

# COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Daniel F. Perkins, Ph.D.  
and  
Kenneth Jones, M.S.

The Pennsylvania State University

Parents, teachers, faith communities, youth development professionals, and others are all asking similar questions pertaining to young people: “What does it take to create a community that will promote the positive development of all young people?”; and “Can youth professionals and communities successfully intervene with high-risk youth and minimize youth’s engagement in risk behaviors?” Providing young people with the people, places, and possibilities by creating structured out-of-school experiences offers opportunities to develop important life skills critical to their positive development. Good schools are not enough; communities must provide high quality learning environments during out-of-school time as well, because the risks facing young people are great. Indeed, research findings indicate that youth living in economically deprived homes are more likely to do poorly academically (Dryfoos, 1990; National Research Council, 2002). Moreover, marijuana use rose substantially among secondary school and college students between 1992 and 2000 (Johnson et al., 2001); nearly one in seventeen (6.0%) twelfth graders is now a current daily marijuana user (Johnson, O’Malley, & Bachman, 2001). In addition, the physical health of the nation’s youth is in grave danger due, in part, to the increase in teen-age obesity and the decrease in physical activity, as reported in the National Research Council’s book, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (National Research Council, 2002). Yet, recent findings suggest that young people who are engaged in positive experiences as youth are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to higher education and less likely to commit violent crimes (National Research Council, 2002).

While the news about our nation's youth is both positive and negative, there is growing recognition that all young people need a variety of opportunities for positive development, both in schools and in their communities. The recent report released by the National Research Council states, “Adolescents who spend time in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities for them experience less risk and show evidence of higher rates of positive development. A diversity of program opportunities in each community is more likely to support broad adolescent development and attract the interest of and meet the needs of greater number of youth” (National Research Council, 2002, p. 11). As Pittman (2000) noted, young people need to be more than “fully prepared,” they need to be fully engaged as partners with adults in their own development and in the development of their communities. Therefore, communities must develop a way to carefully assess the opportunities that exist in the community to promote the positive development of all the young people. Structured out-of-school experiences present one way to address the needs of young people within a community.

## **Purpose of this Bulletin**

This bulletin describes a unique community-based assessment process that engages youth and adults by employing various techniques (i.e., youth community mapping, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and *Concept Mapping*) to provide a picture of the youth development opportunities in a particular community. This community-

based assessment is entitled, *Comprehensive Community Assessment of Youth Development Opportunities* (CCAYDO). The goal of CCAYDO is to conduct a year-long community planning process in a specific community in order to develop a community mobilization plan to implement the needed positive youth development opportunities (both school-based and community-based) during out-of-school-time. The major strategies involved in this community-based assessment process are: (1) creating a community taskforce and youth action team; (2) conducting an assessment of the opportunities for youth in terms of skill development, recreation, and engagement in risk behaviors; (3) identifying the needs and desires of youth, parents, and youth professionals in terms of the enhancement of existing positive youth development opportunities and the creation of new positive youth development opportunities; and (4) employment of the information gathered from strategies two and three to develop a community mobilization plan to address the identified needs.

Besides helping a community to develop a clear community mobilization plan based on the community's needs and wants, this process has the potential to enhance youth's life skills. This process:

- Fosters the development of youth and encourages learning.
- Provides an opportunity for youth and adults to work together and enhances the partnership between them.
- Provides a chance for youth to contribute to their community in positive ways and encourages their sense of contribution.
- Provides youth with the opportunity to develop critical career skills.

In the following pages of this bulletin, we outline the major strategies and their respective sub-components. Alone, each one of these strategies provides useful information. Together, however, these strategies form a comprehensive assessment of a community from the perspective of the youth that live in the community.

### **Strategy One: Creation of Taskforce and Youth Action Team**

A community taskforce will act as the board of directors, whose major function is to assist in the interpretation of data and the development of the community mobilization plan. The members of the taskforce will meet monthly. The taskforce will be composed of representatives from local youth serving organizations, school personnel, parents, and youth. A Youth Action Team (YAT) will be created in addition to the taskforce. The purpose of the YAT will be to collect and present the data. The youth involved in the YAT will be paid for their time. Two youth on the YAT will also be members of the taskforce. The critical function that the YAT will play in this proposed project will become clearer as the methodologies for gathering data are presented below.

### **Strategy Two: Youth Community Mapping and Interviews**

Two methodologies are proposed to address strategy two, which involves conducting an assessment of the opportunities for youth in terms of skill development, recreation, and engagement in risk behaviors. The methods include youth community mapping and youth-conducted interviews of representatives from youth-serving organizations. The former, youth community mapping, is a technique used to identify both positive assets (e.g., parks, YMCAs, youth clubs, meeting spots like churches,

people themselves) and deficits (e.g., alcoholic beverage stores, vacant buildings) in a neighborhood. The young people will map all areas of their community to identify assets/resources relevant to them, such as: programs, safe places, social service centers, and caring adults who have a vested interest in improving the area. The youth will also map those resources in the neighborhoods that are not positive, such as: beer and liquor stores, vacant or abandoned buildings, and street corners used for loitering/drug sales.

The youth community mapping methodology will be conducted utilizing Global Positioning System/Geographic Information Systems and photography. The youth, who will travel in pairs, will be given a section of the community to map. They will walk through the community street by street, identifying both the positive and negative resources. Then one youth will use a hand-held Global Positioning System tool to enter the exact location of the resource. The youth will also document the type of resource and its hours of operation, if appropriate. At the end of the day, youth will transfer the information in the GPS into a computer, and the data will be mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Youth community mapping incorporates a technique utilized in several major cities across the Nation by the Academy for Educational Development's (AED) Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (2001) entitled, *Community Youth Mapping*. A number of organizations, such as the National 4-H Council, National Urban League, and United Way, have partnered with AED in carrying out the distinctive process. However, unlike AED's *Community Youth Mapping* technique, our youth community mapping technique will be a more comprehensive examination of the community, charting both assets and deficits. The resources to be targeted through youth community mapping are presented in Appendix 1. In addition to documenting the location of a resource, the youth will also take a picture of it. This will provide an opportunity to bring the map to life through pictures.

The second methodology employed to address strategy two involves youth-conducted interviews of representatives from all the youth-serving organizations identified through the mapping. Members of the YAT will conduct a semi-structured interview of a representative from every youth-serving organization identified. The interviews will be a fact-finding process that identifies what types of structured out-of-school experiences are available to youth in the community. A mix of government, not-for-profit, and for-profit agencies will participate in the interviews. A tentative list of questions to be asked during the interviews is provided in Appendix 2. YAT members will adapt this list of questions to ensure that it addresses their concerns.

### **Strategy Three: Youth Created and Conducted Surveys**

Surveys will be used to address strategy three. As noted previously, strategy three is the identification of the needs and desires of youth, parents, and youth professionals in terms of the enhancement of existing positive youth development opportunities and the creation of new positive youth development opportunities.

Youth will develop, coordinate, implement, and analyze surveys conducted with youth and parents. The content of the youth surveys will focus on what activities youth are currently engaged in during their out-of-school-time, as well as what other opportunities they would like to see in their community, and their sense of community connectedness. The surveys will employ scientifically proven items and scales; however, YAT members will provide reality checks and guidance about survey questions. Parental surveys will explore parents' needs in terms of structured out-of-school-time opportunities for their children and youth. In addition, the survey will investigate the

barriers that parents currently face to their child's/youth's participation in these opportunities.

#### **Strategy Four: Community Mobilization**

Strategy four is the employment of the information gathered from strategies two and three to develop a community mobilization plan to address identified needs. Utilizing the data from the methods outlined previously, the taskforce and YAT will work together to develop a community mobilization plan around positive youth development. The technique of *Concept Mapping* (Trochim, 1989) will be employed to develop the community mobilization plan. *Concept Mapping* is a process that requires the participants to brainstorm a large set of statements relevant to the topic of interest, individually sort these statements into similar piles, and rate each statement on some scale. The analyses typically include a multidimensional scaling (MDS) of the unstructured sorted data, a hierarchical cluster analysis of the MDS coordinates, and the computation of average ratings for each statement and cluster of statements. The maps that result show the individual statements in two-dimensional (x, y) space, with more similar statements located nearer to each other. They also show how the statements are grouped into clusters that partition the space on the map.

Members of the YAT and the taskforce will present the findings from the community youth maps, youth-conducted interviews, and the surveys to ten groups of 10-30 people who will take part in the concept mapping. Then the groups will address the following question: "Given the information from the youth community mapping, youth-conducted interviews, and surveys, what five things should the community do in the next three to five years to enhance the lives of youth?" The concept map groups will be broken down from these three categories: youth (6 groups), parents (2 groups), and youth-service providers (2 groups). *Concept Mapping* is a dynamic method (Trochim, 1989) that helps groups to manage complexity without trivializing or losing detail and also focuses and helps objectify the group planning process.

The taskforce and the YAT will be lead through several structured interpretation sessions designed to help them understand the concept maps and label them in a substantively meaningful way. The community mobilization plan will be drawn from the concept mapping technique. However, the taskforce will take approximately one month to develop the community mobilization plan. Someone who has been trained in Concept Mapping will facilitate the meetings. The authors of CCAYDO can provide technical assistance with data interpretation and with the development of the community mobilization plan.

Members of the YAT and the taskforce will present the findings and mobilization plan to local leaders at organized seminars and community programs. They will present a database of all the newly discovered assets throughout the community, which will, in turn, aim to serve as a valuable resource for all future community development efforts. In addition to providing useful information and a plan for action, this process will demonstrate that adult-youth partnerships can be highly productive.

Data from each method will help provide unique information that will inform the taskforce and the YAT as they utilize *Concept Mapping* to develop the community mobilization plan around positive youth development. For example, from the youth community mapping information and the youth-lead interviews, GIS maps will be developed for the identification of geographical gaps in opportunities for youth in terms of skill development and recreation. In addition, those locations identified as potential

risks to youth (abandoned buildings, street corners used for selling drugs, etc.) will also be displayed. Thus, the taskforce and the YAT will be better equipped to present the information and to strategically take action after visually examining which areas lack resources and are high risk and which have adequate opportunities. The surveys will provide information about what is needed in terms of structured out-of-school-time opportunities. Because the concept maps developed by each group will prioritize the major needs and provide community plans to address those needs, direction will be provided for the community mobilization effort. The findings and the community mobilization plan will be available to the public through an Internet website and a user-friendly report that will be presented at several community forums, thus informing local citizens, businesses, and organizations on the state of their community.

### References

- Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. (2001). *Community youth mapping: A ten-step process*. Retrieved September 10, 2001 from <http://www.aed.org/us/cyd/cym/tensteps.html>
- Dryfoos, J. G. (1990). *Adolescents at risk: Prevalence and prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, L. D., O'Malley, P.M., & Bachman, J. G. (2001). *Monitoring the future: National survey results on drug use, 1975-2000. Volume I: Secondary school students* (NIH Publication No. 01-4924). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.
- National Research Council (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Committee on community-level programs for youth. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Pittman, K. J. (2000). Balancing the equation: Communities supporting youth, youth supporting communities. *Community Youth Development Journal*, 1, 33-36.
- Trochim, W. (1989). An introduction to concept mapping for planning and evaluation. In W. Trochim (Ed.) A Special Issue of *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 12, 1-16. Retrieved March 3, 2000 from <http://www.conceptsystems.com/papers/publications/epp1/epp1.htm>