# Challenges in needs assessment: The Head Start Needs Assessment National Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Needs assessment (NA) is conducted to identify discrepancies that guide the development and improvement of services. In this article we focus on methodological issues in a secondary analysis of a multi-site, national needs assessment. Understanding challenges in such a context is important for needs assessors. The Head Start needs assessment project is a good illustration of the problems that can be encountered. Lessons learned will be useful for advancing NA practice in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

Needs assessments (NAs) are conducted to identify gaps that led to the development of programs and the improvement of services. They are usually done before starting a new endeavor as a critical step for planning and program implementation. A carefully done NA will often specify outcome variables and key process points to be evaluated in the strategies to alleviate discrepancies.

The Head Start Needs Assessment National Analysis Project is a special case that cuts across multiple agencies and nation-wide programs. Many assessments are more localized with national ones being less common. Methodological concerns generally increase in this kind of study and present serious challenges to collecting meaningful data and interpreting results. The issues we faced in the project will be described. The text begins with a brief review of literature, followed by a discussion of methodological problems, and lessons learned.

## 2. Relevant literature

A short introduction to the basic premises of assessing needs is given first. Since a national study is a multisite one, selected

pertinent sources will be reviewed, and some aspects of secondary data analysis will be covered.

### 2.1. Needs assessment

Altschuld and Witkin (1999) define need as the difference between the current status for the area or topic in consideration (the "*what is*" condition) and its desired status (the "*what should be*" condition). NA is a systematic process of "identifying [and prioritizing needs], making needs-based decisions, allocating resources, and implementing actions to resolve problems underlying important needs" (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 20). Measuring discrepancies or gaps is fundamental to NA. The scope of NAs can be small or large (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010), depending on purpose and the context in which it is conducted (individual unit/organization, multiple organizations and country-wide programs). Assessment should lead to plans to resolve needs, organizational change, development, resource allocation, and to respond to accountability demands by government and funding agencies. The activity can be political in nature in that results could lead to resources being shifted from one activity to another so there will be winners and losers with vested interests coming into play (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010).

### 2.2. Multisite endeavors

Multisite work as pursued in evaluation consists of obtaining data and aggregating it into a composite for many sites (Straw & Herrell, 2002). It is prospective or retrospective, planned ahead or

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an afterthought (Sinacore & Turpin, 1991). Another distinction is whether there is identical or differential implementation across geographical locations (Sinacore & Turpin, 1991).

Numerous sites may increase validity, but at the same time, add to the likelihood of disparate ways of conducting projects and inconsistent data collection when done by various staff members, site collaborators, and stakeholders. The political climate and organizational culture can be highly variable. Quality and standardization of data are problems.

### 2.3. Secondary data analysis

Secondary data analysis (SDA), quantitative and qualitative, takes advantage of data collected previously to gain unique perspectives on research questions or to answer new ones with information often assembled or obtained by someone other than the researcher(s) (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001). Reliability and validity can be affected (Pollack, 1999; Shamblen & Dwidedi, 2010; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, 2008). Accuracy and completeness, format, and consistency of measurement, sampling, and the unit of analysis are complicating factors.

## 3. The Head Start case

### 3.1. Head Start programs

Head Start has offered services to more than 20 million ethnically diverse children and their families since the 1960s (Bailey, Waxler, & Washington, 2006). Early Head Start was introduced about three decades after the original legislation for low-income families with children three and under (Kamerman & Kahn, 2004), including those with special needs (Bailey et al., 2006). Head Start programs are required to meet accountability demands for quality assurance in accord with performance standards (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Ten regional offices monitor services and deliver training and technical assistance when deficiencies are found.

### 3.2. The Head Start Needs Assessment National Analysis Project

The Head Start Reauthorization Act (December 2007) mandates that the Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) conduct an annual NA of Head Start and Early Head Start grantees in states with respect to coordination, collaboration, alignment of services, and alignment of curricula and assessment. Identifying gaps in these areas was seen as important for planning and developing Head Start activities and programs.

The first Head Start Needs Assessment (HSNA) in 2008–2009 focused on ten priority areas (Health Care, Services for Children Experiencing Homelessness, Welfare/Child Welfare, Child Care, Family Literacy Services, Services for Children with Disabilities, Community Services, Partnerships with Local Education Agencies, Transition and Alignment with K-12, and Professional Development). The results were to inform the HSSCO about improving services for children and their families.

Following the above mandate, the Office of Head Start (OHS) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services requested HSSCO Directors to submit a NA report. The federal office did not participate in state assessments. After examining what it received, OHS wanted to probe into the data from each state to gain information about collaboration between Head Start grantees and service providers (mental health, medical, social work and others) nationally and regionally. OHS was especially interested in knowing which of the ten priorities needed to be attended to as indicated by discrepancies uncovered. In this regard, the national analysis will be useful for understanding needs for technical assistance provided by regional offices to the HSSCO Directors.

The University of Cincinnati's Evaluation Services Center (UCESC) was selected to do that analysis. A team including an external consultant was formed to conduct the project. In the planning stage, UCESC team was informed by the national office of six questions or priorities that were of concern to it. Most of these were accepted but several were modified. An example was the change from "what trends are reflected in…" to "what patterns are reflected in…." Subsequent analysis on the new set was performed on state reports and data. A small number of states did not meet timelines, so they were not included in the study. The data was screened in terms of completeness, uniformity, nature of measurement, etc. Many problems were apparent. Findings from that screening are the basis of what follows. Variations in participant selection, instruments used, data collection procedures, and coding schemes were observed.

## 4. Methodological issues encountered

### 4.1. Sampling

Grantees were required to be assessed annually by the HSSCO to comply with the 2007 Reauthorization Act. Due to complexity of service providers, several types of "grantees" were employed with no clear specification as to who they exactly were. The general categories (grantee-based, grantee and delegate, and program-based) are explained in Table 1. The grantee-based responders were the most frequent, but others were seen. Beyond the three classifications, not much information was available about the responders which is a consideration in secondary analysis and could affect understanding the results.

### 4.2. Instrument

A survey, the Head Start Needs Assessment Survey Template, HSNAST (see Hung, Marx, Morrison, Jordan, & Castañeda-Emenaker, 2010), was developed by a work group consisting of a cohort of HSSCO Directors and OHS staff. The final version was then sent to the Directors for use in their state's assessment. Additionally, the HSNAST was available for downloading through the National Head Start Association website during the specified completion time frame.

The national survey consisted of 170 items in ten priority areas. Items were rated in terms of relationships and difficulty by 4-point Likert type scales. For relationships, the scale values were "no working relationship, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration" choices and for difficulty, "not at all difficult, somewhat difficult, difficult, and extremely difficult." Two open-ended questions were included. States were allowed to make adaptations to the instrument if their context warranted them.

An examination of each state's instrument was conducted to determine if it was appropriate for further analysis. The results were:

**Table 1**
Head start needs assessment participant selection designations by number of states.

| Participant selection designation | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Grantee-based | 32 | 66.7 |
| Grantee and delegate | 6 | 12.5 |
| Program-based | 8 | 16.7 |
| No information available | 2 | 4.2 |

Note:
a, number of states = 48.
b, grantee-based: grant receiving agencies only.
c, grantee and delegate: grant receiving and their delegate agencies.
d, program-based: program providing Head Start services.