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# What Do Youth Want to Do? A Youth Needs-Assessment Process for Communities

**Abstract**
This article details a youth needs-assessment process. The process in founded on two notions: (a) sound data on youth wants and needs is extremely important for any youth programming decisions; and (b) youth, organizations, and the community should be involved in gathering information.

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The American public at all socio-economic levels is increasingly concerned about cimmunity problems involving youth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Some communities are attempting to combat these problems by offering youth activities that can be positive, structured alternatives to antisocial behaviors (Pittman & Wright, 1991). The question communities ask is, "What activities should we offer and how should we offer them?" Youth perspectives are an important element in the answering of this question.

As University of California Extension agents, we have assisted a number of communities in assessing youth wants and needs in terms of youth programming. As a result of these efforts, we have developed a sound and effective process.

While a needs-assessment's primary purpose is to obtain vital information, it can bring youth and the community more into the decision-making process. Questioning youth and community members about their ideas on youth activities develops greater ownership and creates an expectation of things to come. Furthermore, these efforts can help to build relationships that can be beneficial during implementation. These intangibles must be encouraged if youth and the community are to get behind a project. The youth needs-assessment process rises out of these premises:

1. Identify parameters and objectives of the potential project(s) with community youth and representatives from concerned agencies and organizations. This means determining the target youth population, the desired outcomes, and the scope of the future project.
2. Conduct a series of focus group discussions with youth representing the diversity of the population. Some issues important to address are:
   - What do youth currently do?
   - What do they want to do?
   - How would they want these activities structured?
   - What are other important concerns, (safety, gang problems, transportation, etc.)?
3. Conduct a series of focus group discussions with parents representing the diversity of the youth population.
4. Design a survey based on focus group discussions and collaborators' guidelines. Important issues to address:
   - Background information so analysis can compare the responses of sub-groups. For example, high vs. low risk, ethnicity, gender, gang exposure, etc.
   - Rating current programs. For example, "How would you rate the summer camp program?".
   - Rating potential activities. For example, "How would you rate an air-brush class?".
   - Organizational items. For example, "Would you come to an activity before school?".
5. Pilot the survey with a small number of youth and ask them to indicate items they do not understand and discuss with them any other possible edits.
6. Re-examine the survey with collaborative partners.
7. Have community based meeting(s) discussing the needs- assessment process, and the information that will be generated.
8. Administer the survey to a substantial (at least 10% of the target youth population), cross-sectional sample of youth. If possible select these youth at random.
9. Analyze results using frequencies and statistical tests.
10. Compose a report detailing findings.
11. Assist community collaborators in interpreting implications of the findings and generating an implementation plan.
12. Report findings to the community (including youth) and get input on the implementation plan.
13. Act upon the implementation plan!

Although this needs-assessment process can be laborious, it is necessary to get input from those that will eventually be involved in the program. Participation in extracurricular activities is a powerful buffer against risk behaviors (Blyth & Roehlkepartain, 1993). How an organization or community attracts youth becomes the issue. Sound and rigorous data have to be collected in order to inform debate about what programs to provide and how to provide them. The community and youth themselves have to be incorporated into the data collection process. This involvement encourages a sense of ownership and ultimately provides more sound data. This extensive effort is necessary in order to offer suitable alternative activities to stem the rising tide of youth risk behaviors.

## References

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