

Evidence Brief

Approaches & Strategies for Effective Community Asset Mapping

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "community asset mapping," "youth," "outcomes," "impacts," and "best practices."

A. Definition of Key Terms: Community Asset Mapping

What is Community Asset Mapping?

Community Asset Mapping is an approach to data collection that supports "the power and capacity of people to represent themselves and their understanding of the world around them" (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 361). It "involves documenting the tangible and intangible resources of a community, viewing it as a place with assets to be preserved and enhanced, not deficits to be remedied" (Kerka, 2003, p. 1). Community Asset Mapping can be effective for community-based research because it allows for the meaningful engagement of people, particularly youth (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Crane & Mooney, 2005), as "citizens rather than clients" (Kerka, 2003, p. 1) in participatory approaches to community development (see also Burns et al., 2012).

This process involves community stakeholders making an inventory of both assets and capacity, while building partnerships and a shared vision for the change that they seek to effect through their research, "leveraging internal and external resources to support actions to achieve it" (Kerka, 2003, p. 1). Maps are not necessarily geographical, but can represent "processes, concepts, timelines... power and decision-making structures" (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005, p. 3), outlining elements relevant to the area of inquiry and the relationships and interactions between these elements (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005).

Community Asset Mapping recognizes that community development "cannot take place without active local commitment and local resources" (Trickett & Beehler, 2017, p. 532). This process could be used to:

- Identify new assets or gaps in resources (or even gaps in access to assets or resources).
- Avoid duplicating services and resources.

* Adapted from HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005; Crane & Mooney, 2005.

- Discover what can be done to advance the needs of a community.
- Leverage existing resources for a common purpose (possibly to address needs).
- Cultivate connections and partnerships within or across the community in order to encourage collaboration and facilitate joint action.
- Mobilize relationship networks to focus on taking necessary action.

What are community assets?

Assets are considered to be the “the attributes and advantages of a community which are considered essential for the maintenance of its quality of life” (Falls Brook Centre, 2012, p. 4). Community assets may be defined along the following categories:**

- a) **NATURAL:** pertaining to our natural environment (water, soil, etc.)
- b) **BUILT:** pertaining to physical structures (buildings, public infrastructure)
- c) **SOCIAL:** pertaining to the values and culture of the community (traditions, attitudes)
- d) **ECONOMIC:** pertaining to jobs and businesses
- e) **PUBLIC:** pertaining to government-funded services (hospitals, schools, etc.)
- f) **INTANGIBLE:** pertaining to undiscovered/underutilized skills

B. Summary of Evidence:

Three Approaches for Effective Community Asset Mapping

These three approaches for effective Community Asset Mapping reflect the principles and values of community building (Lazurus et al., 2017, p. 220):

- 1) community-based strengths orientation (focus on **assets**, capacity-building & mobilizing community resources)
- 2) cross-system collaboration (**integrative**, comprehensive & **holistic**)
- 3) brokering and building local power through institutional **partnerships**

1) Asset-Based

Community Asset Mapping necessitates an emphasis on community assets rather than deficits. An asset-based approach aligns with positive youth development, a framework that promotes youth assets rather than focusing on youth ‘problems’. This framework is substantiated by extensive research demonstrating that certain identifiable assets within communities positively correlate with success in both youth and adulthood. Positive youth development encourages research, programs, and policies that create pathways to these assets within communities. This differs significantly from the deficit-based – or needs-based (YouthREX, 2016) – approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt, concentrating on what is missing in individuals, groups or

** Adapted from Falls Brook Centre, 2012.

communities. Youth organizations can engage with youth in a more humanizing and empowering way by seeing the ‘problems’ they face as connected to broader social issues.

Organizations can use *Appreciative Inquiry* in order to support an asset-based approach, focusing on “collective narratives and local histories to study how learning from the experiences and achievements of the past can prompt positive change” (Alevizou et al., 2016, p. 12). This emphasis on storytelling can “encourage the unearthing of shared experiences among participants with a view to instilling confidence and ideas about change” (Alevizou et al., 2016, p. 12). In this way, *meeting people where they are at* is critical, as is recognizing *how much change* they are both ready for and ready to support, especially when working with youth (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005).

2) Socially-Inclusive

The strength of Community Asset Mapping “begins from the openness and inclusiveness” of the process (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 361). Meaningful youth engagement goes beyond representation and consultation; organizations must ensure that young people of various intersecting identities and experiences are integrated into every stage of the process – from design to content, from reflection to action – thereby enhancing “creative and innovative approaches to formulating research results and outcomes” (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 357).

Organizations must create a safe, “open, unrestricted space in which youth can determine how to represent their voices” (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 369). Change strategies that are identified through Community Asset Mapping should, ideally, “build on the strengths and interests of the participants” (Trickett & Beehler, 2017, p. 533; see also Bandauko, 2018).

Community Asset Mapping is effective because it “supports dialogue and relationship building. The final products... offer a rich and layered description of the map-makers’ perspective of the local environment” (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 361), reinforcing the collective and creating a “snapshot of the community as the community sees it” (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005, p. 362). At its best, Community Asset Mapping gives voice to those who are often excluded from decision-making and community development processes (Cutts et al., 2016). Organizers and facilitators should address power imbalances within Community Asset Mapping processes in order to mitigate any possible manipulation by stakeholders with more (perceived) power (Bandauko, 2018).

3) Partnerships-Based

Engaging relevant stakeholders from across the community, including young people, will both require and result in partnerships between individuals, groups, organizations, and sectors. The Community Asset Mapping process can surface the power of community networks – “the

interwoven net of relationships that, when mobilized, can accomplish seemingly impossible objectives” (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005, p. 3).

Organizers and facilitators must allow for “significant time to establish trust and build rapport within the community and agencies” (Flemingdon Health Centre, 2009, p. 45), and for continued collaboration and communication (Sustainable Cities, 2009), which will contribute to the strength of both the process and the outcomes. Community Asset Mapping can support “fostering mutually accountable partnerships, dealing with historical trauma, building trust, and promoting equity and justice” (Cutts et al., 2016, p. 85; see also Trickett & Beehler, 2017). Again, organizers and facilitators must address power imbalances in the building of shared values across partnerships (Killing Wood, 2008; Bandauko, 2018).

This type of relationship-driven organizing is different from issue-driven organizing; the former “benefits from the enduring power of relationships... whereas with issue-driven organizing, once the issue is addressed, the group no longer has anything binding them together” (Killing Wood, 2008, p. 89).

C. Summary of Evidence:

Seven Best Practices for Effective Community Asset Mapping

Many principles and frameworks outline best practices for effective Community Asset Mapping. The following is a synthesis compiled from various sources, cited in the footnotes provided.

1. Set a clear focus.¹

Define the boundaries for your Community Asset Mapping process (geographic or social or both), and determine what type(s) of assets you might want to include in order to focus your scope.

You may want to establish one or more organizers or facilitators to guide the process by setting a vision, establishing goals, determining a timeline, and developing communication channels/media, as well as a relevant strategy to ensure ongoing engagement of the various community stakeholders, including youth.

2. Create a safe, open, and unrestricted space in order to build trust.²

Create a space in which participants can feel safe, secure, engaged, and creative. In this instance, the word ‘space’ refers to both a physical location and the interactions within that location; Steenbergen and Foisy’s (2006) definition of a safe space is one that provides “a supportive

¹ Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Crane & Mooney, 2005; Sustainable Cities, 2009; YouthREX, 2016.

² Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005.

environment in which participants are able to have their voices validated and heard free of discrimination” (p. 96). This will facilitate the surfacing of honest and authentic reflections, as well as outcomes that are unique to – and appropriate for – the community.

3. Encourage collaboration and facilitate participation.³

Identify, recruit, involve, and sustain the engagement of partners, including the different individuals, groups, organizations, and other stakeholders who will do the asset mapping. When possible and appropriate, build on existing initiatives within the community.

Be sure to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each participant. The process should be collaborative and cooperative throughout, with all stakeholders contributing their knowledge and experiences in order to identify needs, plan, implement, and evaluate. Acknowledge the lived experience of participants, give voice to their concerns, and focus on the issues and conditions identified by youth and community members.

4. Address power dynamics.⁴

Again, organizers and facilitators should continuously make explicit and mitigate the power relations between participants by “increasing the access of community members and young people to knowledge and skills typically monopolized by researchers and decision-makers” (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005, p. 5).

5. Facilitate empowerment.⁵

Participants should come to understand the social, cultural, historic, and structural contexts of their community, and use these new perspectives to develop resources and strategizes to effect change.

6. Document your progress.⁶

Be sure to organize assets on a map or in another visual format. Capture quotes from young people, participants, and partners to provide evidence of the impacts of the process. Document your challenges, successes, and lessons learned.

³ Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Crane & Mooney, 2005; HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005; Sustainable Cities, 2009; YouthREX, 2016.

⁴ HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005; Bandauko, 2018.

⁵ Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005.

⁶ HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2005; Sustainable Cities, 2009; YouthREX, 2016.

7. Evaluate your outcomes.⁷

Develop an evaluation plan at the outset to assess your progress and understand your impacts, and design a strategy to disseminate your outcomes, recommendations, actions, and lessons learned.

⁷ Crane & Mooney, 2005; Sustainable Cities, 2009; YouthREX, 2016.

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