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- THE ARTS
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- CIVIL JUSTICE
- EDUCATION
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- INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
- NATIONAL SECURITY
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- PUBLIC SAFETY
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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T



Criteria for Assessing the Usefulness of Community Health Assessments

A Literature Review

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Prepared for the Public Health Information Group of the Center for
Community Health in the New York State Department of Health

The research in this report was conducted by RAND Health, a unit of the RAND Corporation. It was conducted under contract with the Public Health Information Group of the Center for Community Health in the New York State Department of Health, with financial support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Assessment Initiative.

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Published 2006 by the RAND Corporation
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SUMMARY

Community health assessments (CHAs) are a means of identifying and describing community health problems, gaps and strengths in services, and interventions to improve the health of the community. To inform the development of a Web-based tool to determine and enhance the usefulness of CHAs, we performed a literature review of various studies and publications to identify factors and criteria for a useful CHA process. We found no rigorous, systematic reviews of CHAs, nor any comprehensive summaries of CHA strengths, weaknesses, and outcomes. However, we used this opportunity to review descriptive reports of a number of CHA processes throughout the United States and to learn about common—and not so common—characteristics that might be used in the Web-based tool.

We found substantial variation among CHAs with respect to process, participants, goals, and products. Few CHAs seem to focus narrowly on health care, without paying attention to other community issues that can affect health. Most CHAs seem to include an improvement aspect, going beyond assessing the problems in a community to develop a plan for addressing them.

This review and subsequent discussions led us to identify 21 criteria to describe the usefulness of CHAs. With respect to the content, for instance, the CHA document should clearly state the goals and purpose of the CHA, include the most important aspects of the community's health, allow comparisons with data from other communities or other appropriate benchmarks, allow comparisons over time, present data in meaningful subgroups of population, provide sufficient focus on positive characteristics, and sufficiently document the process and methods used to create the CHA. The format of the CHA document should use a consistent format to present information on different topics in the report; include both summary and detailed versions to be useful to a variety of audiences; be well-organized so that content is easy to find and easy to understand; clearly indicate the relationships among

related health indicators; include narrative and graphic representation of key findings to meet the needs of varying audiences; use a similar structure or data elements to that of other community planning tools currently in use; be available online; be suitable for photocopying; and clearly identify the data sources used. Finally, the CHA document should serve as a resource to prioritize and plan services; for writing grant applications; and to guide a comprehensive health promotion strategy.