FACT SHEET

Community data

This fact sheet provides an overview of community data, including types of data and how to gather it.

LEARN

Community data is any form of evidence or information that is relevant to the local community.

Finding relevant data for a community initiative helps to inform 'where to start' and evaluate 'how we are going' in achieving intended impacts.

Using community data keeps the focus where it should be – the community.

We need community data to:

- explore and expand our knowledge and understanding
- provide evidence and an 'argument' for implementing an initiative
- inform the design of an initiative
- enable buy-in or support for an initiative, and
- create a rationale for funding by demonstrating rigour and outcomes.

Creating a data picture

When considering how gathering data can be useful in developing a community initiative, it is also useful to think of community data as part of a larger 'data picture'.

Community data can be used to stimulate discussions about early child development among teachers, parents, schools, community groups and early childhood services.

Regional data can be used to identify communities and neighbourhoods where children may be at risk developmentally. This data can be also be used to plan and evaluate early childhood strategies and actions.

State/national data can be used to leverage better informed early childhood policies which match programs with investment opportunities. This data can also be used to document the effect, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness of early childhood programs.

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Types of data

There are several types of data to inform the design and review of an initiative. These include:

Primary data

Primary data is evidence or information collected for a specific purpose directly from the source of the information in an organised way. Examples of primary data include:

- formal surveys
- interviews
- focus groups
- case studies
- community meetings.

Secondary data

Secondary data is evidence or information that has already been collected by others. It is not specifically designed for initiative. Secondary data is usually widely available and easy to gather. Examples of secondary data include:

- government statistics and evidence from related databases
- media mentions
- reports, research and inquires.

Formal data

Formal data is gathered in a defined an accurate way so that decisions made can be defined as 'valid'. Examples of formal data include:

- surveys
- government statistics.

Informal/anecdotal data

Informal or anecdotal data can be gathered in a more informal way.

Examples of informal/anecdotal data include:

- interviews
- focus groups
- stories
- conversations
- media mentions
- children's artwork
- photographs.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data can be 'counted' or 'measured with numbers'. Examples of quantitative data include:

- statistics
- survey response rates
- attendance.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data supports, approximates or informs but does not measure with numbers. Qualitative data describes whereas quantitative data defines.

Examples of qualitative data include:

- stories
- interviews
- focus groups
- case studies.

Both qualitative and quantitative data are important and can guide discussion from community stakeholders to inform planning and review.

How to gather primary community data

There are many different ways to gather primary data from the community. You can use informal or formal methods.

Informal data gathering

Interviews and focus groups

Speaking directly with people (one-on-one or in groups) and listening to their thoughts, ideas and concerns is a very effective way to find out more about a community. It also provides an opportunity to build relationships.

Meeting people where they are

Finding people where community members gather, work and socialise is an effective way to find out more about 'how things work'. Using informal and personable ways of meeting people can be very effective in gathering genuine and relevant information.

Formal data gathering

Random sampling

Random sampling is objectively selecting participants for a consultation. This is a standard way to get a representative sample of a community's views and attitudes. To help minimise bias or false reporting it is important to ensure the sample is representative of the characteristics of the community (by controlling for age, place of residence, gender, income, education level etc).

There are a number of ways to engage people in a formal process including:

Face-to-face: Once a profile of the population has been developed to suit the issue being discussed (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, housing tenure, occupation, geography, religion), recruiters often find participants by approaching people face-to-face either at their homes, in shopping centres, and so on. This contact is also an opportunity to build relationships with community members and can provide an informal way to hear their story.

Targeted advertisements: Advertisements can be placed online or in newspapers asking for participants and specifying the issue to be discussed. Respondents could be asked to write a brief explanation of their interest and are then selected according to certain criteria. This approach would work well when considering literacy, language and the formality of an application process.

Non-targeted advertisements: General advertisements can be placed online or in newspapers, which ask for participants for a consultation, with very limited additional information. Those who express an interest are surveyed by telephone, and then matched to a profile.

Random letter writing: Letters are sent to community members randomly selected from the electoral roll inviting them to participate.

Personalised letter writing: Letters are sent to community members randomly selected from the electoral roll. The letters are then followed up with a telephone call or a personal visit. This approach can work well in small communities.

Random telephoning: People can be randomly selected by telephone number and invited to participate.

Tips to remember

Communication

When communicating with community members, it is important to be mindful of language and jargon. Plain language is most effective for a general audience. Also, be mindful with the questions you ask. Ensure the questions are clear and don't lead participants to respond in a certain way.

Relationships

When learning about the community it is important to develop and maintain genuine relationships. This may require allocating more time to hear from community members and a more personal introduction to different groups and people.

Local context

Being aware of local issues, history and relationships is useful when meeting with community members. This is particularly important in regional areas and when working with Aboriginal communities where there is a need to involve members of a number of different communities. Knowing the history between Aboriginal people and service providers in a community can help establish trust in the consultation process.

Approach

Carefully consider the way you engage the community in a consultation process. Entering into a consultation without preconceived ideas; being prepared to spend some time discussing personal and life experiences; being a patient and active listener; and maintaining contact with the community after the initial consultation period is over are all important parts of the process.

Also consider the best approach for engaging the community. For example, when engaging young people, an effective approach could involve selecting venues they attend (e.g. youth centres), paying them for their attendance, and providing food and refreshments.

For more Platforms information, resources and support visit: www.rch.org.au/ccch/platforms

This resource is designed for use in conjunction with the Platforms Guide. © Centre for Community Child Health.