

Community Needs Assessment

What is a community needs assessment?

A community needs assessment uses research methods to determine a community's needs on a certain issue, such as victim response. The "community" could be a geographic area (e.g., a city or county), members of a specific demographic group within that area (e.g., immigrants), or members of an institution (e.g., college students on a university campus). It is important to consider seeking input from at least three primary groups when doing a victim-related community needs assessment:

- Current and former victims of crime or abuse;
- Practitioners or professionals who work with victims; and
- General members of the community.

How do I plan a community needs assessment?

Practitioners and researchers should work together to plan the most appropriate strategies for identifying current needs. Be as specific as possible about the information you want to learn. The adjacent questions can help you determine the focus of your assessment.

Thoughtful and thorough answers to these questions can help you plan for next steps, including the groups you will seek input from, the methods you will use to collect information, your timeline, and data analysis procedures.

- **WHOSE NEEDS DO YOU WANT TO ASSESS?**
Victims of specific crimes? Specific groups of victims?
- **WHAT TYPES OF NEEDS DO YOU WANT TO IDENTIFY?**
Service needs? Information needs? Access needs?
- **WHAT DO YOU ALREADY KNOW?**
Needs of this population? Existing resources?
- **HOW WILL YOU USE THE RESULTS?**
Inform changes in your community?

How do I conduct a community needs assessment?

Two research methods that are useful for community needs assessments are (1) surveys and (2) individual and/or focus group interviews with key stakeholders. Surveys are useful for gathering information anonymously or from larger groups of people at once, whereas interviews with individuals or groups offer a chance for gathering more in-depth information from a smaller group of people. A community needs assessment may use one or both strategies.

Common steps in conducting a community needs assessment include:

- (1) Gathering any information about victim needs that already exists (previous needs assessments, information that others have gathered, etc.).
- (2) Identifying the groups (victims, service providers, officials, other stakeholders) whose input you want.
- (3) Determining the most appropriate way to obtain their input, such as surveys, interviews, or a combination, while taking into consideration your research questions, available resources, timeframe, and other factors.

- (4) Developing survey and/or interview questions to gather participants' insights on the community's current strengths, needs, barriers, and other relevant topics.
- (5) Collecting data by recruiting participants to complete the survey and/or be interviewed either individually or in groups.
- (6) Analyzing the information obtained using descriptive statistics and other analytic tools.
- (7) Reviewing the findings with input from key stakeholders to be sure you are interpreting them correctly.
- (8) Using the findings to inform decisions about changes to address unmet needs within the community and the broader social context.

These steps will help you to understand current needs within the community. This process also will help you identify possible strengths and resources to build upon, barriers and challenges that may need to be addressed, and potential solutions for meeting the identified needs.

Additional Resources

The Center for Victim Research offers [free technical assistance](#) to victim service providers with research and evaluation questions. No question is too small! Email TA@victimresearch.org for help now.

Other resources that can provide more in-depth information about community needs assessments include:



The Community Tool Box from the University of Kansas offers a [toolkit](#) and [detailed chapter](#) to offer guidance for conducting community needs assessments.



Strengthening Nonprofits offers a [Resource Guide for Conducting a Community Assessment](#), which includes some useful worksheets to complete in the planning process.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers a 79-page [handbook](#) for conducting community needs assessment. The handbook offers detailed guidance on collecting and interpreting data through the assessment process.