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Libraries Take Notice:
San Francisco Department of Children Youth & their Families needs assessment is a
guidebook for library service

Comprehensive and trustworthy community needs assessments are a prerequisite

for libraries hoping to provide services that meet their community's needs. Unfortunately,

due to funding cuts, libraries may not be able to conduct their own needs assessments.

There are a variety of other private and government organizations that conduct needs

assessments, though. Librarians who are trained to assess the validity of these reports can

use the information they provide to supplement library needs assessments or replace

them, if necessary. The city of San Francisco is home to variety of government

organizations that are dedicated to supporting its diverse population. In this paper I will

analyze the validity of a community needs assessment conducted by the San Francisco

Department of Children Youth & their Families (DCYF) and highlight ways the report can

inform library programming.

I chose the DCYF's community needs assessment because I am planning to do a

Directed Field Work internship at one of the San Francisco Public Libraries this fall and I

wanted to learn more about the community that this library system serves. I located the

needs assessment by performing a Google search for "Community needs assessment San

Francisco." When a multitude of results appeared, I chose this study for its currency and

because I am completely unfamiliar with the needs of the city's children and youth.

DCYF is responsible for administering tax money that has, by the passage of the

Children's Amendment, been earmarked for spending on projects specifically targeted at

youth who are seventeen years or younger. To fulfill this mission, the department performs

a community needs assessment every three years. The information gathered in the

assessment is used to develop budget priorities and allocated funding in the two

subsequent years (SFDCYF, 2011, p.2). Regularly collecting data about the community

allows the department to stay abreast of new issues impacting this rapidly changing group.

The 2011 Community Needs assessment was conducted with the assistance of Harder and Company Community Research. Harder and Company Community Research is a California company that works with numerous government organizations including the San Francisco Department of Public Health and the San Francisco Mayor's Office (Harder and Company Community Research). Harder and Company was tasked with sorting and analyzing much of the primary source data collected for the needs assessment. It is unclear from the report what role Harder and Company played in either data collection or summary. A clear breakdown of responsibilities would have improved the report and served as a blueprint for other organizations considering a similar partnership.

Researchers used data from a wide variety of sources as the basis for the needs assessment. Secondary data was collected from the US Census Bureau, the California Department of Education, the California Department of Health Services, Center for Health Statistics, the California Department of Public Health, the California Office of the Attorney General, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, the California Health Interview Survey, the Center for Social Services Research at U.C. Berkeley, the Adolescent Health Working Group, the First 5 San Francisco, San Francisco's Child Care Planning and Advisory Council, San Francisco State University's Public Research Institute, the San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco City and County departments and task forces, and the DCYF (SFDCYF, 2011, p.3). These sources include local, state, and federal government departments and include research conducted by academic institutions. Sources whose names might not reference children or youth such as the Criminal Justice Statistics Center are also listed because they collect data that relates to youth issues. The use of data from so many groups indicates that the researchers took a holistic approach to studding the community.

In addition to secondary source data, researchers used several collection methods to gather information directly. Between August 2010 and September 2011 researchers conducted input sessions where community members could share information about their needs and the needs of the community. Nineteen such sessions were conducted with community groups, six with parent groups, and five with groups representing youth. A total of approximately 740 people participated in all of the sessions combined (SFDCYF,

2011, p.3). The researchers also collected input at fifteen sessions held with groups of community service providers.   These sessions were an important data source and are cited frequently throughout the report. Quotes from participants are used to illustrate many of the report's statistics.

On-line surveys were used to gather additional information from forty-three principals and administrators in the San Francisco Unified School District as well as from three hundred and fifty six staff from one hundred and forty five community groups that serve the city's youth. The department also helped to develop an on-line survey called the "Youth Fall Vote 2010" that was distributed to more than 8,000 high school students at nineteen schools. Approximately 714 surveys were returned, one third of which came from parents (SFDCYF, 2011, p.3).

Researchers held a total of five focus groups to collect information from populations that were difficult to access. Difficult to access populations included homeless and under-housed families and those who were categorized as recent immigrants. These populations sometimes overlapped with families living in single room occupancy (SRO) hotels, for example, often fitting into both categories. Finally, interviews were also conducted with fifteen policy makers (SFDCYF, 2011, p.3).

The triangulation of data collection techniques as well as the extent to which different segments of the community were studied adds validity to the needs assessment. I was particularly impressed by the effort that the researchers made to gather information directly from youth. Too often studies about youth and their needs fail to include primary source data from youth because of difficulties in gaining access.

Despite the overall quality of the needs assessment, there is some room for improvement. The report is up-front about discussing some of the limitations of their data including the use of older secondary sources that may not reflect recent economic changes and the lack of funding for representative sampling (SFDCYF, 2011, p.4). When reviewing the report I also noticed a couple of things that I would have done differently.

The report did not specify how participants were recruited or selected for input sessions, focus groups, and interviews. It was clear though, that the input studies, which were a major source of data, were not lead by the DCYF or Harder and Company alone. Instead, the researchers partnered with existing community organizations and groups (SFDCYF, 2011, p.117). While capitalizing on the trust that these organizations have in their communities may have drawn participants, it may also have isolated potential respondents with reservations about the partner group. This seems particularly problematic since one of the goals of these sessions was to determine areas where community groups were falling short.

Despite minor methodological concerns, the community needs assessment conducted by DCYF provides a wealth of information that can inform library programming in San Francisco. One of the most consistent findings emphasized throughout the report is that youth in San Francisco lack safe areas to go after school and on the weekends. They require places that offer academic support and homework help that are cost effective (SFDCYF, 2011, p.104) for residents in the lowest income brackets. Homework help is particularly important for youth whose parents are incapable of helping them at home due to language barriers. The city's homeless population was another group that the report identified as being underserved. Families with children make-up approximately eight percent of the city's homeless population (SFDCYF, 2011, p.113), but shelters typically offer limited programming for children. All parents also expressed the need for a centralized location where information about the city's myriad of services as well as government information could be accessed (SFDCYD, 2011, p.110).

These types of programs and challenges seem as though they are either already in existence at local libraries or would fall under the library's mission of information access and literacy. Yet the report makes no mention of the library as a potential youth service provider. The DCYF community needs assessment includes valuable information about the communities served by San Francisco libraries but it also highlights that libraries need to reach-out to community organizations in their area to establish themselves as key youth service providers. For libraries, analyzing community needs assessments performed by

outside groups is not only a cost-saving measure, but a also a chance to get a glimpse of how their services are perceived by the community.

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