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## TOOLKITS

### Assess Community Needs and Resources:

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#### Outline for Assessing Community Needs and Resources

- Describe the makeup and history of the community to provide a context within which to collect data on its current concerns.
  - Comment on the types of information that best describes the community (e.g., demographic, historical, political, civic participation, key leaders, past concerns, geographic, assets)
  - Describe the sources (e.g., city hall, maps, phone book, library, newspaper) of information
  - Comment on whether there are sufficient resources (e.g., time, personnel, resources) available to collect this information
  - Comment on the methods (e.g., key leader interviews, observation, ethnography, windshield tour) used to collect the descriptive information
  - Assess the quality of the information
  - Describe the strengths and problems you heard about
- Describe what matters to local people
  - Discuss how you arranged to listen to community leaders and members
  - Describe who you listened to and why
  - Discuss the methods (e.g., listening sessions, public forums, interviews, concerns surveys, focus groups, ethnography, interviews) you used to listen to the community
  - Illustrate the issues of concern to people in the community
    - Explain how important these issues are to citizens
    - Express how satisfied citizens are with community efforts on the issues
    - List priorities based on issues of high importance and low satisfaction
  - Describe barriers or resistance to solving the problem f. Describe the resources available to problem solving efforts
  - Tell of possible solutions and alternatives suggested by the community
- Describe the needs identified by community stakeholders (optional)
  - Indicate the target populations and subgroups
  - Specify who the stakeholders are
  - Describe what they wanted to know
    - List the questions you asked
  - Describe the methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, secondary information, small group discussion) you used to gather information
    - If you used a survey, describe the sampling method
  - Describe the limitations of the needs assessment
- Compile and describe the evidence suggesting that identified issues should be a priority
  - Describe the community level indicators -- those incidence or prevalence levels of behavior or events that relate to the issues of concern (e.g. if joblessness is an issue in the community, you may want to collect information on the unemployment rate and the rate of job creation in the community)
  - Explain how frequently it occurs
  - Illustrate how many people are affected by it and in what severity
  - Discuss how feasible attempting to solve it is
  - Explain the possible impact and/or consequences of solving it
- Describe the resources available in or to the community that help address this issue
  - Indicate what and where the resources are. Express how we identify and tap into those attributes that could help facilitate the process.
  - Indicate who the community leaders are. Describe the individuals and organizations that influence the community.
  - Describe how the networks are organized. Explain how you can build on already existing networks and effectively foster new ones.
  - Depict the community projects currently in progress. Analyze and discuss what this tells us about where the community is invested and how they might be involved in the future.

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### Assess Community Needs and Resources:

#### Narrative Outline for Assessing Community Needs and Resources (with links to how-to sections of the Community Tool Box)

- Describe the makeup and history of the community to provide a context within which to collect data on its current concerns.
  - [Chapter 3, Section 2: Understanding and Describing the Community](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 4: Collecting Information About the Problem](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 12: Conducting Interviews](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 13: Conducting Surveys](#)
    - Comment on the types of information that best describes the community (e.g., demographic, historical, political, civic participation, key leaders, past concerns, geographic, assets)
    - Describe the sources (e.g., city hall, maps, phone book, library, newspaper) of information
    - Comment on whether there are sufficient resources (e.g., time, personnel, resources) available to collect this information
    - Comment on the methods (e.g., key leader interviews, observation, ethnography, windshield tour) used to collect the descriptive information
    - Assess the quality of the information
    - Describe the strengths and problems you heard about
- Describe what matters to local people
  - [Chapter 3, Section 3: Conducting Public Forums and Listening Sessions](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 10: Conducting Concerns Surveys](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 12: Conducting Interviews](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 13: Conducting Surveys](#)
    - Describe who you listened to and why
    - Discuss how you arranged to listen to community leaders and members
    - Discuss the methods (e.g., listening sessions, public forums, interviews, concerns surveys, focus groups, ethnography, interviews) you used to listen to the community
    - Describe the issues of concern to people in the community
    - Discuss how important these issues are to citizens
    - Discuss how satisfied citizens are with community efforts on the issues
    - List priorities based on issues of high importance and low satisfaction
    - Describe barriers or resistance to solving the problem
    - Describe the resources available to problem solving efforts
    - Describe possible solutions and alternatives suggested by the community
- Describe the needs identified by community stakeholders (optional)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 1: Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs and Resources](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 7: Conducting Needs Assessment Surveys](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 11: Determining Service Utilization](#)
    - Indicate the target populations and subgroups
    - Indicate who the stakeholders are
    - Describe what they wanted to know
    - List the questions you asked
    - Describe the methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, secondary information, small group discussion) you used to gather information
    - If you used a survey, describe the sampling method
    - Describe the limitations of the needs assessment
- Compile and describe the evidence suggesting that identified issues should be a priority
  - [Chapter 3, Section 5: Collecting Information About the Problem](#)
  - [Chapter 3, Section 9: Developing Baseline Measures of Behavior](#)
    - Describe the community level indicators -- those incidence or prevalence levels of behavior or events that relate to the issues of concern (e.g. if joblessness is an issue in the community, you may want to collect information on the unemployment rate and the rate of job creation in the community)
    - Describe how frequently it occurs?
    - Describe how many people are affected by it? It severity?
    - Discuss how feasible attempting to solve it is?
    - Discuss the possible impact and/or consequences of solving it?
- Describe the resources available in or to the community that help address this issue
  - [Chapter 3, Section 1: Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs and Resources](#)

### Chapter 3, Section 8: Identifying Community Assets and Resources

- o Indicate what and where the resources are? Describe how we identify and tap into those attributes that could help facilitate the process?
- o Indicate who the community leaders are? Describe the individuals and organizations that influence the community?
- o Describe how the networks are organized? Discuss how you can build on already existing networks and effectively foster new ones?
- o Describe the community projects currently in progress? Analyze and discuss what this tells us about where the community is invested and how they might be involved in the future?

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- Tools & Checklists - A checklist that summarizes the major points contained in the section.
- Overheads - Ready to use overheads summarizing the major points in the section.

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## Analyzing Community Problems

**Main Section**

Contributed by Bill Berkowitz Edited by Phil Rabinowitz

### Communities have problems, just like people

#### What is a community problem?

#### What is analyzing community problems all about?

#### Why should I analyze a community problem?

#### How should I analyze a community problem?

#### When should I analyze a community problem?

#### Going beyond the basics -- does analysis really work?

### Communities have problems, just like people

Problems are part of life -- they go together with being alive. And every community has problems, too; they go together with being a community. That's just a fact of community life.

Two more basic facts:

- Communities, like people, try to solve their problems.
- And analyzing those problems helps in their solution.

#### Example: A community problem

The downtown area of a community is declining. Stores are closing, and moving out; no new stores are moving in. We want to revitalize that downtown. How should we do it?

Our thinking here is simple:

- We'd be better off analyzing why that decline is taking place, why the problem is occurring, rather than simply jumping in and trying to fix it.
- A good analysis will lead to better long-run solutions. And therefore:

- A good analysis is worth taking the time to do.

So this section explains what analyzing community problems is about, and why it can be helpful -- and then how to do it.

## What is a community problem?

### *Some Examples*

This covers a lot of ground. There's a long list of nominees. And you probably know the main contenders. Can you name the leading problems in your own community? Chances are you can at least start the list.

Below are types of problems that might appear on many community lists, in alphabetical order:

### **Example: Community problems**

Arson, child abuse, child neglect, corruption, crime, domestic violence, drugs, elder care, emergency services, ethnic conflict, graffiti, health, housing, hunger, inequality, jobs, noise, nothing to do, overwork, poverty, public services, racism, rats, safety, schools, sexism, stress, teenage pregnancy, transportation, trash collection, vandalism

What others would you add?

### *Some Criteria*

But rather than aim for a complete problem list, here are some criteria we can use for definition:

- The problem occurs frequently. (**frequency**)
- The problem has lasted for a while. (**duration**)
- The problem affects many people. (**scope, or range**)
- The problem is disturbing, and possibly intense. (**severity**) (It disrupts personal or community life.)
- The problem deprives people of legal or moral rights. (**legality**)
- The problem is perceived as a problem. (**perception**)

This last criterion -- perception -- is perhaps the most important one. If people perceive the streets as unsafe, that is a problem, regardless of what crime statistics say.

If people think that the schools are rotten, that is a problem, no matter what objective facts are offered. A problem can be a psychological fact; it doesn't have to be based on hard evidence.

And what is seen as a problem can vary from place to place, and from group to group in the same place. Community A may see new immigrants, or absentee landlords, as problems; while Community B, with the same percentages of new immigrants and absentee landlords, may not have given either one a serious thought. Back in Community A, teen-agers might say their biggest problem is nothing to do; but their overloaded parents might wish for that same problem, devoutly.

There's no official definition of a community problem; but the criteria above should give you a start.

## What is analyzing community problems all about?

In a nutshell:

**Analyzing community problems is a way of thinking carefully about a problem or issue before acting on a solution. It first involves looking for possible reasons behind a problem, and checking out whether those reasons are true. Then (and only then) does it involve identifying possible solutions, and implementing the best ones.**

The techniques for analyzing community problems are easy to state. They require simple logic, and sometimes the collection of evidence. But sometimes these techniques elude us in practice. We act on impulse rather than logic; or we neglect the evidence. A careful analysis of the problem can put us back on course.

*Okay, but let's make sure I understand this...*

## Why should I analyze a community problem?

*\* To better identify what the problem or issue is...*

Kids gather on a street. Sometimes they drink; sometimes they get rowdy. What is the problem here? The drinking? The rowdiness? The gathering itself? Or, the possible fact that kids have nowhere else to go? Before looking for solutions, you would want to clarify just what is the problem (or problems) here. Unless you are clear, it's hard to move forward.

*\* To understand what is at the heart of a problem....*

A problem is usually caused by something; what is that something? We should find out. And often the problem we see is a symptom of something else.

*\* To determine the barriers and resources associated with addressing the problem.*

It's good practice and planning to anticipate barriers and obstacles before they might rise up. By doing so, you can get around (or over) them. Analyzing community problems can also help you understand (and find) the resources you need. And the better equipped you are with the right resources, the greater your chances of success in tackling whatever problem you are facing.

And finally:

*\* To develop the best action steps for addressing the problem.*

Having a plan of action is always better than taking a few random shots at the problem. If you know where you are going, you are more likely to get there.

In general, when you tackle a problem, it's almost always smarter to analyze it before you begin. That way, you've got a deeper understanding of the problem; and you've covered your bases. There's nothing worse for member involvement and morale than starting to work on a problem, and running up against lots of obstacles -- especially when they are avoidable.

When you take a little time to examine a problem first, you can anticipate some of these obstacles before they come up, and give yourself and your members better odds of coming up with a successful solution.

## So When Should I Analyze a Community Problem?

Always. At least, almost always.

Every community problem should benefit from analysis. The only possible exception is when the problem is an immediate crisis that requires action this very moment. And even then, analysis should help later.

However, there are conditions when analysis is especially important. And these are:

1. When the community problem is not defined very clearly
2. When little is known about the community problem, or its possible consequences
3. When you want to find causes that may improve the chance of successfully addressing the problem
4. When people are jumping to solutions much too soon
5. When you need to identify actions to address the problem, and learn what persons or groups could best collaborate in taking action.

## How should I analyze a community problem?

And of course, that is the heart of this section.

The answer is there's no one way to do it. There are many. And we'll suggest further that you keep your eye on the big picture: **to understand the problem better and to deal with it more effectively**. These are the goals of *any* problem analysis. So the method you choose should accomplish those goals for you.

We'll offer one very simple analytic method here, and walk through a few examples. We think this method is helpful, but we encourage you to check it out for yourself. It is certainly not the only one available; some excellent alternative (and more detailed) problem-analysis methods are found at the end of this section.

Here it is. There are eight easy steps:

1. **State the problem**, in general terms.
2. **Give specific examples** of the problem.
3. **Think of reasons** for the problem.
4. **Find the most probable solution**.
5. **Identify solutions**.
6. **Choose the best one**.
7. **Implement the solution**.
8. **Evaluate the solution**.

A challenge question: Find an acronym to sum up these steps!

Does this seem too formal or too mechanical? If it seems that way to you, consider that this is similar to the way we solve many problems of everyday life. In every hour of our life, we face problems -- usually smaller problems -- and devise solutions to them. In fact, we are so experienced at this that we hardly recognize our problem-solving activities. But here's a simple, common example:

1. State the problem.

*The room is dark.*

2. Give some examples.

*When I turn on the light switch, nothing happens.*

3. Think of reasons.

*(a) I might have blown a fuse.*

*(b) The switch could be defective.*

*(c) The light bulb might have blown.*

4. Find the most probable reason.

*The fuse isn't blown.*

*The switch is new.*

*The bulb is old.*

*So it's probably the bulb.*

5. Identify solutions.

*(a) Replace the fuse.*

*(b) Replace the switch.*

*(c) Replace the bulb.*

6. Choose the best one.

*I'll try changing the bulb; it's simplest and cheapest. (If the bulb has really blown, that's probably the only solution there is.)*

7. Implement it.

*I can change a bulb with the best of them...*

## 8. Evaluate it.

*Good. I've got some light now.*

This is an example of analyzing an everyday problem, even though we might not call it analysis. It's largely unconscious. And, two key points:

- We are already skilled at doing analysis.
- The analysis helped lead to a successful solution.

Community problems, it is true, are generally more complicated than changing light bulbs. But the same type of analysis can apply to them as well, frequently with similarly -successful results.

Here's what we mean, using a different example. We'll add some commentary (in light shading) as we go along:

### 1. State the problem.

*It's dangerous for kids to cross the street around here.*

This is a pretty good opening statement, but it's not sufficient by itself. We need some examples, so that we can all be clear what we're talking about.

### 2. Give some examples.

*At the intersection of Broadway and Maple, a kid was hit by a car last week. Two other kids got brushed just a few weeks before.*

These are good examples. They are specific, observable, and measurable indicators, and they are certainly enough to spur the search for solutions and action. But why did these accidents and near-accidents occur? What are the reasons?

### 3. Think of reasons.

*Let's see. There are a couple of possibilities:*

*(a) The traffic blinker at the intersection might not be working properly.*

*(b) How about the crosswalk? The lines marking it are faded. Drivers probably can't see easily.*

*(c) There's no crossing guard on the street. Didn't there used to be one a little while ago?*

Here's an important point. Even for relatively simple problems (and on the scale of community problems, this is a *relatively* simple one, even though it is important), there are often several possible reasons. That's the case here. The reasons above are just some possible reasons. Are they the only ones? Probably not.

Let's at least find the main possibilities. But community life is complex. The underlying reasons aren't always apparent right away.

That's why analysis makes sense!

### 4. Find the most probable reason.

*Okay -- we'll have to do some checking around.*

*(a) The blinker -- I asked the neighbors, and there's never been any problem with it.*

*(b) The crosswalk lines -- actually, they haven't been painted in two years. They should be. But that wouldn't explain all the accidents right now.*

*(c) The crossing guard. Yes, the previous guard retired just about a month ago. And there hasn't been a replacement since.*

So, according to this analysis, the absence of a crossing guard is the most probable reason for the accidents. Would you agree? And do you see the value of analysis here? Here it is:

**The value of analysis is that  
it helps point you to an effective solution.**

And think: How did you find the most probable reason? A likely answer is that you did some checking around. You collected some facts about events in the past, and related those facts to the accident patterns now.

In other words, you collected some evidence. And then you used logic. In other words:

**Analysis of community problems involves  
collecting evidence, and using logic to interpret that evidence.**

5. Identify solutions. (based on the most probable reason)

*The solution is to get a new crossing guard. It didn't take much to figure that out.*

Well, it didn't, but you still had to do some figuring, didn't you?

Analysis may have helped here. Caution, though: This doesn't necessarily mean the crossing guard is the best solution -- we have to check that out in the real world.

6. Choose the best one.

*Find the crossing guard.*

Again, this is easy. The only question now is where will we find one. (Advertise -- Announce at the PTA -- Send a notice home with the kids) This could be another small problem (though maybe not). But if it were, you could probably solve it. Are we right?

7. Implement it

*We found a new crossing guard. She starts next Monday.*

Congratulations! Now let's see how this works.

8. Evaluate it.

*It's been a year now since she started. No more accidents, or close calls. Everyone thinks she's doing a good job. She's happy, too. I guess we can close the books on this problem.*

**Analysis has helped solve this community problem.**

## Going beyond the basics does analysis really work?

What do you think of this approach for analyzing problems? As we mentioned, we think it is useful; but of course you must make that judgment yourself. The best way to do so is to try it out. You'll get a better feel for its pros and cons. You'll understand it better.

So we encourage you to test it. Try this analysis out with a different problem, such as the declining downtown example at the start of this section. Better yet, try it with a current problem in your own community setting.

What do you conclude? We hope you'll find some value in analysis. We do know that when we have tried this method with real problems in our own communities, we have drawn some additional conclusions of our own, going beyond the basics:

1. *Analyzing community problems can be hard work.* It takes real mental effort. We're not used to sitting down and thinking deeply about a problem. (We're too busy!)
2. *Real community problems are likely to be more complex, and harder to solve, than the street-crossing example given above.* The problems themselves may be larger (on all dimensions), the costs greater, the stakes higher, and the opposition stronger. There may be more elements to take into account. Solution may also depend more on factors outside your immediate control. A revitalized downtown, for example, depends upon the overall strength of the economy. You can't control the economy by yourself.
3. *When you go looking for reasons and underlying causes for significant problems, you are likely to find more than one.* Life is not "one problem = one reason." It's more complicated than that. Several different reasons may be operating. They may be influencing the problem, in different amounts, all at the same time. (And these may be not just possible reasons, but actual ones.) It may not be an easy task to untangle all the reasons and their relative strengths. Yet you want

to untangle them as best you can.

4. *The problem may not only have more than one reason; it may have more than one solution too.* Problems often call for multiple solutions. That is, for difficult problems, there may be more than one thing you need to do. So in revitalizing the downtown, you might want to (a) beautify the streets; (b) expand the staff of the chamber of commerce; (c) run sidewalk sales; (d) look for outside loans; and (e) recruit new businesses. These are all parts of the solution -- or important-but-partial solutions -- solutions that come together into one whole. Many different types of actions might be necessary for revitalization.

So in solving real community problems, the analysis is not always so cut and dried. There may be multiple reasons behind the problem, and multiple reasons to consider, with many unknowns. The analysis may not always be easy. The solution may be more difficult still.

But that's why problems are problems. If analysis and solution were as easy as pie, we'd be gaining a lot of weight. Community problems exist precisely because they often resist clear analysis and solution. They persist despite our efforts. They can be real challenges.

Yet this doesn't mean we are helpless. Not at all. Analysis, including the analytic methods we have described, can take you a long way. In the downtown example, if you were serious about reversing decline, you might get a group together (a group is usually better than going it alone) and follow the same steps outlined before. State the problem. Look at the examples, the facts and figures. Lay out all the possible reasons. Find the evidence that supports each reason, and possibly prioritize their importance. Identify possible solutions for each reason. Pick the best. You'll then have what may approximate a comprehensive package of solutions. Go to work on implementing them.

This analysis can work, and it can help. If the downtown keeps declining, it may not be because your analysis is poor. It may be that you simply don't have the resources, or the control, or the community will to create the needed changes. Even then, you needn't quit. You can go back to the drawing board and (at the minimum) rethink your resources and regenerate your will.

With good analysis, some resources, and enough determination, we believe even the most troublesome problems can be at least partially solved.

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## Resources

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## Analyzing Community Problems

Contributed by Bill Berkowitz Edited by Phil Rabinowitz

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## Analyzing Community Problems

**Tools & Checklists**

Contributed by Bill Berkowitz Edited by Phil Rabinowitz

### Checklist

Here, you'll find checklists summarizing the major points contained in the text.

*I understand that*

Communities, like people, try to solve their problems.

Analyzing those problems helps in their solution.

*Criteria for analyzing the problem:* I have taken into consideration the following

Frequency of the problem

Duration of the problem

Scope or range of the problem

Severity of the problem

Legality of the problem

Perception of the problem

*Reasons why you should analyze this problem:* I understand that

To better identify what the problem or issue is....

To understand what is at the heart of a problem....

To determine the barriers and resources associated with addressing the problem.

To develop the best action steps for addressing the problem.

*How to analyze a community problem:* I have

- Stated the problem, in general terms.
- Given some specific examples of the problem.
- Thought of some possible reasons or causes.
- Found the most probable reason.
- Identified some possible solutions.
- Chosen the best solution.
- Implemented that solution.
- Evaluated the solution.

*The value of analyzing community problems:* I understand that

- Analyzing community problems can be hard work.
- Real community problems are likely to be complex and hard to solve.
- When I look for reasons and underlying causes for significant problems, I'm likely to find more than one.
- The problem may not only have more than one reason; it may have more than one solution too.

*Common criteria for the best possible solution:* In coming up with the best possible solution, I have taken into consideration

- Cost.
- Time.
- People.
- Obstacles.
- Impact.

*Measuring impact:* I have asked myself the following questions

- How many people will be affected/ will benefit?
- For how long will they benefit? How long will the solution last?
- How intensely will they benefit -- what is the extent of impact on their lives?
- Are there any possible side consequences, or spin-offs, or unanticipated effects?
- What is the community's preference?
- What is the likelihood of success?

*Questions to ask about the likelihood of success:* I have asked myself the following questions

- What is the best evidence that this solution is going to work?
- Where has this solution been tried before, and what has been the outcome?

\_\_\_ What does expert opinion say on the probability of this solution being successful?

\_\_\_ Have there been research studies showing that this solution works, or is likely to work?

\_\_\_ Does my situation match others where this solution has been successful?

\_\_\_ Do I have personal direct experience using this kind of solution?

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## Analyzing Community Problems

### Overheads

Contributed by Bill Berkowitz Edited by Phil Rabinowitz

Here, you'll find ready-to-use overheads summarizing the major points in this section. Highlight the following text, then copy and paste it into a word processing or PowerPoint document for your next presentation or training session.

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## Analyzing Community Problems

---

### Communities have problems, just like people

- . Communities, like people, try to solve their problems.
  - . Analyzing those problems helps in their solution.
- 

### Examples of community problems

Arson, child abuse, crime, domestic violence, drugs, elder care, emergency services, ethnic conflict, graffiti, health, housing, hunger, inequality, jobs, noise, overwork, poverty, racism, safety, schools, sexism, teenage pregnancy, transportation, vandalism

---

### Criteria for defining a community problem:

- . frequency**
  - . duration**
  - . scope or range**
  - . severity**
  - . legality**
  - . perception**
- 

## **Why analyze a community problem?**

- . to identify what the problem or issue is**
  - . to understand what's at the heart of a problem**
  - . to determine barriers and resources associated with addressing the problem**
  - . to develop the best action steps for addressing the problem**
- 

## **When should you analyze a community problem?**

- 1. When the problem isn't defined very clearly**
  - 2. When little is known about the problem or its possible consequences**
  - 3. When you want to find causes that may improve the chance of successfully addressing the problem**
- 

## **When should you analyze a community problem? (continued)**

- 4. When people are jumping to "solutions" much too soon**
  - 5. When you need to identify actions to address the problem, and learn what persons or groups could best collaborate in taking action.**
-

## **How to analyze a community problem**

- 1. State the problem, in general terms.**
  - 2. Give some specific examples of the problem.**
  - 3. Think of possible causes.**
  - 4. Find the most probable reason.**
- 

## **How to analyze a community problem (continued)**

- 5. Identify some possible solutions.**
  - 6. Choose the best solution.**
  - 7. Act to implement that solution.**
  - 8. Evaluate the solution.**
- 

## **Does analysis really work?**

- 1. Analyzing community problems can be hard work.**
  - 2. Real community problems are likely to be complex and hard to solve.**
  - 3. When you look for reasons and underlying causes for significant problems, you're likely to find more than one.**
  - 4. The problem may not only have more than one reason; it may have more than one solution too.**
- 

## **Criteria for judging the best possible solution to a problem**

- 1. Cost.**

**2. Time.**

**3. People.**

**4. Obstacles.**

**5. Impact.**

**6. Side consequences, or spin-offs, or unanticipated effects.**

**7. Community preference.**

**8. The likelihood of success.**

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## Developing Baseline Measures of Behavior

**Main Section**

Contributed by Chris Hampton, Bill Berkowitz, and Kate Nagy Edited by Bill Berkowitz, Jerry Schultz, and Kate Nagy

### What is a baseline?

### Why use baseline measures?

### How do you develop a baseline?

### How do you interpret changes from the baseline?

### How do you use baseline data to develop an intervention?

So you've set out to identify the problems that exist in your community and you've started collecting information about a particular problem. How will you get started attacking the problem unless you first have some idea of its extent and intensity? Once the intervention is in place, how will you know how effective it is unless you know how bad the problem was before it started? This is where baseline measures come in to play.

### What is a baseline?

To make a change in your community, one of the first things you'll need to do is figure out how much the different factors and trends you're examining are happening in the first place. Try to find out how prevalent any problems and positive tendencies are how often things happen, the duration and intensity of most incidents, etc. The things you keep track of in order to obtain this sort of information are called *baseline* measures. In other words, the baseline is the standard against which you will measure all subsequent changes implemented by your program. We call them baselines because they're usually shown as lines in graph form to easily show changes over time.

Here's how baseline measures work. Suppose you've observed a high rate of teenage pregnancy in your community, and your organization decides to do something about it. So you gather statistics over a one-year period about the number of reported teen pregnancies, and then you measure again, comparing the new figure against your baseline. Depending on whether the numbers have gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same, you'll know whether or not your intervention is working.

Let's look at some other examples of baseline measures from everyday life.

### Examples: Baseline measures in everyday life

- A mother hears her baby crying. She knows from past experience how and when her baby usually cries -- that's her baseline. Because of that, she can tell this time around whether the baby is crying just because he's fussy, or whether there might be something to worry about.
- Rafael gets up in the morning and doesn't feel well. He makes that judgment based on knowing how he usually feels when he gets up. That usual feeling, based on past experiences, is his baseline. He uses it to help decide whether he should get up and go to work, or call in sick and get some rest.
- Your friend Marisol tells you you're looking good. She knows how you usually look-- that's a baseline for her. If you're looking particularly rested, or tanned, or fashionable, or bright-eyed this morning, Marisol notices and comments.

All of these simple everyday examples involve baselines. Sometimes people may call them other names: reference points, adaptation levels, anchors, or norms, for example. But whatever we call them, we all have them and we all use them. In a way, they are essential for all of us in making judgments about people and things. Without baselines, it would be much harder to navigate our way through the world.

Most everyday baselines are casual and informal. We may not even notice them; we certainly don't measure them. In making decisions about community actions, and about public policies in general, however, we sometimes take baselines a lot more seriously. For example, every month, the Consumer Price Index is released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The numerical value of that index, which tells us whether the cost of living is going up or down, relies on a baseline. Likewise, many other indices, including stock indices (e.g., the Dow Jones), local quality of life indicators, etcetera, rely on baseline measures.

Interpretations against a baseline are the way most policy decisions get made. If a new law has raised the penalties for drunk driving, has drunk driving decreased? What kinds of activities will draw visitors to local parks, based on data we already have on park use? Good decisions in these cases and countless examples more will depend on good collection and utilization of baseline data. Comparison to a baseline is the standard against which policy success is judged.

Experts generally consider determining baseline measures of behavior to be the first phase in any sort of behavior modification program, followed by implementation of the program and finally a follow-up phase in which the results are measured and analyzed.

## Why use baseline measures?

**Baseline measures can tell you whether your efforts are working.** To plan a truly effective program, you have to know how much of an effect your efforts are having. You need to have an idea of the level of the problem without your efforts being a factor to know whether you're really making a difference at all. Recording baseline measures, which you can then compare with whatever the numbers are after your intervention has started, will help you figure that out.

**A baseline can help you make sense about something that might be too massive and complicated to understand otherwise.** A question like How well are our schools working? might be overwhelming to try to answer. However, keeping track of baselines, such as standardized test scores or high school graduation rates, can help you better understand the bigger picture.

**A baseline can help you decide whether this is a good time to start an intervention or whether a particular intervention is appropriate.** Say you're working to decrease fatal car accidents in your county. One of the ways you're thinking about doing this is to start a program to encourage seat belt use. Getting some idea of how many people in your county are consistently using their seat belts will help you decide whether you should spend any time and resources on such a project. The rate of seat belt use will be your baseline measure. If 98% of local citizens are already using their seat belts most of the time, you may want to explore other possible interventions.

**Baseline measures can sometimes tell you if an intervention isn't necessary at all.** For example, community leaders may be crying out about an increase in gang-related activities among youth and demanding programs to discourage it, but a good, accurate baseline measure of juvenile delinquency rates could show you that there really isn't a problem at all.

**Baseline measures can help you tell if you're using methods that aren't working.** If there is no change in the behavior compared to the baseline, you can stop wasting your time with an ineffective method. For example, let's say you're working to increase the numbers of pregnant women in your city getting prenatal check-ups, and you've decided to use a series of public service announcements to do this. By comparing the number of women receiving prenatal check-ups after a given period (such as a month or six weeks) to your baseline measure the number of women receiving prenatal check-ups just before the public service announcements started running you can decide whether the numbers have improved enough to warrant continuing with the public service announcements. Maybe the numbers are increasing and you'll decide to continue running the public service announcements, or they may be remaining steady or even decreasing, in which case you might want to consider trying another method.

*Keep in mind, however, that your method or intervention may take some time to produce the desired effect.* Behavior change may not show up immediately. Be sure to wait a while before concluding that a method or an intervention isn't working. It could be that it just needs more time.

## How do you develop a baseline?

*First, pick an indicator or indicators that best reflect the behaviors that are most important to you.*

An indicator is anything that is measurable that can be used to identify a change in trends. An indicator can be the number of alcohol-related car accidents per county per month throughout your state, the number of people requesting a particular pamphlet that your organization distributes, or the number of pregnancies among teenagers in your community in a year.

The indicator needs to be relevant it should tell you what you need to know. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does this represent what's most important and pertinent to our community?
- Does this show some facet of the long-term well-being of our community?
- Is this measure showing what it's supposed to measure and not some by-product?
- Can this measure be compared to progress in similar communities on this issue?

Below is an example of a group selecting a baseline measure to use in tracking the effectiveness in one of its programs.

#### **Example: An anti-gang project for urban high school students**

Some indicators that you might want to consider using as your baseline measures could be rates of:

- Students involved in extracurricular activities and church groups
- Drug and alcohol use
- Students wearing gang colors
- Students in counseling programs
- Students in conflict resolution programs
- After-school and weekend employment

If one of the things your group is planning is an after-school discussion group, then the first indicator would probably be a good one for you to use as a baseline measure, because it should give you a good idea of the numbers of students who might be likely to participate in an after-school activity.

*Next, find measurements on those indicators.*

Once you've chosen indicators, decide exactly what you're going to measure, and for how long. For example, will you measure violent gang-related incidents on school property during the school year? Will you measure the number of alcohol-related automobile fatalities over a four-week period? It's possible that someone else has already measured these things if so, then you'll just need to verify (and, if necessary, update) the information. Otherwise, you or someone else will need to go out there and measure them. See [Chapter 3, Section 4: Collecting Information about the Problem](#) for more information on how to gather the specifics you'll need.

Some things to consider if you're doing the measures yourself:

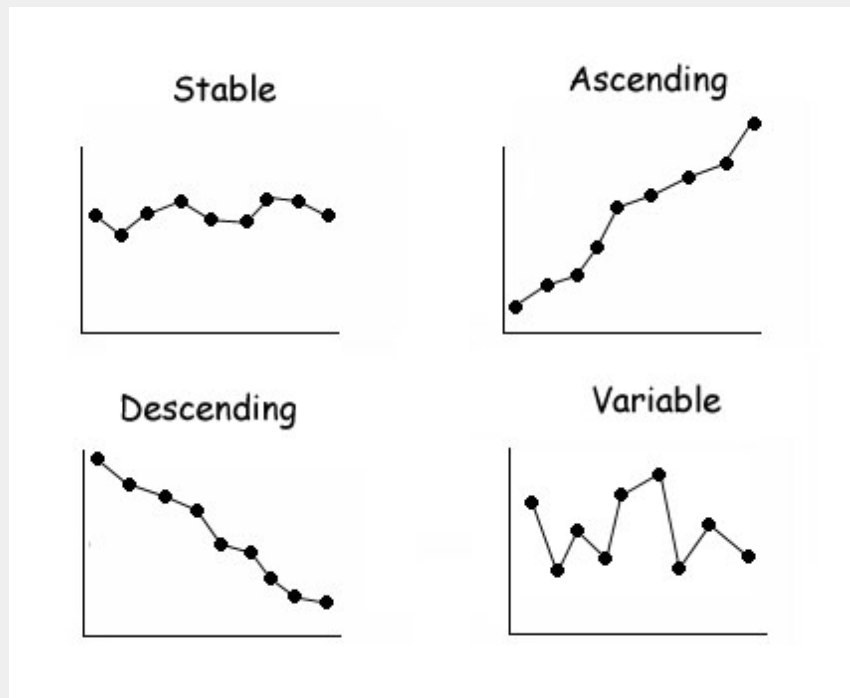
- What characteristics of behavior should be measured? Some of those characteristics include frequency of behavior, rate of behavior, percentage of occasions the behavior occurs, and duration of behavior.
- Under what conditions should you collect data?
- Will you observe continuously or do sampling? If sampling, how often to do so?
- Will you collect data for given periods of time, or by intervals? If for given periods of time, how long will those periods be? If by intervals, how long will the intervals be?

Remember that a good baseline will include information gathered at several points over a period of time, rather than simply a snapshot of information gathered over, say, a single weekend.

## **How do you interpret changes from the baseline?**

Let's say that you now have data for your baseline measure, as well as data collected at a handful of different times afterwards. How do you make sense of this information? First, you should know a bit about the different types of baseline data patterns.

When you present your baseline measures in graph form, you can learn a lot about how bad a problem is in your community and whether now is a good time to introduce any sort of intervention to change it.

**Example: Baseline data patterns***Stable baselines*

With a stable baseline, there's no evidence of upward or downward trends; things may fluctuate a little over time but for the most part the data points fall into a pretty tight range.

A stable baseline is the best basis for starting your project. If rates of whatever it is you're measuring have stayed pretty stable over a long period of time before you start, you can be more certain that changes after your intervention begins are really a result of your efforts.

*Ascending and descending baselines*

As you might guess from the names, an ascending baseline means that whatever is being measured has steadily increased over time, and a descending baseline means it has decreased.

*Unstable or variable baselines*

When the data points range all over the place and there are no clear trends, you have an unstable or variable baseline. With a variable baseline, it's usually not a good idea to introduce any sort of intervention, because the variations in the baseline make it too hard to tell whether any changes will be a direct result of the intervention.

When you have a more complex baseline, you need to give some serious consideration whether the health problem is increasing or decreasing.

Say, for example, that the baseline measure you're graphing stands for the rate of teen smoking in your county. If the baseline is descending, indicating that fewer and fewer teens are smoking, then you may want to hold off on conducting any sort of intervention. However, if the baseline is ascending, showing that teen smoking is on the rise, then conducting some sort of intervention is probably the right thing to do. It may not be as easy to tell what the effect of your intervention is as it would be with a stable baseline, but knowing that the problem is increasing is plenty of reason to take action!

**How do you use baseline data to develop an intervention?***Decide which problem(s) to address*

Based on the data, decide what problem(s) should most be addressed by your group or coalition. What looks like it most needs to be dealt with? Is it something you can reasonably expect to be able to change? See [Chapter 3, Section 5: Analyzing Community Problems](#) for some ideas on how to do this.

*Identify primary targets of the intervention*

This means deciding who your intervention will be aimed at a given group of people? An institution? Decide how their behavior helps produce and maintain the problem. Figure out what your research results suggest about relationships between the problem (s) and the behaviors of the targeted group.

#### *Develop an action plan*

- Set a behavioral goal for the intervention ([Chapter 8, Section 3: Creating Objectives](#) and [Section 4: Developing Successful Strategies: Planning to Win](#) can further help you with this).
- Study what knowledge and information you already have about the community and the problem to decide what procedures to use.
- Decide who will be in charge of making the behavior change(s).
- Determine how to involve those affected by the problem(s) in the solution.
- Study other models of change what existing methods for dealing with the behaviors have been successful in similar communities?
- Decide how you will go about explaining the intervention to the public. For more information, check out [Chapter 6: Promoting Interest in Community Issues](#).

For more help designing an action plan, see [Chapter 8, Section 5: Developing an Action Plan](#) and [Section 7: Identifying Action Steps in Bringing About Community and Systems Change](#).

#### *Begin your intervention*

Get going! With the knowledge you've gained from checking your baseline measures, you will have a much better chance of making real changes in your community, and you can use those measures to monitor your success.

## To sum it up

Using your baseline measures to figure out how prevalent any problems and positive tendencies are in your community can be very effective in helping you to monitor how the effect your efforts are having. By giving you one way to measure the success of your programs, baseline measures can be enormously helpful to your efforts.

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## Resources

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## Developing Baseline Measures of Behavior

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## Developing Baseline Measures of Behavior

### Tools & Checklists

Contributed by Chris Hampton, Bill Berkowitz, and Kate Nagy Edited by Bill Berkowitz, Jerry Schultz, and Kate Nagy

### Checklist

Here, you'll find a checklist which summarizes the major points contained in the text.

You understand what a baseline is.

You understand that baseline measures can tell you whether your efforts are working.

You understand that a baseline can help you make sense about something that might be too massive and complicated to understand otherwise.

You understand that a baseline can help you decide whether this is a good time to start an intervention or whether a particular intervention is appropriate.

You understand that baseline measures can sometimes tell you if an intervention isn't necessary at all.

You understand that baseline measures can help you tell if you're using methods that aren't working.

You understand that your method or intervention may take some time to produce the desired effect.

#### *Developing your baseline:*

You have picked an indicator or indicators that best reflect the behaviors that are most important to you.

You have found measurements on those indicators.

You understand the different types of baseline data patterns.

You understand how to interpret those patterns.

You have decided what problem or problems to address.

You have identified primary targets of the intervention.

You have developed an action plan.

You have begun your intervention.





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## Developing Baseline Measures of Behavior

### Overheads

Contributed by Chris Hampton, Bill Berkowitz, and Kate Nagy Edited by Bill Berkowitz, Jerry Schultz, and Kate Nagy

Here, you'll find ready-to-use overheads summarizing the major points in this section. Highlight the following text, then copy and paste it into a word processing or PowerPoint document for your next presentation or training session.

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# Developing and Using Baseline Measures of Behavior

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## What is a baseline?

- . The standard against which you measure all subsequent changes implemented by your program.
- . Usually shown as lines in graph form.
- . Sometimes called:

reference points

adaptation levels

anchors

norms

---

## Why use baseline measures?

### *Baselines can:*

- . Show whether your efforts are working
  - . Help you make sense about something complicated
  - . Help you decide whether to start an intervention
  - . Tell you if an intervention isn't necessary
- 

## Developing a baseline

1. Pick indicators that best reflect the behaviors that are most important to you.
  2. Find measurements on those indicators.
- 

## Interpreting baseline changes

- . Data points fall into a tight range
  - . Best basis for starting
- 

## Ascending and descending baselines

- . Ascending: the indicator has increased
  - . Descending: the indicator has decreased
- 

## Unstable or variable baselines

- . Data points range all over the place and there are no clear trends
- . Usually unwise to introduce any sort of intervention, because the variations make

## it too hard to tell whether changes are a result of the intervention

---

### Using baseline data to develop an intervention

1. Decide what problem(s) to address
  2. Identify primary targets of the intervention
  3. Develop an action plan
  4. Begin your intervention
-