Tips for Developing a Data Collection Plan

Agencies and organizations routinely collect all types of data. Some of these data will be useful to your assessment; some will not. Figuring out which data to look for can initially seem overwhelming. That's where a plan comes in. A systematic plan can make gathering data manageable, keeping the process focused and organized. To develop a systematic data-gathering plan, you will need to:

1. Clarify the purpose
2. Identify the data you already have
3. Determine the data you need

Clarify Your Purpose

Some communities will have the flexibility to determine for themselves the purpose of their needs assessment. In other communities, the purpose will be defined by state or funder priorities. Regardless of your starting point, a local assessment will help you understand what the problem looks like in your community. Clarifying the purpose of your assessment will help you hone in on the questions you want answered by data you will gather. These questions are key to keeping your data search focused and on-track.

Some common assessment questions include the following:

- What are the substance use patterns and trends?
- What are the consequences of this problem?
- Which populations experience the highest rates of this problem?
- When and where does this problem occur?
- What are the local factors that contribute to this problem?

Identify the Data You Already Have

After you clarify your purpose and identify the assessment questions you want the data to answer, take an inventory of any data you already have and that is readily available to you. For example, there might be data you can easily access in one or more of the following places:

- Your grant application
- The agency or organization where you work
- Your community's prevention task force or coalition

Taking an inventory of the data that already exists is important for several reasons:

- You won't have to start your data search from scratch.
- Once you know what you have, you can see what you need.
- It will prevent you from wasting time and effort gathering data you already have or that you don't need.

Determine the Data You Need

Once you have completed an inventory of the data in your own backyard, you can determine what you need. Take a look at what is missing and begin to fill in the gaps. Make a list of the remaining data you will need to answer your assessment questions.

Sample Data Inventory Form

Questions	Data			
1. What are the patterns and trends of this problem?				
2. What are the consequences of this problem?				
3. Who (which populations) experiences the highest rate?				
4. When and where does this problem occur?				
5. What are the local factors that contribute to this problem?				

Figuring out the data you need can be challenging. It takes time and patience. You may end up identifying data that don't answer your questions or help you understand your problem. At some point, you might also run out of ideas about what else you need. Identifying and filling data gaps cannot happen in isolation.

Involving other people from the community in your data-gathering efforts is important for a variety of reasons:

- Community partners might have the data you need, or know who does
- Connecting with community members who serve population groups that experience your priority problem will help you better understand the population, the problem, and related consequences
- Involving other people builds community support and buy-in for prevention

You may want to involve people from the following community agencies, organizations, or sectors:

- Health department
- Local hospital
- Police department
- Fire department
- Ambulance company
- Schools or district office
- Local college
- Mental health providers
- Treatment providers
- Community organizations or groups serving specific population groups (e.g. immigrants, youth) or addressing certain issues (e.g. underage drinking)
- Business leaders
- Active and/or well-connected community members

From the Prevention Solutions@EDC online course: Go Get It! Finding Existing Data to Inform Your Prevention Efforts.