

Needs Assessment Techniques

Using Key Informant Interviews

You may have been asked to help with a needs assessment in your community that will use key informants. Don't let the sound of it intimidate you. It just means that Cooperative Extension wants to know if the needs in your area have changed since the last time they were assessed. There's no sense in spending time and money on programs no one needs, so conducting a needs assessment is a good way of learning about the educational needs of a community.

If you have had lunch with a local public official, minister, or school principal to discuss community needs, you have informally used the key informant technique. **Put simply, it is obtaining information from a community resident who is in a position to know the community as a whole, or the particular portion you are interested in.** That community resident can be a professional person who works with the group you want more information about, or a member of the target audience. Key informants can be young or old, or from a variety of socio-economic levels or ethnic groups.

There are many ways to get the information you want from a key informant. You can talk with them in an informal way, or you can use formal techniques, such as written questionnaires, telephone interviews, personal interviews, group interviews or community forums and public hearings. You can also make this a one-time event, or something you do on a regular basis to stay current with community developments.





Like any assessment technique there are some advantages and disadvantages to using key informants:

ADVANTAGES DISADVANTAGES

Opportunity to establish rapport/trust and get an insiders' view	Other community members who are not being used as key informants may become jealous and resent being left out
Can provide in-depth information about causes of the problem	Your relationship with the informant may influence the information you get
Allows you to clarify ideas and information on continual basis	Informants may give you their own impressions and biases
Can easily be combined with other techniques	May have to be combined with other methods, because representativeness of the total community is difficult to achieve
Allows you to obtain information from many different people, including minority or "silent majority" viewpoints	The information you get may be difficult to quantify or organize
Community volunteers can be involved in the process, and thus build community awareness and support, both for CES and the project	May overlook the perspectives of community members who are less visible
May avoid high cost of printing, mailing, and data analysis.	Takes time to select good informants and build trust
Can be used with all age groups, including elderly and children.	

Selecting the key informant is very important. The informant should be someone who not only understands the situation, but also thinks about it. A good informant will be able to express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and his or her perspective on the topic. The decision of who to interview may have already been made for you, or it may be a joint decision discussed in council meetings. No matter how the informant is chosen the first guideline is: pick someone who knows what's going on, and is articulate enough to share that knowledge.

The second guideline in picking a key informant is a little more complex. By the time all the informants have been interviewed, you want to be sure you have talked to a mix of people -- people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliation, educational level, etc. You want the total group of informants to reflect the characteristics of your community, or the group being studied.

Otherwise you run the risk of talking only to people with one background or

viewpoint, and having your conclusions one-sided or biased. Needs assessment takes too much time and is too important to mess up that way.

Most of the things to remember about choosing a key informant involve common sense. For example, if you were assessing the need in your community for youth at risk programs, you might contact any, or all, of the following:

- high school guidance counselor
- someone from Planned Parenthood
- minister who has been active in youth activities
- family court judge
- social worker or juvenile probation officer
- youths

Any of these people might be able to refer you to other key informants, who can then refer you to someone else. In the early stages each new informant may give you new information. In the later stages informants usually confirm or clarify information you already have.

There is no mystery to using key informants. Like anything else, you'll get better at it as you go along. By remembering these simple guidelines you too can be the **toast of the town!**

Information taken from: McKillip, Jack (1987). *Need analysis: Tools for the human services and education*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Butler & Howell (1980). *Coping with growth: Community needs assessment techniques*. Corvallis, OR: Western Rural Development Center. Caffarella, Rosemary S. (1982, July/August). Identifying client needs. *Journal of Extension*, 5-11; Anderson, Curt L., et al (1990, April), *Evaluation Review*, 14, 182-1 91.

Provided by the University of Illinois Extension Service-Office of Program Planning and Assessment

