

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT: BROADENING THE PERSPECTIVE ON ITS UTILITY AND TIMING

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**Abstract** — Needs assessment, a tool for program planning, involves collecting data from service agencies, key informants, and potential clients, and drawing inferences from indicators of community needs. As portrayed in the literature, this approach to evaluation should only be used prior to program development. Both the utility and the timing of the needs assessment approach have been restricted by this portrayal, as case studies will illustrate. Needs assessments should be conducted not only in the initial planning stage but periodically after a program has been implemented. In conjunction with formative evaluations, periodic needs assessments can be useful in the on-going process of program modification and in planning for future service delivery.

**Résumé** — L'évaluation des besoins, un outil en planification de programme, englobe à la fois la cueillette de données auprès des services, personnes ressources et clients potentiels, ainsi que l'utilisation d'inférences faites à partir d'indicateurs des besoins de la communauté. Telle que décrite dans la littérature, cette approche à l'évaluation ne devrait être utilisée qu'avant le développement d'un programme. Cette représentation limite l'utilité et l'opportunité de l'évaluation des besoins, comme l'illustrent certaines études de cas. L'évaluation des besoins devrait être faite non seulement au moment de la planification initiale, mais aussi de façon périodique après l'implantation du programme. L'évaluation périodique des besoins, jointe à des évaluations formatives, peut être utile au processus continu de modification de programme et à la planification des services futurs.

**IN CONTRAST TO PROCESS** and outcome approaches to evaluation, the literature on needs assessment is sparse. Although some evaluation textbooks contain a brief overview of needs assessment (e.g., Posavac & Carey, 1985; Rossi, Freeman, & Wright, 1979; Siegel, Attkisson, & Carson, 1978; Windsor, Baranowski, Clark & Cutter, 1984), others make no reference to this approach (Borus, Buntz, & Tash, 1982; Shortell & Richardson, 1978; Rutman, 1980). For more information on this topic, students and practitioners of evaluation must consult either government reports (Fishman & Neigher, 1979; Warheit, Bell & Schwab, 1977) or simplified, cookbook materials (Chambers, Woodward, & Dok, 1980).

Posavac and Carey (1985) noted that before initiating a new program, researchers should estimate community needs and identify the target population(s). Rossi et al. (1979) suggested that innovative programs must verify that a problem exists and that it is not already being successfully treated. Other descriptions of needs assessment are similar. For instance, it is viewed as a research activity designed to determine a community's service needs and utilization patterns (Warheit et al., 1977); to identify gaps in service provision (Windsor et al., 1984); and to establish priorities for the creation of service programs (Fishman & Neigher, 1979; Siegel et al., 1978).

All these sources consider needs assessment an advisable first step in planning a relevant and accountable community-based program. There is also agreement on the techniques that comprise a needs assessment study. The majority of information is solicited from three sources: (a) health and social indicators, (b) similar or related existing service agencies, and (c) potential clients. Finally, there is consensus that this evaluation activity should be carried out before a program has been developed and implemented.

This article argues that both the utility and the timing of the needs assessment approach have been restricted by this traditional view of needs assessment, which assumes that community and target population needs remain static. Neither of these assumptions are true, yet needs assessments conducted after program development or implementation has been completed are considered suspect. Needs assessment has been both misunderstood and underutilized. Just as it is a promising tool for planning in the initial stages of program development, *periodic* needs assessments can be useful in the ongoing process of program modification, and in planning for future service delivery.

Prior to presenting this broader perspective on the needs assessment approach, this article will review and address published criticisms of the traditional approach. I will then discuss periodic needs assessments in relation to process evaluation and on-going program monitoring as well as in relation to the types of information collected. Finally, I will present case studies that illustrate the utility of this approach in various stages of a program's lifespan.

## CRITICISMS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Kimmell's paper (1977) continues to serve as the landmark critique in the field of needs assessment. Both Kimmell and others after him (e.g., Cochran, 1979) tend to attribute the poor track record of needs assessment studies to

inherent weaknesses in the approach, rather than to its misunderstanding and misuse. Furthermore, many of the criticisms leveled at needs assessment are equally applicable to other types of evaluation research (process and outcome), and some are relevant to non-evaluation types of research as well.

Cochran (1979), for instance, argued that social indicators used in needs assessment research are value-laden. In response, Kamis (1979) correctly pointed out that all measurement necessitates a choice among variables and among data reduction strategies; if carefully selected and interpreted, social indicators can provide useful information for identifying at risk groups. Cautions include distinguishing between the incidence and the prevalence of a given problem (Posavac & Carey, 1985; Siegel et al., 1978) and between a program's impact and its changes in incidence rates (Baylis & Myers, 1988; Cox, Carmichael, & Dightman, 1979). Thus, as with any data source, social indicators should be used judiciously.

Needs assessments have been further criticized on the grounds that the approach is descriptive rather than analytical (Kimmell, 1977). Process evaluation is also descriptive in nature, yet the overall utility of this approach has not been similarly questioned.

The needs assessment approach has been faulted for lacking built-in mechanisms for prioritization of the needs identified (Siegel et al., 1978) or for estimation of costs (Kamis, 1979; Kimmell, 1977). However, a methodology should not be blamed for researchers' and decision-makers' failure to address the relative importance of community needs or to project the costs involved in meeting those needs. Needs assessment is only one tool for planning. Other tools are available for setting priorities (e.g., Delphi techniques) and for determining costs. As Kamis pointed out, planning decisions should be based on both need and cost data.

Kimmell (1977), among others, has noted that "need" can have multiple meanings, and that needs assessments often have unclear conceptual boundaries. Once again, the onus is on assessors to clearly state the purpose of their particular study. For instance, it is now generally recognized that it is important to distinguish between needs as perceived by the experts or service deliverers and needs as perceived by the target group or potential consumers. Both kinds of data have value, as does the discovery of discrepancies between the two (Kamis, 1979).

Needs assessments have been characterized as yielding poor payoffs for resource deployment, partly, as Kimmell (1977) notes, due to an organization's

relatively small areas of flexibility. In response, Cox et al. (1979) pointed out that greater efforts must be made to match anticipated data to available decision alternatives. Strategic evaluation planning in its broadest sense involves determining an organization's informational requirements for decision-making (Myers & Gonda, 1987). These principles apply to all evaluation activities, including needs assessments.

Finally, needs assessors have been typecast as "skillful political partisans" (Kimmell, 1977), the most common stimulus for needs assessment being seen as an external requirement such as a grant proposal or renewal (Cox et al., 1979). Many needs assessments do wind up as "empty pro forma data collection efforts" (Cox et al., p. 270). Yet any type of evaluation research can be conducted for internal or external purposes, or for both. Moreover, the issue of poor utilization of findings can be applied to all areas of program evaluation (e.g., Weiss, 1973). Acknowledgment that human services exist within a political system does not rule out the possibility of collecting data that are relevant to short- and long-term decision and planning functions (Cox et al.; Kamis, 1979).

## PERIODIC NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Needs assessments can be divided into two categories with respect to program stage: (a) those carried out before a program begins; and (b) those carried out periodically after a program has been implemented. The former type of assessment provides decision-makers with information needed in deciding whether to offer a specific program, where, and to whom, and enables them to plan program advertisement and delivery strategies. The latter type should facilitate decision-making concerning whether to continue to offer a specific program (in a similar or modified form), whether to redirect the program at new target groups, and whether to change program advertisement/delivery strategies.

In both cases, information obtained from the needs assessment study is meant to serve a planning function—either initial planning as in the former, or ongoing and future planning as in the latter. Although the timing is different, periodic needs assessments are identical to more traditional studies of this nature in that they are based on the same sources of information. Periodic needs assessments are conceptualized as being distinct from but complementary to process evaluations, as discussed below.

## Comparison With Process Evaluations

While process evaluations do not attempt to draw conclusions about program effectiveness, they are presented as a means of facilitating program evaluability (Rutman, 1980) or as a prelude to outcome evaluations (Borus et al., 1982). Their findings are suggestive rather than definitive, with the purpose of providing directions for program modifications and future planning. This type of evaluation serves an auditing or monitoring function, as a means of addressing program accountability.

Periodic needs assessments can serve similar purposes. What distinguishes periodic needs assessments from process evaluations is the type of data collected. Process evaluations involve collecting data on program operational variables (e.g., services delivered, staff workloads, etc.) and current program users (e.g., client profiles, utilization rates). One possible finding of a process evaluation study is that the population receiving the service is not the one originally targeted (e.g., Myers & Hamilton, 1985). Another possible finding is that the target group's needs have changed since the program began (e.g., Lawton, Greenbaum, & Liebowitz, 1980). Either finding would warrant a rethinking of the present system of service delivery.

Process evaluation studies, however, rarely include an assessment of community resources other than the program in question, or of non-users characteristic of the target group. While such information is collected in a traditional needs assessment study, it should be updated from time to time. For example, although service duplication may not have been an issue when a program was originally developed, similar services may now exist in the community. Thus, community needs may have changed over time. In addition, new potential clients may be identified. One such group consists of individuals who approach the program but either are not accepted or choose not to take part. Another group consists of persons who do not approach the program due to lack of awareness or other barriers. Thus, a thorough planning process requires information not only on program operational variables and current users, but also on available community resources and potential users. The following case studies are presented to illustrate the utility of periodic needs assessments.

## Case Studies

Cox et al. (1979) introduced the *optimal treatment approach* to needs assessment, as distinct from other techniques commonly described (e.g., Siegel et al., 1978). In Cox's example, a committee proposed an ideal treatment plan

for individual juvenile offenders. After one year, actual and optimal treatments for each of the 50 youths were compared to identify gaps in service resources. Given that the focus was on current program users, Cox et al.'s approach could be considered more of a process evaluation than a needs assessment. As Myers and Gonda (1987) point out, mechanisms for ongoing information gathering or monitoring (e.g., client tracking systems) should be built into all programs to facilitate timely evaluation activities. In any case, Cox et al. argue for the importance of assessing unmet needs after program implementation, and cycling this information into the on-going planning process.

Two more traditional needs assessment studies (Walfish, Wentz, Benzinger, Brennan, & Champ, 1981; Grant & Rice, 1983) are used to illustrate the potential utility of periodic needs assessments. Studies by Myers and Hamilton (1985) and Lawton et al. (1980) demonstrate how periodic needs assessments can complement process evaluations. Finally, a recent study by Baylis and Myers (1988) provides a working example of a combined process evaluation/needs assessment.

Walfish et al. (1981) conducted a needs assessment in the early stage of planning a university-based alcohol abuse prevention program. Data were obtained on the drinking patterns and related problems of potential clients, that is, students. One of the findings indicated an age-related progression in the number and type of negative consequences experienced as a result of alcohol usage. Based on this finding, Walfish et al. suggested that intervention efforts directed at students in the 20-25 age group should differ from those directed at the 18-19 age group. One can speculate that this pattern might change over time. For instance, there is some evidence to suggest that there may be a downward shift in the onset of adolescent drinking. According to the Addiction Research Foundation (1985), close to 90% of students in grade 11 consume alcohol. Thus, it is conceivable that in time the negative consequences reportedly experienced by Walfish et al.'s more senior students may be fairly commonplace in incoming freshmen. A periodic needs assessment conducted 5-10 years after program development could be highly beneficial in re-targeting primary versus secondary prevention efforts.

Grant and Rice (1983) used a mail-out survey to examine the prevalence of transportation needs identified by seniors in rural Saskatchewan. At the time, the province was establishing the Rural Transportation Assistance Program (RTAP) on a pilot basis. Grant and Rice used the opportunity to compare persons in their sample with access to RTAP routes to those with no access. Among the former, they found differences between the group of non-users who

were aware of the service, and the group consisting of users and those unaware of the service. Thus, in a traditional manner, Grant and Rice assessed unmet needs by surveying potential clients, including those using a similar existing service, that is, the RTAP. In addition, the study provided at least a partial process evaluation of the RTAP. For the purpose of the present article, the Grant and Rice study indicates the value of post-program implementation comparisons of service users with non-users characteristic of the target group.

A process evaluation by Myers and Hamilton (1985) focused on participants in The Canadian Red Cross Society's Fun and Fitness Program. The sample consisted of seniors from 11 fitness classes across four provinces. Findings indicated that the program was being delivered to seniors who were not part of the original target group. One recommendation was that the program implement screening of incoming participants and regular monitoring of class members. Another recommendation was that each area periodically investigate other fitness programs available in its community and survey the awareness level of seniors concerning the availability of such programs. Information on the community could be used to avoid service duplication and to provide alternatives for referral of persons considered unsuitable for Fun and Fitness. The survey information could be used to identify potential new Fun and Fitness members and to develop new advertisement strategies. Both of these planning-related activities could be classified as periodic needs assessment strategies.

A process evaluation by Lawton et al. (1980) examined changes in two housing environments for the aged over periods of 14 and 19 years, respectively. They found that new tenants were increasingly older and in poorer functional health than original tenants. With the aging of longer term residents, an overall decline in the independent nature of the housing population was evident. Since the goal of service was to match the level of service provided to the level of competence (and therefore need) of the residents, a decision had to be made concerning whether to preserve the original criteria for screening, or to accommodate the change in tenant characteristics by the stepwise addition of services. Ideally, Lawton et al. suggested, it would be useful to identify the universe of potential applicants and compare those who request tenancy and are accepted with those who apply and are refused and those who decide not to apply. One could add that the latter group would include persons aware of, and those unaware of the service's availability. The Lawton et al. article documents the fact that when characteristics of a client group change over time, their service needs also change in a major way. Accordingly, both periodic monitoring of existing clients and periodic assessments of potential clients are necessary to future planning initiatives.

Finally, Baylis and Myers (1988) demonstrate the utility of a combined process evaluation/needs assessment approach one year after program implementation. Their objective was to suggest possible modifications in The Safety Van Program, a free transportation service designed to reduce the incidence and fear of sexual assault among female university students living off-campus. A process evaluation approach was selected to examine utilization patterns, to determine whether program users were members of the defined target group, and to identify barriers to optimal service use. Non-users characteristic of the target audience were also surveyed, using a needs assessment approach, to provide a further appraisal of barriers to service use. Data from the process evaluation indicated that while the present route was adequate, the program should increase seating capacity and/or provide more frequent service during heavy demand periods, specifically between 9 p.m. and midnight. Increased costs of an additional van and driver could be partially offset by reducing the frequency of service during periods of low utilization.

In light of the needs assessment findings, however, such changes in service delivery were considered premature (Baylis & Myers, 1988). Data on non-users indicated a low level of program awareness. Only 6% had accurate information about all aspects of program operation, information obtained primarily through word of mouth as opposed to formal modes of advertisement. Baylis and Myers recommended not only that the extent of program advertisement be increased but that the content of such advertisement emphasize details of program operation. In particular, they suggested that advertisement stress the fact that the Safety Van operates seven days a week (80% of the target group lacked this knowledge). Baylis and Myers further suggested that the effectiveness of a new promotional campaign be empirically demonstrated before any program modifications (such as changes in scheduling) were undertaken. In other words, changes in service delivery should not be based solely on current utilization patterns, since overall utilization rates would likely increase if potential users were made more aware of the service.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As portrayed in the literature, needs assessment is a highly restricted approach to evaluation. Furthermore, this approach is considered to have multiple inherent weaknesses, such as reliance on descriptive and value-laden sources of data (Cochran, 1979); failure to prioritize needs and estimate costs (Kamis, 1979; Kimmell, 1977; Siegel et al., 1978); and unclear conceptual boundaries (Kamis, 1979; Kimmell, 1977). At the extreme, needs assessments have been



viewed as nothing more than a political exercise and a waste of resources, the resulting findings having little relevance for organizational decision-making (Cox et al., 1979; Kimmell).

Although a decade has passed since these critiques first appeared, many of these misconceptions remain. While strategic planning models (e.g., Myers & Gonda, 1987) and evaluability assessments (e.g., Rutman, 1980) have been developed to enhance the utility of both process and outcome evaluation findings, needs assessment has become a neglected approach.

This article has argued that needs assessment has been both misunderstood and misused. Furthermore, as a tool for program planning, this approach has been under-utilized. Traditionally, needs assessments have been reserved for the program planning stage. In fact, Kamis (1979) recommended that all "retrospective" needs assessments be blacklisted as a way of restoring respectability to this evaluation activity. Kamis' recommendation could be interpreted as including any needs assessment study conducted after program implementation, although in fact it specifically referred to post hoc studies conducted for the sole purpose of program justification. One could speculate that such studies would probably consist of a survey of current users, asking them to retrospectively appraise their reasons for entering the program or their perceived need. In contrast, while the Baylis and Myers (1988) study was conducted one year after program implementation, the needs assessment component focused on potential (versus current) clients and served an internal planning function.

Needs assessments should be conducted not only in the initial planning stage but periodically throughout a program's lifespan, with the timing of period assessments dependent on the nature of the service and the community in question. Such periodic needs assessments have been discussed in this article as being distinct from but complementary to process evaluations, in that the findings are channelled into the on-going process of program modification and into planning for future service delivery. Conceptually, periodic needs assessments are identical to more traditional studies of this nature, being based on the same sources of information.

As is the case with any evaluation activity, the onus of clearly specifying the purpose of a study lies with the assessor. This specification must be based on both program stage and organizational requirements for decision-making. Within this framework, the needs assessment approach can realize its potential as a valuable tool for program planning.

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