. It could be read to mean you, personally or to refer to the community in general. Also, will the words you use be understood by all of your respondents? If no, similar substitutes can always be found.

■ **Is It A Leading Question?**

Through words or format, it is easy to lead the respondent's answers. The result is biased information. The question below would be considered a leading question.

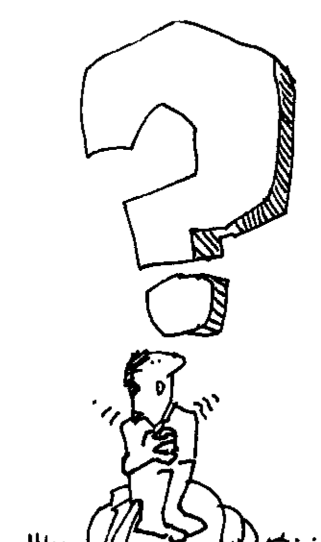
Would you say that we need more programs for youth in this neighbourhood?

■ **Is The Question Too Complicated? Can It Be Answered?**

Some questions are just too difficult for people to answer with any degree of accuracy. For example, asking people to recall details from the past (such as how many hours they watched television last week) may not be a reasonable question.

Also, it is best to avoid asking your respondents about other people's behavior or attitudes. For example:

How do you think your children feel about the new sex education program in their school?



■ **Are Loaded Words, Formats And Response Categories Used?**

Loaded words or phrases tend to generate strong emotions and can bias your results. To refer to 'drug abusers' or 'wife batterers' for example, may elicit a response to the words rather than to the essence of the question. Also, in closed questions, a lack of balance in the response categories may have the effect of leading the respondent. An example would be:

8. To what extent has your self-esteem increased since beginning this program?

☐ DECREASED
☐ STAYED THE SAME
☐ INCREASED A LITTLE
☐ INCREASED A LOT

In this case, there is bias in the question itself through use of the word "increased" and in the response categories which are unbalanced, i.e. 2 answers starting with "increased," only 1 for "decreased."

■ **Does It Contain A Social Desirability Bias?**

Social desirability bias refers to people's tendency to answer questions in such a way as to make themselves appear in a more positive light. So, for example, when you ask people about their behavior toward their children or their views on certain "motherhood issues" you may well get a biased response. For example, the question:

15. *How much time, on average, do you spend with your child each day?*

will likely elicit a response which is an overestimation because many people feel that they should spend more time with their children.

■ **Is The Question Worded In The Negative?**

Questions which may require respondents to answer "YES" to a negatively stated question can be confusing. Consider, for example, the question:

20. *Would you prefer not to have a sex education program taught in your local high school?*

☐ YES ☐ NO

■ **Does The Question Ask More Than One Question?**

Sometimes people are asked to respond with a single answer to what is, in fact, a double question.
An example would be:

A. *Do you support the idea of offering a program for drunk drivers and making this program compulsory?*

☐ YES ☐ NO

■ **Is The Question Offensive In Any Way?**

Questions that offend respondents or that are too sensitive may be left unanswered or answered dishonestly. They may even prompt respondents to refuse to answer the entire questionnaire. Questions used to collect demographic information are often subject to this problem. Rather than asking:

What is your annual family income?

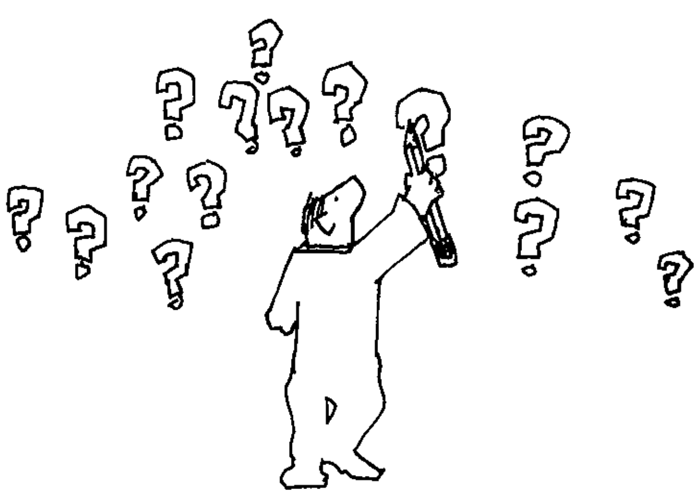
it would be more appropriate to provide people with different categories. For example:

Under $5,000
$15,000 - $19,999
$20,000 - $29,999
$30,000 - $39,999
Over $40,000

Other questions which may be objectionable to respondents are those which attribute what they may perceive as negative characteristics to them, their families or their friends. For example:

Are any of your family members alcoholics?

Such information can be gathered by using wording which softens the impact or by using a series of questions.



SAMPLING

As part of the design of your needs assessmment study, you will need to decide *where* you will get your information from. If you are using a key informant approach or doing a survey of some type, you will probably want to choose a sample of people to survey. A sample simply refers to a representative portion of the population or group from which you are seeking information.

In cases where this population is quite small (for example, all of the doctors in a small town) you may include everyone from that group. However, in most cases, it is far too costly and time consuming to survey an entire group and so a sample is selected.

There are three important questions to consider in choosing a sample:

1. **Who should be included in the sample?**
   This does not refer to specific individuals but to the types of people to be included. For example: Do we include past users of a service or only present users?
2. **How large should the sample be?**
   How many people will you include in your sample?
3. **How will we choose our sample?**
   What method will you use for collecting your sample?

Sample size and method are particularly important because your sample should be representative of the population being studied. If your sample is too small or appears to be biased, you run the risk of losing credibility for your study.

Of course, not every study needs to have a highly-refined, large-scale sample. In fact, many organizations do not have the resources to select such a sample. In deciding on sample size and sampling method, you will want to consider:

- how to ensure credibility of your study by using an appropriate sample,
- what resources you have available (time, money, staff) to survey the number of people needed

There are various types of samples or sampling methods to choose from. Some of the more common types with a brief description of each are listed below.

Random Sampling

In random sampling, every member of a given population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. This requires being able to identify, in some way, all members of the population. You would then randomly choose a sample of the size required.

For a relatively small population in which members can be identified, this is a fairly simple approach. You could put each name on a piece of paper, mix them up and draw out names until your sample size is reached. If you wanted to survey students in a high school, for instance, this method would work well.

For larger populations, however, random sampling becomes more difficult and costly. It may even be impossible to identify all members of your population, in which case, a true random sample could not be selected.

Stratified Sampling

Stratified sampling is a variation on random sampling but, in this case, the sample is drawn from distinct segments or sub-groups of the population. When you want to be sure that these sub-groups are represented in the sample, this approach should be used, otherwise there is a good chance that some groups will be missed.

If, for example, you are surveying the users of a community health centre, you may want to stratify your sample by age so that all age ranges are sure to be represented. The number of people drawn from each sub-group should be in proportion to their numbers in the entire population being sampled.

Cluster Sampling

Also known as area sampling, this method involves dividing a geographic area into sub-areas (such as census tracts or even city blocks) and then selecting a random sample from these. The benefit of this approach is that it minimizes the number of areas that you have to visit in conducting face-to-face interviews. For instance, if you want to interview single parents but do not want to travel all over the city to do so, you might want to select areas by way of cluster sampling. You would then use random sampling to select households within each area.

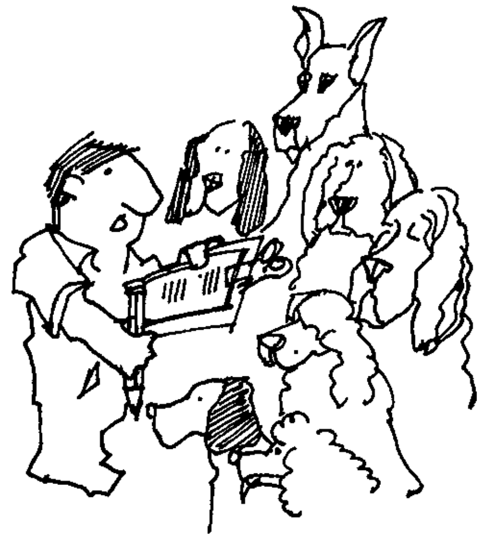
Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is used to select respondents with certain attributes to represent a population. These individuals are recommended as respondents because of their knowledge of the community, their reputations or their positions. Key informant surveys often use this method of sampling.

A related method is snowball sampling in which one respondent identifies others who possess a particular attribute. This method is useful for studies in which the population is limited and, as a result, a sample is difficult to find. If, for example, you were assessing the needs of parents whose children had committed suicide, a snowball sample might be the only way of finding respondents.

Quota Sampling

If you have limited resources but want to ensure as representative a sample of your population as is possible, quota sampling may be your choice. The first step is to choose the sub-groups that you wish to have included. Knowing how many people, in total, you can afford to survey, you then design a sample which specifies how many people from each sub-group should be surveyed. You would then survey people representing each subgroup until your quotas are reached. No random sampling is involved.



Accidental Sampling

In accidental sampling, you simply choose your sample size and then interview people until your sample size is reached. No attempt is made to choose people according to predetermined characteristics nor to randomize the selection process. The interviewer would simply stand on a street corner or in a shopping mall, surveying anyone who agreed to respond. This method is subject to considerable bias.

USEFUL REFERENCES

ABBEY-LIVINGSTON, D. and ABBEY, D.S.
Enjoying Research? A 'How-To' Manual on Needs Assessment. Produced for the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1982.

An extensive but easily understandable manual that explains how to do effective research.

DILLMAN, Don. A.
Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method. New York: John Wiley-Sons, 1978.

An excellent and straight forward guide to doing surveys. Very practical.

POWERS, G.T., THOMAS, M.M., and TOOMEY, B.G.
Practice Focused Research: Integrating Human Service Practise and Research. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1985.

Provides a concise overview of what needs assessment is. Describes the various approaches and a basic 'how-to' of questionnaire design. See pages 114 to 130.

SCHUERMAN, John R.
Research and Evaluation in the Social Services. New York: The Free Press, 1983.

A useful but more academic book than the other references with chapters on needs assessment and questionnaire construction.

NOTES