



Introduction to Assessing Community Needs

Objectives:

- ✓ Distinguish between the types of needs assessment tools available
- ✓ Identify sources of existing quantitative community needs data
- ✓ Break down demographic data contained in the lesson
- ✓ Interpret quantitative data and predict how it can be used in a community action plan

Advance Preparation:

- ✓ Secure data for your county and/or community by retrieving it from the U.S. Census Bureau Website at <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html> or some other highly relevant source for local planning purposes
- ✓ Use the census data to create a profile for your county or community similar to the "Harrison County Narrative Profile"

Materials Needed:

- ✓ One copy of "[Types of Needs Assessments](#)" for each participant
- ✓ One copy of Handout "[Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of Bolivar County, MS](#)" for each participant
- ✓ One copy of Handout "[Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of Harrison County, MS](#)" for each participant
- ✓ One copy of Handout "[Harrison County Narrative Profile](#)" for each participant
- ✓ One marker and flip chart for each group of five participants
- ✓ One copy of your community data and profile for each participant (see Advance Preparation)

Time Needed: One to Two Hours

BACKGROUND

Introduction

One of Extension's most profound missions is to help people improve their lives. This is done through an educational process targeted at local issues and needs. An important first step in the educational process is to assess these needs and issues. How is this done? How can we be sure of our findings? How often should we examine these changing needs and issues? These questions will be answered in this series of three lessons designed to "Reach the Masses." During these lessons, we'll practice some common methods of investigating and interpreting community needs.

There are many ways that needs and issues can be identified. It can be as simple as asking the right people or as complex as sorting through mounds of profile documents. Many researchers have found clever methods for categorizing these needs assessment tools and while the names may differ, the techniques are similar. For the purposes of these lessons, there are four needs assessment techniques:

- Existing Data
- Attitude Surveys
- Key Informants
- Group Sessions

An accurate picture of community issues and needs is best found through a combination of these techniques.

Existing Data

Existing data can help gain insights into populations. This data, often called demographics, can be used to examine current trends of a given community as well as identifying changes in a community. Also, demographics provide a source for Extension educators and advisory members to understand the way of life of local citizens that they are attempting to change through educational programs, and have access into the groupings of their local citizens/clientele. Demographics help people see a visual representation of information about their community, thus making them important in assessing needs. Additionally, demographics often are used to provide a break down of local citizens according to such characteristics as age, sex, marital status, income, educational level, ethnic background, etc. Other than program needs, demographics are also highly useful in detecting clientele groups that are underserved in the county or community and in defining potential audiences.

While there are other sources for demographic data that may be more relevant to your community, county or state, these are five solid sources for obtaining demographic data:

- Agricultural Statistics
- U.S. Census Data
- Local Chamber of Commerce Data
- Local Board of Education
- Local Health Department

Other sources include labor surveys, sales tax reports, bank deposit data, police reports, hospital information and more. Dig around in your local data - no telling what you will find!

INTEREST APPROACH

- Distribute Handout "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of Bolivar County, MS" to participants.
- Ask each participant to determine what program direction we should take based on this information. Allow five minutes for data review and then you will discuss it as a group.
- Once the five minutes is up, say "I'm sure you will all agree that the data clearly indicate that our Extension programs should target the Asian population with a program on Awareness of Heating the Home with Kersosene." (*Even a quick review of the data tells us that this is not an accurate interpretation of the data, so this should stimulate a discussion*).
- Once the discussion of "Where did that come from?" ensues, tell them that you were, of course, joking in your assessment of the data. Nonetheless, many programs are targeting such a minor sample of the population that this example proves relevant. In order to keep from following this and other bad examples and really target the needs and issues of the people, we must give closer analysis to who we serve and "where they are".

LESSON

- Distribute the Handout "Types of Needs Assessments" to participants and explain that these are some ways that we can explore community needs. Explain that the first step in doing any needs assessment is to properly analyze your intended audience. This is best done through examining existing data.
- Describe the five main sources of demographic data (and remind that there are others available that may have a more direct impact on the local needs and issues).
- Since it helps to learn and practice a new skill in an environment where there are few personal, social, political or emotional "strings" attached, this lesson uses Harrison County, MS as an example to learn and practice needs assessment.
- Distribute Handouts "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of Harrison County, MS" and the "Harrison County Narrative Profile". Explain that it often helps to examine

data in the form of charts and narration to look for trends.

- Break the participants into groups of five (depending on your situation) and give them each a marker and a flip chart.
- Ask them to make notes of their interpretation of the data set by identifying audiences and issues apparent from the raw data. Give them up to 15 minutes to complete the exercise.
- Ask each group to share their findings. Did the groups provide a good picture of "where we are?" Based on this data alone, where should Extension be focusing their educational programs? What are some issues that the data brings out? Insight?

APPLICATION

- Use the data that you generated for your local community, county or state (see Advance Preparation) and replicate the lesson exercise you completed for Harrison County, MS.
- While the groups are giving their wrap-up presentations, make a list of those highly pertinent themes that come out (especially if from more than one group). Review this list with the group after they conclude their presentations.
- Be prepared to acknowledge gaps in the way things are and the way they should be using the discussion items from the group interpretations. For example, "we have a large elderly population and are really doing very little to reach them other than our traditional programs which apparently are not "drawing them in"."
- Map a tentative, precursory plan of new audiences, new potential programs to initiate, programs that should probably be de-emphasized in the changing population and other issues that come out of these discussions about your community, county or state.
- Wrap up with a Question and Answer session to bring closure to the discussion.

REFERENCES

Iowa State University Extension. Needs assessment strategies. Retrieved June 25, 2002, from the Iowa State University Web site:
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/>

Mustian, R. D., Liles, T. R., Pettitt, M. J. (1988). Working with our publics - module 2: The extension education process. North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service and the Department of Adult and Community College Education, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

Nether, S., Barks, N., McKee, R., Peterson, S., Rice, B. Getting on board
- module 2:

Audience/clientele base module. Retrieved May 15, 2002, from Purdue
University Web site:

<http://www.admin.ces.purdue.edu/field/gob/audience.html>
