Community Assessments

Why Conduct a Community Assessment?
A community assessment gathers data from community members to assess the current situation in a city or town. As part of the community development process, the purpose of the assessment is to identify assets and areas for improvement. The findings from the assessment help to make decisions about how best to leverage assets or prioritize community needs to address. Assets include a variety of categories, including individuals, organizations, businesses, institutions (ex: schools, churches, hospitals, libraries), physical spaces (ex: parks, trails, rivers, community art, sidewalks), community services (ex: public transportation, recycling) and any other resources in the community. Areas for improvement refer to needs or vulnerabilities identified in the community that can be addressed or improved. Depending on the scope, a community assessment may focus on a neighborhood, main street, town/city, county, or other area identified.

Accessing and Collecting Data
A community assessment may include reviewing secondary data or data that already exists and collecting primary data, or new data from community members. There are a variety of resources for existing data, described in detail below. In addition, there may be recent community input in municipal plans or reports, like a current master plan or a report sharing findings from a recent community conversation.

Resources for Existing Data
There are many different sources and resources for accessing data about your community. Here are a few to get started:

**Economic Profile System.** The Economic Profile System (EPS) by Headwaters Economics is a free and accessible software that creates detailed socioeconomic profiles of communities, counties and regions based on public data sources. Reports available include demographics, socioeconomic trends, natural hazards, land management and more.

**Census Bureau of the United States.** This is the official source of U.S. demographic data which includes many datasets: population, housing, labor and health.

**NH Employment Security.** Provides a variety of labor market data, for example: employment statistics, commuting patterns, employment projections. NH Employment Security also publishes a [NH Community Profile](#) for each municipality and county.

**NH Office of Strategic Initiatives Municipal Land Use Survey Results.** This interactive map which portrays the results of the 2019 survey shares information about municipal organizational structure, land use regulations, housing, building code, economic development, planning, water and shore-land regulations and energy information.
Engaging your Community

While it is feasible to gather lots of information based on secondary data sources described above, the people in your community know the community best and it is critical to gather information directly from them. It is critical to engage a broad and representative group of people in your community and offer multiple and different opportunities for people to participate. There are a number of tools to collect data, including key informant interviews, surveys, focus groups, posters, mapping and more.

UNH Extension Community Assessment Tools

Community assessments are a key step in the community development process and are a major component of UNH Extension’s community-based programs. We have developed different assessments for different purposes: broad community assessment, business retention and downtown-focused assessments.

Components of a Vibrant Community

The components of a vibrant community are typically used to lead community conversations in our Community Profile visioning program. These components represent the different facets of a community that are necessary for a healthy and vibrant community. A broad community based assessment should include all of these components.

Business Retention Interview Questions

The business retention interview questions are used during our Business Engagement and Retention program. The purpose of this interview is to develop a relationship with businesses in your community to learn about their needs and opportunities. This interview can be used to conduct a community assessment specific to businesses.

Downtown Characteristics

The downtown characteristics are used to conduct an assessment of a downtown or main street through our First Impressions program. These characteristics represent the different parts of a downtown that work together to create a welcoming, inviting and vibrant space. Assessing a downtown often focuses on the built environment (sidewalks, seating, parking), but also includes history and cultural features (architecture, points of interest, community art) and natural assets (parks, rivers, trails).
Conducting Assessments for Community Economic Resilience

Planning for resilience requires conducting an assessment to identify assets and needs to prepare for potential disruptions and improve quality of life. Resilience can be defined as the ability to adapt and respond to shocks and disturbances, and can imply that the return to “normal” or pre-crisis state is the goal. However, resilience is also defined as sustaining and improving the quality of life for community members through environmental, social and economic crises. Through resilience planning there is the opportunity to spring forward to an improved state rather than bounce back to normal.

Community assessments identify ways to leverage assets and identify areas to improve in order to strengthen quality of life and prepare for potential disturbances. Some community resilience assessments focus primarily on identifying potential hazards and developing emergency plans, and while important, it is recommended to also focus on community assets and improving quality of life to become more resilient. Resilience focuses on enhancing and strengthening the community versus preparing for specific events.

Community Economic Resilience Assessment Tools

- Community Resilience Planning Guide (National Institute of Standards and Technology)
  https://www.nist.gov/community-resilience/planning-guide
- Community Resilience Assessment (Community Resilience Organizations)
  https://gocros.org/community-resilience-assessment
- City Resilience Index (Arup & Rockefeller Foundtation)
  https://www.cityresilienceindex.org/#/resources

Learn More about Asset Based Community Development and Community Assessments

- DePaul Asset Based Community Development Institute. https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx
- Community Tool Box (University of Kansas). https://ctb.ku.edu/en/toolkits

About the Author

Casey Porter is the former Community and Economic Development Program Manager at the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Casey works with communities to build their capacity to gather input, develop strategies and move to action, resulting in downtown revitalization, community vibrancy and a strengthened economy.