

# **A Community Needs Assessment Framework**

Prepared for AK SPF/SIG Grantees, March 2012\*

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A needs assessment is a tool that can be used to understand a community's needs and assets – telling an objective story about a community through primary and secondary data. Through the assessment process, information can be gathered to describe substance use in the community, the impact of substance use, current prevention/enforcement activities already being used, and gaps in community resources. This information can be used to educate community members and stakeholders about substance use in the community, dispel misconceptions about substance use, review current prevention efforts, and prioritize strategies to address the most pressing concerns identified during the needs assessment process.

The following framework is intended to be a resource to help communities think critically about data collection and how that data can be used to develop an assessment process from which appropriate strategies and actions can be identified and developed.

## **WHICH QUESTIONS SHOULD BE ANSWERED IN A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT?**

All needs assessments should be developed to meet the needs of the community. The following framework consists of six key questions that can be answered by compiling primary and secondary data. Suggestions for potential sources of data are included in this framework.

*\*Note:* This document has been adopted from *Assessing Community Needs and Readiness – A Toolkit for Working with Communities* published by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, ATOD Prevention.  
<http://www.wilder.org/download.o.html?report=2463>

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## Community Needs Assessment Guiding Questions, Topics, Data Examples + Options

I. What are the characteristics of the community?		
<p>Descriptive information including the location and size of the community, demographic characteristics of residents, number of schools, employment, and home ownership rates, and other information, can be used to “paint a picture” of the community. When gathering information, consider what a reader would need to know in order to understand the community’s assets, strengths, and challenges.</p>		
Topic Area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Demographic characteristics of community residents	Gender, age, cultural characteristics of community residents, including trends over time	Secondary data review (Census/American Community Survey data, student demographic information through school districts)
Description of local strengths, weaknesses, resources, gaps	<p>Number/type/description of agencies currently offering prevention services</p> <p>Description of a coalitions recent accomplishments; description of the groups represented on the coalition</p> <p>Number of licensed alcohol/tobacco vendors</p> <p>Status of local ordinances (for example: whether alcohol compliance checks are currently performed; policies around drinking at public events)</p>	<p>Asset mapping (definition: a structure approach to identifying community assets and gaps) or resource assessment</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Review of city administrator records</p> <p>Review of existing policies and ordinances</p> <p>Key informant interviews</p>
2. What concerns about youth alcohol use and adult heavy and binge drinking have brought stakeholders to the table?		
<p>It is important to understand the concerns and priorities of local stakeholders. Some communities may have a strong interest in focusing on restricting youth access to alcohol, while others may be focused on adults. Recent local events or things highlighted in the media could have raised awareness or concern about an issue. This information is useful, not only in understanding current community concerns, but in recognizing potential priorities or biases among coalition stakeholders.</p>		
Topic Area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Perceptions of alcohol prevention needs among coalition members/stakeholders	Qualitative data describing major alcohol related issues, concerns	<p>Key informant interviews</p> <p>Facilitated discussion</p>
3. What is known about youth drinking and adult drinking in the community?		
Topic area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Actual alcohol use among community members	<p>Percentage of students/adults reporting alcohol use</p> <p>Number of treatment admissions/ER visits</p>	<p>Secondary data review (YRBS, adult survey)</p> <p>Secondary data review (local data from clinic, other to be determined)</p>
Impact of alcohol use in the community	<p>Number of DWI crashes, arrests, DWI-related deaths</p> <p>Number of underage citations</p>	Secondary data review(crime report data; local law enforcement records, Division of Public safety records)

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## 4. What are the perceptions of residents about alcohol use in the community?

While existing data sources can provide information about actual alcohol use, it is also important to understand how alcohol use is perceived by community members. Information about the ways youth access alcohol, factors that encourage/discourage unhealthy alcohol use behaviors (for example community culture, peer pressure), and the degree to which residents feel alcohol use is a problem in the community may also be helpful to understand. Factors influencing alcohol use or perceptions around alcohol use may vary based on the age, socioeconomic status, or racial/ethnic background of residents, so efforts should be made to ensure feedback is gathered from a representative sample of residents

Topic area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Perceptions of community regarding alcohol use	<p>Factors that encourage/discourage alcohol use among teens</p> <p>Qualitative/quantitative description of level/degree of resident concern</p>	<p>Focus groups</p> <p>Key informant interviews</p> <p>Written/online surveys</p> <p>Focus groups</p> <p>Key informant interviews</p> <p>Written/online surveys</p>

## 5. Is the community ready to make change?

Community readiness is important to consider before identifying potential prevention/intervention strategies. When considering readiness, it is critical to consider prevention/intervention strategies. When considering readiness, it is critical to consider whether the community is prepared and ready to act on the areas of concern identified through the needs assessment process. Therefore, a community readiness assessment should not be conducted unless a community needs assessment has been completed recently (or is being completed simultaneously).

Topic Area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Perceptions of community capacity to implement prevention activities	Descriptions of stakeholder concerns + perceptions	<p>Written survey</p> <p>Focus group</p> <p>Key informant interview</p> <p>Facilitated discussion</p>
Level of support among key stakeholders, community residents for alcohol prevention activities	Rating of “readiness” using a standardized instrument	

## 6. Are there other community strengths, assets, weaknesses, and challenges that should be taken into account when working on this type of initiative?

In the course of working with a community as the needs assessment is conducted, you may want to ask about other factors or important issues to consider when developing strategies to address alcohol prevention in the community. This “catch-all” question can help coalition members remain open and receptive to new pieces of information that may not otherwise fit into their data collection plan.

Topic area	Examples of data that can be used	Data collection options
Other high priority issues, concerns identified by key stakeholders	<p>Potential emerging issues</p> <p>High visibility events/recent concerns among community residents</p> <p>Factors that should be considered when considering interventions with specific populations</p>	<p>Open-ended responses to questions on written surveys</p> <p>Key informant interviews</p> <p>Focus groups</p>

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## **How should the data be interpreted?**

After the data has been gathered, it's important for the coalition and community to step back and figure out what it means and how it applies to your community. The following questions can help interpret the results from the data that has been collected:

- What patterns and themes emerge in the results?
- Are there any deviations from these patterns? If yes, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?
- Do the results make sense?
- Are there any findings that are surprising? If so, how can the results be explained?
- Are the results significant from a clinical or statistical standpoint? Are they meaningful in a practical way?
- Do any interesting stories emerge from the responses?
- Do the results suggest any recommendations for improving prevention efforts in the community?
- Do the results lead to additional questions about community needs? Do they suggest that additional data may need to be collected?

## **How should the findings be reported?**

The results from the community needs assessment should be shared in a way that provides clear information that can be used to help guide next steps. The approach used to report key assessment findings may vary based on the needs of the coalition and community. While a PowerPoint presentation may be appropriate for some audiences, others may want to read a formal report and have opportunities for discussion and strategic planning.

Regardless of the approach taken, the following tips should be taken into account when reporting information:

- Share the most important take-away points and highlight key pieces of data that support these findings. If there are surprising or potentially controversial findings, it may be necessary to report additional supporting data in the appendix or an expanded section of the report.
- Consider using bulleted lists, graphs, and charts to present information in a clear, concise way. In written reports, bold font or bulleted lists can be used to clearly identify key points to the reader. Graphs and charts can be used to simplify data and may be a more meaningful way to report information to audiences who are visual learners.
- There are strengths and limitations associated with all types of data collection approaches, and some information can be challenging to gather and interpret. Be forthcoming with the limitations of the assessment approach so the audience can interpret the data in the appropriate context.

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## Sample Report Outline

### *I. Introduction*

In one to three sentences, identify the purpose of the community needs assessment, the target populations included in the assessment (i.e., youth 12-20 and adults 21-44), who participated in the development of the needs assessment, and how this information will be used. Report any concerns that brought local stakeholders to the table to discuss prevention of youth alcohol use and adult heavy and binge drinking.

Briefly describe the community, including demographic characteristics of residents and changes in community growth observed over time. It may also be useful to include the number of schools in the community, types of major employers, and other information that describes key aspects of the community.

### *II. Data collection methods*

Describe the data collection methods used, including the names of instruments. Include the response rate for written surveys or number of key informants/focus group participants. Identify limitations of the data collection methods (e.g., surveys were not translated into other languages), when necessary.

### *III. Key findings*

Report the most important information collected through the needs assessment, highlighting key findings and important trends to consider. When necessary, describe gaps in the data or limitations that the reader should consider when reviewing this information. Some of the key questions that may be answered in this section are listed below:

#### What is known about youth alcohol use in the community?

Using secondary and/or primary data sources, describe alcohol use in the community. When reporting the results, consider if there are specific populations (i.e., cultural groups, age groups) that are most impacted by alcohol use and changes in trends/patterns over time. Consider including regional- or state-level data to put local information into a larger context.

#### What factors encourage/discourage youth alcohol use and/or adult heavy and binge drinking in the community?

Describe the policy, social, and environmental factors that encourage or discourage youth alcohol use and adult heavy/binge drinking in the community. Possible areas of interest to include in this section of the report are:

- Report the number of alcohol vendors in the community, including the rate of failed alcohol compliance checks
- Describe the policies that are in place (or are lacking in the community) to discourage youth alcohol use (i.e., Social Host ordinance) and adult heavy and binge drinking (i.e., alcohol sales at community events or fairs)
- Describe local enforcement activities (i.e., are fines a deterrent to underage alcohol sales?)
- Describe the availability of alcohol in the community, as perceived by key stakeholders, including information about age of initiation or how alcohol is often introduced to youth, if known
- Discuss concerns around social norms that may contribute to youth alcohol use and adult heavy and binge drinking

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## What are the perceptions of residents about youth alcohol use and adult heavy and binge drinking in the community?

After reporting existing data that clearly describe the rates of alcohol use and areas of community concern, include information about how residents perceive alcohol use in the community. Consider whether the perceptions of residents align with what is indicated by the data.

## What other community strengths, gaps, assets, and/or weaknesses should be considered?

Describe current and past prevention activities in the community, the results of efforts to strengthen ordinances/enforcement activities, the prevention resources available in the community, and the results of past coalition efforts. Describe the relationship between community-based organizations, law enforcement, school personnel, and other organizations as appropriate.

## Is the community ready to make change?

Report the results from the community readiness assessment. Describe whether the coalition has appropriate multi-disciplinary representation and strong leadership and the readiness of community members to address alcohol-related prevention. Consider how well the areas of readiness align with the needs of the community identified when reviewing existing data sources.

### *IV. Synthesis*

Provide a critical analysis of the data, highlighting the most important community needs and trends that should be considered by the coalition. Do not introduce new data in this section of the report, but guide the reader to help them understand how it all fits together. Describe common themes identified when multiple data collection sources were used and provide possible explanations for differences between data sources. It may also be helpful to identify areas where additional data collection may be needed to fully understand an issue. Questions to ask when writing this section are:

- Based on the data, what ATOD concerns are of greatest importance to the community? (This could be described by identifying issues that have an impact on the largest number of residents or disproportional impacts on specific populations. Trend data may also indicate important increases in ATOD use or changes in risk behaviors.)
- How do the community's current policies, environmental attributes, and social norms encourage/hinder prevention efforts related to these key areas?
- What community strengths/assets can be used to address concerns in this area?
- What challenges or areas of weaknesses will need to be addressed?

### *V. Recommendations*

The "Synthesis" section of the report points out areas of concern in the community, as well as resources and assets that can help the coalition address alcohol-related issues. The recommendations section should offer potential strategies that can be used to address challenges or build on strengths. The types of recommendations will vary depending on the needs and resources of the community; for example, for coalitions/communities that do not want recommendations that are too prescriptive, an appropriate recommendation might be, "Focus future coalition meetings on identifying evidence-based models that can be used to address binge drinking among college students." This section is also a place to suggest specific resources that may be helpful to the coalition as they work on alcohol prevention efforts in their community, such as the Evidence-based Strategies guide forthcoming from the State of Alaska.