

Community Assessment Tools

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One of the fundamental components of a community planning process is the development of a local community assessment, community picture or blueprint. This provides a comprehensive profile of the community, including demographic makeup, health status data, as well as current initiatives and policies that impact health and well-being. A community picture includes a quantitative and qualitative description of the each community's "current state" with respect to specific health indicators, as well as the broader socio-economic determinants of health.

The community picture is the foundation on which Healthy Communities Partnerships will determine local health promotion priorities, consider appropriate strategies, and then align necessary community and financial resources to address priority issues.

While census data, provincial data bases, disease registries, community health status reports etc. can provide information at the provincial, health unit, regional or municipal level, rich information can also be found at the community and sometimes the neighbourhood levels through surveys from community organizations, reports, planning documents and even Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data.

The challenge for community planners is often one of scope: determining what information is available, accessible and relevant to the task at hand, and balancing this with the need to be comprehensive within assigned timeframes and finite staff and financial resources.

At the Heart Health Resource Centre's Building Blocks for Community Planning workshop held March 23, 2010 in Toronto, Healthy Communities Partnership Coordinators and partners had the opportunity to learn about a wide variety of community assessment tools that could be used by Healthy Communities Partnerships to create local community pictures. These tools and additional resources are noted within this article, with the caveat that while community assessment tools are plentiful and varied, it's important to consider "which tool is right for the job". It is equally important that once an assessment tool is found, that the actual community assessment process be inclusive, transparent, and focus on a community's assets and strengths, as well as needs.

Using Data as a "Jumping Off" Point

Community planning groups typically look to readily available statistics, data sources and local reports to begin their community assessment work. Alanna Leffley, Senior Epidemiologist with the Grey Bruce Health Unit, provided an overview of widely accessible data sources, and encouraged workshop participants to reach out to local epidemiologists for their expertise in identifying, interpreting and critically appraising various data sources. Ms. Leffley identified several sources of data including census information, community health status reports, Health Canada statistics, cancer and reportable disease registries, and Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance (RRFS) data. She urged participants to consider:

- the timeliness of the data that they will be using, noting that Canada census data may be 4 or 5 years "old" before they are available. She also cautioned that "change takes time", and that it can take 5 to 10 years before changes "show up" in the data.
- that data from a comparable community be considered as a proxy measure. Due to discrepancies in data sets, she urged people to carefully source their data to avoid confusion.
- using non-traditional sources of community data, including reports available from community partners and local NGO's, the business sector as well as the province's 21 social planning councils.

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Leffley acknowledged that while there are efforts to make data more accessible to communities, there is a need to balance data needs with privacy issues. She cautioned the group to accept the fact that in some cases, the information you need, might not exist, and that a proxy measure might have to be used. She suggested that to avoid the risk of “drowning in data”, that Partnerships reach out to local expertise at their Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) or health unit to get the support they need.

The following internet resource links provide additional community level data and information.

Title	Web link	Description/Purpose
Association of Public Health Epidemiologists of Ontario	http://www.apheo.ca/index.php?pid=55	Core Indicators & Resources - definitions, calculations, data sources, limitations
Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System	http://www.rrfss.ca/query http://www.rrfss.ca/	RRFSS Query System – prevalence data at participating PHU-level FAQ's Questionnaires
Ontario Risk and Behaviour Surveillance System (ORBSS)	http://www.oahpp.ca/resources/projects/orbss/index.html	ORBSS is a centralized, province-wide surveillance system that will capture health data on attitudinal, behavioural, socio-economic and other risk factors. The ORBSS Project will build on the work of the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System, the Canadian Community Health Survey and other existing surveillance systems and projects in Ontario. The ORBSS will support public health practitioners in achieving the Ontario Public Health Standards, responding effectively to evolving public health conditions, and contributing to the public's health and well-being.
Statistics Canada – Community Profiles	http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/index.cfm?Lang=E	Community-level information from 2006 Census of the Population – type in place name and province to get to the geographic level you request. Data includes age, income, education, language etc.
Statistics Canada – Health Profiles	http://www.census2006.ca/health-sante/82-228/2009/06/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=HR&Code1=3536&Geo2=PR&Code2=35&Data=Rate&SearchText=Halton%20Region&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=35&BL=All&Custom=	At the Public Health Unit level of Community Profiles, go to the left hand tool bar and click on Health Profiles (at bottom of the list) - gives you health status indicators including well-being, health conditions & behaviours, accessibility(from CCHS), deaths work & living conditions as well as summarized community info.
Statistics Canada - CANSIM	http://cansim2.statcan.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgi.pgm?Lang=E&RootDir=CII/&Array_Pick=1&ArrayId=105-0502&C2DB=PRD&ResultTemplate=CII%2FCII	Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) available FREE of charge.
Canadian Institute of Health Information	http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/disPage.jsp?cw_page=statistics_source_e	Excellent source for reports, data, etc. Quick Stats – topic areas include Ontario Trauma registry (LHIN-level data reported), health conditions etc.
Canadian Institute of Health Information	http://www.cihi.ca/hireports/search.jspp?language=en&healthIndicatorSelection	Hospital indicators at the PHU, LHIN, provincial levels plus time-trends.
Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences	http://intool.ices.on.ca	Excellent source for reports, data, etc. inTool – interactive tool – retrieve data on topics such as medical access, interventions, outcomes.

Title	Web link	Description/Purpose
CAMH – Ontario Student Drug Use Survey (OSDUS)	http://www.camh.net/Research/osdus.html	OSDUHS- a population survey of Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 (since 1977); excellent trend data down to the large regional level
Public Health Unit Peer Groups, from the Initial Report on Public Health	http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/pub/pubhealth/init_report	A peer group is a cluster of health units with similar social and economic factors. From a practical perspective, the impact of social and economic factors on health outcomes can be seen more clearly by clustering the health units and comparing results within peer groups. If local data is unavailable, consider accessing data from another health unit in your peer group as a proxy.
Provincial LHIN s	http://www.lhins.on.ca	Community Engagement Consultants in each of the province’s LHINs, have expertise, resources and information on various community engagement strategies underway in their areas, and have access to a wealth of community-level data that could be considered in a community assessment.
VITAL Signs Reports	http://www.vitalsignscanada.ca/local-reports-e.html	Vital Signs is an annual community check-up conducted by 16 community foundations across Canada. The report measures the vitality of various cities, identifies significant trends, and assigns grades in areas critical to quality of life. Each city’s report card data is a compilation of numerous research sources, much of it local, that help communities make connections between issues and trends in different areas. The findings are presented in a reader friendly format to make them as accessible as possible. In Ontario, there are Vital Sign reports for the communities of Guelph & Wellington, Kingston and Area, Oakville, Sudbury, Toronto and Waterloo.

Community Asset Mapping

Asset Mapping produces a common view of what is considered important in a community, and is a useful starting point for community mobilization, strategic planning processes or organizational development.

Mapping community assets involves:

- taking an inventory of all the good things about your community;
- ranking the most valued aspects of your community; and,
- discovering the reasons why people place high value on these assets.

Community Asset mapping is a powerful, engaging and inclusive process for identifying a community’s strengths, unique features and heritage.

Community asset mapping allows you to collectively strategize about how to build on the assets in order to sustain and enhance them for future generations. The asset mapping process has the potential to be inclusive of all community dimensions, features and interests. This is important because recognizing that different assets are important to different populations and interest groups is critical when selecting the strategies necessary to sustain these assets. (Cyr, 2010)

At the Building Blocks Workshop, Janet Gasparini of the Sudbury Social Planning Council spoke passionately about her experience with Community Asset Mapping, emphasizing that **asset-mapping begins with people, focuses on creating relationships and builds social capital**. Community asset mapping is rooted in the community development and capacity building work of John McKnight and John Kretzmann, who have written extensively on leveraging a community’s strengths and resources to address priority issues.

Community Asset Mapping is an asset-building approach to planning that:

- builds on a community's strengths,
- is internally focused, and
- is relationship driven.

Janet stressed the importance of mapping informal organizations in your community, including faith groups, sport organizations and neighbourhood associations. In addition, more formal methods and technology such as GIS mapping software can be used to build a comprehensive picture of your community. The community engagement aspect of the community asset mapping process, is a critical part of building relationships and trust among diverse community partners with different mandates and agendas.

Tools and Resources

The following community asset mapping articles, tools and resources are recommended as an introduction to the concept and practical application of asset mapping. This list is in no way exhaustive, and the HHRC welcomes suggestions of additional resources. The following community assessment tools have been selected for consideration by community planning groups. These tools are not presented in order of preference since different communities may find different tools useful.

Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets (1993). John P. Kretzmann & John McKnight. Available for purchase online at:
<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/publications/basicmanual/>

Video Training Program: Mobilizing Community Assets: <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/resources/>

Based on the principles outlined in Building Communities from the Inside Out, this downloadable video training program introduces the concept of "asset-based community development" as a new and more effective method of community building. The program consists of six separate modules, each lasting 30-45 minutes. John McKnight and John Kretzmann present clear, practical ways to mobilize the capacities of local residents, the power of citizens' associations, and the resources of local institutions to build stronger and more vibrant communities.

Introduction to Asset Mapping (John McKnight): <http://www.abcdinstitute.org>

Capacity Inventory Tool (John McKnight)

<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/resources/>

How to Use a Capacity Inventory (John McKnight)

<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/resources/>

Asset Mapping: A Handbook: http://www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca/cms/documents/11/Asset_Mapping1.pdf

This handbook provides an introduction to the concept of community asset mapping, and outlines three asset mapping approaches: the Whole Assets Approach, the Storytelling Approach, and the Heritage Approach. The Handbook provides detailed facilitation notes for each process, as well as optional "next steps" for consideration.

Community Assessment Tools

Many community organizations, government bodies and academic institutions have developed community assessment tools which provide frameworks, techniques and tools to support community groups throughout the community planning process. While they may include asset mapping as one component of a comprehensive plan, they generally encompass a larger, longer approach.

With the introduction of sophisticated GIS computer software, community mapping has "gone digital", and the ability to map a wide range of health and socio-economic information, among many other variables, at a neighbourhood or community level allows for more precision and sophistication in the community assessment and planning process. GIS information is becoming more readily available to community organizations and groups, with social planning councils taking a lead role in supporting the use of this technology for the purposes of community planning.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is aiming to increase the GIS capacity of public health professionals at the federal, provincial/territorial, regional, and local levels, as well as within non-government organizations (NGOs) and academic research groups working in the areas of chronic and infectious disease prevention and control, health promotion, surveillance, emergency preparedness and response, and pandemic outbreaks. The Office of Public Health Practice provides GIS training and support on intuitive and easy to use tools, and access to no cost data. Information on PHAC's services is available at:
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/php-ppsp/gis-eng.php>

From the Ground Up: <http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/from-the-ground-up-an-organizing-handbook-for-healthy-communities>

This handbook was written by Ontario Healthy Community Coalition staff and volunteers as a guide to individuals, groups and coalitions who want to start a Healthy Community initiative in their community. It gives information and tips on getting started, assessing community needs and assets, organizational development, planning, communication, leadership, partnerships, fundraising, evaluation and more. A glossary of terms, samples of forms and documents, and references for further information are also provided.

Community Health Assessment and Action Planning Handbook, (CHAAP): <http://www.health.state.mn.us/>

CHAAP is a community planning process adopted by the Minnesota Department of Health. The Handbook includes community health assessment and action planning components as well as a capacity self-assessment. CHAAP stresses the importance of engaging the community and provides strategies and tips for facilitating community engagement.

There is also a workbook to accompany the CHAAP Handbook which is available at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us>

The workbook includes downloadable Excel worksheets for capturing community assessment data and information on priority setting and action planning.

Signs of Progress, Signs of Caution: How to Prepare a Healthy, Sustainable Community Progress Report Card

<http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/signs-of-progress-signs-of-caution-how-to-prepare-a-healthy-sustainable-community-progress-report-ca>

The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition's Signs of Progress, Signs of Caution is a tool for local community groups working together towards a shared goal of making their community a healthier place. This workbook outlines 12 steps for collecting social, environmental, economic and health information at a community level. It provides baseline indicators and offers communities the opportunity to add their own locally-based indicators.

Mining and Health: A Community - Centred Health Assessment Toolkit

http://www.miningwatch.ca/sites/miningwatch.ca/files/Mining_Health_Toolkit_web.pdf

This community-centred health assessment toolkit was developed by individuals concerned about health in mining-affected communities, and the need for alternatives to standard risk assessment approaches to studying health. This toolkit offers very user -friendly, practical health assessment methods, processes and tools that are relevant and accessible to communities including tools such as the Web Influencing Diagram. Web Influencing Diagrams provide a way to visually organize community health information and describe how different elements of health influence others. A range of community perspectives can be integrated into the diagram—including conflicting viewpoints which may affect future health planning efforts. The web map also helps identify knowledge gaps, and complex or indirect influences. The Toolkit also offers detailed facilitator notes.

Community Assessment Tools. A Companion Piece to Communities in Action: <http://www.rlifiles.com>

This practical resource produced by Rotary International, provides a description and samples sessions of the following community assessment strategies: surveys, community asset inventories, Community Cafe technique, community mapping, focus groups, and panel discussions.

Port Alberni Community Assessment: Taking Action for Community Sustainability Planning

http://www.portalberni.ca/files/u10/PORT_ALBERNI_COMMUNITY_ASSESSMENT_FINAL%20.pdf

The resource highlights the use of a Community Assessment Chart to capture a wide variety of community data in a systematic, organized way. It can be used to assess community capacity, and align current and future actions with identified priorities. Information and input gathered from community partners at workshops and meetings can be documented and systematically considered or analyzed using this chart. The chart captures information on the future vision that has been developed, community needs assets, actions and local capacity for given topics, as well as potential for action and challenges related to a given topic.

Community Vitality Index: http://www.theCiel.com/pubs_community.php

The Community Vitality (CVI) Index is a tool and process that measures a community's quality of life relative to other communities. CVI gathers perceptions from citizens and stakeholders on important issues and uses process to allow communities to make positive changes.

Communities Matrix: <http://www.theCiel.com>

The Communities Matrix is a quick and intuitive ‘first-step’ for communities thinking of planning or taking action. It follows the assessment of a community through four phases (or eleven stages) of development using a simple circular model. From very challenged (Conflict Stage) to thriving (Learning Culture Stage) communities, the Matrix assists in determining a community’s stage or phase and then links it with stage-appropriate tools and resources. The Matrix can be used to determine “next steps” when a community is considering a comprehensive community plan.

Photovoice: <http://www.photovoice.org>

Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy which combines photography with grassroots social action. Participants are asked to represent their community or point of view by taking photographs, developing narratives to go with their photos, and conducting outreach or other actions. Photovoice can be empowering for those involved, in that it attempts to bring the perspectives of those who are disengaged or marginalized in some way, into the community consultation and policy-making process.

Getting Started...

Launching a community assessment process can seem like a daunting challenge due to the sheer volume of information that could be considered. There are several factors which will influence the scope of your community assessment including:

- what you are being asked, or mandated to produce
- the timeframe available to consider and synthesize the information
- the availability of recent and relevant community assessments, reports, or needs assessments to build upon
- staffing and Partnership capacity and ability to undertake the work, or financial resources to have a third party (i.e. consultant) complete the work.

Partnerships might find it helpful to establish a working committee or ad hoc subcommittee to plan, undertake or oversee this work. When possible, accessing the skills and expertise of an epidemiologist at this point is valuable for creating a data gathering and analysis plan, including establishing realistic parameters and priorities for what information will and won’t be collected and included in the analysis. For example, a work group might decide that reports and statistics no older than 5 years that are directly relevant to certain risk factors or risk conditions will be gathered, in addition to needs assessments and community profiles completed in the last 3 years. Having a detailed plan up-front provides direction and structure for the data gathering phase where the temptation and risk of getting “side-tracked” and overwhelmed with information is a real risk.

Partnerships will likely vary in their approach to creating a community picture. Some will build on the existing work of partner organizations and other community planning processes and documents, while other partnerships might use this opportunity to engage new partners and develop community capacity.

Regardless of the approach, developing a community picture using a variety of data sources, building on community strengths, and incorporating the views of diverse members of the community, will highlight new or recurrent community health issues and allow community partnerships to determine where best to focus their efforts.

References:

Sophie- Michele Cyr, 2010,

Retrieved on: <http://www.fallsbrookcentre.ca/community/mapping.htm>

About the HHRC

The Heart Health Resource (HHRC) anticipates and meets the needs of public health agencies and their communities in in community-based chronic disease prevention programming.

The HHRC was established in 1993 to support the community-based partnerships of the Ontario Heart Health Program. Currently, the HHRC supports 37 Healthy Communities Partnerships working within the Local Planning Stream of the Healthy Communities Ontario approach.

The HHRC is a project of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and is funded through the Ministry of Health Promotion. The HHRC is a member of the Healthy Communities Consortium, a group of resource centres working collaboratively to support those working within the Healthy Communities Ontario approach.

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