

Health Policy Research Program Summary of Research Results

Title:	Measuring Community Capacity: State of the Field Review and Recommendations for Future Research
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Summary

Why is this important

The focus on community capacity has gained increased prominence in health promotion over the past 10 years. We define community capacity as “the ability of people and communities to do the work needed in order to address the determinants of health for those people in that place” (Bopp, GermAnn, Bopp, Baugh Littlejohns, & Smith, 2000). The interest in community capacity has grown because health promotion practitioners and academics increasingly see that effective action requires engaging communities directly and in ways where meaningful decision making power is shared. We believe that measuring community capacity is useful not only for assessing the ability of community members to work together to take action on health determinants but also for assessing generically the health status of the community.

Literature Review

The research team searched the published and grey literature for relevant articles using keywords such as ‘community capacity’, ‘empowerment’, ‘social capital’, and other related terms. 123 potentially relevant articles were retrieved. These were screened using five criteria: Is it about community capacity? Does it describe actual attempts to measure capacity? Was the project community-based research? Did it offer practical guidance for decision makers? Was it a rural setting? Twenty-three articles met sufficient criteria to be included in a detailed assessment. These were significant contributions to the field of community capacity measurement.

We then identified key themes and significant gaps in the literature (from the practitioners' point of view). These key themes are: (1) Gaps between theory and practice; (2) Outsider and insider perspectives; (3) Funder-driven vs. community-based projects; (4) Purposes for measuring community capacity; (5) Preconditions for measuring community capacity; (6) Choice of methodology; (7) A call for mixed methods; (8) Community capacity and/or interorganizational capacity; (9) Domains of community capacity; (10) Impact of community capacity assessment; and (11) Lack of specifically rural relevance in the literature.

Delphi Consultation

We recruited 11 practitioners and academics from across Canada and the US to participate in 2 rounds of a Delphi consultation. In Round 1, we sent them our findings from the analysis of the selected literature and asked their opinions around four main gaps we had identified: (1) Purposes for measuring community capacity; (2) Preconditions for successful community capacity assessment; (3) Levels of assessment; and (4) The value of a core set of indicators for community capacity. They sent back comments on these subjects. We then compiled these comments and sent out a second questionnaire containing draft recommendations for feedback and comments. The responses from this second round helped us formulate our recommendations.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

We recommend that Health Canada fund **interdisciplinary research partnerships** specifically involving organizational and community development scholars and practitioners to further develop complementary and mixed methods for measuring community capacity.

The expected results from this initiative are:

- Clarification of different levels of assessment (i.e., when the target of assessment is interorganizational networks and/or when the target of assessment is the community as a whole, where broad public participation is engaged).
- Further development of appropriate and complementary tools for assessment at each level.
- Further development of mixed (i.e., qualitative and quantitative) methods and tools for measuring community capacity.
- Identification of valid and potentially transferable community capacity indicators for implementation in practice.
- Better understanding of the preconditions, within a range of community contexts, necessary for value-added community capacity assessments.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that Health Canada fund **interdisciplinary research projects** specifically involving organizational and community development scholars and practitioners that a) are for the primary purpose to measure community capacity as a determinant of health, b) use the methods and tools developed from Recommendation 1, and c) are demonstrably embedded in community change processes. Secondly, we recommend that Health Canada fund **evaluation research projects** that seek to further understanding of increased community capacity as an outcome of community health development initiatives.

In order to obtain funding, proposed research projects should contain specific research questions addressing one or more of the following areas for knowledge development:

- The effectiveness and efficiency of community capacity measurement methods and tools (from a practical point-of-view).
- The validity and potential transferability of the community capacity indicators developed. This would involve a comparative study design.
- An analysis of how the presence or absence of key conditions within various community contexts affects the outcomes of community capacity assessment.
- A description and interpretation of how the measures of community capacity were used. This would require longitudinal funding or follow-up studies of previous projects.
- An analysis of and critical reflection on the impact of the theory of change employed and the associated levels of assessment (i.e., when the target of assessment may be interorganizational networks and/or the community as a whole).

Recommendation 3

We recommend that Health Canada fund a research project that targets the organizational and community development scholars and practitioners involved the two research initiatives described above (Recommendations 1 and 2) to further understanding of effective and efficient mechanisms for **knowledge transfer** in measuring community capacity.

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