

Analyzing Community Problems

Yelena Mitrofanova
Extension Educator

Communities have problems, just like people. Problems are part of our lives — they go together with being alive. Every human being, sooner or later, experiences some kind of problems in their lives. And every community has problems, too. That is a fact of community life.

In the dictionary, the word “problem” is defined as “a difficult situation or an obstacle.” We usually define a problem fairly negatively: a problem is a hassle; it is a damage, suffering, stress, etc. This is often true, but more generally, a problem can be considered the difference between *what is* and *what might or should be*.

Defining Community Problems

Below are examples of problems present in any community: crime, drugs, child abuse, poverty, unemployment, housing deterioration, teenage pregnancy, neighborhood disinvestment, vandalism, etc. What is seen as a problem can vary from neighborhood to neighborhood, and from group to group in the same community.

There is no official definition of a community problem, but there are some criteria,

which might be used to define a problem in some particular community/neighborhood.

Criteria for defining a community problem:

- **FREQUENCY** — the problem occurs frequently (frequency of violent crime, improper parking in the neighborhood, etc.).
- **DURATION** — the problem has lasted for a while (for the last five years, 40 percent of neighborhood housing has deteriorated).
- **SCOPE OR RANGE** — the problem affects many people (in some community, half of the youth drop out of high school).
- **SEVERITY** — the problem is disturbing and possibly intense; it disrupts personal or community life (neighborhood traffic—speeding on neighborhood streets caused many injuries of local residents, etc.).
- **LEGALITY** — the problem deprives people of legal or moral rights (dealing with the properties owned by absentee landlords).
- **PERCEPTION** — the problem is perceived as a problem (if people think the neighborhood school is rotten, that is a problem, no matter what objective facts are offered).

The last criterion, perception, is perhaps the most important one. A problem does not have to be based on statistical data or any other

hard evidences. If people perceive the neighborhood streets as unsafe, that is a problem; otherwise they will not feel this way.

Why Analyze a Community Problem?

Communities, like people, try to solve their problems. How do you solve a problem if you do not know what a problem is? Community/neighborhood problems must be identified before they can be resolved and analyzing those problems helps find solutions.

It may seem obvious the first step to solving a problem is figuring out exactly what the problem is, but a surprising number of problem-solving efforts fail when groups skip right to the solution part of the process without first clearly identifying the issues and concerns of the community. By failing to define the problem we may head to soon for solutions or come to conclusions that are ineffectual, irrelevant, meaningless or even counterproductive.

Before you start identifying community problems, remember two general principles:

- **DEFINE THE PROBLEM IN TERMS OF NEEDS OR WHAT IS LACKING, NOT IN TERMS OF SOLUTIONS.** If you define the problem in terms of possible solutions, you will never get to the “root” of the problem, only to the “symptoms.” For example, kids gather on a street. Sometimes they drink; sometimes they get rowdy. The violence and vandalism in our neighborhood is unacceptably high. Without

thinking, people immediately are jumping to the solution: “We need more police patrols on our streets.” What is the problem here? The drinking? The rowdy gathering itself? Attitudes toward vandalism? Or the possible fact teenagers have nowhere else to go and nothing else to do? Unless you are clear about the problem, it is hard to move forward.

- **DEFINE THE PROBLEM AS ONE EVERYONE SHARES; AVOID ASSIGNING BLAME FOR THE PROBLEM.** This

is particularly important if different people (or groups) with a history of bad relations need to be working together to solve the problem. For example, teachers may be frustrated with low attendance rates, but blaming students uniquely for problems at school is sure to alienate students from helping to solve the problem.

Gathering Information

Now the group has defined the problem and agreed to work toward a solution, the next step will be gathering information on the problem. You might collect several types of information available. Most commonly, it will fall into one of the following categories:

- **FACTS** (15 percent of the children in our community do not get enough to eat).
- **INFERENCE** (a significant percentage of children in our community are probably malnourished/ significantly underweight).
- **SPECULATION** (many of the

hungry children probably live in the poorer neighborhoods in town).

- **OPINION** (I think the reason children go hungry because their parents spend all of their money on cigarettes).

When you are gathering information, you will probably hear all four types of information and all can be important. Speculations and opinions can be especially important in finding out how public feels about this particular issue. If public opinion on your issue is based on faulty assumptions, part of your solution strategy will probably include some sort of informational campaign.

For example, teen pregnancy is a problem in your community and you find most people incorrectly believe only teenage girls from dysfunctional families and poor neighborhoods get pregnant. As a part of your solution strategy, you will probably want to make it clear to the public it simply is not true.

Where and how do you find this information? It depends on what you want to know. A very few of the possibilities may include:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- The Library
- The Internet

The Next Steps

The next step in analyzing a community problem is recognizing barriers and resources associated with addressing the problem. It is a good practice and planning to anticipate barriers and obstacles before they might emerge. Also, it will help you understand and find resources you need to address this problem. After you have finished this analysis, you can start identifying some possible solutions and developing an action plan.

Source: *Community Tool Box*, ctb.ku.edu/tools

Training on Measuring Progress, May 17 & 18

Everyone likes to see progress. Measuring progress helps you know where you now are and get to where you want to be. UNL Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County is sponsoring “You Get What You Measure,” a powerful evaluation and planning tool for organizations, agencies and businesses. This training will be May 17 and 18 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Lancaster Extension Education Center in Lincoln.

This two-day workshop allows staff of organizations, businesses, and government to learn the measurement process while applying it to issues central to their missions. Cost is \$349 per participant. For more information, contact Helen Mitrofanova at 441-7180. Registration deadline is May 3.

Measurement provides tangible evidence of progress, which, in turn, motivates one to keep at it. This is true whether the goal is physical fitness or fund-raising, environmental health or literacy. Choosing what you will measure and how you will measure it is a creative process. You can use this process to test your assumptions about the way the world works, to redefine what is important to you, and to create a new focus for your energies.

What you measure is what you get. For example, there are many ways of measuring employment. You might focus on the number of people in your community how have employment that meets their needs; or you might simply count the number of jobs created and lost. If you focus on the number of jobs, you may lose sight of important considerations: What kind of jobs? Jobs for whom? At what cost to the community? If you want to shift and broaden your focus, you need to create new and different measures of progress toward your goals.

“You Get What You Measure,” presented by Yellow Wood Associates, has been provided to clients nationally, including the United States Department of Agriculture, the United States Forest Service, the Missouri Department of Economic Development, Rural Action of Ohio, and the Massachusetts Rural Development Council.



At Nebraska, this Lincoln Student Works Smarter, not Harder

Alexis Wismer, a junior industrial and management systems engineering major at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and a Lincoln Christian alum, knows there isn’t one solution for every problem. In her major, she uses her critical thinking skills to come up with new ways to make work safer, easier and more rewarding. This year, she is redesigning laparoscopic surgical tools. “We went to the Medical Center and observed surgery, had us work on their tools. It’s a great chance to be a part of the research – I have gotten to know the professors really well.”



FOR HANDS ON EXPERIENCE...
There is no place like Nebraska.

Admissions:
800-742-8800
admissions.unl.edu

An equal opportunity educator and employer
with a comprehensive plan for diversity.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Lincoln