

CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY, LIMITATIONS, AND UNDERSTANDING THE DASHBOARD

METHODOLOGY

This section provides a brief review of how this report was developed and the limitations of both the methodology and the report itself.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Community Needs Assessment is developed in three-year cycles by the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas (UWMD). Year one is a longer and more extensive report, with the following two years being briefer updates. The most recent Community Needs Assessment was published in 2005. This document in its entirety, as well as the 2007 and 2006 Community Needs Assessment Updates can be found online at www.unitedwaydallas.org.

A committee of volunteers from all four counties was appointed to oversee the 2008 Community Needs Assessment. A Technical Advisory Committee was appointed to review the methodology, review the indicators and assist with technical issues related to data collection. Committees were recruited for each of the three Impact Areas (Education, Income, and Health), plus one special committee to review the Seniors information. Membership for these committees was drawn from United Way professional planners, partner agencies, donors, and community experts. The community experts were drawn from organizations such as universities, state and local government and non-United Way agencies.

The Impact Area committees first met to review and approve indicators for each of their areas. Using the indicators from prior Community Needs Assessments as a starting point, certain indicators were dropped, others changed and new ones added. Over 200 indicators were eventually chosen to represent the three Impact Areas. Data was collected from a variety of sources including the U.S. Census Bureau and federal, state, and local agencies. The committees then met to review and analyze the new data that was collected. The data and analysis was coordinated and shaped into the Community Needs Assessment chapters. Committee members met to review the drafts and selected the top priorities and trends for the Region.

INDICATORS

The basic building blocks of the Community Needs Assessment are the indicators that were selected by the volunteer committees. An *indicator* is the data collected that measures the state of the community. Indicators are items of information, fact or statistic that provide insight into the condition of a population or community. Following an indicator over time can reveal a trend. It tracks measurable change in some social condition over time. Generally an indicator focuses on a small, manageable, and telling piece of a system to give people a sense of the bigger picture. For example, the number of books being checked out of a library can tell you something about the cultural vitality of a community, while the number of new small businesses that survive their first year will tell you something about economic health overall.

The Community Needs Assessment provides a common set of social and health indicators for use by non-profit agencies, community-based organizations, health and human service funding sources, local governments, public agencies, and residents. These indicators are meant to complement other local needs assessment efforts. The collection of indicators across all three Impact Areas represents the first step in developing a system of measures that, over time, will assist the community in evaluating the impact that its deployment of resources has on important issues, needs and problems. New indicators will be added and others refined as necessary. Accurate and reliable data on the

demographic, social and economic conditions of the communities that make up the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas four-county Service Area Region are vital for planning, resource allocation, and measuring the impact of social policies and programs.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The Community Needs Assessment Update is primarily an environmental scan. Because of time and cost considerations, the report is based on analysis of secondary or existing data. No original survey data was conducted, although some sections include survey results from other sources. Data was collected from a variety of sources including the U.S. Census Bureau and federal, state, and local agencies.

LIMITATIONS

Because of the prohibitive cost of primary research, the 2008 Community Needs Assessment relies on statistics and information that others have compiled, and therefore has its limitations. To assure that the Community Needs Assessment is used and understood most effectively, it is important to be aware of the following limitations.

LAG TIME

Using secondary data requires collecting data from many sources. Data release varies among different data sources. New data is continually being released. Any report of this type will soon have certain indicators that are not the most up-to-date. Even the most recent data will have some lag time between the time the data is collected and when it is released. In the case of unemployment, that time may be only a matter of weeks. On the other hand, information from the U.S. Census Bureau was released 18 months after it was collected.

GEOGRAPHIC LIMITATIONS

The intent of the Community Needs Assessment is to track conditions in the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas four-county Service Area Region: Collin, Dallas, Denton and Rockwall. However, not all data is available at the local or county level. In some cases, regional, state or national prevalence rates, or survey results, are available and can be extrapolated to the local level. However, this assumes that the same rate that applies nationally also applies to local conditions. This may or may not be the case, but the technique allows for an estimate of local conditions.

Due to the small size of Rockwall County, data is unavailable from any American Community Survey prior to 2006. The American Community Survey (ACS) does not present data for all geographic areas. It includes only geographic areas with a population of 65,000 or more.

AVAILABILITY

The Community Needs Assessment relies on data that can be collected and analyzed to help determine if and to what degree a problem or need exists. In some cases, data may not exist that directly applies to a certain need or condition. For example, no data was available to track well-baby or postnatal health trends. In this case, infant mortality and immunization data can serve as indicators of health trends for infants and toddlers. But in other cases, there are no alternate indicators readily available to describe a potential need.

FORMAT

Data is not always collected in the format that is best suited to the purposes of the report. For example, in looking for data related to certain age groups, the data may not be reported in the precise age groups most relevant to the study. In looking for data as it applies to children under the age of 18, source data is sometimes reported for ages 0 to 14 and 15 to 25. It is not always possible to dismantle and recombine data so that it conforms to the parameters of the Community Needs Assessment.

REPORTING PERIODS

Reporting periods can vary by calendar year, frequency, and fiscal year. Some data is reported on a calendar-year basis, other data on a fiscal-year basis. Additionally, different jurisdictions and organizations have different fiscal years.

CONSISTENCY

The consistency of data can vary, especially over time and among agencies and organizations. Definitions of a particular indicator are sometimes adjusted or dramatic fluctuations can occur, especially in low-populated areas such as Rockwall County. Such fluctuations make it difficult to identify trends. Government agencies can change their regulations, or the process by which they gather data, impacting the information gathered from those sources as well.

ACCURACY AND VALIDITY

UWMD has been very careful in collecting, analyzing, and presenting data from a variety of sources. United Way only uses published data in the Community Needs Assessment, and in any case where there was any question about accuracy or validity of data, it was not included in the Community Needs Assessment. To ensure proper presentation of the data, drafts of the report were reviewed by United Way staff and volunteers several times.

Even though the data may be valid, questions about accuracy may still be raised. While underreporting is a concern about data in general, it is of particular concern in certain types of data. Among those areas are criminal activities, family violence, child abuse, and school dropout rates.

There are a number of reasons why individuals fail to report certain conditions:

- suspicion of authorities
- language or cultural barriers
- immigration status
- concerns about retribution
- attempts to protect someone or to keep a problem in the family
- individuals may interpret an incident differently based on personal experience and subjective definitions

Although underreporting can make it difficult to gauge the true size of a problem, if the underreporting is considered to be fairly constant, then trends over time can still be identified.

CAPACITY

The availability of services, or lack of availability, can substantially influence reporting. For example, if resources are limited, individuals in need of a particular service may not be able to obtain the

service and therefore may not be counted in the total. Public awareness is similar to capacity in that reports of certain conditions may increase based on the public profile of an issue or event.

SUBJECTIVITY

One of the primary objectives of the Community Needs Assessment is for various groups to make decisions regarding areas of emphasis for future human service investment. As such, individuals and volunteer committees using this report will make value judgments about the relative importance or size of a problem or need, based on the available data and other information.

The data is subject to interpretation as individuals or groups come to conclusions about what the data suggests. At the same time, the report and accompanying data are intended to serve as a resource to other individuals and groups in the community as they review the data and develop their own interpretations and priorities.

BASELINE

By collecting time-series data whenever possible, trends can be identified. However, because data is available in differing time frames and individuals interpret the data differently, the determination of trends is often subjective. In some cases, individuals may look at long-term changes, whereas in other cases, they may look at only a few years of data.

CAUSATION

Reporting certain conditions or trends does not provide information about their causes. However, certain studies suggest a relationship between cause and effect. For example, unemployment and poor economic conditions appear to be related to crime. There is a clear correlation between education and income levels, obesity and/or smoking and certain health problems. But even in these examples, many other factors can also play a role in the development of a condition; therefore, correlation does not equate to causation.




Finally, it should be noted that in collecting and using data that provides a “snapshot” of conditions at a particular point in time, changes in the conditions of particular individuals or households are not taken into account. Someone who is poor one year may not necessarily be poor at a later date; other poor persons may simply have replaced them.

UNDERSTANDING THE DASHBOARD

In analyzing the data and assessing community need, the Community Needs Assessment uses a *dashboard* approach. A measure, or gauge, is used to summarize findings and provide a quick reading on the current trend of the indicator or need.

The trend summarizes movement within the data. For example, it will tell you whether the number of persons affected by a problem is increasing, decreasing or staying about the same. It is important to note that the trend is based on how changes affect the issue, not necessarily how the numbers are changing. For example, a decrease in the school dropout rate would be considered a positive, or up, trend for the community (rather than a “down” trend simply because the rate is decreasing).

UWMD COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT DASHBOARD LEGEND

TREND	
<p>Most indicators are showing improvement. Movement is generally in the direction of what people would consider as achieving positive results or effects.</p> <p>The situation is generally improving.</p>	 IMPROVING
<p>Indicators are staying about the same or there may be mixed signals.</p> <p>The situation is static.</p>	 SAME OR MIXED
<p>Most indicators are consistently getting worse. Movement is generally in the direction of what most people would consider a negative result or effect.</p> <p>The situation is getting worse or more challenging.</p>	 WORSENING